

De Jonge Guitar Co.



All in the de Jonge family: (standing) Sergei, Devora, Pat Hodgins, Joshia (holding son Ayden), Sagan. Kneeling are Rubin, Talia, and Corin. Alan de Jonge is not pictured.

For Canadian luthier Sergei de Jonge, guitar-making is a family affair. His wife handles the business end of things, and four of his six children as well as a son-in-law help him build guitars and teach lutherie classes in the family's home shop 20 miles outside of Ottawa.

De Jonge's work is anything but conventional. In the mid-1980s he built a reputation for constructing guitars with 14, 15, and 17 strings, and he still builds a couple of multistringed instruments per year, though he focuses mainly on concert classicals. Unsatisfied with standard designs, he's continually experimenting with bracing patterns and other design elements, and he prefers to build guitars one or two at a time so they maintain their individuality. "Compared to most guitar makers," he says, "I make guitars with my bare hands."

Since the mid-'90s, most de Jonge classicals have been crafted with lattice-braced tops rather than more conventional fan bracing. De Jonge says that lattice bracing affects both tone and structural integrity. "Almost any classical gui-

tar you look at that's a few years old is rippled across the top," he explains. "Lattice-braced guitars don't do that, and they don't lift up as much behind the bridge. They don't have as warm a tone as a fan-braced classical guitar, but they do project better, and the tone is really satisfying in a concert hall."

Another structural detail de Jonge is known for is his unusual bridge design. "I think there's a basic flaw in the standard classical bridge," he says. "The wings are carved round, although the strength is really needed at the edges of the bridge. My bridges are more hollow in the middle, and the strength is at the edges. I got the idea in the early '80s and then saw



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Alan de Jonge classical with spruce top and Indian rosewood back and sides (top). Sergei de Jonge cedar and koa Deep OM.

By Simone Solondz

that John Gilbert was using something similar, so I decided to try it.”

Although the family is better known for its classical guitars (daughter Joshia’s classicals were wowing the guitar world when she was still a teenager), steel-string guitars—mostly small-bodied instruments intended for fingerstyle players—account for about half of the de Jonge output. De Jonge’s first steel-strings were round and classically shaped (perhaps because one of his early mentors was Jean Larrivée). He continues to build this model, his standard steel-string design, but he’s also added an OM model similar in shape to the Martin OM. “That’s really a fluke,” he says, “because I didn’t look at the Martin before I designed that shape!”

The family now builds about 40 guitars a year. Sons Alan, Sagan, and Rubin, who have all contributed ideas and guitars to the de Jonge line, are currently studying away from home, but they do try to put together an instrument or two when they’re home from school. The classical guitars are all built by one pair of hands (and labeled with the builder’s name), while the steel-strings, labeled “De Jonge Guitar Company,” are more of a group effort. “I supervise every stage, and I’ve got my hands on every one of them,” says Sergei, “but they can be largely built by Sagan or Rubin or Pat.”

Pat Hodgins, Joshia’s husband, essentially married into the family business. Before meeting Joshia he had “no clue” about building guitars, but her passion for guitar construction immediately rubbed off on him. “Pat came to stay with us,” Sergei recalls, “and he never left!” Pat and Joshia recently had a baby, so they now split their time between the shop and taking care of their son. Joshia’s output has slowed down, and she’s developed an interest in French polish. “I like that it’s natural,” she explains. “It’s a lot nicer to not have the fumes. Everybody’s getting into it, even on the steel-strings.”

Joshia and Pat also take turns helping teach Sergei’s ongoing lutherie class, an intensive, four-week course that costs \$3,200 US, and they continue to learn from the experience. “Showing someone how to do something makes you realize what you know and what you don’t,” Joshia says. Her



Sergei de Jonge, setting up a guitar (above), works on every steel-string in his shop.

father concurs, adding, “Some of the ideas students come up with I wouldn’t have thought of myself. I learn something in almost every course because the students have fresh and open minds. They’re not indoctrinated with the standard ways of doing things.”

But Sergei seemingly has no problem keeping his mind open. He’s currently producing steel-string guitars with adjustable necks, which allows the action to be easily tweaked with the turn of an Allen key at the heel. And he’s experimenting with sandwich-top guitars, which feature two extremely thin slices of wood separated by light inner bracing. On the classical side, he’s receiving quite a few direct orders for cutaway guitars, a model so unorthodox that his dealers refuse to carry it.

De Jonge steel-strings start at \$6,500 and classicals at \$7,500. They can be purchased direct or through a few select dealers, including Beverly Maher, Gryphon Stringed Instruments, and The Luthier’s Collection. His waiting list is currently about eight or nine months long. “I don’t want much more than that,” he says. “I don’t want to look way into the future, to know that I’ve got to build such-and-such a guitar in three years. I want the freedom to change designs.”



Pat Hodgins (pictured) and his wife, Joshia de Jonge, help teach Sergei’s ongoing lutherie class.