

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

BRANDT'S 'BUBBLES'

Southern California luthier Greg Brandt is making world-class custom guitars

by Adam Perlmutter

While the world of custom steel-string guitars is rife with inlay art—the colorful, pictorial style of William “Grit” Laskin and the mosaic patterns of Ervin Somogyi are two notable examples—such ornamentation is generally avoided in classical guitar-making. The master luthier Greg S. Brandt recently challenged the prevailing aesthetic when, in preparation for the 2015 La Guitarra Festival in San Luis Obispo, California, last September, he built a pair of guitars with rosettes having geometric shapes echoed elsewhere on the instruments.

These idiosyncratic designs—nicknamed (by his apprentice, to the luthier’s chagrin) “Bubbles” and “Tiles,” after their respective decorative patterns—are made from a matching set of Indian rosewood; Bubbles has a spruce top and Tiles, cedar. I had the pleasure of getting to know Bubbles, a world-class contender in the arena of fine custom classical guitars.

TONALLY INSPIRING

I admittedly came favorably disposed to review Bubbles, having heard nothing but good things about Brandt and his work. The luthier, whose workbench is in North Hollywood, California, has been building guitars for four decades, for players ranging from the classical great Perfecto de Castro to the late studio icon Tommy Tedesco. His instruments have been heard in concert halls and on soundtracks for movies such as *Goodfellas*, *Blade Runner*, and *Field of Dreams*.

But I was unprepared for just how fine a guitar this would be. Its voice is resplendent, to say the least. The lowest notes have the most impressive presence and depth of sound, while the highest possess a beautiful fullness and lack of stridency—the ideal tonal balance. Bubbles is loud and responsive, too; dulcet when played gently, and a cannon when provoked by the plucking hand. It’s a sound that will fill up a concert hall for sure.

Whether playing modern fare like an excerpt from Hans Werner Henze’s *Royal Winter Music*, lute pieces by the Renaissance composer John Dowland, or bossa nova chord-melody arrangements, Bubbles feels fresh and inspiring; I hear new subtleties when working through familiar territory. What’s more, this newly built guitar, apparently having been played very little, was already starting to open up, sonically speaking, in the short time I spent with it.

Bubbles plays effortlessly. The neck, with the customary 52mm nut, is extremely comfortable to grip in all regions, and the action is low and buzz-free. There is a consistently good sound across all regions of the fretboard, with no dead spots on the neck. All of the fretted notes and open strings ring vibrantly, as do the natural harmonics, and the guitar’s intonation is perfect.

STEEPED IN TRADITION

Though Brandt is adventurous enough to take on the occasional idiosyncratic commission—in 2009 he built a 10-string guitar for de Castro—his building is for the most part traditional, indebted to great Euro-

pean builders, such as Hermann Hauser. He uses the traditional fan bracing, seven fans and two chevron bars, and instead of the traditional Spanish heel method of construction, he opts for a special mortise-and-tenon joint in mating the neck and body, which he finds advantageous in setting the neck angle.

The craftsmanship on Bubbles is surpassingly good. Inside the box, all of the bracing and kerfing has been meticulously shaped, sanded, and glued. The frets are perfectly crowned and polished. All of the inlay work is rendered with impressive precision, and the guitar’s nitrocellulose lacquer finish is thinly applied and rubbed to a uniformly faultless gloss.

Bubbles’ inlay work might not be to every guitarist’s taste, but it’s articulated beautifully. The guitar is as stunning to the eyes as it is to the ears. Against the rosette’s mahogany backdrop are a series of

spheres in assorted sizes, made from various shades of walnut. This theme is echoed on the bridge bar as well as on the butt end and the back. (Potential detractors will be glad to know that the guitar would cost \$1,500 less without these embellishments.) Rosewood body binding, heel cap, and headstock cap lend elegance and visual coherence to the design.

LUTHERIE AT ITS FINEST

Thanks to the use of CNC machinery and other technological developments, the guitar market is teeming with good options, in terms of sound and playability, when it comes to production-model guitars. Spending time with Greg Brandt’s Standard Concert Model, though, is an excellent reminder of what a transformative experience it can be to play the finest luthier-made guitar: an instrument worthy of any serious concert guitarist. **CG**



AT A GLANCE GREG S. BRANDT STANDARD CONCERT MODEL

BODY

Solid European spruce top; Indian rosewood back and sides; gloss nitrocellulose lacquer finish

NECK

Mahogany neck with ebony fretboard; 650mm scale length; 52mm nut; Sloane tuning machines with ebony buttons

EXTRAS

EJ46 Pro-Arté Nylon, Hard Tension strings; TKL hardshell case

PRICE

\$7,000 base/
\$8,500 as reviewed.
Made in the
United States
gregbrandtguitars.com