Alchemy:

the making of an archlute

Adrian L James LRPS

with

Tony Johnson



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Foreword

All lutes made in the UK, and most of those in the world, are hand-made by craftsmen using traditional methods. The images in this book depict a lute being made by Tony Johnson, one of the leading UK exponents of the craft. They show the luthier's working environment as well as what he is doing at various stages in the lute's construction, providing a detailed record of the making/crafting of a unique instrument. They also reveal in great detail both the knowledge and the wide range of skills involved in making a lute, combined with the attention to detail and hand/eye coordination required.

Also important in the making of such an instrument is the lute maker's detailed knowledge of traditional methods and materials, including woods, their unique properties, and how to use them in different elements of a lute's construction. The following woods were used in making this lute: spruce for the neck block and inside lining strip, and also for the front and struts; 31 yew ribs with 30 holly lines were used to make the back; the bridge was made from plum with an ebony plate, and the neck from maple with an ebony veneer, ebony fingerboard and bone nut; maple was also used to make the neck extension, with a spruce core for lightness, finished with an ebony veneer and ebony top nut; and the pegs were made in plum. The back of the lute was finished with an historical style varnish made by the maker by cooking Strasbourg Turpentine (derived from pine resin) and mixed with linseed oil, with added red madder pigment for varnishing the back.

This unique instrument, especially commissioned by the Royal Academy of Music and built to their detailed specifications, is an archlute, on which students at the Royal Academy will be able to learn and practise their skills as lutenists. It is a large instrument, with a long neck, combining long open bass strings and fingerboard strings. It is intended to be played mainly has a continuo instrument, as part of a group of musicians.

Work on planning the design and making of the archlute began when it was commissioned in 2022. The body of the archlute was modelled on an original lute by Marx Unverdorben, which is now housed in Fenton House London. This was originally made as a Renaissance lute, but was later converted to a 13 course swan neck lute in the Baroque period. This type of conversion of earlier lutes was very common, and the Unverdorben makes an ideal model for an archlute. The rosette was based on a rosette by the Renaissance lute maker Michael Harton.

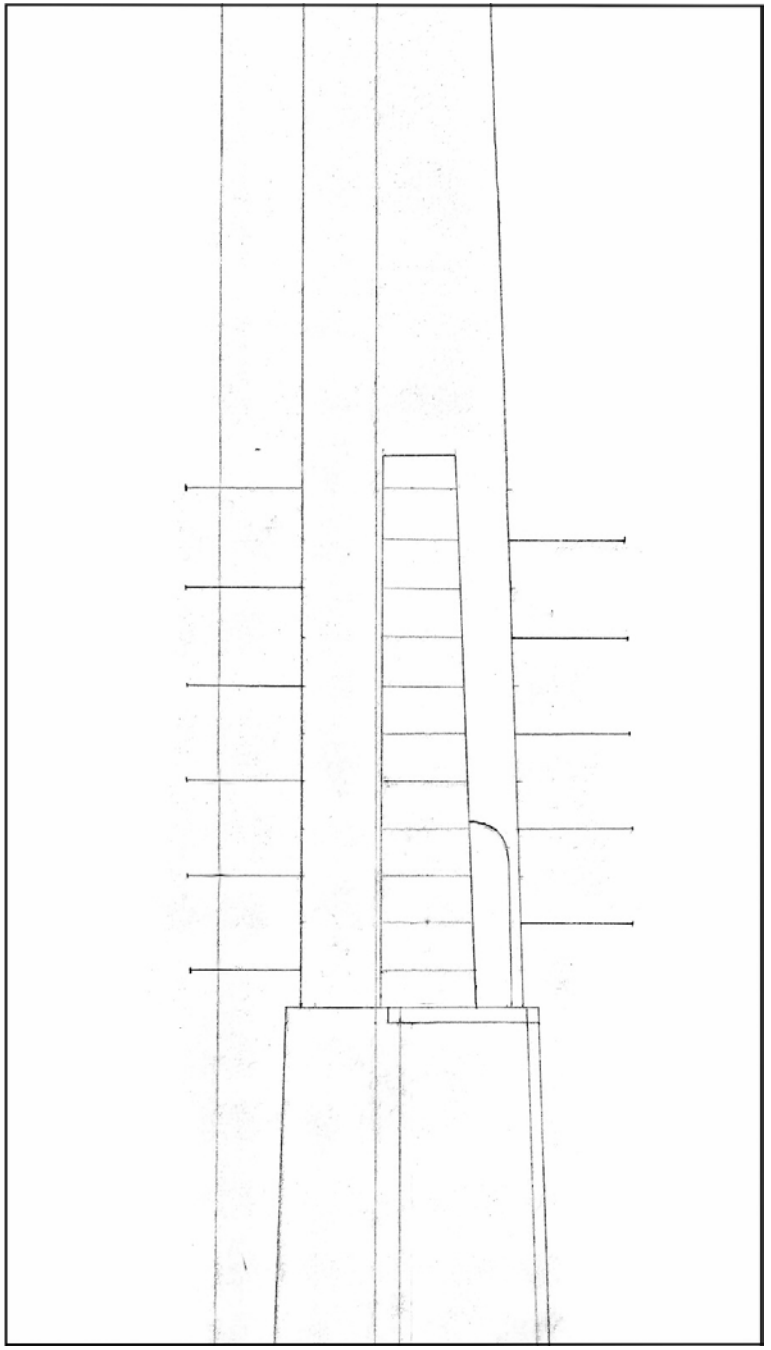
The process of making it took three to four months of work in the period between April and November 2024 (the maker was involved in other projects in this period also). Construction began on 17 April 2024, when the first image in this book was taken; it was finished and strung on 30 November, over 2,000 images and over 50 photographic sessions later.

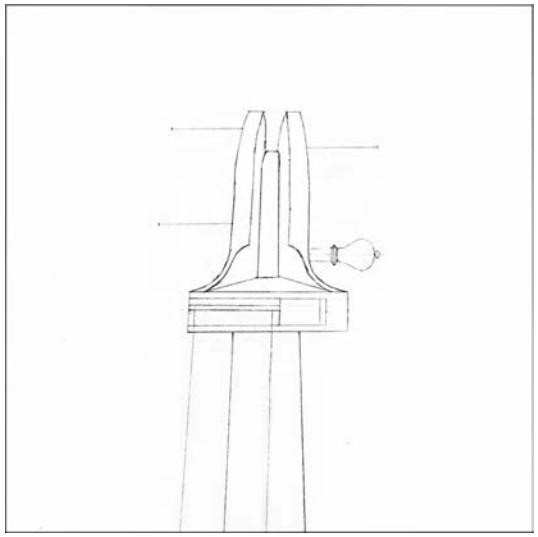
The Maker, the Wood, and the Concept

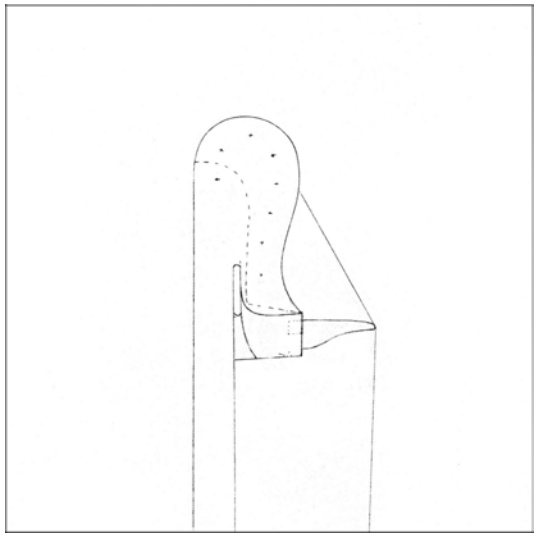












The Making of the Back





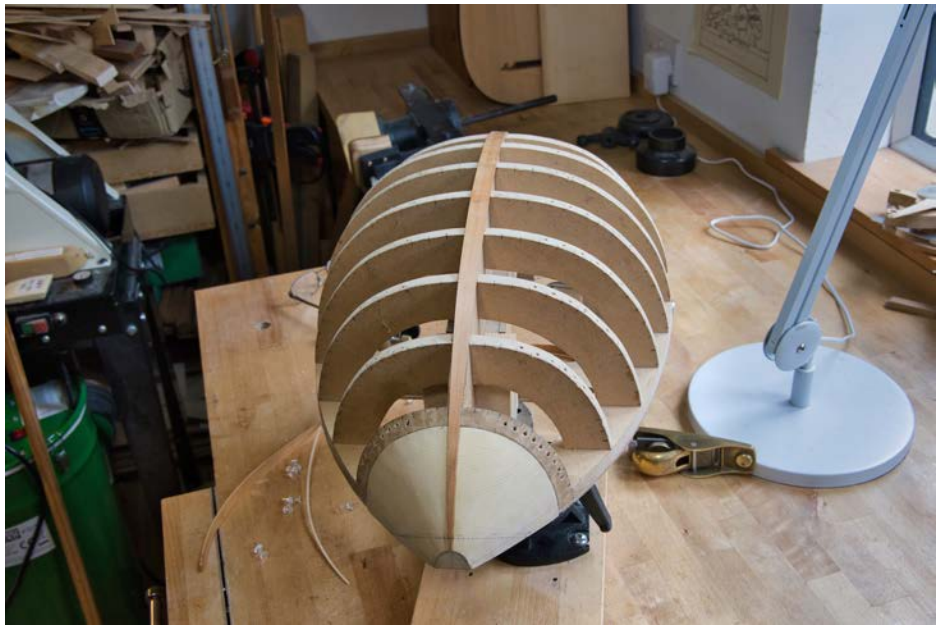


































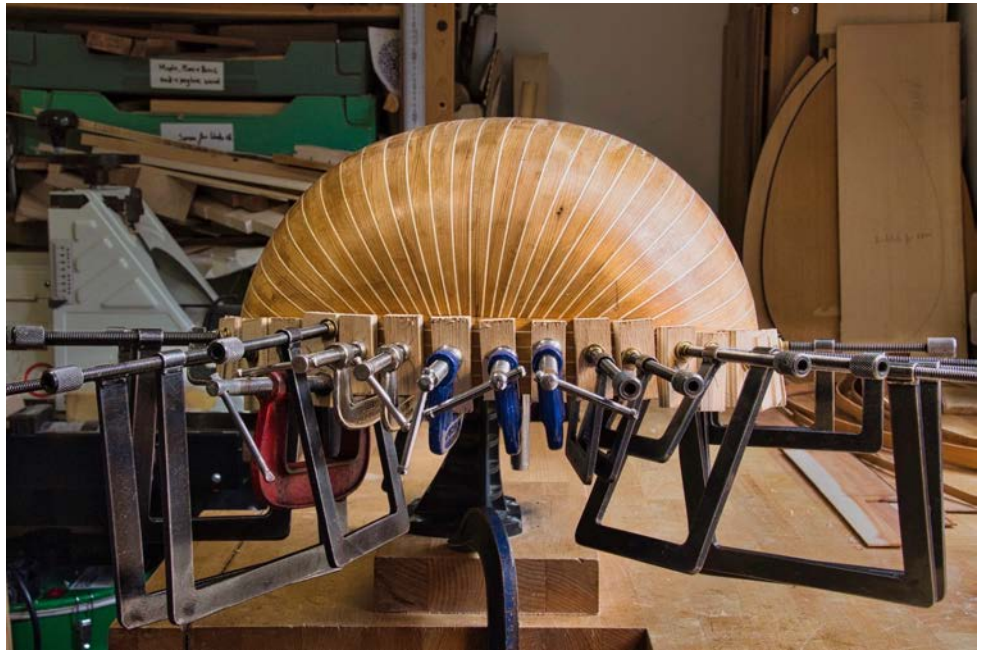




























The Soundboard

- Preparing and thicknessing the Soundboard
- The Rosette: the cutting and the carving
- The Struts
- The Bridge



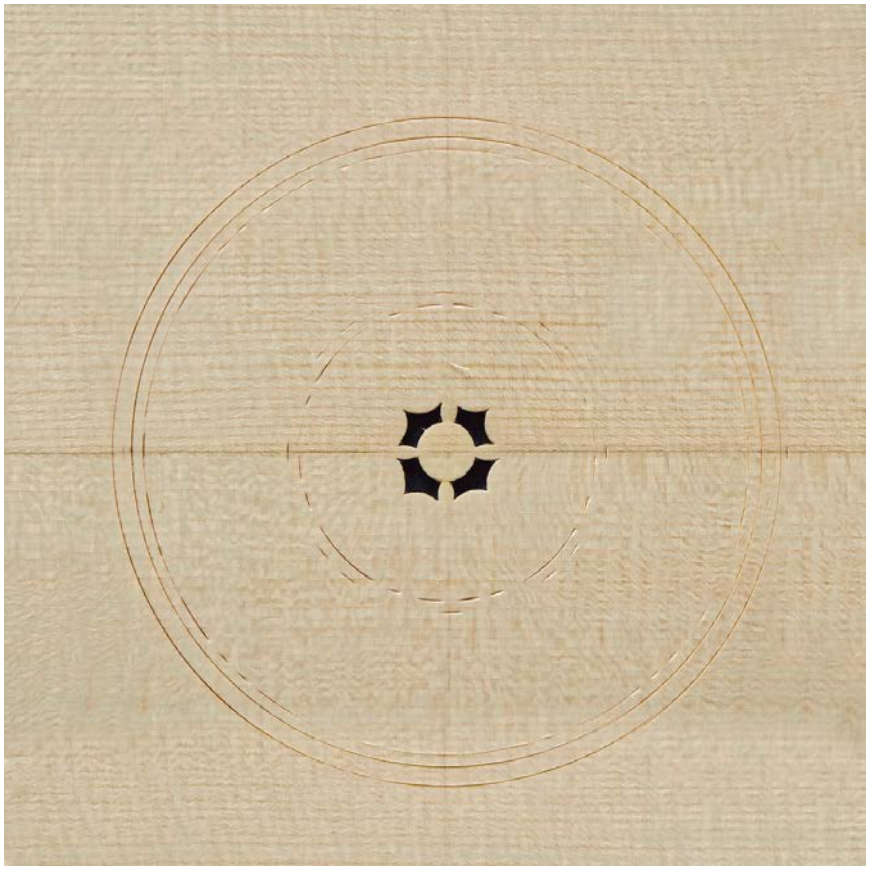





60W MAX







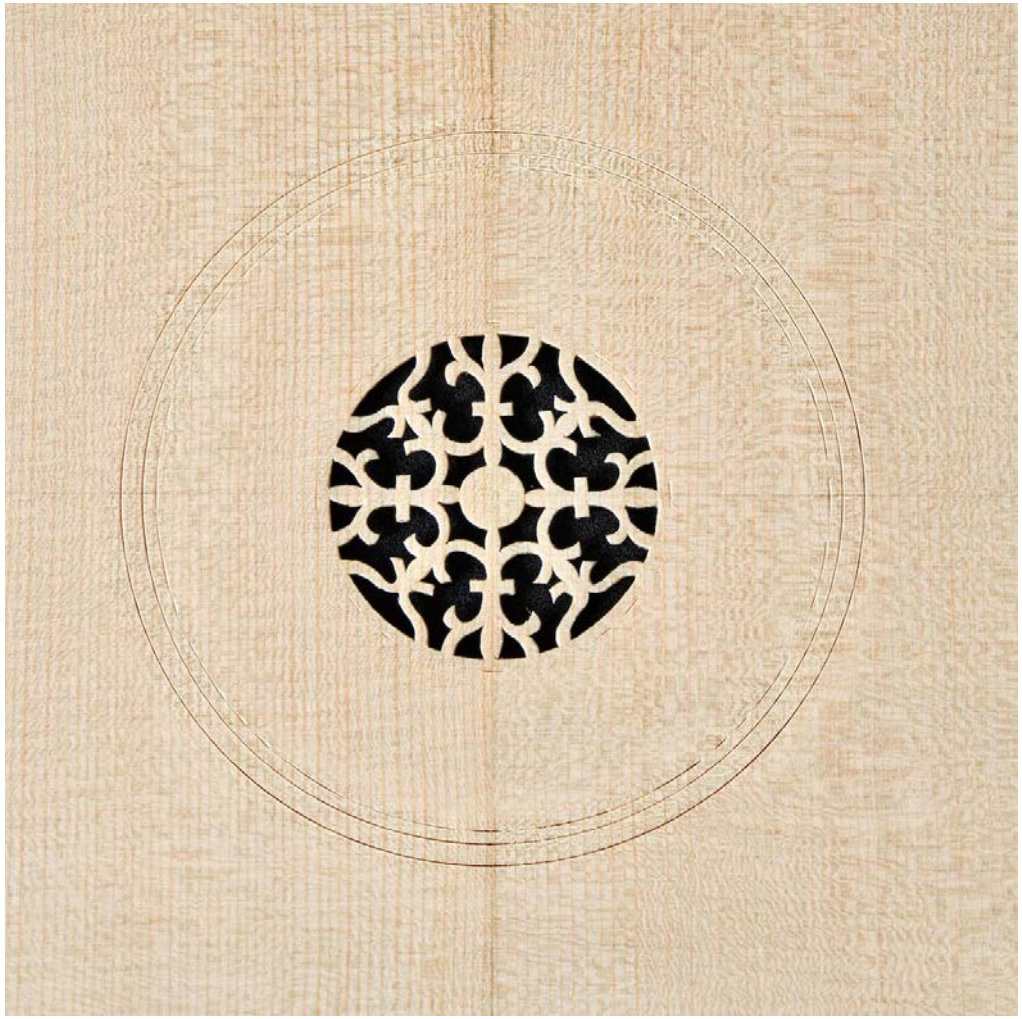


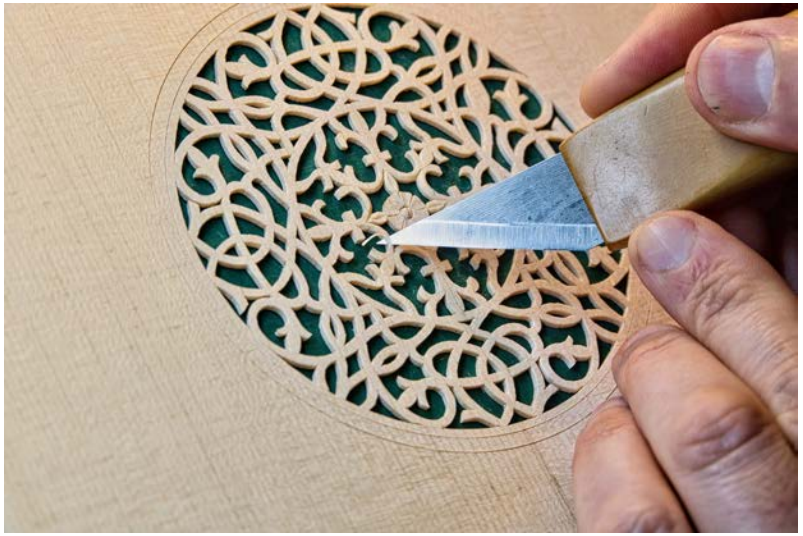

140mm
108.5mm



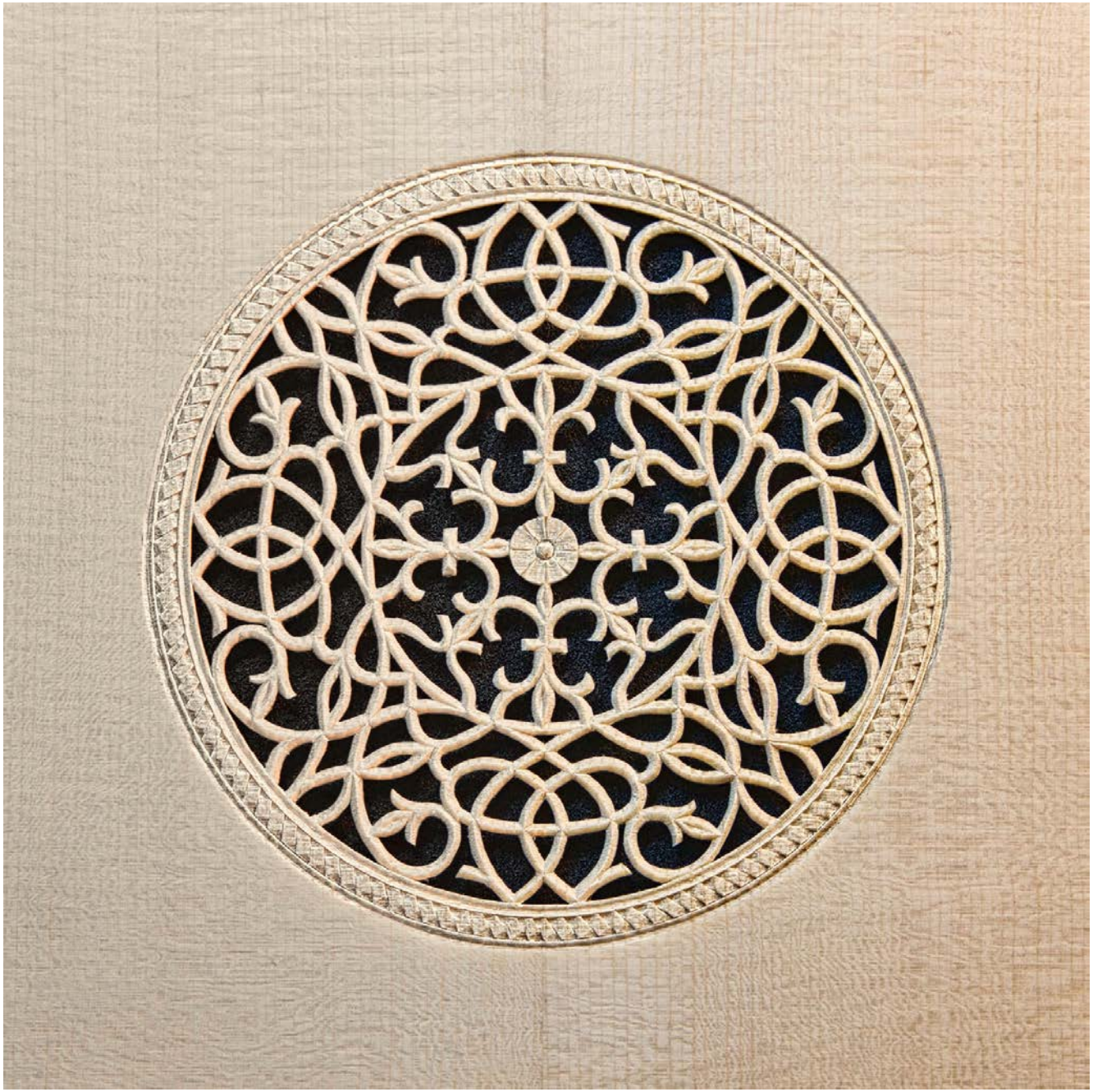































TEMPERATURE
21.1°C
02143%
CLOCK / HUMIDITY
HTC-1



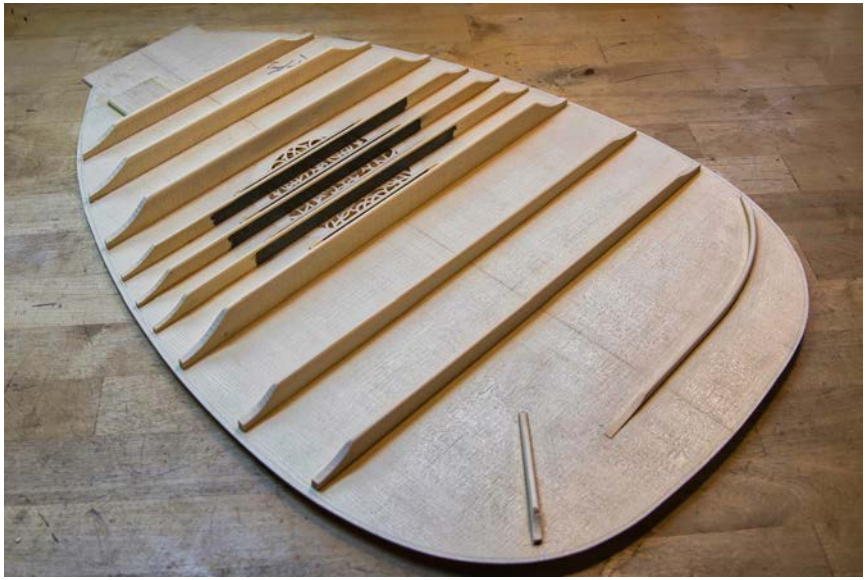




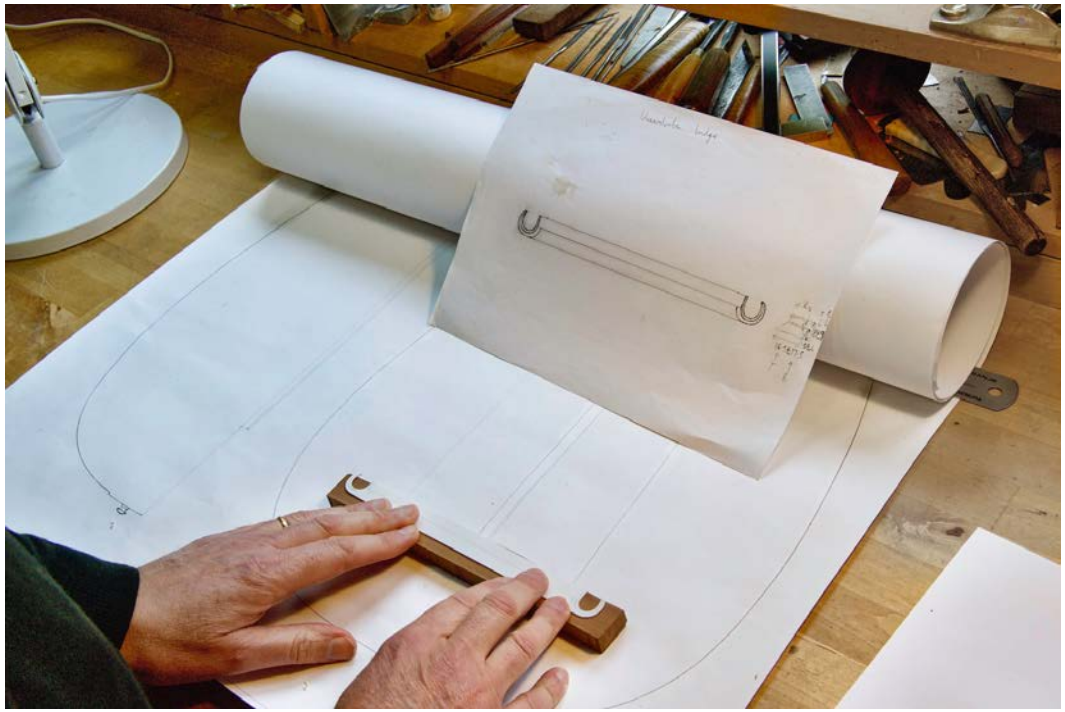

CUTTER
DO NOT CRUSH!


TONY JOHNSON

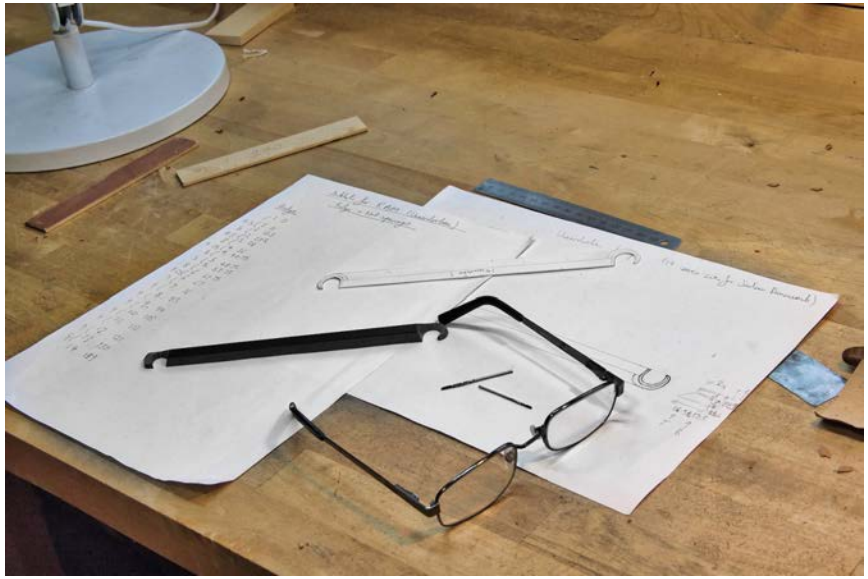






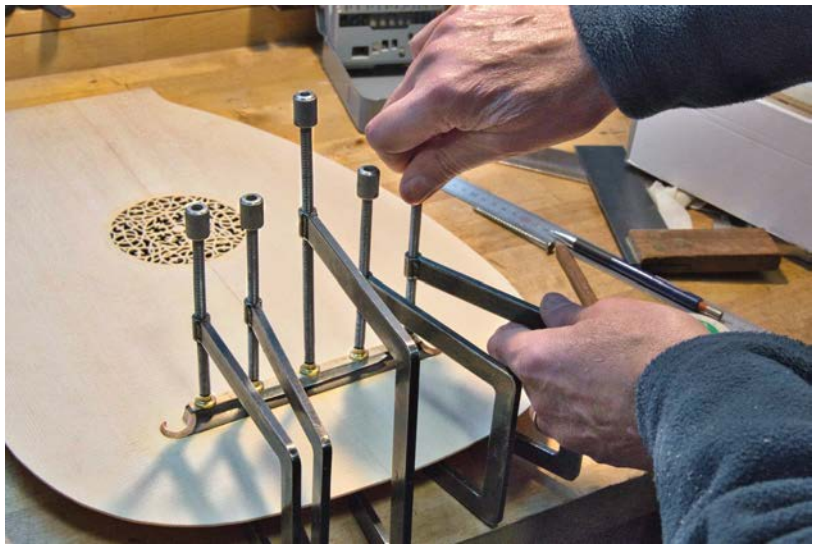








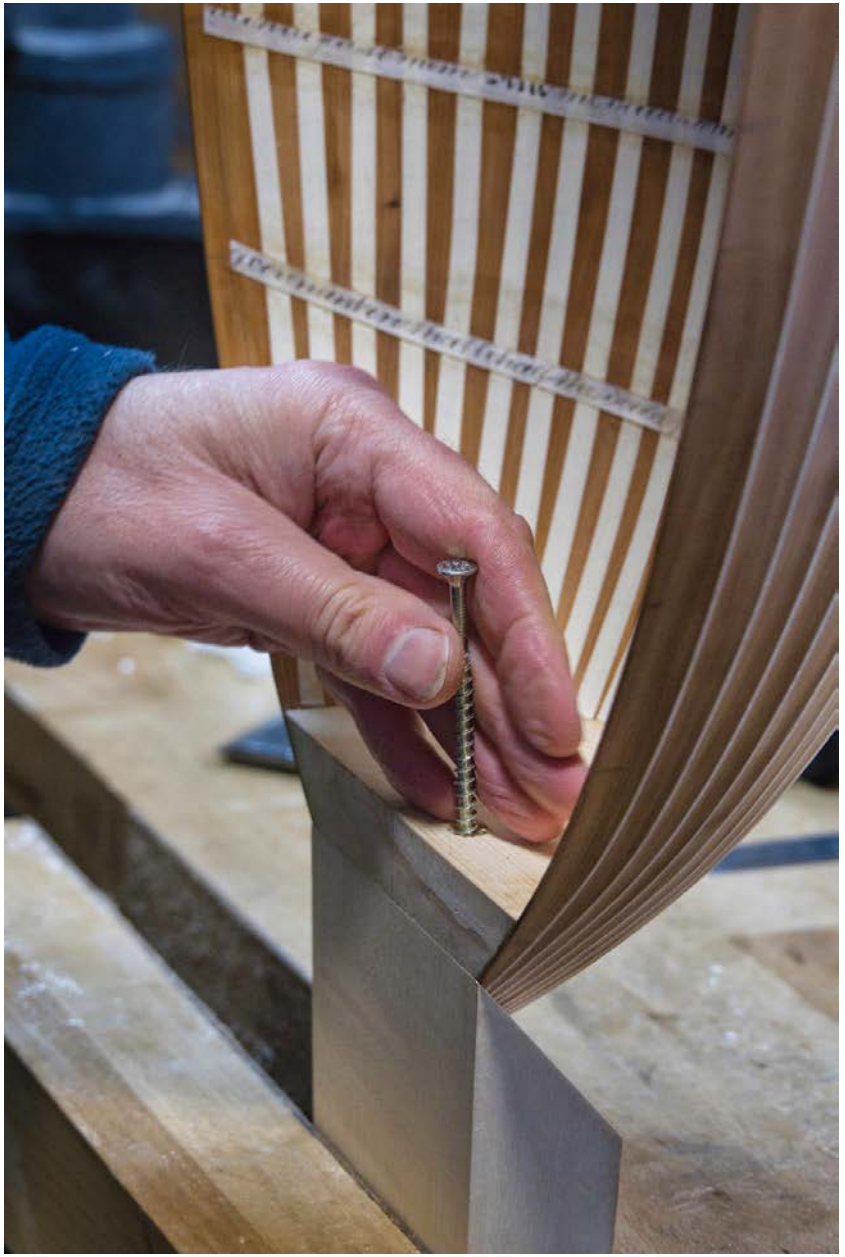






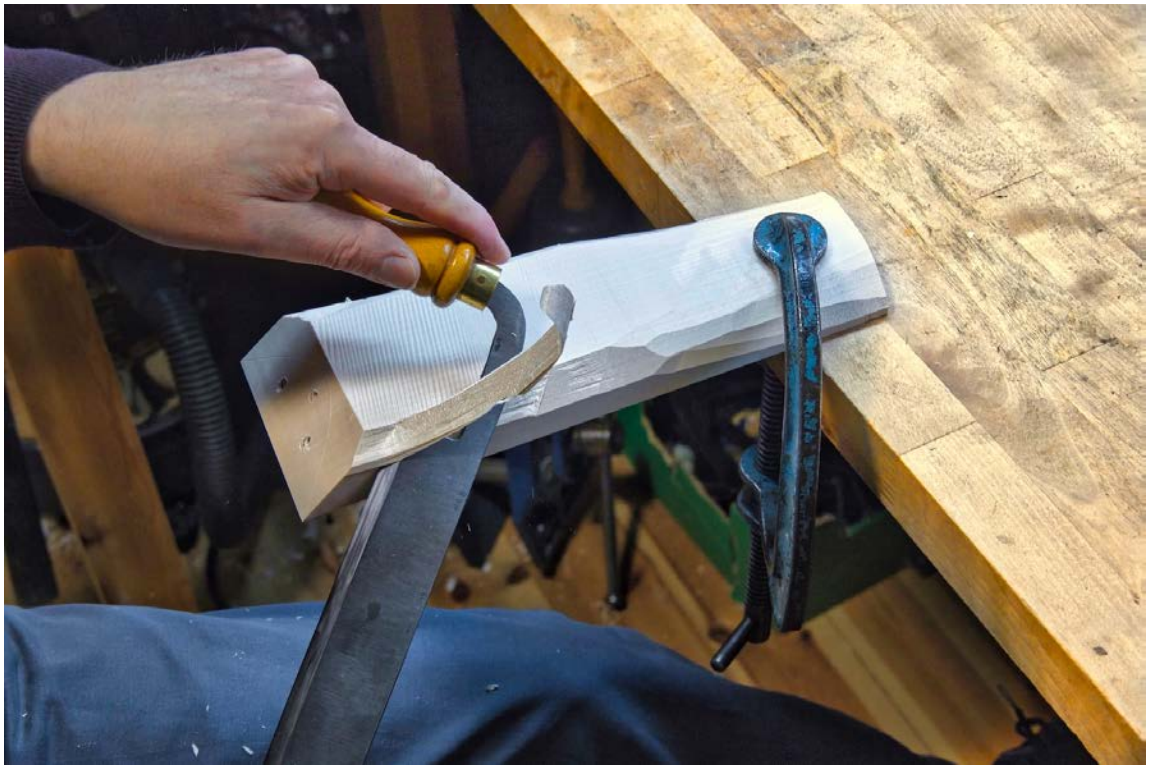
The Neck and Closing the Instrument











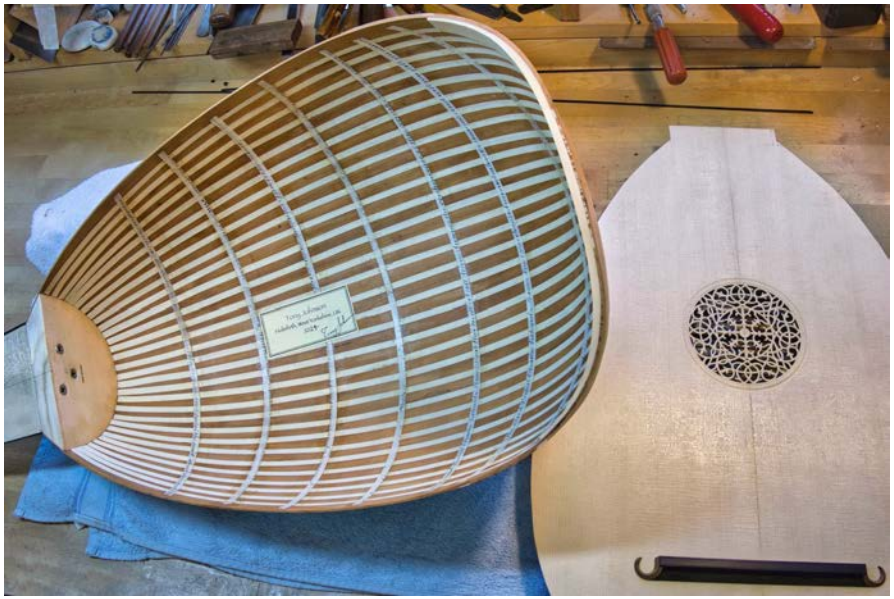




















Gluing the Fingerboard and finishing the Body and the Neck



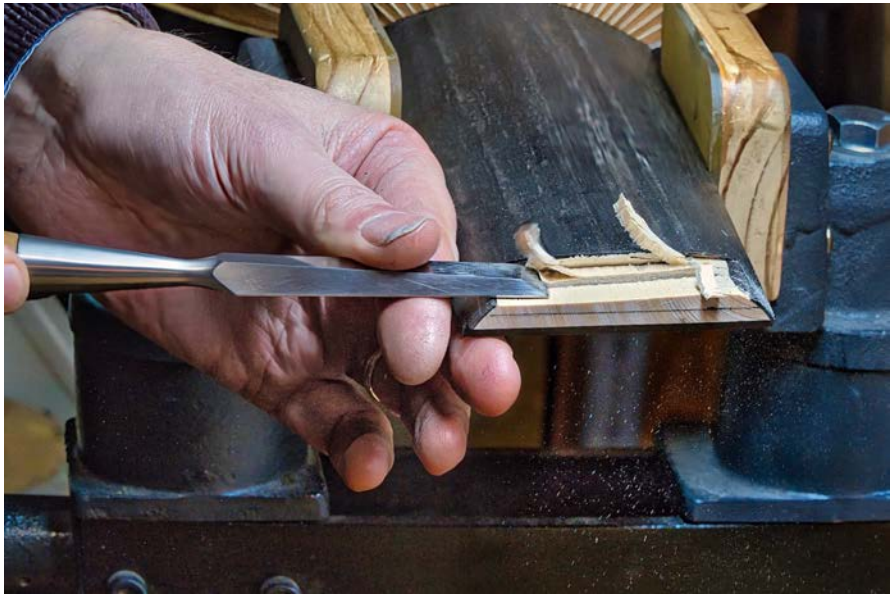


































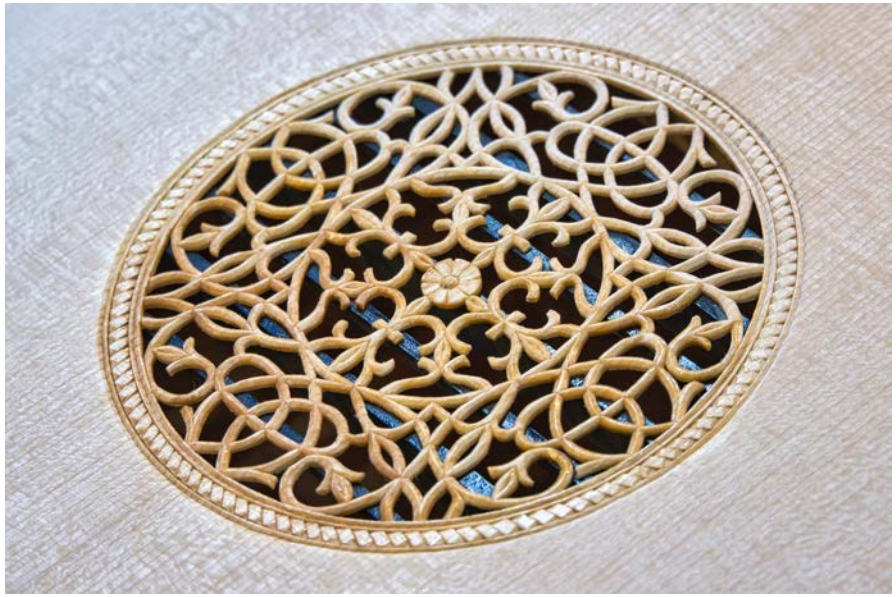


Varnishing












T-CUT
The Original Restorer









The Neck Extension







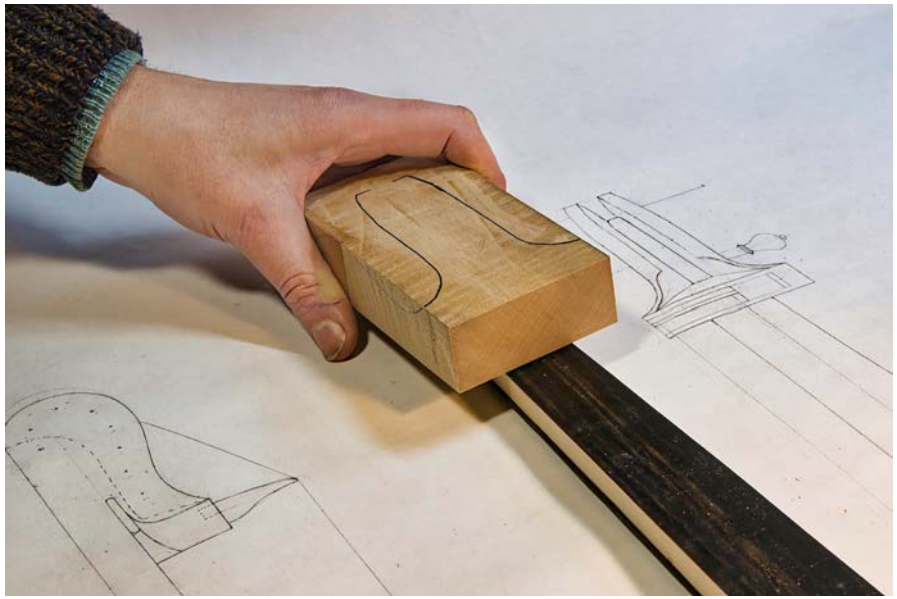




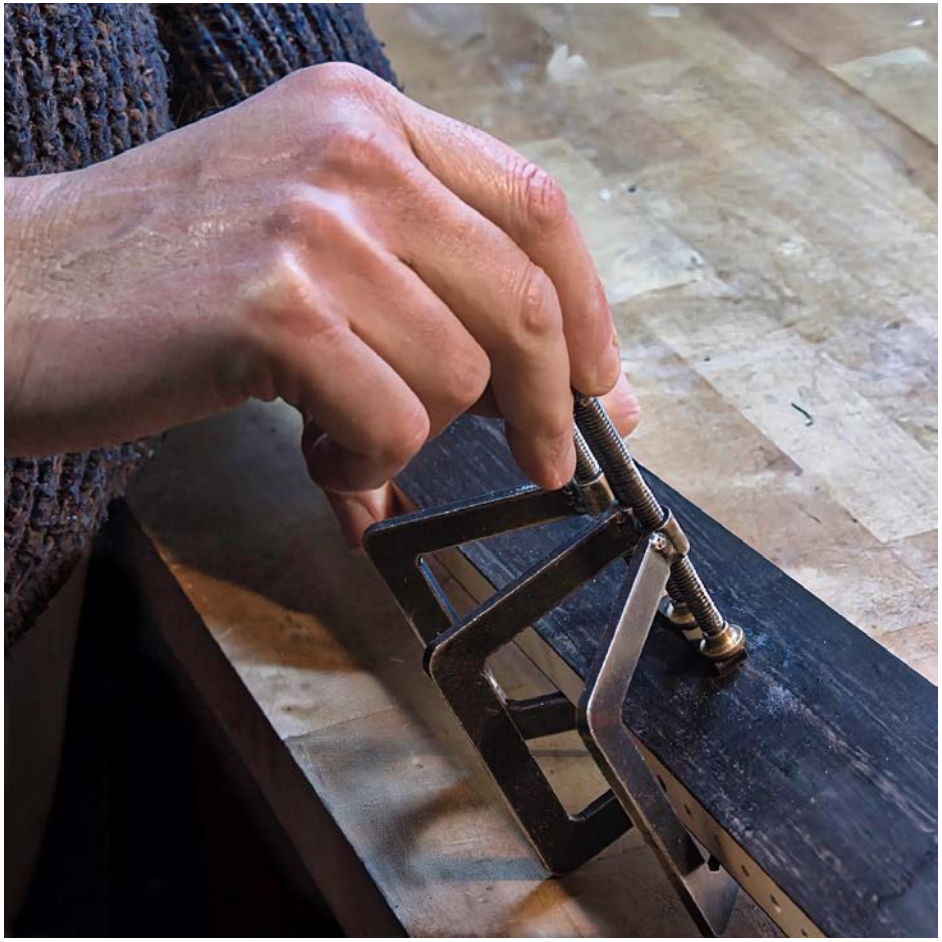


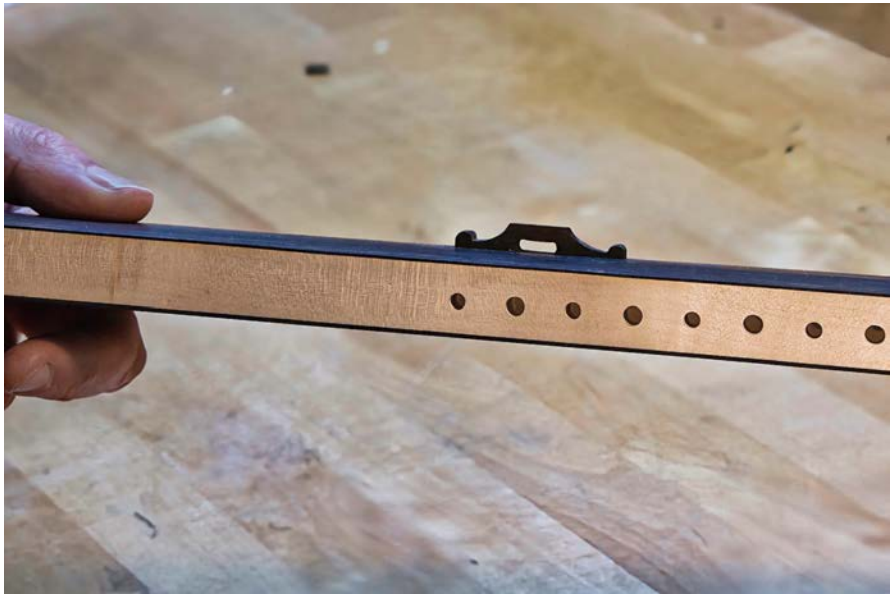

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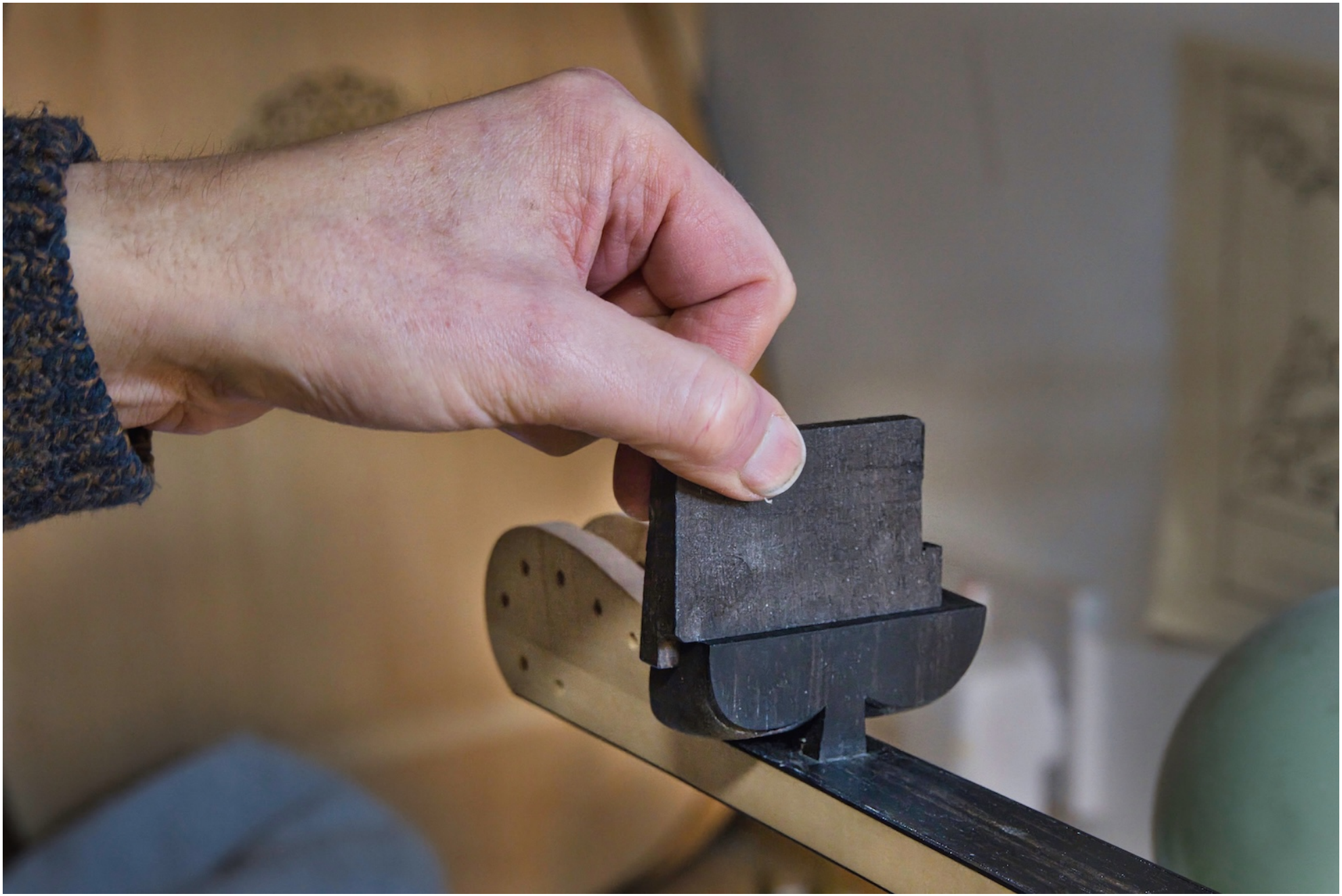


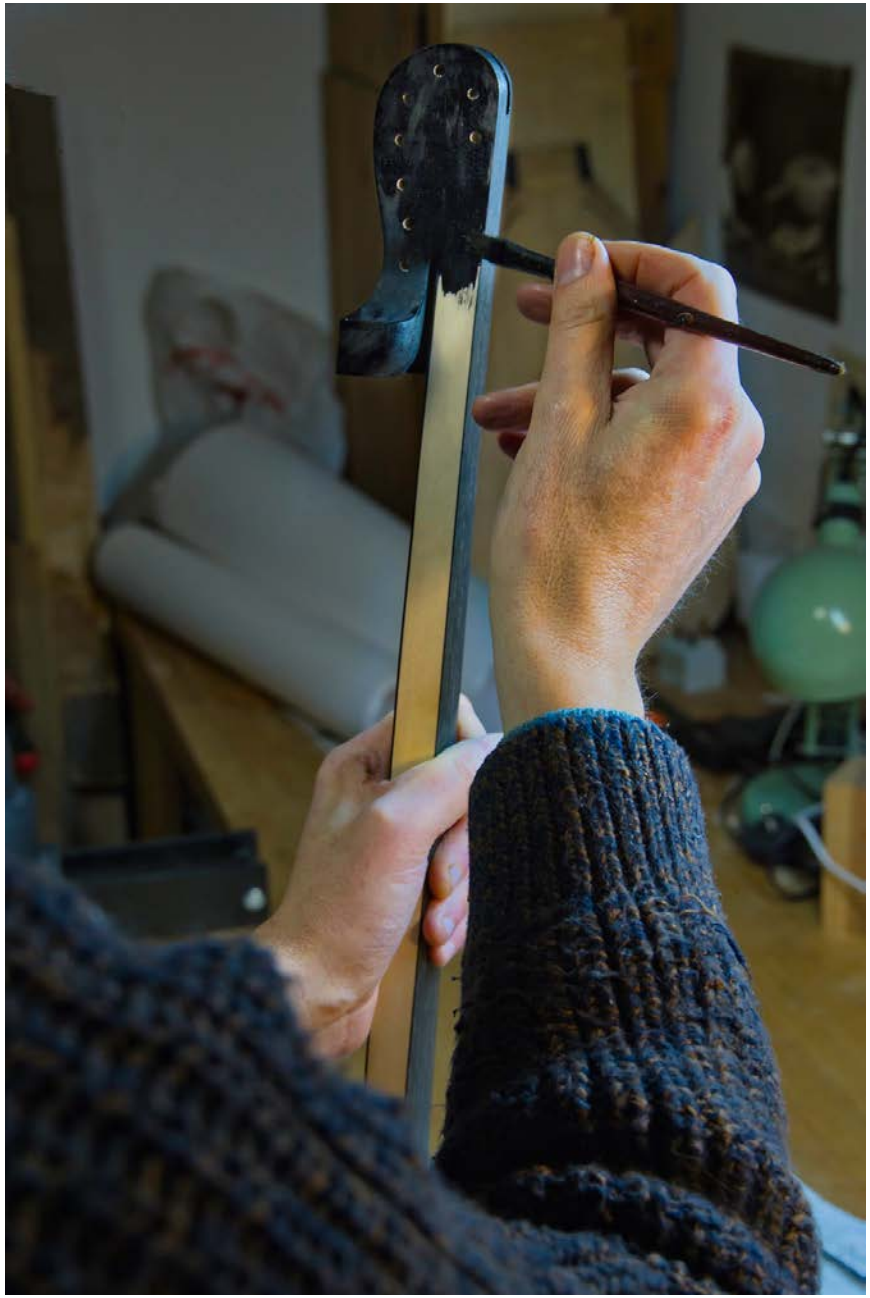












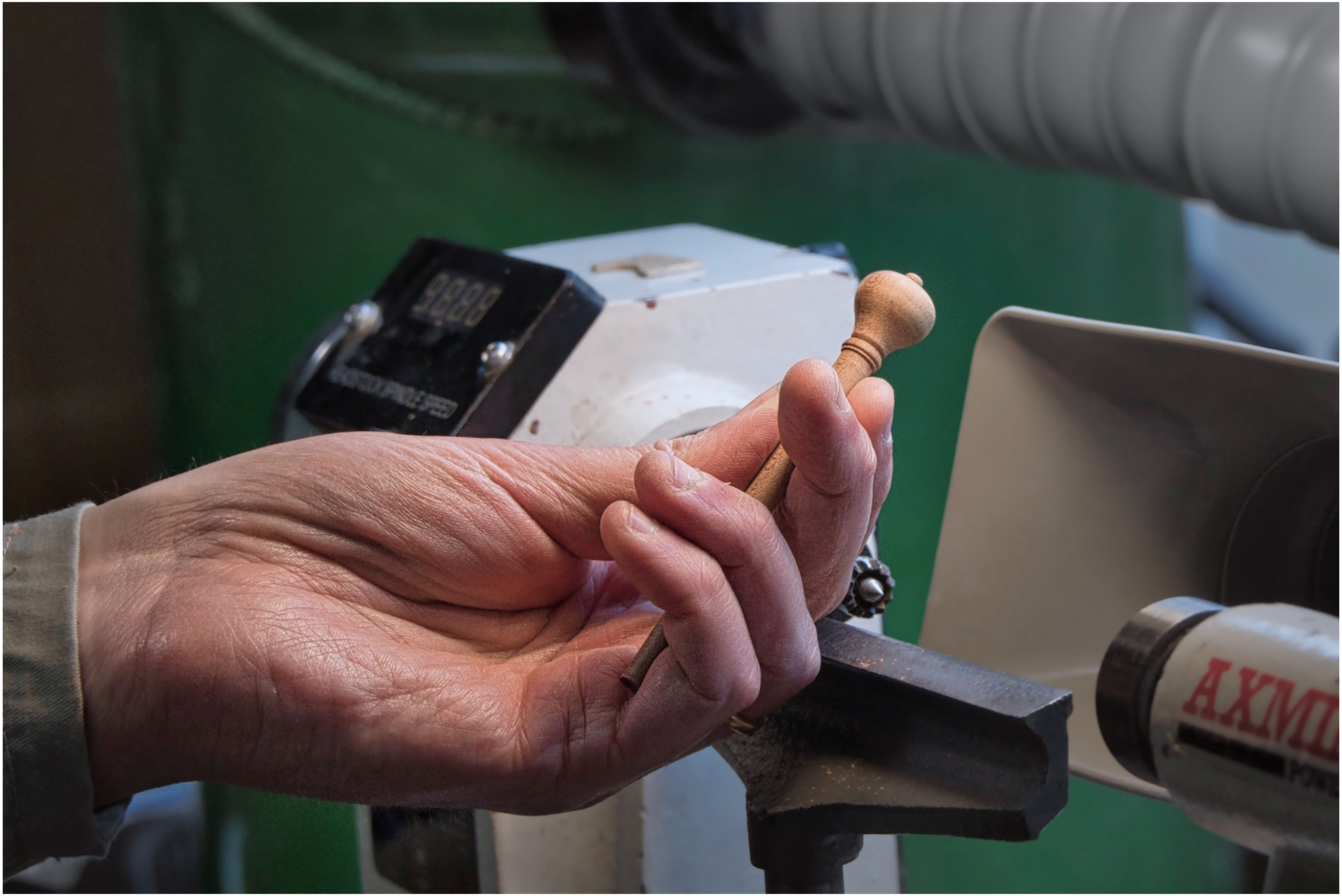


Fitting up the Instrument

- Turning and fitting the Pegs
- Nuts, Frets and Strings


AXMINSTER
POWER TOOL CENTRE









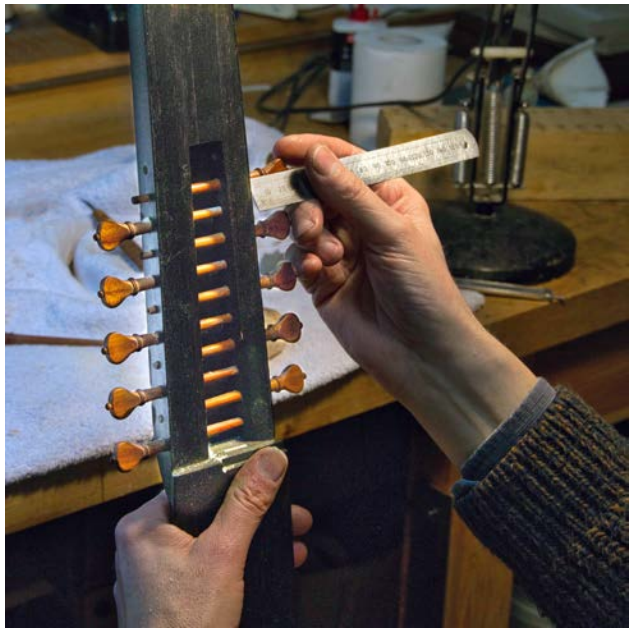




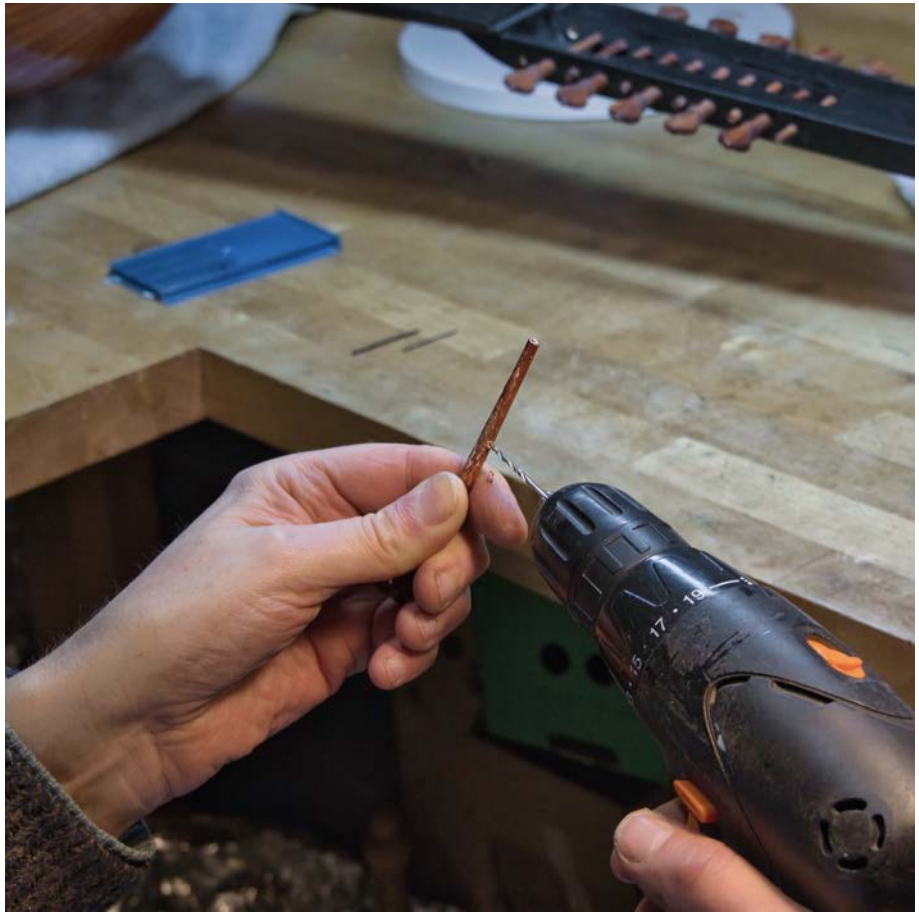














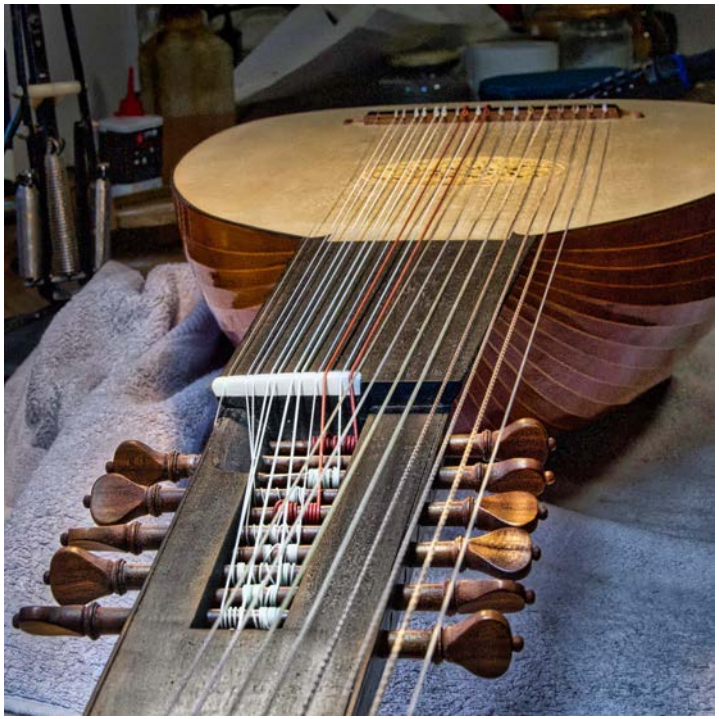


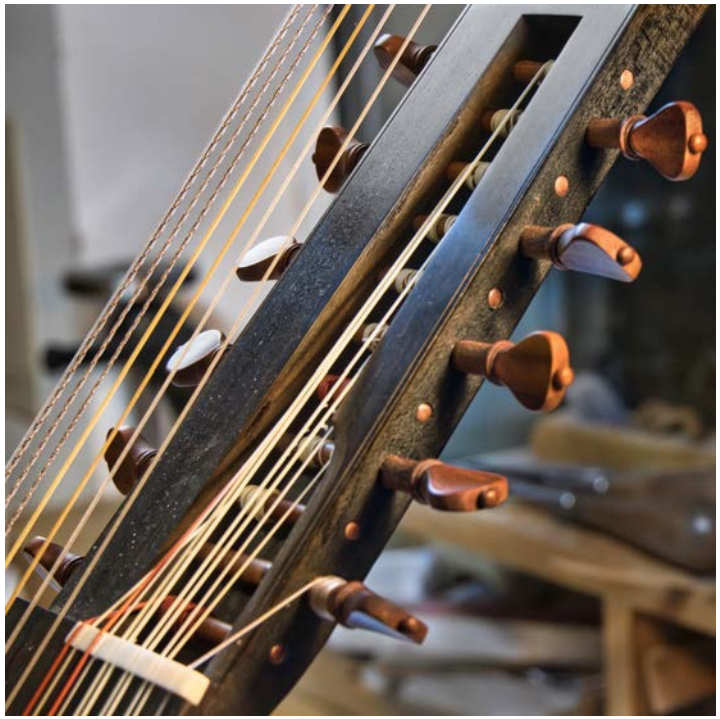

PROXXON




TRADITION
TRADITION
TRADITION
TRADITION





















The Finished Instrument









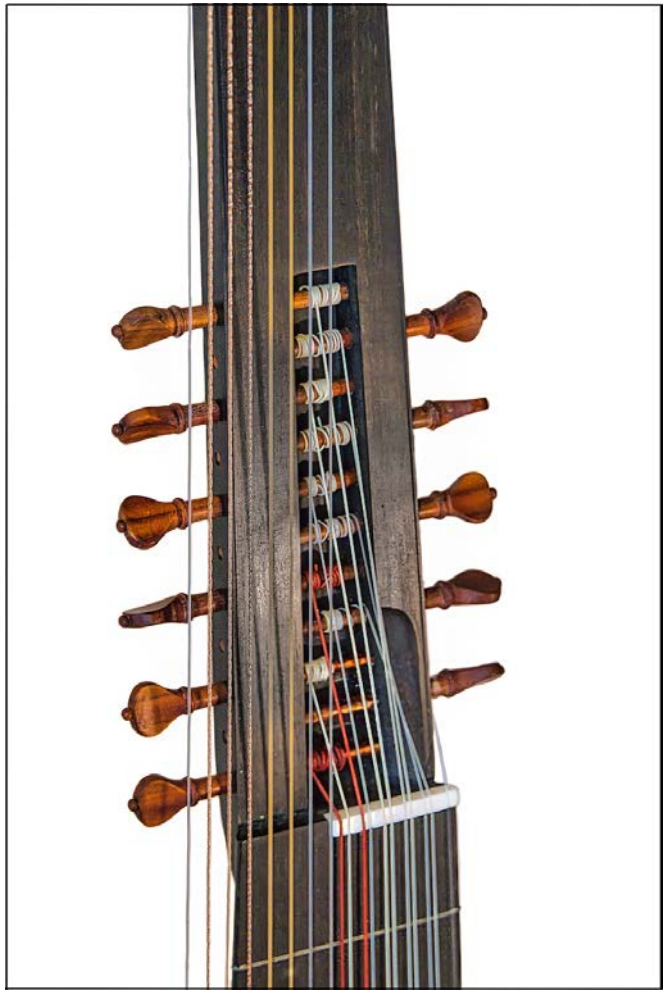












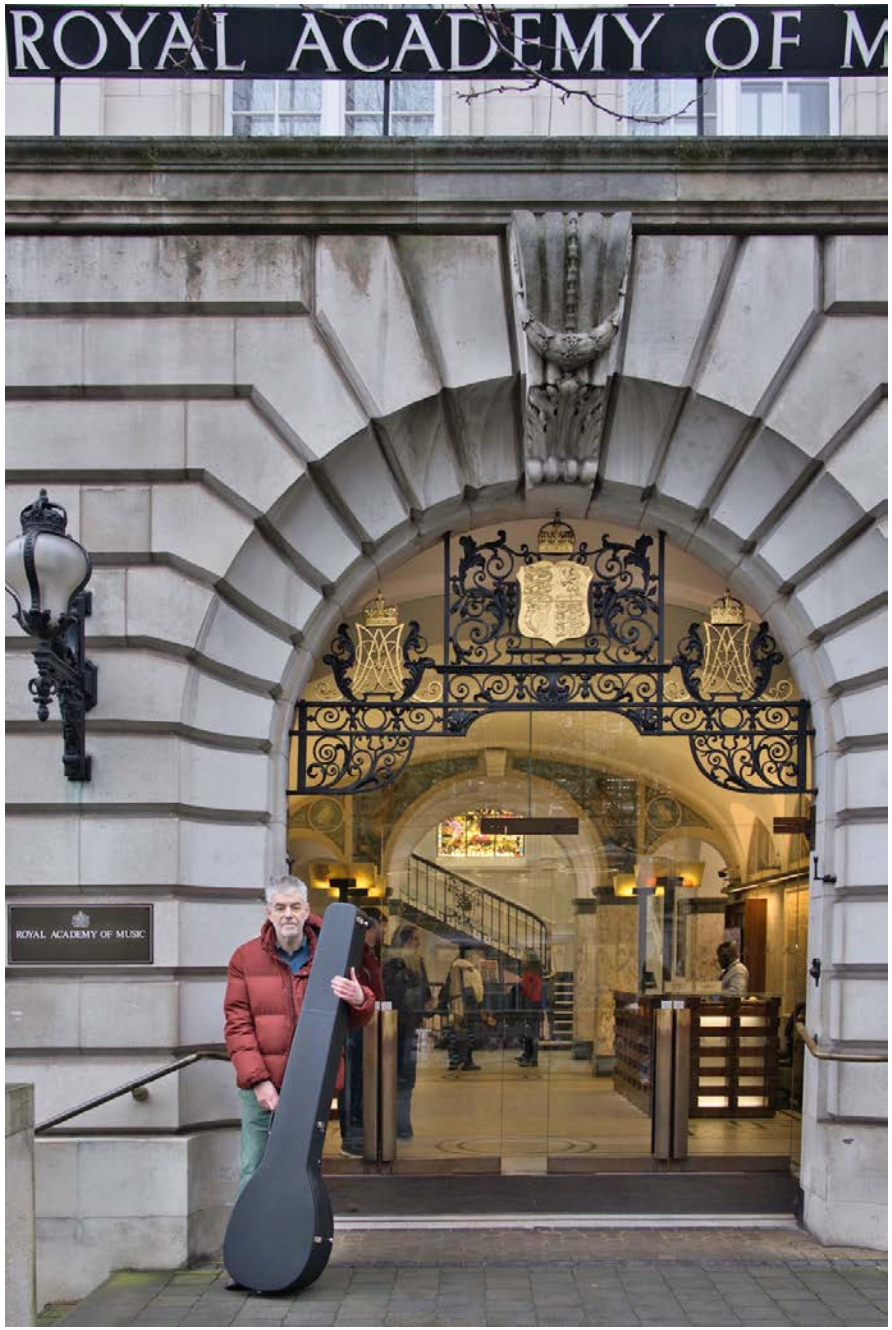






The Delivery

The archlute was delivered by Tony Johnson to the Royal Academy of Music on 15 January, 2025, where it was received by Elizabeth Kenny, Professor of Lute and Theorbo and Dean of Students at the Academy, and one of Europe's leading lute players.

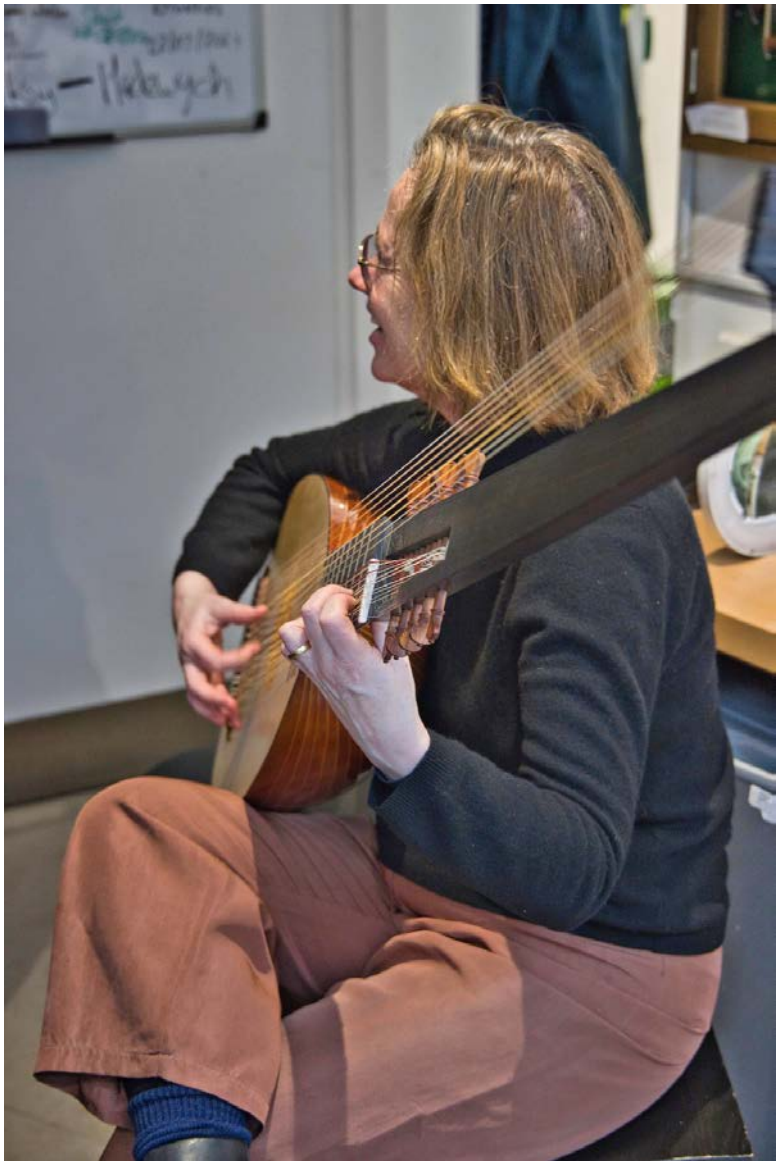
















Biographical details

Adrian James is Emeritus Professor of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Sheffield. He moved to the University of Sheffield in 2004, having been Professor of Applied Social Sciences and Deputy Dean of the School of Social and International Studies at the University of Bradford. He retired in 2010, since when he has devoted much of his time to photography, and was enrolled as a Licentiate of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain in 2021.

Tony Johnson is a luthier based in Holmfirth West Yorkshire. He studied violin making at Newark School Of Violin Making and Repairing from 1979 to1982. Having gained experience in various places in violin making and repairing since leaving college, his interest in playing the guitar and lute led him to making these instruments also. He taught guitar and lute making at Newark College from 1999 to 2005 and Manchester College of Art and Technology from 2003 to 2006. Since then he has been mainly making lutes and occasionally guitars to order for professionals and amateurs from many countries, and some private teaching in his workshop.

Acknowledgements

With many thanks to Catherine Butt, the visionary founder of the Calleva Foundation which funded the making of the archlute; Elizabeth Kenny, Professor of Lute and Theorbo and Dean of Students at the Royal Academy of Music; and Barbara Meyer, Curator of instruments for the Royal Academy of Music.

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