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# Experience, authority and tradition in the making and playing of classical guitars: a hermeneutic interpretation

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The making of musical instruments is an ancient human pursuit. However, to a large extent, this art-form has evaded academic and philosophical enquiry. Most of the theoretical work on the subject is illustrative and includes technical or practical approaches. This article links the building of classical guitars, or luthiery, in a South African and global manifestation, with the writings of hermeneutic thinker Hans-Georg Gadamer. It will investigate notions of experience, authority and tradition relating to luthiery. Interviews with selected South African luthiers will be used to substantiate the relevance of Gadamer's thoughts to luthiery.

## Ervaring, gesag en tradisie in die maak en bespeling van klassieke ghitare: 'n hermeneutiese interpretasie

Die bou van musiekinstrumente is 'n antieke menslike bedrywigheid. Hierdie kunsvorm het egter tot 'n groot mate akademiese ondersoek ontwyk, met meeste teoretiese werk hieroor van illustratiewe, tegniese of praktiese aard. Hierdie artikel beoog om die bou van klassieke ghitare in sy Suid-Afrikaanse en internasionale manifestasie met die denke van hermeneutiese filosoof Hans-Georg Gadamer te verbind. Spesifieke idees oor ervaring, outoriteit en tradisie in die bou van ghitare sal in hierdie verband ondersoek word. Onderhoude met geselekteerde Suid-Afrikaanse ghitaarbouers sal gebruik word ter stawing van die toepassing van Gadamer se denke tot die bedryf.

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The making of musical instruments is an ancient human pursuit. Although much has been written on the topic of musical instrument making, much of this body of work occurs in an illustrative, technical or practical idiom. The focus of this article is to identify and interrogate some intrinsic values and tenets behind various manifestations of the pursuit. Because of the vast scope presented by the notion of musical instrument construction, I shall view instrument-making in its more focused and specialised form of classical guitar building. This investigation will take the form of a hermeneutic reading of luthiery[1] through the thoughts of German hermeneutic thinkers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger.

Information shedding light on relevant notions of guitar building was obtained through interviews conducted with selected South African guitar makers. These interviews formed part of a doctoral thesis (Bower 2008) in which luthiery in its South African manifestation was investigated. The interviews, with consent, were recorded and included as addenda to the thesis. The interviewees featured in this article are luthiers Garth Pickard, Hans van den Berg, Colin Cleveland and Mervyn Davis. They, and others, were purposely selected for the initial study by virtue of their experience and the nature of their specialisation – that of making classical guitars. It must be noted that this article does not seek to interpret these views as being representative of any larger population, and that the qualitative nature of this study allows for an in-depth, interpretive and contextual approach in which the luthiers' views are used to substantiate a new theory highlighting the relevance of Gadamer thought on "experience", "authority" and "tradition" in the pursuit.

## 1. Experience and the maker/player collaboration

A close collaboration and symbiotic relationship between guitar builder and player permeate much of the history of the development of the guitar. This phenomenon is well-documented by authors such as Summerfield (1996: 329). Such a collaborative symbiosis is not unique to guitar-building. However, this relationship seems to feature more strongly in this instrument's development than

1 The generic term luthiery can be applied to the making of all stringed instruments. In this article, however, luthiery refers to guitar building in particular.

the development of most other instruments. Renowned Australian luthier Greg Smallman gives a possible reason for this in saying that the guitar, unlike the violin, is not in a highly developed state which therefore necessitates the introduction of experimental features.[2] For him this could not be achieved without the input of professional guitarists, who are more able to comment on workable and desirable features (Saba 2006: 20). Similarly, Romanillos states that "... the guitar is an instrument that lacks stability like the cello or fiddle. Some ideas work, some don't" (Evans & Evans 1977: 88). Any thorough investigation into the development of the guitar will draw attention to the input of professional performing guitarists in the innovations, motivation and careers of prominent luthiers. This collaboration can be shown by considering some of the most prominent makers and players as outlined in the following diagrammatic representation:

| Luthier | Player |
|---|---|
| Antonio de Torres | Francisco Tárrega/Julián Arcas |
| Hermann Hauser/José Ramirez | Andrés Segovia |
| Daniel Friederich | Alexandre Lagoya |
| José Romanillos | Julian Bream |
| Greg Smallman | John Williams |

Locally, forums such as the South African Guild of Luthiers provide South African luthiers with a platform for the free exchange of ideas between guitar builders and local guitarists such as Charl Lamprecht and Abri Jordaan. Underlying this very practical and pragmatic working relationship, there emerges a thought-provoking philosophical issue. In a quest towards excellence and continuous improvement, the luthier relies on the experience of one who can speak from a place of knowing. Plato, although on a secondary level,

2 Given the notion of tradition adopted in this article, namely one that is open-ended and never finished, Smallman's reference to the state of the guitar's development is perhaps somewhat problematical, since it seems to suggest a continuum with a beginning and an end, and that the violin is further progressed along this continuum if not already at its end, whereas the guitar has a long way to go. Smallman's remark should be understood, however, as pointing to the absence of an exemplary model for the guitar such as the violin has, for example, in the Stradivarius.

refers to this phenomenon in his dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon:

> Socrates: And the excellence or beauty or truth of every structure, animate or inanimate, and of every structure of man, is relative to the use for which nature or the artist has intended them?
>
> Glaucon: True.
>
> Socrates: Then the user of them must have the greatest experience of them, and he must indicate to the maker the good or bad qualities which develop themselves in use; for example, the flute-player will tell the flute-maker which of his flutes is satisfactory to the performer; he will tell him how he ought to make them, and the other will attend to his instructions?
>
> Glaucon: Of course.
>
> Socrates: The one knows and therefore speaks with authority about the goodness and badness of flutes, while the other, confiding in him will do what he is told by him?
>
> Glaucon: True.
>
> Socrates: The instrument is the same, but about the excellence or badness of it the maker will only attain a correct belief; and this he will gain from he who knows, by talking to him and being compelled to hear what he has to say, whereas the user will have knowledge?
>
> Glaucon: True (Rosen 2000: 208-9).

In light of the above, it could therefore be argued that only the player of the guitar will have true knowledge of the quality of a guitar in as far as knowledge is based on experience. John Williams voices his appreciation of the realisation of this fact by luthier Greg Smallman, with whom he collaborates with great success:

> Often I have found that after trying out a new guitar at the request of the maker, you give them your opinion, pointing out weak spots as well as good things, and they just start arguing with you, trying to persuade you that it really is a better guitar than it is! Greg impressed me from the start because he was always willing to listen.[3]

For Romanillos, the collaboration and friendship with acclaimed guitarist Julian Bream is "a driving force, but it could also be a pitfall,

3 <http://www.thewholeguitarist.com/musos/williams-AGJ-06.htm>.

because his standard is terribly high and one is trying to produce the ultimate instrument" (Evans & Evans 1977: 88).

Several questions then arise: To what extent are knowledge and truth related to experience? Should experience be explored as a diachronic or a synchronic phenomenon? Can experience ever be objective?

Gadamer's hermeneutical approach to the concept of experience *(Erfahrung)* offers perhaps the most credible treatment of this issue. For him, the concept of experience proves to be particularly problematical when approached from within the historical-critical paradigm characteristic of the natural sciences. In his view, the natural sciences regard experience as valid only if such experience can be confirmed by repetition, and "this means that by its very nature, experience abolishes its history and thus itself" (Gadamer 2004: 342). He elaborates on this problem, stating that it must be considered that experience is in itself a process. Experience is thus diachronic rather than synchronic in nature:

> In fact, this process is essentially negative. It cannot be described simply as the unbroken generation of typical universals. Rather, this generation takes place as false generalizations are continually refuted by experience and what was regarded as typical is shown not to be so (Gadamer 2004: 347).

The conclusion Gadamer reaches is essentially that there can be no understanding without prior knowledge and that understanding can be described as "the merging of various horizons of meaning" (Delius 2005: 114). Thus, experience should not be removed from its "inner historicality" and should be viewed as "a happening, an event, an encounter" (Palmer 1969: 194-5). Palmer (1969: 196) summarises this notion as follows:

> Since in experience one is reaching into the future in expectation, and since past experiences teach the incompleteness of all plans, there is clearly present here the structure of historicality.

If we are to adhere to this diachronic view in our example of the guitar player, it becomes clear that in this regard experience of such factors as the guitar's quality of sound, its playability, and its aesthetic appeal must always be viewed within the framework of some kind of historical context. The guitar player, as opposed to the

luthier, is in his/her very essence someone with a specific history of similar experiences of extracting and experiencing certain qualities of the guitar. The synchronic scientific notion of confirmation through the repetition of unchanging universals, applicable under all circumstances for all players at all times, would certainly not apply in this instance, the reason being that the guitar builder only benefits because of the specific view of which the player afforded him/her through experiences altogether different from those of the builder. Because a fairly large percentage of luthiers also play the guitar, a distinction needs to be made between these luthiers who are merely able to play, and professional performers who, because of their performing experiences, are able to comment on the required characteristics of a guitar in a performance set-up.

For Gadamer (2004: 350) "... experience stands in an ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge". Instead, experience emphasises the changing, contingent nature of knowledge. There is thus an undeniable qualitative element which Gadamer attaches to the concept of experience. He also states that

> ... only through negative instances do we require new experiences [...] insight always involves an element of self-knowledge and constitutes a necessary side of what we called experience in the proper sense (Gadamer 2004: 350).

It is this negativity, as Hoy (1978: 60) points out, that separates *Erfahrung* from theoretical knowing. Gadamer's concept of negative instances or experiences can be related to those a guitar player might undergo in a number of ways. Negative instances, relating to guitar players, might include constructional and sound production shortcomings exposed by playing a specific guitar. It is therefore only through lack of desired qualities such as sound clarity, sustain, volume or lack of playability, that a player is enabled to gain insight into the desirability of such qualities in a particular instrument, which information can then be relayed to the guitar builder. These insights are thus only gained through the experience of performing on the instrument. Playability of an instrument always remains a priority of high importance to many players. Luthiers often try to rise to the challenge of producing instruments that would continually provide players with greater ease of playing while attempting not to

compromise any quality in the sound of the guitar. In reaction to this, Garth Pickard warns against the possible pitfalls of complying with players' demands in terms of playability to the detriment of the other qualities of the guitar:

> That ease of playing that a lot of guitarists complain about, if I may be controversial, I think they're lazy. Or not lazy, but if you want to make paintings, you need to learn the technique of the brush before you can make a masterpiece. You don't skip the technique of learning to use the brush, in a sense, but that's just my opinion (Bower 2008: 218).

This provides the player with a certain presupposition of what is to be expected from an instrument. When the subject, namely the player, communes with the object – whether a work of art or in this case a musical instrument – his/her original horizon of meaning merges with that of the object (Shusterman 1989: 217). A player thereby arrives at a deeper understanding of what s/he began by presupposing. Gadamer refers to this phenomenon as the hermeneutic circle, initially identified by his teacher Martin Heidegger. In this circle Gadamer identifies a capability of each and every revision of the anticipatory fore-projection to project before itself a new projection of meaning. In addition,

> ... interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation (Gadamer 2004: 269).

Olivier (2002: 249) summarises this notion as follows:

> Gadamer invokes Heidegger's conception of 'fore-understanding' – that is, the insight that the so-called hermeneutic circle is not a vicious circle, but one that harbours a positive possibility in so far as a 'working-out' of the 'fore-meanings' or pre-judgements implicit in one's understanding of something potentially confirms that they are not 'arbitrary fancies', but well-founded or legitimate in terms of their validity and provenance.

Returning to the example of the guitar builder and guitar player, it becomes apparent that that which distinguishes the player from the builder is the extent to which s/he has been exposed to this "constant process of new projection" in terms of the sound and playability of the instrument. Theoretically, the player would be more open to new experiences and horizons of understanding through more rigorously

revising and modifying fore-conceptions. Hoy (1978: 60) elucidates in stating that "... instead of thinking of *Erfahrung* as a coming-to-self-consciousness, as Hegel does, Gadamer sees it as resulting not in greater knowing (Wissen), but in an *openness to more experience*". Two South African guitar builders, Colin Cleveland and Hans van den Berg, are well aware of the valuable input the player can give the luthier because of the player's aforementioned "privileged" position which is evident in their comments concerning two prominent South African guitar players, Charl Lamprecht and Abri Jordaan:

> If it hadn't been for those two, there wouldn't be anybody making guitars. Not like they are today, at least (Cleveland in Bower 2008: 210).

> Hulle sal vir my uitwys waar ek kan verbeter en dan gaan ek weer terug en doen my huiswerk en kyk of ek in daardie opsigte kan verbeter. Ek het baie aan hulle te danke vir hulle bydrae (Van den Berg in Bower 2008: 232).[4]

In light of the comments made thus far, it becomes clear that the symbiotic relationship and close collaboration often seen between guitar players and guitar makers accurately relates to Gadamer's analysis of the concept of experience. However, this article seeks to investigate further and related Gadamerian notions of authority and tradition and its relevance to luthiery as pursuit. This warrants a brief introductory background on traditions encountered in luthiery. Antonio de Torres is considered the most prominent "establisher" of an important tradition in luthiery as pursuit.

## 2. Torres as representative of tradition in luthiery

In the development of both the guitar as instrument and luthiery as pursuit, certain "traditions" and schools of guitar construction can be identified. The traditions were practised by various individual luthiers who, in turn, influenced (and still influence) others. Although many different influences and styles of guitar construction have appeared in luthiery during the course of its history, it is possible to identify two "poles" in luthiery: Those luthiers building in the so-called Spanish

4 They show me where I can improve and then I go back to the drawing board and try to improve in those areas. I am very thankful for their input (author's translation).

tradition as standardised by Torres, and those breaking away from this perceived tradition in a variety of ways. Historically, Spanish master luthier Antonio de Torres (1817-1892) is attributed with having consolidated the dimensions, construction and widely accepted sound production guitar principles. He achieved this through refinements he made in the mid-1800s and it resulted in what is today referred to as the "Spanish method" of guitar construction. Summerfield (1996: 332) calls him "the man to whom we owe the modern concert guitar". Wade (1980: 133) makes a similar observation in saying that "Torres was one of the most inventive luthiers in the guitar's history and, in a sense, created the modern guitar as we know it" and his instruments "... established themselves as prototypes for all subsequent guitar makers of distinction". Renowned Spanish luthier José Romanillos agrees:

> The essence of guitar-making today, if we consider the Spanish classical guitar, is still based on this Spanish instrument developed by Torres (Courtnall 1993: 126).

Courtnall (1993: 29) takes a more balanced stance in assimilating Torres, stating that

> ... his followers are convinced that the Torres contribution to guitar design is paramount, and that his reputation is more than justified. His critics view Torres much more as being one maker amongst many, and not all contemporary makers would acknowledge him as a major influence on their work [...] this is especially true of the most recent experimenters in guitar design, who are attempting to discard virtually all preconceived ideas in the hope of making radically new instruments.

Courtnall therefore makes a clear distinction between a more "traditional school" of luthiery and a "modern approach" already alluded to earlier. This distinction draws attention to the notion of tradition pertaining both to its general meaning and to luthiery as phenomenon. We shall return to Gadamer once more to investigate his notion of tradition as contained in his *magnum opus*, *Truth and method* (1960). However, as stated earlier, the interrelated nature of the notions of tradition and authority necessitates a discussion on both concepts to be true to the Gadamerian analysis thereof.

## 2.1 Gadamer on authority and tradition

Gadamer's inquiry into the notions of authority and tradition announces itself in an initial call for the fundamental rehabilitation of the concept of prejudice and an acknowledgement of the fact that there are legitimate prejudices, "... if we want to do justice to man's infinite, historical mode of being". He thus distinguishes between what he regards as legitimate prejudices and all "... the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome" (Gadamer 2004: 278). Viewed in this light, "... prejudice and tradition are essential to understanding" (Warnke 1987: 75). Gadamer, with respect to his ideas concerning a "rehabilitation of authority and tradition", starts with a critical view of the Enlightenment's treatment of the concept of authority in its claim that reason is its necessary precondition. For him:

> ... the authority of persons is ultimately based not on the subjection and abdication of reason but on an act of acknowledgement and knowledge – the knowledge, namely, that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence – i.e., it has priority over one's own (Gadamer 2004: 281).

In addition, "authority in this sense, properly understood, has nothing to do with blind obedience to commands. Indeed, authority has to do not with obedience but rather with knowledge" (Gadamer 2004: 281). Gadamer's (2004: 281) view of authority as a result of knowledge thus emerges:

> Thus, acknowledging authority is always connected with the idea that what the authority says is not irrational and arbitrary but can, in principle, be discovered to be true. This is the essence of the authority claimed by the teacher, the superior, the expert. The prejudices that they implant are legitimized by the person who presents them. But in this way they become prejudices not just in favour of a person but a content, since they effect the same disposition to believe something that can be brought about in other ways – e.g., by goods reasons. Thus the essence of authority belongs in the context of a theory of prejudices free from the extremism of the Enlightenment. Here we can find support in the romantic criticism of the Enlightenment; for there is one form of authority particularly defended by romanticism, namely tradition.

Gadamer's (2004: 282) initial alignment with romanticism's criticism of the Enlightenment is later broken when he criticises romanticism

for conceiving "... tradition as an antithesis to the freedom of reason and regards it as something historically given, like nature". Thus, for Gadamer (2004: 283-5),

> ... we are always situated within traditions [...] it is always part of us, a model or exemplar, a kind of cognizance that our later historical judgment would hardly regard as a kind of knowledge but as the most ingenuous affinity with tradition [and our interest in tradition is] motivated in a special way by the present and its interests.

Differently put, "... the tradition that informs understanding is unified and all-encompassing" (Shusterman 1989: 218). It should already be apparent that, in light of Gadamer's understanding of tradition as an active appropriation and either affirmation or revision (renewal) of the values it embodies, it is applicable to the practice of luthiery. The luthier, too, inherits a tradition of guitar building, interprets it, and in the process either affirms and repeats it or revises and renews it.

Olivier (2002: 250) summarises this notion in saying that

> ... tradition cannot be side-stepped. Moreover, when something like an artwork is either created as an 'answer' to one's historical situation, or (re-)interpreted in a historically changed situation, one witnesses an event that is historically 'effected'. The understanding of an artistic tradition is therefore, for Gadamer, never finished – it is subject to a 'history of effects', and tradition is 'produced' (in a certain sense 'repeated') in the process of one's understanding participation in it.

Thus, tradition can be "... portrayed as an all-encompassing and ever-developing, continuous and unified totality" and "tradition prestructures and thus unites the different understandings of its participants who are both shaped by it and who continually extends and reshape it" (Marshall 1989: 217). Olivier also identifies two possible ways in which one can respond to tradition, namely in a creative or a conservative manner, "... in the process renewing and enlivening the tradition itself". In addition, he relates Gadamer's notion of authority and tradition to the criteria identified by Heidegger (1971: 150) that legitimise all human endeavours in their "dwelling" and "preserving", namely the "simple oneness of the four" referred to as "the fourfold" (Olivier 2002: 250). Although the principal engagement of this article deals with Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, Olivier's correlation between Gadamer's notion of authority and tradition and

Heidegger's "fourfold" requires a brief exposition, in order to do justice to the main focus of this article.

## 2.2 Heidegger and the fourfold

Heidegger's (1971: 149) notion of the fourfold stems from his reflection on human being's "... dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth". For Olivier (2002: 250), Heidegger's interrelated concepts of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities

> ... comprise the indispensable terms of orientation in the world. This means that, if one or more of these are absent as 'markers' to determine one's 'place' in the world, one would not be able to claim that one is living an authentically 'human' life, which is why he [Heidegger] remarks that the four together comprise 'a simple oneness'.

In his interpretation of this concept of the fourfold, Karsten Harries (1997: 159) explains that the earth refers to "... the ground that supports us, both literally and in the sense that it sustains us with its gifts of food and water". For him, earth further denotes what he calls "material transcendence" in that it transcends "... every linguistic and or conceptual space in which things must find their place if they are to be disclosed and explained" and "... what thus appears is not created by our understanding but given" (Harries 1997: 159). He also distinguishes between earth and world in that world "... names not the totality of facts but a space of intelligibility" which cannot be closed or eliminated and points to the fact that the earth refers to the "... elusive effective ground without which all talk of essences, meaning, values, or divinities is ultimately groundless, merely idle talk" (Harries 1997: 159). However, it is the body which opens human beings to earth and importantly "... the embodied self is a caring, desiring self" (Harries 1997: 159). Olivier (2002: 251) draws a correlation between Harries' view of Heidegger's concept of earth and Gadamer's notion of tradition in

> ... that which limits 'world', or the cultural, linguistic space of a tradition, is the 'ground' which moves humans as affective, caring, desiring beings in the first place to articulate their desires, fears and projects, and these articulations are what constitute the 'tradition'.

Olivier (2002: 251) then concludes that, according to Gadamer, the "present interests" that motivate tradition are

> ... inseparably linked to the 'earth' as that which affects the human, embodied self. Seen in this way, 'earth' is, despite its inscrutability, ultimately inscribed *as such* in that which enables humans to traverse the realm of openness or 'world', namely language (in an encompassing sense) – the 'bearer' of the cultural tradition.

Harries' interpretation of sky centres around the fact that "... human beings are never imprisoned in the here and now but are always 'beyond' themselves, ahead of themselves in expectation, behind themselves in memory, beyond time altogether when contemplating eternity", thus sky "... not only means the familiar sky but opens that meaning to what may be called the ineliminable spiritual or ecstatic dimension of human being" (Harries 1997: 160). Olivier (2002: 252) again establishes a connection with tradition in that "... 'sky' suggests the creative ability to renew or transform the tradition in the face of its inherent conservatism".

Harries' elaboration on Heidegger's mortals, the third term of the fourfold, resonates with Heidegger's earlier notion of *Dasein* in that it affirms the acceptance by human beings of their own mortality as a prerequisite of what can be regarded as an "authentic" existence. This is important because

> ... as long as we remain unable to make our peace with the fact that we grow older and sooner or later must die, remain unable to make our peace with the passage of time, we also will be unable to make our peace with all that binds us to time – with our bodies, for example, with our sexuality, and with the setting of the sun, with the coming of winter, and with the earth, which so often withholds its gifts (Harries 1997: 160).

Olivier (2002: 252) once more successfully establishes the connection with Gadamer's notion of tradition in saying that "... accepting one's mortality liberates one for 'adding one's verse' to the ongoing drama of the tradition".

In elaborating on Heidegger's final term, namely divinities, Harries (1997: 161) reminds us that for Heidegger the godhead is "... the most fundamental measure of human being" and adds that today "God remains unknown" but that "... he is revealed in the endless variety of the things that surround us". He explains:

> Heidegger gestures here toward the many-voiced ground of all meaning and value. To be touched by that ground in a specific way that gives direction to our lives is to receive some divinity's message

> [...] any attempt to name the gods and God – and, in doing so, to take the measure of human being, if only to return that measure to human beings and to let them dwell – is a violation of the unknown essence of divinity, putting the namer in danger of obscuring divinity with some golden calf (Harries 1997: 161).

Olivier (2002: 252) points out the underlying connection between this notion and that of tradition in saying that "... the divine as *unknown* [...] is what 'divinities' ultimately denote, it is the deepest source of all cultural activities which first institute and then expand, extend and modify a 'tradition' of any kind."

Olivier (2002: 252) then confirms his view on the connection between the fourfold and tradition, discussed above, in the following closing paragraph:

> These considerations suggest that Gadamer's conception of 'tradition' may be understood as an articulation – a more 'traditional' one at that – of the theme of the 'fourfold' in Heidegger's work [...[ They also suggest a kind of 'domestication' of Heidegger on Gadamer's part. A more radical way of putting this is to say that Heidegger's *fourfold* is related to Gadamer's concept of tradition as a (Derridean) 'quasi-transcendental': it is simultaneously the condition of its possibility and its impossibility.

## 3. Luthiery, authority and tradition

We can return to luthiery as phenomenon to inquire into the relevance of those notions of authority and tradition encountered above. In fact, this article has been structured on the very premise that there are those luthiers who adhere to a so-called tradition and those who do not. Few would argue that Torres was the first luthier whose work represents the rise of a tradition in that it standardised a school of construction that many subsequent luthiers, even contemporary luthiers, have followed. The manner in which this happened could well be explained by a return to Gadamer's view on tradition and its necessary constituent, authority. As stated earlier, Gadamer (2004: 281) views the authority of a person as something based on recognition of knowledge –

> ... the knowledge, namely, that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence – i.e., it has priority over one's own.

Viewed in this light, a figure such as Torres, in his capacity as "establisher of tradition", can only be ascribed such a title and status through the recognition by later luthiers of his superior judgment and insight into the acoustic workings of wood, for example. In other words, "... his judgment takes precedence – i.e., it has priority over" their own (Gadamer 2004: 281). Consider the following luthiers' remarks:

> If I don't know what to do, then I go look at Torres' guitars and he inspired me not in the way of helping or putting ideas there. It's just a presence in the Torres guitars that you don't see in any other guitars [...] I would attribute a lot of my inspiration to Torres (Pickard in Bower 2008: 218).

> Ek het 'n boek by Garth gesien wat ek ook vir my gekoop het van Torres instrumente met 'n CD by wat elkeen se klank uitwys, wat ongelooflik is. As 'n mens na dit luister dan dink mens altyd jy's te modern en jy moet teruggaan na die ou tradisies (Van den Berg in Bower 2008: 233).[5]

It should be remembered that Gadamer concludes that it is impossible for human beings to escape the influence of tradition, and that we always unavoidably find ourselves within its parameters. Thus, whether we react to it in a conservative or creative manner, we are always confronted by tradition and the artistic tradition, and its history of effects is constantly produced by our understanding participation in it (Olivier 2002: 250). This is clearly illustrated by the comments of two of the currently most radical and 'creative' luthiers in the world, showing their alignment in thought with that of Gadamer in terms of tradition:

5 Garth showed me a book, which I later bought, on Torres instruments with a CD that shows each instrument's sound, which is amazing. When one listens to it, one always feels that one is too modern and that one should return to the old traditions (author's translation).

> Ek dink jy verseker die dood van 'n tradisie deur hom te vas te hou (Davis in Bower 2008: 263).[6]

> There is nothing wrong with the Torres fan strutting. If you use a normal thickness soundboard 2.0 – 2.5mm, then it is the best system [...] It's hard to optimize whatever system you choose to use (Smallman in Saba 2006: 22).

The fact that these statements were made by Mervyn Davis and Greg Smallman, whom many would consider extreme examples of luthiers with a lack of dependence on so-called traditional construction techniques and design, is profound. Neither of them views his own design, which breaks away from the apparent Spanish tradition of guitar construction, as a reaction against and denial of the tradition that confronts each one as luthier. Their own contributions are thus not an attempt to undo or annul the tradition with which they are confronted, but rather to continue and creatively add to the tradition in their "understanding participation in it" (Olivier 2002: 250).

This notion of tradition as a history of effects is perhaps particularly applicable to guitar building given that "... the guitar is unlike the violin in that the exact way in which it produces sound, and the best way of releasing tone and volume from the instrument, are still in dispute" (Evans & Evans 1977: 58). This points to the fact that, although traces of a set tradition can be identified, notably the Spanish tradition as established by Torres, no tradition currently dominates luthiery on a worldwide scale. This characteristic of guitar-building, in particular, is what appeals to many guitar enthusiasts, notably Colin Cleveland:

> There's a hundred ways of making a very good classical guitar. There's not just one way [...] They all have different-coloured voices. That, to me, is the charm of the guitar. If you use a different strutting on three different instruments [...] there would be three different sounds, but each beautiful in their own right (Bower 2008: 210).

The reasons for this peculiar lack of a dominant tradition, in itself part of the tradition of luthiery, are many and mostly speculative. Davis provides us with a possible answer:

6 I think you guarantee the death of a tradition by holding on to it too vehemently (author's translation).

> Ek sou amper wou sê dat dit gaan lank vat om by 'n tradisie uit te kom, maar ek dink die ander filosofiese aspek hiervan is dat die ghitaar se ontwikkeling het op die verkeerde tyd gebeur. Die wêreld is nie meer tradisievas nie. Verandering is baie meer kenmerkend van ons tyd as wat tradisie is en die tempoverandering versnel die heeltyd. Daar moet dus 'n tradisie gebou word om 'wat doen mens met verandering?', nie meer 'wat doen ons met die feit dat als dieselfde bly?' nie. Dis 'n helse groot wêreldsvraag. Ek dink dis 'n groot filosofiese kwessie. Die ghitaar het nou ontwikkel te midde van dit en ons het elektriese kitare en allerlei verskillende goed, so ek dink Torres het 'n vernouing gebring en dat dit nou weer begin verbreed (Bower 2008: 271).[7]

Davis' views on tradition appear to deviate from Gadamer's, at least ostensibly. A careful reading shows, however, that even rapid change, of the kind he refers to, can only occur in the context of a tradition in Gadamer's sense, even if the process of modification is accelerated.

## 4. Conclusion

This article attempted to place various aspects of social pheno-mena pertinent to luthiery, more specifically guitar building, within a hermeneutic model and theoretical frame-work. This framework proved to be particularly effective in interrogating and explaining specific matters such as experience and the collaboration between guitar players and guitar builders which, in turn, led to the identification of the underlying and interrelated notions of authority and tradition. Having thus arrived at a hermeneutic understanding of the notions of experience, authority and tradition and having established its relevance to luthiery, we can conclude that luthiery in its entirety falls within the parameters of a tradition, and that all of the different schools of guitar construction and different designs can be regarded as contributions, whether conservative or creative, to the

7 I would say that it is going to take a long time before we arrive at a tradition, but I think the other philosophical aspect is that the guitar's development took place at the wrong time. The world does not hold on to tradition anymore. Change is much more characteristic of our time than tradition and the rate of change is continually accelerating. Thus, a tradition must be built around the question: What does one do with change?, and not 'what does one do with the fact that everything remains the same? This is a big universal issue. I think it is a big philosophical issue. The guitar developed in the midst of this and now we have electric guitars and all kinds of instruments, so I think Torres brought about a funneling that is now starting to expand again (author's translation).

ongoing process of tradition. Viewed in this way, different luthiers' perspectives and designs all contribute to a single history of effects, always changing, always growing, never finished.

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