

After death of master guitar maker, his teacher fills the void

By Hector Saldana
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SAN ANTONIO - When innovative New York classical guitar luthier Thomas Humphrey died suddenly last year, more than a dozen of his much-in-demand guitars were left in various stages of completion.

In a rarified world where waiting lists are measured in years, those prized instruments - they sell for \$15,000 - could not remain in limbo.

Enter stage left guitar maker David Santo, who helped teach Humphrey the craft in 1970 at Gurian Guitars in New York.

Humphrey's widow enlisted Santo, who hadn't seen his old apprentice for nearly 40 years, to finish the Brazilian rosewood instruments, which are known for their volume, singing sustain, and projection.

But Santo doesn't take any credit for Humphrey's slanted soundboards, elevated fretboard, X-bracing, and use of nontraditional materials.

"They're clearly Humphrey guitars," he said. "His classical guitars - he really went pretty far out in terms of unusual design and innovative stuff."

Santo, 62, sees his task in romantic, almost epic, terms.

"I was his teacher, and 40 years later, I'm finishing my student's instruments, and he became the great master," he said. "It's a strange circumstance of events, really. For the student to pass away, and the teacher to complete his work, is very romantic. There is the feeling of his spirit being here in the shop. The romance and intrigue are part of the story."

Humphrey's spirit permeates this month's Southwest Guitar Festival and International Competition.

Sergio Assad's "Interchange for Guitar Quartet and Orchestra" concerto, which premiered at the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet's concert with the San Antonio Symphony last Friday, was dedicated to the guitar maker.

Assad and his brother, Odair, have long played Humphrey guitars. They are treasured.

"I don't know how much it's worth because I'm never going to sell mine," said close friend Bill Kanengiser of the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet. "There was a mystique before he died. Tom was always looking for the next great idea to revolutionize the classical guitar. . . . He was an uneven genius. He sometimes built brilliant guitars, greater than anyone's ever made, and sometimes he built a couple of dogs."

The plucky chatter among connoisseurs of classical guitars, if not exactly deafening, is certainly enthusiastic - not only for the acclaimed instruments (most notably the signature Millennium), but also for the man.

In his younger days, Humphrey's New York apartment was often a crash pad for performers on tour.

Classical guitarist Bruce Holzman, a professor at Florida State University and a competition judge at the festival, was one of Humphrey's friends and customers.

Holzman recalled that his eccentric, cello-playing friend often had an odd number of guitars going at once.

"I asked him, 'Why do you do seven at a time?' He said, 'Because I have seven hooks to hang them on,' " Holzman said. "He had a very artistic soul."

Humphrey's designs were a radical departure from, say, the heralded handmade guitars of Puerto Rican maker Manuel Velazquez, whose instruments were played by Andres Segovia.

Luthier Michael Gurian presented a lecture about Humphrey shortly after he died. Gurian was the first to give him a job in New York.

Most apprentices don't go on to become master builders. "He was very focused," Gurian said from Seattle.

Kanengiser knew that look. "No matter what guitar he had just finished, he believed, in an almost Don Quixote-like way, that it was the greatest instrument he had ever built. He had this incredible enthusiasm about it, to the core of his being." ■