LUTHIER PROFILE:
RICHARD BRUNÉ

By JULIA CROWE

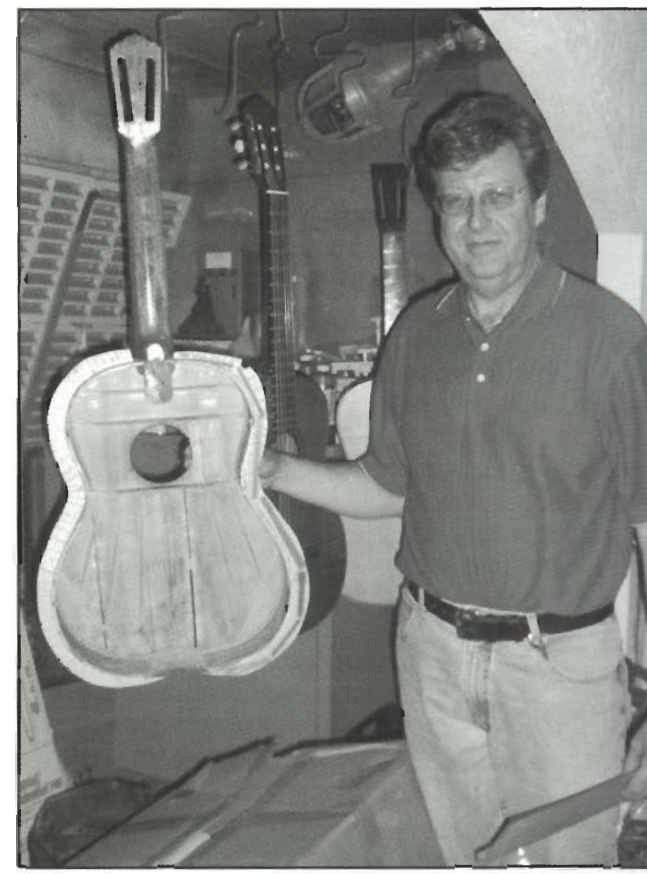
LUTHIER RICHARD BRUNE, who works in his Spanish hacienda-style studio in Evanston, Illinois, has cultivated considerable stature both within the U.S. and Europe as a self-taught master craftsman. He is credited as an authoritative source in José Romanillos' new guitar dictionary and the Grondona/Waldner *Masterpieces of Guitar Making* (Chantarelle), to name but a few books in which he has contributed.

Among the artists who currently play or have played his guitars include the late Andrés Segovia (who owned two instruments), the Romeros (Pepe Romero recently recorded the *Aranjuez* Concierto on one of Bruné's cypress guitars which was made from cypress grown on the Palace grounds of Aranjuez where Rodrigo wrote the concerto) Sabicas, El Moraito de Jerez, Earl Klugh (who owns five guitars), the Pearl-Gray duo (whose recordings are entirely on Bruné guitars), Igor Kipnis, and many others.

His many accomplishments include having a Baroque guitar of his displayed at the Smithsonian Institute and also, drafting the technical details of Andrés Segovia's 1937 Hermann Hauser guitar, which is currently on display at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. He has been entrusted with the task of repairing countless rare guitars of name and note, most notably several original Torres guitars, a guitar believed to have belonged to Marie Antoinette, Agustin Barrios' 1927 Simplicio (mentioned in *American Lutherie* #52) and Sabicas' 1951 Marcelo Barbero (*American Lutherie* # 55). Bruné also performed repair work in 1978 for Julian Bream on his lute, originally crafted by David Rubio, and then Bruné's son Marshall, a master craftsman in his own right, worked again on this same lute several years ago.

To date, Richard Bruné has made 692 guitars, along with 12 harpsichords, 50 lutes, 1 full size violin and 2 Arabic ouds. Currently, his backorder requires a wait time of 6 years for a custom-made guitar. He is also the founding member of *American Lutherie*, which has approximately 5,000 members and typically 500 exhibitors at its annual convention.

Bruné first started building guitars in 1966. One year later, at age 18, he made a pilgrimage to the Ramírez shop in Spain. 'I wanted to glean what I could from them,' he says. 'I was listening to many flamenco artists, and learning from them also. Before I left for Spain I had ordered and paid in advance for a Ramírez guitar, as Ramírez indicated that was the only way to be certain it would be there when I arrived at his shop.'



Richard Bruné with Byrd guitar.

Bruné, however, found himself deeply disappointed with this particular guitar, especially when compared to other Ramírez guitars he had played and tested. The experience spurred him to continue making his own guitars with the hope of producing the kind of guitar he envisioned. 'It was the best favour Ramírez ever did for me. Had the guitar been what I was hoping for, I would have abandoned this guitar-making thing altogether, as it was definitely more difficult for me in those days than playing was. I had no prior woodworking knowledge or experience, so every technical aspect of the art was a struggle for me. The playing on the other hand came very naturally, given that I had grown up listening to flamenco.'

Bruné first came to Chicago in 1972 from his hometown in Dayton, Ohio as a flamenco guitarist. He had spent some time performing in Mexico City solo and with members of Carmen Amaya's clan at the Rincón Goya, a tablao owned by the famous gypsy flamenco singer Manolo Caracol. 'Manolo lost money with this tablao, but it was his way of supporting flamencos stranded in Mexico City, where flamenco in those days did not attract much of an audience, because the music was Spanish!' Bruné explains.

Bruné quickly landed a solo gig playing at a downtown Chicago restaurant called Café Barcelona, where he played for an Argentinian dancer named Reuben Goya. While taking in his new surroundings, Bruné observed there weren't any major makers in the Chicago area and decided to pursue guitar making full time.

'I'd also realized that I like to eat,' he says, citing another reason for his career switch. Over the years, however, Bruné has played for many flamenco singers such as Agujetas, Pepe Culata, Jesus Montoya, and many others legends among the flamencos. Bruné contributed to the growing Chicago guitar scene and also to the community of guitar builders in the U.S. by supporting The Guild of American Luthiers, begun by Jerry Beall of Newark Ohio in 1972.

The Guild of American Luthiers

'In the beginning the Guild published a newsletter, which many years later morphed into the magazine now called *American Lutherie*,' Bruné says. 'My motivation was to advance the art of lutherie here in the United States, where traditional guilds and instruction schools didn't exist at that time. I was the first elected president of the Guild of American Luthiers. I also organized their first major national convention, which was held here at Northwestern University in 1975. We had participants from all over the world, along with daily radio coverage by a news team from National Public Radio in Washington, D.C., who aired daily broadcasts from Northwestern on their *All Things Considered* news programme. I figured that sharing information with others was far more efficient than everybody learning by making the same mistakes individually.' [Information on the Guild and its history can be found on their website: www.luth.org.]

Segovia's 1937 Hauser Guitar

Bruné first published a monograph and drawings of Andres Segovia's famed 1937 Hauser in the Guild of American Luthiers' *American Lutherie* magazine (issue #31) over ten years ago, based upon measurements and photographs he had taken of this guitar with permission from the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. The drawings, a booklet of its history, photographs and an accompanying CD of Segovia playing this Hauser are now available in a boxed set manufactured by Dynamic in Italy. This spruce-top and Brazilian rosewood guitar is currently part of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art's permanent display within its Musical Instruments collection, along with Segovia's 1912 Ramírez guitar.

Bruné has also made a complete set of measured drawings for the 1912 Manuel Ramírez, (American Lutherie #40) and he was the first scholar to point out that this guitar had originally been made as an 11-string guitar (for Antonio Jiménez Manjón) and the first to connect this guitar to the now-famous 1912 photograph of the Manuel Ramírez shop which has this guitar visible in the storefront window, still in its 11-string configuration. Bruné points out that Segovia had been credited with playing a Hauser guitar in his concerts for nine years before receiving this particular guitar, according to concert programme notes from as early as 1929, eight years prior to his playing the famous 1937 instrument.

Marshall, Pauletta and Richard.

'Hauser never attempted to make a Spanish style guitar until he met Segovia in 1924 through an introduction from Miguel Llobet,' Bruné says. 'Up until that point, Hauser made guitars in the Viennese style, patterned after Luigi Legnani as interpreted by Stauffer. Hauser took careful measurements of Segovia's 1912 Manuel Ramírez, which had been made by Ramírez shop foreman Santos Hernández and in 1924 Hauser started making guitars influenced by the Spanish designs of Manuel Ramírez, who followed the school of Antonio de Torres. Possibly the first performance where Segovia played this guitar was at the Civic Center in Chicago on March 13, 1938.'

When Bruné examined Segovia's Hauser guitar, he found broken and missing tentellones around the top border, a bad microphone blemish from a recording studio accident and dried sweat stains left behind by El Maestro. At one point, this guitar met with the misfortune of having a microphone drop on it during a recording studio session. Hauser II sanded the top and refinished the surface to remove the blemish but at this point, Segovia stopped playing the guitar, claiming that the sound of its first string had died thereafter. In his booklet which accompanies the boxed set detailing this guitar, Bruné discusses the fan struts and detail of the bridge, which he describes as a particularly important feature when it comes to reproducing the essence of a maker's sound.

'To me the importance of the 1937 guitar is that, for the first time, a major player like Segovia was playing an instrument designed by a maker with no knowledge or influence from flamenco. This was the first step in the making of

the modern classical guitar; the instrument that significantly affected the way non-Spanish makers viewed the design of the instrument, vis-a-vis the classical player.'

Old instruments

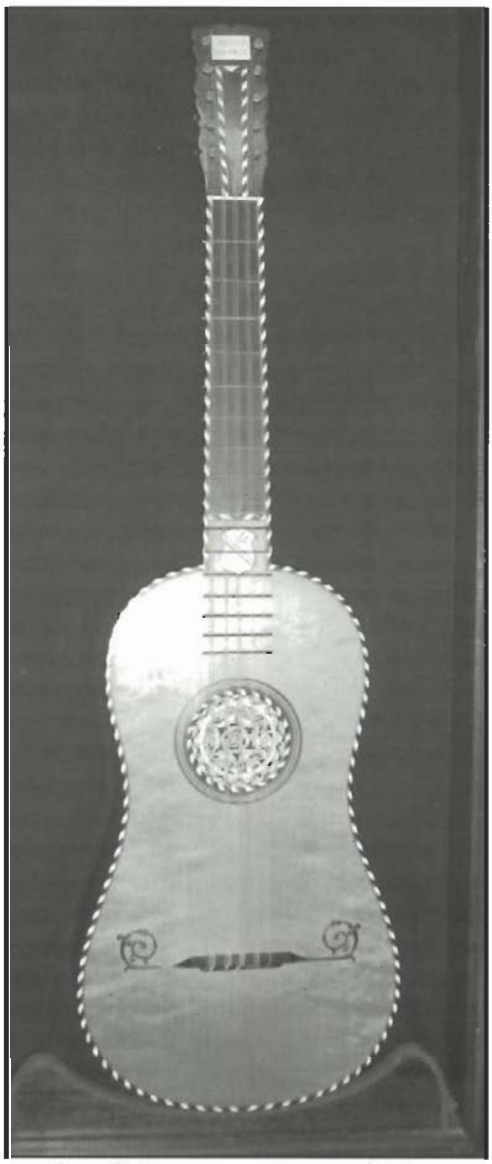
'Original instruments are the best teachers,' Bruné says. 'For this reason I have collected one guitar at a time. Some people might assume, "Oh, all Richard likes is old guitars". But nothing could be further from the truth. I've been lucky to have been able to study the icons of the best makers and the defining instruments. 99% of most luthiers will never get the chance to handle these kinds of instruments. This doesn't mean the guitar becomes frozen in form or in shape. It excites me to work with musicians who challenge the status quo.'

When asked if he has personally observed any truth about superior sound quality of wood grown from a cold climate, based on a report by a dendochronologist who recently speculated this might be the secret behind the sound of Stradivarius violins, Bruné quickly bursts that myth.

'Stradivari was born 1644. Given that a musical instrument grade spruce tree needs at least 150 years to come to maturity before felling, it seems to me that on that basis alone, the supposed Maunder Minimum effect would have to be ruled out, even if we ignore the time necessary for natural air seasoning,' he says.

As a bit of background, a December 8, 2003 CNN News story reported a theory proposed by a tree-ring dating analyst and climatologist that the prized resonance of Stradivarius violins might be due to superior acoustical properties developed in the wood due to the cold climate where it was grown. An historic cold spell known as the Maunder Minimum, had affected Europe at its coldest point during the years 1645-1715. The cold snap slowed tree growth, producing a denser molecular structure in the wood, and as Stradivari was born a year before the Maunder Minimum, the wood he used for his violins would have been from this unusual climatological period.

'Most Strads have been hot-rodded,' Bruné says, expressing doubt. 'And by this, I am referring specifically to the 19th century re-builds that virtually all save one, a viola from 1690 known as "Il Medcea", have experienced - in which the necks, bass bars, bridges, tailpieces, fingerboards, neck angles, string lengths, soundposts and often interior thickness graduations were changed from Strad's original work. The general repair and restoration processes which also incurred, both pre- and post hot-rodding, may or may not have had much impact depending on the nature, skill and severity of the work. However, it was the hot-rodding that changed the character of the original instruments and made them what I call "cultural composites."'



Bruné' Baroque guitar on display at the Smithsonian.

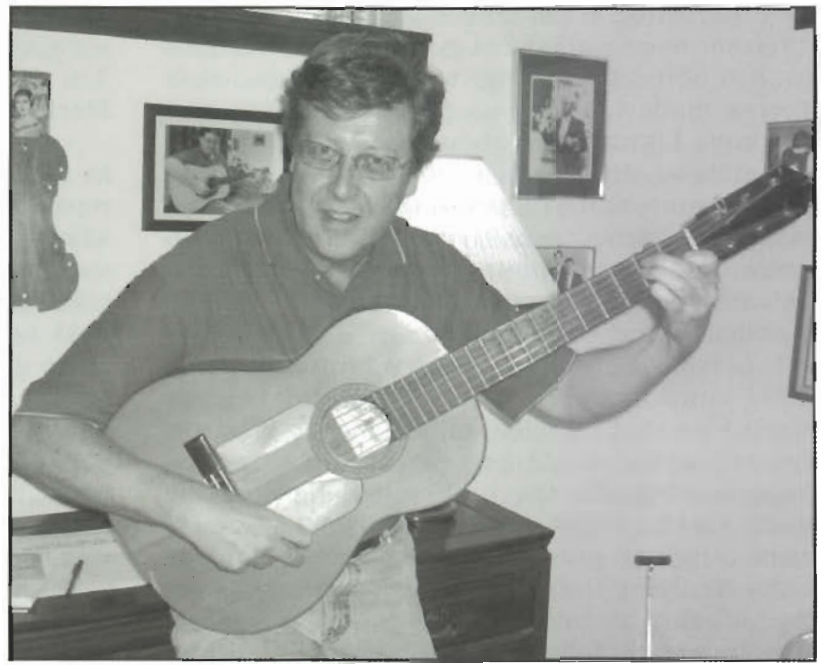
When asked about the Messiah violin at the Ashmolean Museum: a mint-condition, unplayed Stradivarius violin which has been authenticated by the same dendochronogist of this report, Bruné points out a very interesting twist to the story.

In 1998, a colleague of Bruné named Stewart Pollens, the stringed instrument expert of the Metropolitan Museum of New York, published an article in the *Journal of the Violin Society of America* stating that the earliest possible date that the spruce used for the front plate of the Messiah could have been cut down was 1738, the year after Stradivari passed away. During his examination of the instrument, Pollens began to have doubts about the authenticity of this instrument after observing several glaring inconsistencies between what he had read about the violin and what he actually observed: such as the wrong letter "G" imprinted on the instrument to identify the pattern the maker had used, the shape of the decorative f-holes on the violin's front, the unusual colour of the varnish, and the absence of repair patches documented by one of the violin's later owners, Count Cozio.

Pollens took detailed photographs of the violin's wood grain and sent them in for analysis to Dr. Peter Klein from Germany's Hamburg University, who determined in a blind study that the wood dated from 1738. Because of the stakes involved, the family which lent the violin on permanent loan to the Ashmolean had this study refuted by hiring their own dendochronologist who dated the wood to 1682 and the scientific debate apparently still continues.

Helen Hayes, President of the New York-based Violin Society of America, had remained circumspect in this CNN report by saying, 'But on the other hand, nobody in this field ... would ever say that if you put the best wood in the world in the hands of a mediocre maker that you would get a good instrument. So it is never a complete explanation.

'I think Helen Hayes was extraordinarily diplomatic to suggest that perhaps there are other areas in which one might look for the "secret" of Stradivari,' Bruné observes. 'Of course there is no "secret": that is a total chimera. Fine instruments are a complex recipe of which the ingredients are but one element. You can make a Volkswagon out of titanium, but it will still drive like a Volkswagon.'



Richard Bruné.

Classical versus Flamenco Guitars

Bruné points out that, unlike violinists, most guitarists tend to run out and get a new instrument rather than modify a instrument which has existed for centuries, except in rare cases. If there is any similar controversy in the guitar world about authentication, it might be the ongoing argument about what constitutes a classical guitar versus a flamenco guitar. Bruné has made it a personal quest to set the record straight about any supposed differences.

'World War II brought the advent of the nylon string but the classical guitar we play today is based on the Torres design from one hundred fifty years ago, developed originally for the gypsy flamenco market. While the music itself might be like comparing two different breeds of dogs, the instrument itself is not different. Much of the information out there about differences between the two guitars is the legacy given to us by Segovia.'

Bruné had given a lecture at the 1996 GFA which turned into an in-depth article for The Guitar Foundation of America's *Soundboard* magazine in 1997, outlining his researched definition of the cultural origins of the modern guitar. In an attempt to categorically define what structurally constitutes a classical guitar, Bruné points out that the instrument can come in many different shapes and sizes and that several music dictionary definitions, in their pursuit of brevity, remain disappointingly unclear and unprecise. Bruné created a foundation of a basic definition for a guitar and further delineated a Spanish model versus other models by lying out the mathematical dimensions of an Antonio de Torres guitar with measurement comparisons to non-Torres models, such as Joseph Benedid, Voboam, Panormo, Lacote, J.G. Scherzer, Grobert, C.F. Martin and J.D. Paul model guitars.

When he looked closer to examine what differences might exist between classical and flamenco guitars the terrain became contradictory. 'Let's assume that one can make an accurate description of either the classical or flamenco guitar. What would our criteria be? Materials? Design? Construction methods? Decoration? Usage?'

In his experience, Bruné has observed many instances where these criteria do not add up in a consistently definitive fashion. He points out that the 1884 Antonio de Torres 11-string guitar made of cypress with wooden pegs, owned by José Rojo Cid, fits the typical 'flamenco' guitar by modern definition but has no musical function as a flamenco guitar. And in the case of machine heads v. pegs, he has confirmed by the catalogues of both Manuel and Jose Ramírez that the choice of pegs or machines was purely an economic one. He also found that the presence or absence of a *golpeador* (tapping plate) is not an accurate indication either, as the famous papier maché Torres guitar listed in Romanillos' book appears to have been fitted originally with a *golpeador* and this same guitar was later reported to have belonged to Tárrega, who was not a flamenco player. This guitar passed on to Miguel Llobet, whose daughter sold it to the Museo de la Musica of Barcelona.

In his article, Bruné says that action height is not even an indicative criterion between a classical and flamenco, because during Torres' era most guitars were made with actions that are lower than current standard models of classical guitars. As for the cypress wood argument and differences in decoration, Bruné points out these are again, mainly economical. 'Native gypsies did not have much of money to purchase a guitar so cypress, being a locally-grown wood, was a much more affordable alternative to the finer imported woods.' While this could be seen

as criteria for what makes a flamenco guitar different from a classical guitar, Bruné returns to a quote, according to Romanillos, that Torres made his famous papier maché guitar 'to prove his theories about the relative unimportance of the woods used for the back and ribs.' Bruné adds, 'I personally doubt that a maker of Torres' sensitivity would have been unaware of the obvious acoustical differences between cypress, the rosewoods, maple, mahogany and other woods.

'I believe Segovia's later intentions, from 1936 onwards, were to divide the guitar community so that classical and flamenco forms of guitar playing would be separate. In this way, Segovia would be the undisputed head of the pack, and he could more easily divert any wayward attention guitarists might give to flamenco by implying that it was a lesser art not worthy of the attention of "serious" students. "Rudimentary folkloric divertissment..." and "nervous hands of the flamencos" were two of his pet catch phrases. By making sure everyone was on the same wavelength with the instrument, not to mention musical editions, fingerings and approach, ensured that he would always be the titular head of the school,' Bruné says.

'I have always maintained that Segovia's search for legitimacy for the guitar was but a poor metaphor for his true life goal which was to bring legitimacy to himself, understandable given his birth status. The guitar was merely the media through which he pursued this goal so arduously. I don't think money had anything to do with this, other than Segovia's fear of the difficulties he might face if the flamencos were appearing in the same legitimate halls he coveted for building his legitimacy. Segovia understood the popular attraction of flamenco, and he did everything in his power to make sure it stayed in the tablaos and didn't cross over to legitimate concert venues. Despite his efforts, some of the more prominent flamencos such as Ramón Montoya, Sabicas, and later, Paco de Lucía, experienced successes in these very same venues. But, by this time, the damage was already done in terms of creating a kind of musical apartheid, at least in the minds of the Segovia followers. Classical guitar and flamenco guitar now tend to be separate audiences.

As a maker, Bruné feels all the best makers are those steeped in flamenco-playing background 'because the guitar-making process is ultimately an illogical, counterintuitive one. And while makers with classical leanings are always trying to get the diabolical personality out of the guitar, flamencos understand and accept it.'

"I have always maintained that Segovia's search for legitimacy for the guitar was but a poor metaphor for his true life goal"

Marie Antoinette's guitar

In January of 1983, Bruné received a guitar for repair from a Swiss woman, Rosemarie Haefliger, who had kept the original newspaper clipping from the *Neue Würzburger Beitung*, dated July 2, 1850, offering the guitar for sale along with other household items. The advert, placed by the woman's great, great grandmother, Ottilia Fabri, states that guitar belonged to Queen Marie Antoinette and was brought to Würzberg by French immigrants. The guitar did not sell and while there is no way to prove that Marie Antoinette actually owned this guitar, Bruné is of the opinion that her ownership was likely.

'The owner also had in her possession the diaries written by Ottilia which spoke of her grandfather's acquisition of this instrument from French immigrants, who stated it had belonged to Marie Antoinette, so there is a second layer of history covering this attribution,' he says.

Bruné describes the five-course, spruce-topped pegboard guitar as a fine example of an instrument built between roughly 1650-1700 by a master luthier in his prime. The guitar was in excellent condition, considering its age, and features a rosette of alternating ebony and ivory slashes, ebony and ivory rings and remains of gilded parchment rose. The back of the neck featured maple veneered with a 1.5mm ebony and ivory checkerboard pattern. Bruné provided photographs and a full text description of this guitar in his detailed article for *American Lutherie*'s Fall 1989 issue, Number 19. Upon Ms. Haefliger's death, the guitar became part of the collection at the Historiches Museum of Basel in Switzerland, overseen by curator Dr. Martin Kirnbauer.

'Unfortunately, the original copy of Rosemarie Haefliger's restoration report was lost during the period after her death,' Bruné says. 'I have a second original copy in my archives but I was able to recreate a second copy for the Museum, which they have now. Unfortunately, the original 19th century diaries, which I had seen when Rosemarie was alive describing how the guitar came from Marie Antoinette, were lost. But I still have the original page of geneology Rosemarie wrote out for me in which she mentions the diaries and the history of the guitar. I had wanted to make copies of these too to keep with the restoration report and history, but it never came to pass.'

Whilst visiting Bruné's studio, at the time of writing, he had waiting for repair an 1850 double-necked Scherzer and Charlie Byrd's 1928 Hauser guitar. When asked if he's ever encountered a guitar

he could not repair, Bruné's wry answer is, 'This depends entirely on the owner, and what they are willing or not willing to pay for the work that needs to be done.'

Next generation

Bruné's 22 year old son Marshall is already a talented luthier who conducts masterclasses on French polishing techniques, in addition to having authored an article on 19th Century American maker James Ashborn, a contemporary of C.F. Martin, for *Vintage Guitar Magazine*. The experience of making a violin with his father when he was 9 years old apparently made an impression, as Marshall Bruné is currently studying with Peter Prier at the Violin Making School of America in Salt Lake City.

As for the future of classical guitar, Richard Bruné fully expects to see the guitar achieve the same status and respect given to any of the more established musical instruments within his lifetime. 'I say this because of the attitudes I see from parents of the newest generation of players those in the ten years old and under age, many of whom are only dimly aware of Segovia, but their parents, and this is key, have absolutely no reservations about their children studying classical guitar. Hence, the children consider it to be no different than any other instrument studied by their peers and equal in status. As for flamenco becoming accepted, it is slowly becoming accepted by some established teachers, especially those who are more open minded.

'The largest danger here is that flamenco is evolving so quickly away from the flamenco I grew up with (and what many ignorant of the art conceptualize as flamenco) into something more allied with jazz than classical. This may ultimately become the stumbling block of acceptance among those classical professors who have no jazz background and are intimidated by this element manifest in modern flamenco. I think the compositional element expected in flamenco is very intimidating to those trained only to be interpreters but not composers.

'Certainly this was Segovia's Achilles heel, and I suspect it is one of the many reasons he denigrated flamenco as he had with Barrios.

Segovia had similarly denigrated Barrios for many reasons, not the least because Barrios was a skilled composer. Again, I feel that Segovia was very intimidated by this skill and feared aficionados of the guitar would have their attention drawn to Barrios and be tempted to make unkind comparisons between the two artists based on compositional skills.

Don't forget Segovia came from a flamenco environment in which individual compositional skill trumps all other talents. Segovia was one of the judges at the 1922 Granada Cante Jondo contest organized by Falla, Miguel de Unamuno, Federico Garcia Lorca and other leading Spanish intellectuals. Segovia performed during the contest playing *por soleares* accompanying Federico Garcia Lorca reciting one of his poems. Segovia knew flamenco far more intimately than he ever let on in his later career (post WW II), but he also knew he did not have the compositional skills and so his choices of composers were confined to those who were not touring professional guitarists. Hence his unkind comments about Barrios. There was plenty else he didn't like about Barrios, too: he was using steel strings, dressed in Indian garb, constantly on the verge of failure, etcetera.

Lest any get the wrong idea of my own feelings toward Segovia, I should stress that I understand and fully appreciate I am able to have the career I have today because of the fruitful and long career Segovia maintained. That he was so anti-flamenco later in life I partially understand, though I don't condone it, and given the pluses of his accomplishments, in the end I think they outweigh the enormous damage he did in creating this apartheid between the two arts which is still felt in so many spoken and unspoken ways. In time this will change and the enormity of Segovia's positive influence for so many players will ultimately outweigh his shortcomings. Like many great artists, he was a very complex person, and the true accounting of his life and influence are yet to be written.'

When asked if it were possible to go back in time to study with any one maker, Bruné says, 'Where to begin? I couldn't possibly limit it to one maker because there are so many and I would have so much to ask. However, I would give anything to travel back to Sevilla in 1850-1860 and be the fly on the wall of Antonio Torres' shop. This was the time when the market-place was exploding with demand, with nearly thirty Cafe Cantantes, and Torres was consolidating the features and design which defined his model and has helped make today's modern instrument. It would be very instructive to see first hand the market forces that propelled this, and also to understand the dedication to details that Torres imparted into even his modest models. This would be a very worthy moment. Not having a time machine, I have tried to make this time travel possible by studying the instruments, music and lives of all the masters, so hopefully I can learn from them, and it is from this study I have formed my opinions and notions of the history of the instrument.'

For further reading:

Vintage Guitar *Andre Segovia's Hauser, Built in 1937* by R.E. Bruné, October 2003

GFA Soundboard, *Cultural Origins of the Modern Guitar* by R.E. Bruné, Fall 1997 (based on a lecture given at the GFA Festival in St. Louis, October 24, 1996)

American Lutherie, *Andalusia and the Modern Guitar*, by R.E. Bruné, Number 22/Summer 1990

American Lutherie, *A Baroque Guitar Restoration* by R.E. Bruné, Number 19, Fall 1989

Vintage Guitar, *James Ashborn: Innovative Entrepreneur*, by M.E. Bruné, April 2005