

Interview with José Romanillos

by Eleftheria Kotzia



Photo by Oscar Hedlund

In 1956 José Romanillos left Madrid, due to the political situation, and settled in England as a craftsman. He wanted to amuse himself by playing the guitar, but couldn't afford to buy one, so he decided to build a guitar himself. During the refurbishment of a Victorian public house in Fulham, London, he decided to use the wood from the old bar's countertop to build his guitar. After some time, the first Romanillos guitar saw the light of day.

Today, José Romanillos is one of the world's leading luthiers. He is also doing research into previous generations of guitar makers. One of the fruits of this research is his recently completed book on the great Spanish luthier, Antonio Torres.

In his characteristically modest, direct, and spontaneous way, Romanillos spoke to me about his work at his home in the quiet undulating Dorset countryside.

E.K. You are very well known as a guitar maker. Recently, however, I heard you were writing a book on Antonio Torres. Can you tell me something about it?

J.R. Well, the beginnings of the book on Torres were very simple. I wanted to know about the man, but looking around for information and literature on him, I found there was nothing. I became very curious, and I think fate had a hand in it because one year I decided to go to

Almeria [Spain] to buy some cypress wood to make a couple of flamenco guitars. When we ended up in Almeria I asked a guitar maker where Torres was born, and he proposed to take us there, because the place was not too far away.

So one night with Marian, my wife, and Liam, my youngest son, we went there to find out if anybody knew something about Torres or his family. It was Sunday. Everybody was taking a Sunday stroll, and nobody was interested in hearing my question. So I decided we should come back the following day to talk to the priest and see if we could at least find out where he was buried.

So we spent the whole of the following day looking around the cemetery, but we couldn't find anything about him, his wife, sons, or family. That got me a little bit upset, and I said to myself, "I'll be back to Almeria to find a bit more about Torres and his work."

The following year I went back to see the priest and it has taken me nearly ten years to research and gather all this information. I didn't have the preconceived idea of writing a book. It has taken a long time because I had to do it in my spare time, but after ten years I can say that I have come to know a little bit more about him! It has been very exciting because I have been able to trace sixty of Torres' guitars, and I have measurements, sizes, and colors of woods and photographs.

E.K. Did you travel a great deal to get your information?

J.R. I have visited every place where Torres lived and worked. I went all over Europe, Canada, and the States, and I have enjoyed every

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moment of that. You see, there is nothing written about guitar makers, and they are a very important part of the guitar world, but they are always in the background. This is the first time a book has been entirely dedicated to a guitar maker. I hope I have done something like an homage to him, because the modern guitar springs from Torres. He was the man that changed the whole guitar world.

E.K. Could you tell me something about how you have developed as a guitar maker, and how Torres influenced your development?

J.R. The first guitar I made was based on a book by A.P. Sharpe called *Make your Own Spanish Guitar*. It was a very, very simple book on guitar making, the only one available in the late 50s. After that, I heard that in a commercial place in Birmingham, full-sized plans of the Torres guitar were sold. In fact, I bought one and it had the basic ingredients of a Torres. So my second guitar was based on a Torres.

As usually happens, I made some strange things, changing the structure in one way or another, until in the 1970s I got in touch with Julian Bream, and we started working together. He had brought me a 1936 Herman Hauser guitar so I could take the back off in order to repair it. While I did that I studied it, and I got very interested because it was a very down-to-earth work, very basic, honest craftsmanship, not flashy. Over the years I have seen a few Hausers and as I progressed in my researches with Torres, I realized how much Hauser owed to him.

They were not copies, but they were basically Torres. The strutting, some of the decoration, the head, and even the shape of the body were very similar. So Hauser over the years had evolved through the Ramirez and some other Torres to the final guitar that is a sort of Torres; a second type guitar that is very similar.

Myself, I went through a cycle. I started with Torres, went through Hauser, and came back to Torres. Obviously I do things of my own, but they're not basically a change from what I call the Torres pattern. Whether this is retrograde or not, I wouldn't know, but I don't think that since Torres established the guitar in the 1860s anything has come out to change the basic quality of the guitar. They all talk about the guitar sounding louder, but I think that the quality of some of these instruments is wanting. I don't think that the modern generation of guitar makers has contributed anything to the guitar to the extent that Torres did.

Every guitar maker has his own peculiarities, so that the sound of every guitar maker isn't better, worse, or whatever, but different. You can't reproduce, say, the sound of Torres, the sound of Ramirez, etc. Each one is an individual. When I speak about copying, it has to do with the framework of the guitar, but when we speak about the sound, that's another matter. It evolves through the knowledge, the experience, the sensitivity or intuition of the particular maker, and has nothing to do with Torres really.

It is impossible to copy another maker. I'm not ashamed to say that I derive whatever experience I have from Hauser and Torres. There are others, and there are other fine makers

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today, but I wouldn't look at any other guitar maker with the same deep interest. These two were absolutely great guitar makers.

E.K. Leaving aside guitar makers, are there any guitar players who have influenced you?

J.R. Obviously, here it has to come out about Julian Bream because I'm sort of connected with him. Actually not connected, but we have been working together and separately for the last twelve years. Obviously his musicianship, sensitivity, and his knowledge about the guitar have given me a lot of ideas on many different points. But basically I don't make guitars for any particular guitar player, but in order to please myself. What I am trying to do, with my limited ability as a human being, is to create excellence. This is practically impossible because we all have different tastes and approach to music.

I would say that the guitar player who has influenced me the most is Bream because of the great love he has for the instrument. I would like to think it has rubbed off on me a little bit. I have been very privileged to have my guitar played by him. We have discussed every aspect of guitar making (quality and so forth) for many hours, but I haven't tried to make a guitar to suit him personally. I have been trying to produce a guitar of excellence; whether I'll achieve it I don't know, but that's what I am trying to do.

Julian Bream



When we are making an instrument, we make something that we really don't quite understand. The complexities of the sound are such that it is very difficult to be precise about it. You can't be totally objective about a guitar in a sort of proof capacity, because you can't test the result. You only test it by the result of the sound, but this doesn't mean that the sound came because you did what you did. If I scientifically wanted to be sure about the result it would hardly be possible.

Nevertheless, over the years the maker evolves through experience, and sometimes the fingertips tell you what to do. But that as well doesn't necessarily mean that it always works out, because the material is different every time and wood is a medium that is total movement. I think it is a great thing to have a great guitarist around a guitar maker.

E.K. I have heard it said that it was Julian Bream who inspired you to make guitars.

J.R. This is a misconception. People grow up to believe that he initiated me in the world of guitar making. Before I met Julian Bream I had been making guitars for over eight years. I started making guitars in 1961 that are played by famous guitarists. Obviously the relationship with Bream has been an influence, and has put some final points to my work. It has been very exciting.

E.K. What materials do you use and how do you choose your wood?

J.R. The materials I use are really the classical ones. I use two types of rosewood, the Brazilian-Rio rosewood and Indian rosewood. There is a little bit of nonsense about the woods, particularly for the back and the sides. Some people go as far as to say that they can't produce a decent guitar with any other rosewood

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than the Brazilian one. But I don't find much difference between them. I think that even maple can make a fine-sounding guitar. Torres himself made all kinds of guitars from very different woods: maple, rosewood, even locust wood. Other very good guitar makers use cedar, but to me the sound of these guitars doesn't appeal, so I don't use it.

The soundboard is all spruce. Others use other types of wood like Columbian pine, Alaskan pine, or western cedar, but I don't like the sound they produce — a sort of dark sound, uninteresting to me. I happen to believe that spruce is the finest wood — European spruce.

Guitar making is for me a sensual experience, in the sense that it uses the senses from the hands to the eyes. You know the pressure you want, and you have to feel the woods, and you have to be in tune with it. If I pick up a piece of wood and I don't find it tells me anything, I won't use it! Because I already have something against it. There has to be a great affinity between the wood and the tactile sense and myself. If I think that I am using a piece of wood I am not going to enjoy working with, it will not be a good guitar. Therefore, there is a psychological aspect to this, but I just work like that.

E.K. What is the quality of sound you are aiming to create?

J.R. Well, the interesting sound for me has to be in particular the treble, like a running brook, a crystal clear brook, a river where, when you look down at the surface, you think the bottom is very near, but in fact it is very deep and you can see right through. So you have clarity, but you also have perspective. You imagine the river being a note that is very clear, but it has a lot of body in it: it is very well defined; crystal clear, but without being brittle. If I am fortunate enough to get that, what will happen is that over the years the guitar will mature and will get a great depth of body and we will have a silkiness and a characteristic that a darker sound wouldn't get. If you get a darker sound, to me it wouldn't be interesting at all. The basses should be deep and dark, but without being too gloomy; they should be very resonant, but again very definitive between the notes. I wouldn't like a sound that plunges, the sort that when you play the note it disappears. I like the reverberation of the sound and the darkness, but without being too diffuse.

I think when you are dealing with the classical guitar, you have to give the performer all the subtle possibilities of tone color and variation: to be able to create both crisp, sharp ponticellos and the sweetness desired by many players. You have to have contrast. The guitars that have a dark sound don't get all that much variety of sound; they are limited. All this depends on the guitar schools. I know the Spanish and South Americans want a sound that appears warm and luxurious and dark. When you play that music then, the guitar you need to use must have the ultimate subtleties and have clearness and precision of note.

That's what I try for and that's what I like. I can't waste my time with woods that I don't enjoy.

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E.K. How many guitars do you make a year?

J.R. It varies. I only make sixteen or seventeen guitars. I have not yet done twenty in a year.

E.K. Do you have any assistant or any apprentice to help you?

J.R. Just for the last year. I had the pleasure of having my youngest son, Liam, helping me. He is hoping to learn the craft. But up to now, I have been working entirely by myself. It is a very personal thing, and I don't want anybody to

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touch them. I make everything myself, all the inlays, the decoration. That's why I make so few guitars. Other guitar makers have people in the back room making guitars like hot cakes!

I want to enjoy my work. To make a decent guitar and make it as good as possible. But as I said, Liam has been working with me and I'll try to teach him the little I know. It would be nice to think that he will take it in and that my other two sons may come in as well.

E.K. Is it true you once smashed a guitar you were unsatisfied with?

J.R. Yes, that's absolutely true. It was a very trying time in our lives. We had lots of problems with building, and we were living under very strenuous conditions. I was making a guitar which wasn't coming on well at all. I had made a couple of irritating mistakes, desperate for money, so I couldn't put aside that guitar at that particular time. The mistakes were irritating, but nothing special that would be very detrimental to the sound. I persevered until I made a third mistake. That was a bit too much. The balance was not good. I had not put the back on yet, so what I did was to very ceremoniously pick it up, put it side-up on the floor, lift my right foot, and smash it in the waist. It made a tremendous bang, and I heard Marian rushing from the stairs shouting, "What happened? What happened?" "Nothing dear," I said. "I'm just smashing the guitar."

It was a great relief. It was as if something came out of me and relieved me. I could have saved the neck and the sides if I'd been a little cooler, but I had decided it wasn't worth it. It did me a lot of good. I had to relieve the tension that had built up. I smashed the guitar, and I felt great!

E.K. Are you interested in giving classes to younger guitar makers, like you did in Toronto and Esztergom?

J.R. Well, I am interested in as much as I would like other people to know about what guitar making is all about. There used to be a great secrecy about guitar making. Through the centuries you find that makers didn't want to give away what they considered to be their secrets. It is a legacy from the old days when it was difficult to get a job and everybody had to protect himself and didn't teach anyone.

When I learned the carpentry trade, I never had any proper training. I had to just watch and pick it up. That also applied to guitar making. But now guitar making is not just an exclusive career for myself, it is a world-wide profession, and you have very good guitar makers all over the world. My basic philosophy about teaching is that, like the scientist who shares



Jose Romanillos in Toronto,
holding class for luthiers.

his knowledge with others, the guitar maker has a duty to teach.

The problem with me is that, having to work by myself, I don't have much time to teach. So what I do once or twice a year is give a master class. In Toronto last year we spent a week with twenty guitar makers from Canada and the United States, and we had a great time. Not because I was teaching (if I had something to teach them) but in the sense of getting to know how other guitar makers feel and how they do things, and we shared our knowledge. The guitar people, guitarists and guitar makers, are marvelous people.

I enjoy teaching. I like to communicate. Obviously it is very difficult because I am self-taught. I had to evolve and develop through myself. I do things intuitively, just by instinct, so it's difficult to explain to other people. But what happened in Toronto was great. A rapport developed, and I managed to communicate the feeling that it is not only important how you make guitars, but how to enjoy making them. If you don't enjoy what you do, you won't be any good at all. On the other hand, it helped me because, as I said, I work intuitively, but since I've had to explain, I've had to think about it, to find the sequence, the pattern, and from intuition emerged the technique, and now I am more aware of what I do.

I hope in three or four years to be able to set up an annual master class for one or two weeks to share my knowledge. By the letters I get from all over the world, there is a great interest in guitar making, and I would like to help.

E.K. How do you dry the wood and maintain the right humidity for the instruments?

J.R. Humidity control is a great problem. I do have a humidity control unit that is pre-set to a particular percentage of humidity in the air, and that works. Wood is a hygroscopic material, moving according to humidity and environment. Let's say I want to make a guitar for Scandinavia. I could make it to the relative humidity that they want, say 45-50%. In the summer in Scandinavia the humidity will go up to 85-90%, so the guitar will swell. I can stop the guitar from cracking if I make it very dry, because I have the means to control it. But when they stop the central heating, the timbers absorb moisture and they swell. So the great difficulty for a guitar maker is to find a mean average, and I usually give it a relative humidity of 58-60%. The museums set their humidity at about 58-60% relative humidity. That's what I'm aiming at.

There are a lot of misconceptions about using old woods and seasoned woods, but all that is nonsense. It doesn't matter how old the wood is. It will react according to the humidity. If you put a guitar being built in a high humidity in a dry environment, it is going to move and vice-versa. In some parts of Canada and the States bowed instruments have two soundposts fitted — one for the winter and one for the summer. Because in the summer the timber swells and the soundpost gets loose and falls off. A timber, even if it is 300 years old, can still move according to the relative humidity. We have to aim for the happy medium and hope that it will be good for Scandinavia as well as Japan, countries that have differences in humidity of 40%.

The selection of materials does help, so we use quarter-sawn woods in order to minimize the movement of the woods imposed by the climatic conditions.

I know people who put their guitar next to the heater, and the guitar stacked against the case more or less melted. A Brazilian girl had the heating so high that the guitar shrank! So I have 58-60% of humidity, and I keep my fingers crossed.

E.K. Have you experience with any other instruments, for example, the lute, ten-string guitar, etc.?

J.R. Yes, I have made about five lutes, one pandora, a ten-string guitar, two baroque guitars, and one vihuela. Of course, each of them requires a different kind of technique. I made a baroque guitar and a vihuela for Julian Bream recently. I am rather interested in them from the historical angle, but I wasn't overjoyed to make them. They are lovely in themselves and one can learn by making them, but my love is the classical guitar.

The connections with the vihuela came from the fact that I am Spanish, and without knowing why, I feel attracted to the instrument. The vihuela I made took two years to develop, and Bream and I developed it from a guitar in the conservatory in Barcelona. It is one of the oldest musical instruments (I found another one in Paris later).

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I used this guitar as a pattern for the vihuela, because contrary to the expert opinion of the musicologists, who seem to think that the vihuela disappeared in the 16th century, an instrument doesn't disappear overnight. I think that this is a lot of nonsense. The vihuela and the guitar lived in Spain alongside one another up to the early 19th century. If you push me a little, I will say that they still do. In Spain we still have two types of guitar, the culture-classical guitar and the flamenco guitar. To me the classical guitar is the development of the vihuela, and the flamenco is the development of the barber sort of guitar playing in the 16th and 17th centuries.

In this guitar or vihuela I made (call it what you like), I used some of the techniques that didn't put any linings on the back, and it had a very deep body. But, the sound was dead. Over these two years Julian Bream and I trimmed it out to what we thought would fit the music played at that time. I am not professing to say that this is the right sound of the vihuela, but we tried to create something in the spirit of the music written for it. I was very interested because I don't believe the vihuela disappeared.

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This needs a lot of research and investigation. Not being a musicologist, but just a guitar maker, I like to think about how it developed and the techniques used in that development. I found that it couldn't have changed much because the guitar hasn't really evolved over 300 years. I mean, it may be larger or smaller, but basically the construction, pattern, the struts, and the bars, etc., didn't change much until the late 18th century. I don't believe for a moment that the vihuela disappeared from the musical scene in Spain in the 16th or 17th century.

E.K. Julian Bream says about the instrument you made for him and that he has played since 1973 that it is an "unusually fine instrument." Many other players as well as myself, after hearing the records he has made with it, think that it is almost perfection. Do you agree?

J.R. No, I don't think that any guitar could be perfect. How can one define perfection in the guitar? Life wouldn't have any meaning for me if I believed that I had got there and nothing else was left. I think that it is a very fine instrument, and in the hands of Julian Bream sounds great, obviously, but I am too considered and too vain to accept that that is perfection. I think that I still could do better, not really because inside I think that I am going to reach perfection, but there isn't much point saying, "Well, I have made the guitar that many people consider perfect — that's it — I am going to sleep." To me this is a defeatist attitude, and I'm not prepared to accept that any guitar I make is perfect.

The guitar in itself is imperfect according to the supreme conception. The guitar is a guitar; it sounds better or worse. I think I will make a better one, and probably I have already made it. Bream plays that particular one and I'm not saying that it's not the best guitar I have made, but that probably he is the greatest guitar player in the world, and that makes all the difference. The guitar has its qualities, has something, otherwise he couldn't make it sound like that, but in the hands of an inferior player it wouldn't sound like it does. I feel blessed and fortunate about this.



Eleftheria Kotzia
with her Romanillos guitar.

E.K. I think you are being very modest. I don't think that the quality of the instrument is dependent on the quality of the artist.

J.R. No, it isn't, but the player does help. You see, I know that guitar very well, and I know how Bream studied it. He really knows that instrument intimately; he knows how and where to get the right sound out of it. I am very fond of that guitar, obviously. What I do say is that the performer can make a lot of difference.

I must be fair. What this guitar has got is a great character. This character is enhanced when Bream plays it. People say that my guitar in the hands of Julian Bream couldn't have been better.

E.K. Apparently he succeeded in the perfect marriage.

J.R. It's a nice thought, but I know that if I believed I couldn't make better than that I wouldn't like to make guitars any more. I would rather go and make furniture. ■

[Eleftheria Kotzia was born in Alexandropolis, Greece, and studied guitar with Dimitri Famos and Alexandre Lagoya. She currently makes her home in London where she studies with David Russell and Christopher Wilson. She was the First Prize winner in the 6th International Guitar Competition in Milan and has given recitals in the principal cities of Greece, France, Germany, Spain, and Hungary.]