

FROM A LUTHIER'S NOTES:

DANIEL FRIEDERICH

A sort of obituary by Sebastian Stenzel

I have never met Daniel Friederich in person, yet he has always been present in my work as a guitar maker. I was lucky to already see quite a number of his guitars during my apprenticeship and I have repaired and maintained many in the years since. Most of what I know about Friederich I have "read" in his guitars, and I dare say that this is actually a rather intimate way to come to know a luthier colleague.

If I was asked to attribute a single word to Friederich's guitars, it would be "elegance". Every detail in his guitars has that quality. His plantilla (since 1970) (the outline of the body of the guitar) is, with its low waist and straight loin, considered by many the most elegant ever designed, and it has in fact been copied many times, especially by Japanese makers. His rosette design set a new standard in craftsmanship and refinement, which in my opinion has not been surpassed yet. More than anything, the elegance shows in the sound of his guitars. Every note is beautiful, mellow yet powerful, and perfectly balanced in all dimensions.

All Friederich guitars I have seen were first class instruments, with one exception, if you include longevity as a parameter: one of the guitars Alvaro Pierri had played for some years had suddenly lost its power, which was caused by a mechanical fatigue of the very thin soundboard (cedar, around 1.8 mm). Friederich seems to have tested the limits of how thin he could work the soundboards during the 1980s. While his soundboards from the late 1970s usually had an average thickness of 2.3 mm, during the 80s the thickness decreased every year in very small increments.¹ At the end of the 80s, he went back to a little thicker soundboards again (thick being relative, here). Personally, I like his guitars from the late 70s and early 80s the best, and those from the 90s till he stopped working in 2015. This means that Friederich has consistently built at the absolute top level practically throughout his career as a guitar maker.

It is commonly said that Friederich was influenced by Robert Bouchet, that he even learned guitar making from him. Friederich himself recounts how he was encouraged by Bouchet when he showed him the 15th guitar he had made, and that he received Bouchet's help and advice over the course of some years. But even in Friederich's early guitars (beyond N°15, of course), I fail to see much in common with Bouchet's. I rather got the impression that

¹ Since I have measured only about a dozen of Friederich's guitars of the period mentioned, this observation could be a statistical freak, but I doubt it. I would like to know if any of my colleagues could confirm this observation.

although they liked and respected each other, they were also well aware of how different they both were in their approach to guitar making, and, I suppose, in character.

Friederich's first guitar was a copy of one by Francisco Simplicio, which he built in 1955 at the instigation of his teacher, Christian Aubin, who himself had made a copy of his own Torres guitar. (This Torres had been badly damaged and was extensively repaired by Bouchet). According to Friederich himself, it was Aubin who taught him the principles of Spanish guitar making.

It is clear in every detail of Friederich's guitars that he had his own mind and a very clear sound ideal, one of the four main prerequisites for any true master instrument maker. The second, skillfulness, he had literally in his blood, coming from a family of *ebeniste*, for which the English "cabinet maker" is a poor translation, because the French *ebeniste* were also masters in marquetry, inlays and elaborate varnishing techniques.

The third is understanding, and I think it is fair to say that Friederich was the first scientific guitar maker. In 1962, the great guitarist Alexandre Lagoya introduced Friederich to Émile Leipp, head of the Musical Acoustic Laboratory of the University IV in Paris, who, I am certain, influenced Friederich's work more than Bouchet did.

The fourth essential prerequisite for an instrument maker is a clear concept of construction, based on understanding of the functional principles of the instrument. His own concept of construction Friederich developed during the 60s and basically he never changed it, he only adapted it to specific wood properties and kept refining it. Likewise, he never changed his rosette design, nor the design of his head stock. His famous and now often copied head stock with its "lance" and raised edges of the windows shows another facet of Friederich's character: he put beauty and proportion over functionality. Some might accuse me of sacrilege, but I always found it annoying that it is almost impossible to put strings on a Friederich guitar without the outer strings touching the edge of the head stock window.

All in all, Friederich manifested these four aspects of mastery in a focused and undistracted way that I can see only in very few other guitar makers. Partly because of Friederich's own humility, his importance for the evolution of the classical guitar in general and the French school of guitar making in particular is, although acknowledged, still underestimated.

The list of renowned guitarist who played Friederich's guitars is too long to list here. Suffice to say that while guitarists are notorious for changing their instrument much more often than other instrumentalists, many Friederich players wouldn't play any other guitar.

A truly special guitar is a guitar Friederich built in 1977, N°437, with movable frets to allow tuning the guitar in any meantone temperament. Pierre René Lacôte in Paris and Louis

Panormo in London had made such guitars in the 1840s and 50s, i.e., before the general acceptance of equal temperament. Friederich's musical sensitivity was such that he was well aware of the price of this 'equally wrong' tuning. I think that he had built this guitar 50 years too early to be accepted by the guitar community.

In all the beauty and perfection of Friederich's guitars I always also sensed a profound joyful sadness, such as comes from the awareness of the limitations of life. He is often quoted saying that to make good guitars, solitude was essential. He also compared himself several times to a Carthusian monk, which always struck me as a little odd, not only because of the extremely strict rules of the Carthusian order, but especially for their eschewal of any musical instruments.

Friederich was born on 16th of January 1932 in Paris. His mother died when he was still a small child, and half of his childhood he grew up with relatives in the countryside where his father had sent him, probably with the best of motives: to keep him safe and better nourished than life in Paris under German occupation could provide. After the war, at the age of 13, his father called him back to Paris where he started his professional education in a school for fine cabinetry.

I know of one son, Sylvain, born 1965, but I have no other knowledge whatsoever of his private life.

A monk indeed. His guitars were his holy scriptures, his contemplation and meditation, his redemption and his peace.

Daniel Friederich died on 4th of November 2020. In his guitars, he lives on.



Daniel Friederich in his workshop, ca. 2013
Picture by Alberto Martinez