



The Guitar Man Accolades for a local luthier

GEORGE PASSMORE

“CAN’T BE THAT HARD to make a guitar — it’s nothing more than a few bits of wood held together with glue.” The flippant remark offered by his dinner guest a few years ago left Rod Capper flabbergasted.

The concert guitar-maker sums up his craft as a cross between building furniture and constructing model aircraft. “It also takes an understanding of physics, with a bit of intuition and creative flair added to the mix.”

The spicy scent of cedar permeates the air in Capper’s humidity-controlled workshop — a

converted room in his Torbay, North Shore, home — where the coniferous timber is stacked in thin sheets alongside spruce and rosewood. When wood is not available locally, the luthier treks to Europe to hand-select supplies. The scarcity of traditional guitar-making timbers has spurred Capper, 60, to experiment with alternatives from abroad and New Zealand natives: matai, kauri and black maire.

The timber is aged and dried before use, which can take several years. Then it’s roughly 175 hours from plank to product, “depending on

how many coffee breaks I have. And I only build when I’m in the right frame of mind.”

The guitars, which sell for about \$6000 each, are crafted two at a time: “It makes it easier when you’re waiting for glue to dry on one piece...It’s not mass production.”

Capper comes from a musical family; his mother, aunt and sister were accomplished pianists and singers. When adolescence ended his soprano singing, he started strumming. A hankering for a better guitar than was available at the time triggered his first tinkering in the workshop.

“I used green wood on my first attempt though, so it cracked.”

In 1967, Capper went to Spain in the hope of hiring himself out as a guitar maker’s apprentice, but no-one was willing to take on the 19-year-old. “I got the impression the Spanish were reluctant to share the secrets of the trade.”

It wasn’t a waste of a P&O ticket, though. “I ended up having lessons in Alcoy [in Alicante, Spain] with one of the leading classical guitarists of the time, Jose Luis Gonzalez.”

Returning home, Capper demoted his dream to hobby status and pursued a career as a qualified electronics engineer. But he continued to squirrel away guitar-making parts and ideas.

Nearly 35 years after his first attempt, attending a lecture by British luthier Paul Fischer combined with his own misgivings about a recently purchased Spanish instrument inspired Capper to craft another guitar. To maximise sound projection, he developed a unique construction on the internal bracing. Local players were enthusiastic about his efforts; one even bought two guitars on spec after hearing his new guitar played.

The response gave Capper the confidence to wind up his electronics repair business. “To succeed in the art of building classical guitars, it must be your primary focus. It takes most of your time, energy and concentration. You’re always thinking about the process, taking it everywhere you go.”

The obsession paid off. Since 1999 Capper has produced 57 instruments — sold locally and overseas — from his modest workshop. New Zealand professional classical guitarist Bruce Paine is a return customer; he recorded his latest album using two of the five Rod Capper instruments in his collection.

“The quality and sound of the instrument is comparable to many top overseas makes such as Daniel Friedrich and Miguel Rodriguez,” says Paine. “They have great clarity and balance across the tonal range, with a truly expressive, singing quality.”

Capper plans to continue his craft as long as consumer demand endures — and the timbers are still available. “The day I’m forced to resort to using man-made materials will be the day I stop making guitars.”

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