

Members' Spotlight

DEJONGE GUITARS

by Carl Kaufmann

(Carl Kaufmann began this article after Symposium 97, long before the de Jonges became as well-known as they now are. The change in editorship and guitarmaker's publishing schedule prevented its publication until now. But with an issue devoted to nylon strung guitars and Sergei's thoughtful article on page 8, it is time to share this story with ASIA members. - Ed.)

WHEN **guitarmaker** BEGAN THINKING about an article on the de Jonges, we struggled to find the right focal point. Was this supposed to be about an ex-classical guitarist, largely self taught, who turned himself into a luthier at the master's level, and the operator of a school of lutherie to boot? Enterprise, hard work, sacrifice - all that stuff Or should it be about the younger de Jonges, a precocious bunch of youngsters who build guitars? Maybe, considering the road the de Jonges had to travel to get where they are today, the real star of the show ought to be the mother in this family.



Joshia deJonge

The right answer is "All of the above." It is a success story about the whole tribe.

They are seven in number: Sergei and Devora, and their

children - Joshia, the only daughter, who is 20; Sagen, 18; Rubin, 14; Alan, 12; and Corin, age six. Corin does not make guitars, yet. The other kids do. Joshia's and Sagen's guitars in particular have to be taken seriously. They began building about eight years ago, and as teenagers gave new meaning to the term "student made." Their instruments sell in the open market at more than \$3000 each. At a West Coast meeting of luthiers, Joshia's instruments won high praise in an anonymous



review. When the emcee asked the maker to stand up and be recognized, the group was astonished to see this young woman stand up. (More later on how the junior division got started.)

Pere Sergei was born in Holland but has lived in Canada since he was four years old. Devora is from Toronto. They met in the 1970's, when they were both living in a co-op house. They now live in Oshawa, Ontario, about 30 miles from Toronto, with the de Jonge home-shop-lutherie school located in a cluster of three buildings which the de Jonges largely rebuilt with their own hands. De Jonge guitars, whether made by Sergei or his offspring, are all acoustical instruments, primarily classicals. In the past, Sergei made steel-string guitars - "In the late 70's and early 80's, about 150 of them because that's where the market was and I had to make a living." His passion, though, is and always has been the classical guitar. That is all that comes out of his shop today, except for the steelstring boxes built by students in his school. (We'll also get back to this in a minute.)

As for Sergei's guitars, they get high marks from fellow luthiers. Says William (Grit) Laskin, a longtime friend and fellow Canadian, "Sergei has an easy going manner. Nothing fazes him. But don't let that fool you: He has very high standards of craftsmanship and he knows guitars!" Linda Manzer, another Canadian friend and well-known luthier, offers her compliment: "I would go to him for advice."

Getting to this echelon of this craft was not quick or easy for Sergei. There were lots of tangential jobs and lean years. As

apprentice to Patt Lister, Sergei spent half of a year living in a tent on a beach, in a part of Canada where the temperatures can be 25° below zero. He has held a variety of jobs unrelated to music - teaching, running a health food store, building movie sets. Having spent years getting himself established as a luthier, Sergei lost his workshop in 1986. He found a new location, only to lose that too. His tools were packed and he was ready to move in when, one day before the move was to occur, the deal fell through. He had to find other things to do:

"Bills had to be paid." For several years the mainstay was setbuilding for film makers. That kept his growing family fed. "Lots of hours," he reports, "but lots of money too." The downside was that Sergei was out of guitar making from the late 1980's until 1994, and the recognition that he had earned began to slip away. For the past five years, he has been back at the guitar bench, but as he sees it, he is still in the reconstruction phase, getting his name and work known again.

Sergei's first exposure to the world of guitar making began with Edgar Monch, a renowned German builder, and Jean Larrivee, a Canadian who apprenticed with Monch during a five-year period when Monch worked in Canada. "I was playing classical," de Jonge remembers, "and saw some guitars Monch had made, and later, some by Larrivee. I fell in love with these beautiful handmade guitars. I wanted one really badly, but when I found out the price my hair stood on end. I figured I could never afford one."

In early 1970, while a student at a teacher's college, Sergei met Larrivee at a concert, and asked if he could work with him to learn to build guitars. Larrivee told him to come to his



Rubin deJonge completing a finely-worked soundboard

shop the next Monday "and we'll talk about it." With that for

an invitation, de Jonge said goodbye to school.

"I went into Jean's shop and never looked back. I was there every day from nine to five ... for almost a year." At that time, Larrivee was known as a builder of classical instruments only, though de Jonge reports that during this year Larrivee also began experimenting with steel string boxes. The first effort was modeled on the classical pattern, with beefed-up bracing. Later, Larrivee switched into cross-bracing patterns, and went "more and more towards steel strings," de Jonge reports.

Before hanging out his own shingle (in 1972) Sergei also worked for about a year with Patt Lister, another builder of high-end classicals, who also worked in the Toronto area. Lister's guitars have ended up in the capable hands of such people as Julian Bream and English-born Canadian guitarist Liona Boyd.

Both Grit Laskin (who also began his career under Larrivee's guidance), and Sergei look upon Patt Lister as a modern pioneer. They credit him with being the first to build classical guitars with lattice-braced tops. Arguably, the best known lattice-bracer is Australia's Greg Smallman, who makes guitar for concert artist John Williams. Smallman dropped the fanshaped patterns that have long distinguished classical guitar tops, and replaced them with an egg-crate pattern that, among other things, permits the tops to be shaved ultra-thin. The argument is that this also makes the guitars ultra-responsive. Numerous builders have bought into that logic and are now doing lattice bracing.

However, as de Jonge explains, Patt Lister may have been the first among the many, and de Jonge believes that Lister's success may be traced to the fact that he was unencumbered by traditional guitar making "rules."

"He was self-taught," Sergei explains. "He used to be an aircraft engineer in England, and he based his bracing designs on airframe principles - i.e., get the greatest strength with the least mass. So he played around with very unorthodox bracing patterns, including lattice patterns for the top and back, and even beehive patterns for the top." (Interestingly, a similar story is told about Smallman's work -lots of experience with very light model aircraft, leading to braces incorporating balsa and graphite for super-lightness.)

There is a point to be drawn from Sergei's start-up stories:

On the luthiers' learning curve, he was not only exposed to high standards but also to innovative, experiment-minded people. That may account for the fact that, from the time he struck out on his own, Sergei has also been a constant experimenter. Over many years, he reports, through hundreds of guitars, he did exact duplicates of a top bracing pattern only three or four times. Currently, he is working on variations of the lattice pattern. "It's working really well," he

says, though he is not yet ready to declare this to be the holy grail.

Whatever the task, Sergei demands the best of himself. Nothing is too much trouble. He concerns himself with the most minute details. His rosettes tell that story. He designed the pattern himself, and for a time had the rosettes made by someone else. The results were handsome - Sergei showed us an example at the 1997 A.S.L.A. Symposium in Burlington but not good enough to suit him. He wanted more contrast, with the lighter colors to come out cleaner and stand out better. To get the bright look he wanted, he took over the process himself, selecting or dyeing his own woods and making his own rosette logs. All his rosettes are now entirely of his own making. Showing off the result in a finished guitar, he asks, "Can't you see the difference?" Yes, you can - once he has pointed it out.

The price of such perfectionism is many hours in the shop. Says Laskin, "Sergei thinks nothing of working 15-hour days."

One thing that adds to his hours is his School of Lutherie. Three times a year, he offers a nine-week course in acoustic guitar building. No more than three students at a time. Total immersion. Eight hours a day. Five days a week. Students can live on site if they wish, in one of those three buildings the de Jonges restored. Devora will do the cooking - vegetarian.

The course, like the instructor, is thorough. Students learn to make templates and jigs, maintain tools as well as use them, make kerfed linings, insert bindings and rosettes, and make dovetail neck-to-body joints. Each student begins with raw wood and ends with two guitars, a classical and a steel string, one finished out, the other nearly so.

His own youngsters, though, are not graduates of the Sergei de Jonge School of Lutherie. They got started by osmosis. It was Sagen, who led off. He had been hanging around dad's shop and, as a boy of age eight, without asking permission, he bent a set of sides for a small guitar, and then went to work on a back and top. He had no plans to follow. It was all done by eye.

His father picks up the story: "By the time I saw what he was doing, he was well on his way. So I got interested and showed him how he could actually get the thing assembled. I put my hands on it, but not much." It did not come out symmetrical, but it was playable. Sagen gave it to his sister as a present.

She was next on the production line. Being older (then age 11) Joshia decided to go for a full-sized instrument. Her father helped with this one, guiding the process from the start. Sagen then tackled his second guitar, also a full-sized guitar, also with hands-on parental guidance.

"Both those guitars sold almost immediately," Sergei reports. Now, two more de Jonges, Rubin and Alan, have guitars to their credit. Joshia and Sagen have built up momentum: The two of them have made a total of more than 40 guitars to date.

Such a time commitment has to put a real crimp into the normal youngster's schedule. Many after-school hours are spent in the shop instead of with their peers. Do the young de Jonges feel that they are missing out?

guitarmaker asked them point blank: "Don't you resent not having more time to be with kids your own age?" Answer: "No." The younger de Jonges say that they are doing what they want to do. Their father adds, "It keeps them out of trouble." It also puts money in everybody's pockets. The youngsters split the income from their guitars with the family.

Will they keep on performing as a group, like the Trapp family singers? Are the children going to pursue lutherie as a life work? No one can say. What seems certain, though, is that Sergei and Devora will continue to meet life head-on, doing what they want to do. Having delivered one of their children on a freeway off-ramp, trekked through Europe with a newborn in a back-pack, and built de Jonge Guitars into a respected name in the United States as well as Canada, starting from scratch, they are not likely to let much of anything faze them from now on.