LIUTERIA NARRATA n.1 - 26 March 2025

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The reasons for a project

The Liuteria Narrata project tells the way in which luthiers and performers collaborate in the creation of instruments that are on the one hand the result of a study of the works of some important historical luthiers and, on the other, the satisfaction of some specific needs of use. What are the factors that led us to choose to dedicate ourselves to Francisco Simplicio and his instruments?

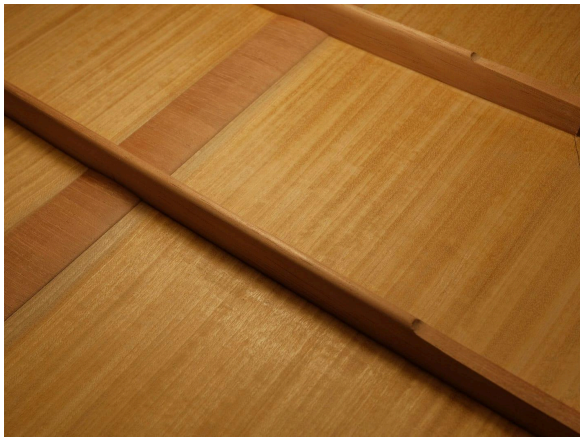
First of all, there is a strictly subjective aspect of sound fascination. The Liuteria Narrata group shares a love for the sound of that line of luthiers, the so-called Barcelona school, which finds its most illustrious exponents in Francisco Simplicio (1874-1932) and his teacher Enrique Garcia (1868-1922). Common to these instruments is a relatively slow sound emission, a construction aspect deliberately sought. The resulting instruments have a less aggressive, persuasive timbre, in which the contours of the sound are particularly soft and elegant. In a sense, the sound elegance of the Barcelona school of the twenties and thirties is opposed to the speed and clarity of attack of the instruments built in the same years in Madrid: drier, more percussive and influenced by the flamenco musical world.

Enrique Garcia, who as we have said was Francisco Simplicio's direct teacher, had closely studied the works of Antonio Torres (1817-1892), the Stradivarius of the modern classical guitar. It was precisely the difficult restoration of the Torres FE-17, the first of the three Torres instruments owned by Francisco Tarrega (1952-1909), that allowed Garcia to investigate the construction aspect of the elasticity of the soundboard, a central point in Torres's work. It was the starting point of a research that aimed to enhance, in addition to the promptness of the response, also the stability of the sound, which was central in the early twentieth century, years in which

the guitar began to compete with the greatness - also in sound - of other more renowned instruments such as the violin or the piano.

Simplicio gathered inspiration and expressed it in a particularly prolific production, which amounts to more than four hundred guitars. From Garcia, Simplicio also borrowed a taste for generous decorations, creating instruments not only with elaborate mosaic rosettes, but also with fine embossed bas-reliefs on the headstock, strongly indebted to the art-deco aesthetic taste. The opulence, sometimes ostentatious, of the art-deco taste was in turn typical of the artistic context of Barcelona, the richest and most culturally open center in all of Spain at the time.

The Liuteria Narrata group is aware that the work of approaching these particular instruments and building new ones inspired by them must deal with particular needs related to the way in which the profession of the classical guitarist is configured today. Carrying out the profession of concert performer today means dealing, both in solo and Chamber music contexts, with a vast literature that ranges from transcriptions of pieces for lute to the most recent contemporary literature. This must be done by playing on pitches between 440 and 442 Hz, higher than those used in historical instruments, and using nylon strings instead of gut ones. Furthermore, one must deal with the protection of protected plant species: the Rio rosewood, or Dalbergia Nigra, which was the wood of choice for the ribs and backs of many historical Luthiers is now a species protected by the CITES convention.



The first aspect we had to deal with was the essence of the back and sides. Rio rosewood, precisely because of CITES, is a difficult alternative due to its high costs and could create significant problems if the new instrument were to cross the border. For this reason we decided to use satinwood (Chloroxykolon swietenia), a

typical essence of the Indian subcontinent that has characteristics of average weight per cubic meter and density similar to those of Rio rosewood (with which, moreover, it shares the ease in creating cracks and fissures). It is a choice that follows the one Simplicio made for instrument no. 240 of 1929, our main reference as regards the appearance of the wood essences and decorations.

The second is related to the functionality of the soundboard. In the previous paragraph we specified how a characteristic of the instruments of Simplicio and his teacher Garcia was the relative slowness in the attack of the soundboard. At first Simplicio, following Garcia's example, built guitars with extremely thin soundboards, supported by an asymmetrical bracing with eight fan braces. In this way he obtained his personal compromise between the ease of attack of the soundboard and its stability. At a later time Simplicio developed instruments that, while maintaining the asymmetrical pattern with eight fan braces, exploited more generous thicknesses of the soundboard, especially to adapt to climates other than that of Barcelona (these were guitars mainly intended for export). Finally, the luthier returned to thinner thicknesses, abandoning the eight asymmetrical fan braces model and revisiting the symmetrical pattern with seven fan braces that had been one of the main trademarks of Antonio Torres.

The Simplicio instrument whose functionality we want to approach, namely no. 288 from 1930, has a relatively thin top, supported by a symmetrical seven fan braces pattern. In building our instrument, we chose a 1990 Austrian spruce top, belonging to a set selected by José Romanillos (1932-2022) and purchased on the occasion of one of his violin making courses in Siguënza. This top was chosen because it has a fairly wide grain, and for this reason is lighter and tends to be very elastic. The intrinsic lightness of this soundboard, balanced with a medium thickness, allows us to combine the advantages of a thick top (fullness of tone, long-lasting sound) with those of a light top (prompt response). To get an idea of how Simplicio worked on the elasticity of the soundboard, we refer to this link in which Gabriele Lodi, speaking about the restoration of

a guitar by the Barcelona luthier, describes in detail the management of the deformation and the elasticity itself.

The last feature we wanted to borrow from Simplicio is the grain orientation of the Spanish cedar neck. The Cedrella Odorata wood used in guitar luthiery for necks can be obtained by a radial cut of the plant, that is, following the medullar rays of the tree from the center of the trunk towards the bark, or by a tangential cut, parallel to the growth rings of the tree. The radial cut gives the Cedrella neck a certain rigidity and, by virtue of this rigidity, favors a percussive transmission of the sound. The tangential cut, on the contrary, is less stable in a dimensional sense, but for this very reason it allows the Cedrella neck to better accommodate both the vibrations of the soundboard and the natural curvature that the neck assumes under the effect of the traction of the strings.

For our instrument we will use a Cedrella cut in a transverse direction, exploiting the characteristics of elasticity allowed by this cut. Furthermore - and we have reason to believe that it would have been shared by Simplicio himself - the tangential cut allows for an astonishing flame effect, which enhances the overall aesthetic result of the instrument and increases the overall impression of elegance and prestige.