

## Palmer luthier pleases the ears of the world's greatest players

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**PALMER** -- The Greek philosopher Empedocles once defined God as a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. It is a fitting metaphor in which to bring together the pervasive presence of God and music in the life of Thomas Malapanis, a Palmer guitar builder who was honored in November by the Rasmusson Foundation with one of its \$12,000 individual artist grants.

For Malapanis, belief suffuses his practice of his craft, and his craft is an expression of belief. Those living secular lives might be tempted to dismiss such passionate conviction, but with Malapanis that's a little hard to do. In the seven years it has taken him to turn out 31 classical guitars, his instruments have ended up in the hands of some of the world's premiere performers, including Angel Romero, the guest conductor and performer for this weekend's program with the Anchorage Symphony Orchestra.

"Tom is a maker of extreme and rare quality," Romero says. "He really is very innovative, and the instruments he produces -- like the one I have -- well, there's not another instrument that could push it to the side in the concert hall."

Strong words to use in describing something made in a converted garage in the Valley off Fishhook Road by a man who, until not too many years ago, was cleaning carpets for Sears. No one could be more surprised than Malapanis himself.

#### **PASSION FOR CLASSICAL**

It's an odd and compelling fact of Malapanis' life that he has forgotten how to read music and rarely plays the guitars he makes. Had life consented to order itself according to his dearest early wishes, things might have been different, and he might even have ended up on the stage himself.

"I've always just loved classical guitar," he says. "If I could play Spanish guitar the way somebody like Christopher Parkening does, that's what I'd want to do. But I've just never had time to really play. I've always been too busy raising a family and making a living."

Malapanis, 50, came to Alaska from Arizona in 1984. He had three children from a previous relationship when he met his current wife, Kay, who had three children of her own. They shared a deep Christian faith and soon enough blended their families, making a life first on the Kenai Peninsula and then, for the last 13 years, in Palmer. They raised their children and worked, and religion was at the center of their lives.

Music was always a part of the picture: Malapanis has warm memories of his large family singing together, four guitars going at once, during a time on the Kenai when they were not part of any congregation and spent Sundays worshipping God on their own. For a long time, this was enough to get from life. In 1990, though, things began to shift.

"That was when I first started to think about building guitars," Malapanis says.

In truth, the notion had been with him for a while, gestating, as most obsessions do, in the darkness of fancy, where it could be revolved and revolved. Thought added to thought until things gradually turned to action and Malapanis started to acquire books, tools and wood.

He was interested in building only the classical guitar, the figure-eight-bodied instrument quite different from the thing of squashed ellipses that most people think of when someone says "guitar." That is the folk guitar, whereas the object of Malapanis' obsession was the instrument used to produce the music he loved best, written for it by composers such as Joaquim Rodrigo, Heitor Villa-Lobos and Manuel de Falla.

"That's the foundation guitar," Malapanis says.

## **GUITAR'S GOLDEN AGE?**

Though the guitar has been around in one form or another for centuries and such composers as Vivaldi and Bach have written music for it, the classical guitar as we know it really only came along in the late 1800s, and many say it peaked in the early 1960s and '70s with instruments made by Mariano Tezanos Sr. and the craftsmen of the Ramirez guitar workshop in Spain.

This flowering of fine workmanship might not have been possible a century earlier. Most guitar historians seem to agree it wasn't until Andres Segovia came onto the scene in the 1920s that the guitar really began to be accepted as a classical instrument.

Segovia was a prodigy burning with the determination to make the world accept the guitar as more than merely a box on which to bang out folk tunes. Such passion married to talent draws notice, and the attention paid to Segovia, Narciso Yepes, Celedonio Romero -- father and teacher of Angel -- and players like them has driven innovation just as the rise of orchestral music during the 17th and 18th centuries drove the refinement of the violin in the Cremona workshops of Amati, Guarneri and Stradivari, creating what is now called the golden age of the violin.

Whether now might be the golden age of the guitar is an interesting question, but Malapanis points out that it's a question history will have to settle.

"There are very few instruments around that have been handled by masters for decades, let alone hundreds of years, the way Stradivarius and Guarneri del Jesu violins have been," he says, referring to the notion that these instruments have been sweetened through hundreds of years of intelligent and passionate use.

Whatever history's ultimate verdict, the innovative spirit present among the storied Cremonese violin makers is present in spades among the guitar makers of today, who have been tinkering with the guitar's structure to evolve it from an instrument fitted to small rooms to an instrument whose sound can reach the farthest corners of performance halls.

## **VOLUME ISN'T EVERYTHING**

"There are guys out there using all this carbon fiber and bracing that's completely different because they're under the misconception that a guitar has to boom to make it to the end of the hall," says Beverly Maher, proprietor of the Guitar Salon in New York's Greenwich Village, which carries Malapanis guitars. "There are people who make X-bracings or put extra holes on the sides, use carbon fiber and go for a bigger sound with more projection and sustain."

Malapanis stresses, though, that loudness is a secondary, not primary, characteristic for a good guitar, and innovation can become a cult. It's a point with which Malapanis agrees.

"There are luthiers like me who, while they believe the guitar is still an evolving instrument, are not at all happy with some of what they see coming out -- going after volume, using these synthetic materials rather than using intuition and wood. We're standing on the shoulders of the people who invented the instrument, and we should remember that. That's why I call myself a builder, not a maker."

Malapanis' shop supports the notion that craftsmanship is a product of heart rather than technology. It's a surprisingly modest affair: His bench holds a fine-toothed gentleman's saw, brass thumb planes that look like shoes for elves, a set of chisels that were a gift from master toolmaker Paul Beebe and, inevitably, shavings. Above the bench hangs a set of compound hunting bows, one of them made to his specifications. A drugstore-brand humidifier throws a constant mist into the air. To one side, a guitar back is held in a homemade jig under a network of tensioning rods, which hold it in position while the glue dries on a newly milled set of braces.

Malapanis shows evident pride as he lifts the fine woods he has collected to work with: bird's eye maple, cocobolo, Honduran mahogany, ebony, spruce and cedar for the tops. He figures he has enough on hand to make another 20 guitars -- about three years' worth, at his current clip of approximately six guitars per year. He hopes to use his Rasmuson money to buy more wood and equipment, improving his capabilities but not expanding his production by much, if any at all.

He shows off his soleras -- pattern blanks in the shape of his guitars, which are perhaps the highest-tech tools in the shop. He had them cut with lasers to his specifications from sheets of steel, along with the patterns he had fabricated to help him bend the ribs -- the sides -- of his instruments.

Malapanis stresses that a good guitar is a balancing act, a dance of countervailing stresses and demands.

"There are so many ways you can go wrong," he says, seated back in his neat living room with a cup of coffee, a yearling Jack Russell terrier named Spencer milling about and looking for attention. "You might end up making an instrument that has certain parts in order or one that's aesthetically pleasing, but then you get up the neck and find out it's not worth having."

"It's difficult to make a guitar that gives a player satisfaction on all the different levels. Each note must be strong and even, and it must have a lot of sustain. It must have clarity and volume. There's got to be evenness in tone and no dead spots in the sound. The traditional Spanish guitar should sound very sweet; it should have a rich and creamy sound."

It's hard enough to bring out an instrument that delivers some of this let alone all of it, singing like a diva in a packed auditorium. So how is it that Malapanis -- without decades of experience behind him or the instruction of a great master luthier to guide him -- has been able to rise to this challenge, producing guitars whose asking price is \$8,000 each? While the process remains mysterious to him, the source of his inspiration does not.

"You're either gifted enough to do it or you're not," he says. "The best answer is that I believe God gifted me."

**NOT THE RIGHT TIME**

For a while, though, Malapanis' talent as a luthier seemed a gift that would never be opened.

After the initial idea of building guitars came, he spent a long time studying, acquiring materials and tools, and had even gone so far as to trace out a finely rendered blueprint for the first guitar he would make.

"I was totally convinced this was what I was going to do," he says. "I had enough wood to build three guitars, and I had started to build parts of them."

By this time it was 1994, and he decided before making the leap that he needed to consult the elders of his church. He ran straight into a brick wall.

"They told me they felt it wasn't the right time," he says.

This came more as a confirmation than a surprise. Truth be told, he himself felt he wasn't ready. There was something overheated, he had come to suspect, in his focus on this would-be vocation.

"I listen to my heart," he says. "I've never listened to anyone else ahead of it. It was because of that feeling and not because of what the elders of my church said that I stopped. God really made me know that it wasn't time."

So instead, Malapanis went off and cleaned carpets. For five years. Gradually, the parts laid out on his worktable lost their allure, and he boxed them carefully, along with his tools, and moved them into storage.

It wasn't until 1999 that he came back. That was when he and his wife had an empty nest for the first time in their marriage. He began poking around in the basement and came across the boxes, neatly labeled, and began to go through them with a feeling of dawning pleasure. The urge to get to work came back, but this time it felt mellowed by the time he'd spent away from it -- a considered passion rather than a fevered, newly minted crush.

"I'd been encouraging him," Kay recalls, "because I knew he had the ability and the gift to do it. I wanted him to be able to do the thing he dreamed of doing. I figured if the door was going to open, it was going to open, and if the door was going to close, I'd accept that too."

Feeling ready at last, Malapanis went back to work and made three guitars.

### 'COME ON, OPEN UP'

Whether what came next happened because of divine intervention or sheer guts is an open question, though not to Malapanis. With his first instruments completed, he sat down and wrote a letter to Christopher Parkening -- one of the first-rank virtuosos of the classical guitar -- to ask for an interview. He wanted to find out what Parkening thought of his work.

"I've talked to other luthiers since who've asked me: 'How in the world did you get that meeting?' " Malapanis says. "Well, he's a Christian man and I'm a Christian man; I had told him I was doing something God had directed me to do, and I wanted to get his opinion, and he agreed to see me. I went to visit him where he was teaching in Santa Clarita, Calif."

The meeting, he recalls, was "awesome and incredible. I was starstruck, couldn't believe I was in his

presence, showing him my guitars."

Malapanis was not disappointed he made the trip. Parkening told him he was building instruments comparable in quality to the best being made. That was enough to sustain him until the next fortuitous, if not miraculous, meeting.

This came roughly a year later when conductor and legendary player Angel Romero was playing with the Anchorage Symphony and giving a guest lecture at Loussac Library for upper-tier symphony patrons. Taking his courage and his guitars in hand, Malapanis crashed the event.

"I stood there in the back, and he saw me," Malapanis recalls. "He knew what I was doing. He saw my two guitars, and for a player of his caliber, it's almost like someone standing there with drugs: 'I've got to see what you've got in that case; come on, come on, open up.' "

According to Romero, though, it's an experience he's repeated countless times, as does any player who achieves any stature. Luthiers besiege him constantly, hoping he will like their instruments. It's one of the main ways they advance their careers. Once a master player has put his or her imprimatur publicly on a guitar builder's work, orders from aficionados, collectors and salons will often follow. Without a nod from a famous player, the luthier will most likely remain a hobbyist.

"When you travel, it's 'Oh my God, here comes another one,' " says Romero, who already has more than 60 guitars, including some legendary instruments, in his personal collection. "So you act surprised and pleased to see their instrument, so at least you are being a decent human being. You hope for the best, because it's very difficult to tell a guitar maker to his face: 'Your instruments suck.' "

"That's why it's a very nice surprise when you do open the case and find all things are coming together. That's wonderful. And that was how it was with Tom."

Romero was impressed enough to add a Malapanis guitar to his collection and, when interviewed for this story, said he intended to use it Saturday in his Anchorage performance. He also gave Malapanis a testimonial that the guitar maker has posted on his Web site, a bit of hagiography that has since been joined by endorsements from other players, including classical player Tavi Jinariu and jazz player Peter White.

"I met Tom about four years ago in a master class Chris Parkening was leading," Jinariu says from his California home. "Luthiers come to master classes all the time, pushing their instruments, and I didn't give Tom's instruments that much attention until at last I picked one up, and my jaw just dropped when I played it. It sounded powerful and sensitive to the touch. At that point I didn't own a guitar, and it wasn't a hard choice to say, 'Hey I want to play this one.' "

Jinariu now owns three Malapanis guitars -- numbers 10, 15 and 16. He says they're very different in their character and yet have an unmistakable common tonal quality.

"They're incredibly powerful, first of all. With Tom's guitars, you never need a microphone in concert. Then, probably, my very favorite thing is the guitars' dark, creamy, mellow, lyrical sound. His guitars are very sensitive too, and you can hear every single note all the time. If I were to put the guitars made by Tom into a category, it would be of the '60s Ramirez guitars."

High praise indeed, since the Ramirez instruments from the '60s are still considered by many to be the

benchmark of quality for classical instruments.

"I just compared the No. 15 with a '63 Ramirez that's played by Christopher Parkening, and really, there wasn't much difference," Jinariu says. "It's amazing that nobody has ever taught Tom how to make his guitars. You could see there's something special about this guy. He's just got it."

And what is "it"?

"When he makes a guitar, he pours his soul into the instrument. You should see his face when I play it back for him. Just to see the joy in his eyes when he listens -- it's priceless."