

# Meet the Maker: Arie van Spronsen

by Sjaak Elmendorp



**A**RIE VAN SPRONSEN lives in the city of Alphen aan den Rijn in The Netherlands. I met him a few years ago when I moved to the area and he has impressed me with his dedication to the craft and his love for the guitar. He describes himself as a “hobbyist with a professional attitude,” meaning that he does not build musical instruments to make money, but rather to create a great experience for the player. I can testify that in terms of design, sound, playability, and workmanship, there is no doubt that a professional is at work, with great intuition and affection for the materials he is processing. He does not take a hugely scientific approach, but has a keen interest in the research of others and is always looking to implement their findings and build on their foundations. For example, he is now using the strobe-tuning method described in Roger Siminoff’s excellent book *The Art of Tap Tuning*.

Arie was a carpenter and talented guitar player in the late 1970s when he lost part of his left hand in a tragic accident at work. Clearly his days as a guitar player were over, but his love for the instrument didn’t waver. After studying the pioneering books of Irving Sloane and Arthur Overholzer, he set out to build his first guitar from lovely Honduras mahogany table tops and some fine European spruce.

Starting professional life as a carpenter has certainly helped Arie become a luthier. Whereas most beginning luthiers need to learn the essentials of using power tools, as well as sharpening chisels, planes, and scrapers, this was already in the bag for Arie. An experienced luthier may not think about it too much anymore, but give a plane to anyone who has never used one and set them to work on a piece of cross-grained mahogany and you are in for a laugh. Also, the basic understanding of wood types, humidity response, and even tool and material suppliers will give anyone with woodworking training a head start in the journey to become a musical instrument maker.

Let me briefly describe a few elements of the evolution of the amateur lutherie scene in The Netherlands and Belgium. Although, in the past, several smaller companies have built guitars for the public, these all went away before Arie and I got into it. There were a few craftsman custom-building high-end instruments for professional guitarists, but an enthused amateur community, such as we saw in the USA in those days, was lacking. Arie is my senior by about ten years, but I built my first guitar just before he did in the late 1970s; that was pure luck. Cees van Loon also built guitars and sold tools and materials to high-end luthiers. He was the owner of the local guitar shop, Vox Humana in Vlaarding, which is now the leading lutherie materials and tool supplier over here. He was kind enough to sell me his only copy of Irving



Sloane’s book *Classical Guitar Construction* and invited me into his workshop to teach me the basics. I purchased a shaped neck, some maple and spruce that was already thickness sanded, and a rosette. From that I made a classical guitar I still play to this day, although when befriended guitar makers come to the house, it usually finds itself in some cupboard or other.

Arie was not that fortunate, but his experience as a carpenter made the literature on the topic more accessible to him. He met with the small community of professional builders to acquire (or copy) some of their tools and started from there. A lot has changed. We now have well-attended annual gatherings and exhibitions of various groups of amateur guitar builders, who mix with professional luthiers as well as suppliers. To see a list of amateur and professional luthiers in Belgium and The Netherlands, go to [www.gitaarmaarwaar.com](http://www.gitaarmaarwaar.com) and click on “gitaarbouwers.”

The Internet has changed the way we procure materials and tools, of course, but most luthiers still enjoy an expedition to a specialty wood store. They go to the *Fijnhouthandel* in Amsterdam or Arnhem, and make trips to the many tonewood specialists in Germany to handpick their materials. One thing our American readers may not appreciate is that most of the wood at a regular lumber yard in Europe is spruce. If you see someone tearing apart a huge stack of lumber at the home improvement center, looking for that one quartersawn, straight-grained piece, you can bet he is likely to spend his free time creating some musical instrument. Width is usually the issue, but for brace wood, blocks, linings, and such, lumber yard material over here is just fine.

After the proverbial table tops, Arie moved up to the use of Brazilian, Indian, and Cuban rosewoods.



He often raids a hardwood supplier nearby for high-quality Honduras mahogany and is keen to pick up more exotic woods such as fruit woods, quilted and flamed maple, myrtle, and snakewood. He is not afraid to experiment with materials, and is always ready to share his learnings. For tops he will travel to Germany to handpick Alpine and Sitka spruce sets, but has also used (sinker) redwood, cedar, and mahogany.



As a finish, he prefers French polish for the top, back, and sides, and likes to use True Oil for the necks to get a satin gloss and super slippery feel for easy playing. Arie will follow his customers' specific preferences, but not without a friendly, yet persistent debate!

Nuts and saddles are made from cow bone, supplied by a befriended butcher. The bones are boiled in water to remove any remaining meat and tendon, then bleached in the sun. Anyone who has undertaken this process will







*This was a one-off mandolin/bouzouki ordered by a Greek customer. Note the extra quarter tone frets between 1st and 2nd frets, and the 3rd and 4th frets.*

testify to the rather rich smell that is produced. There was a question in *AL#132* about fats oozing out of the bone into the wood. This can certainly happen when the bone is cut too close to the marrow channel. Just stay a few millimeters away from it, and the nuts and saddles will be quite dry. A simple wipe with a good solvent will yield perfectly usable parts. Arie and I both use material prepared in this way and we never see fat migrating into the wood.

In his forty years as a luthier, Arie has built classical, steel string, resonator, and Gypsy guitars, as well as Weissenborns, F-5 mandolins, Celtic harps, tipples, ukuleles, and Irish bouzoukis. He specifically likes the OM platform to try out new materials and methods, as it balances flexibility with great sound and playability. All this is done in a small shed where he houses his power tools, plus a converted bedroom for assembly and finishing.

To recover the cost of tools and materials, some of his instruments are custom-built for local artists, or sold in specialty musical instrument stores. Most, however, are given away or donated to charity. One example is the annual European World of Bluegrass festival in The Netherlands where a Van Spronssen instrument has been the main item for years in the charity auction.

I'm an amateur builder myself, and there are a few cases where I have come around to doing things Arie's way. First is rigorous humidity control in storage, sawing, sanding, gluing, and finishing. All this is to create instruments with consistent humidity levels, which avoids stresses when moisture equilibrates. Humidity is as much about discipline, Arie stresses, as it is about equipment. His workshop (a bedroom) and wood storage (the bedroom cupboard) are modest in size, which helps. Also, keeping doors and windows closed at all times is an important part of the routine. A simple €300 Delonghi dehumidifier runs 24/7, and operates in tandem with an equally simple humidifier in the wintertime. This keeps the humidity between 40% and 50% year-round in the workshop and the wood storage cupboard. The humidity and temperatures are carefully monitored and do seem to hold well, even when Arie is absent for a few days. The climate in Holland certainly helps in that ambient humidity and temperatures are fairly mild and stable.

Second is Arie's approach to making his rather thin necks as stable and playable as possible. He employs two carbon reinforcing strips and a two-way truss rod for dimensional stability. His guitar fretboards are tapered in thickness from 4mm at nut end to 6mm at the soundhole so that the fretboard can lie flat on the soundboard and still get the proper saddle height. Arie does not build relief into the neck, but expects it to creep in over time due to string tension. And the double-acting truss rod could bring the nut up and induce some relief if need be.

I was impressed by the attention to detail in his fretting method, which avoids the well-known and annoying problem of fret ends sticking out of the fretboard in times of very low humidity. Also, his finished frets look, and more importantly, feel great. It starts with filing a bevel into the fret groove. Not only does this greatly facilitate hammering in the frets, but it also prevents damaging the fretboard when later on in life, pulling out worn frets. The fretwire is first bent to the correct radius, then frets are cut to slightly (0.5mm on each end) shorter than the fretboard width. Fret ends are bullet-nosed with a fret file, then polished smooth with 800-grit paper and a barber's leather strop before being carefully pressed in. Frets are not glued and the frets are levelled and polished before gluing the fretboard to the neck.

Some of the discussions between us revolve around the topic of aging of the sound of the guitar. A much debated topic in *AL* and other forums is the mystique around pre-war Martins and other icons of the stringed instrument world. Popular belief will say that cedar develops its voice rapidly, almost immediately, and spruce a tad slower, while mahogany can take years to finally bed down. Arie suspects that stresses built into the instruments during assembly are a key contributor to this phenomenon, and he thus takes great care that components fit accurately, requiring little, if any, clamping pressure. This topic certainly requires more detailed experimentation, but I do believe Arie is onto something here.

Although now in his seventies, he has not been slowing down. On the contrary, we are looking forward to many more instruments and pearls of wisdom to come out of his workshop. See his website, [www.vanspronsseinguitars.com](http://www.vanspronsseinguitars.com), where you will find lots of instructive photos and videos. —