

Meet the Maker: Gabriel Fleta

by Cindy Burton with Jeffrey R. Elliott



IN LATE MAY 2014, Jeff Elliott and I flew to Barcelona, and after a very long night in a crowded plane we were met at the airport by the friendly faces of Josep Melo and Carme, his wife. (See "Meet the Maker: Josep Melo," by Mónica Esparza, *AL* #120.) Their kindness and hospitality continued to guide us through what turned out to be a wonderful two weeks that included great food; visits to see and handle various historical guitars at both Casa Luthier and the Museu de la Música de Barcelona; visits to Salvador Dalí's summer home in Cadaqués, the Montserrat monastery, many Antoni Gaudí buildings; and, to top it off, the Fleta workshop. Josep had arranged a brief appointment with the grandson of Ignacio Fleta, Gabriel, and had asked his friend Marta Alonso to help translate.

A short walk from the bustling Plaça d'Espanya, we turn down a quiet residential street and find the Farell, 15 address with a modest sign, "Fleta, Luthier," mounted over the door. Gabriel answers the door with an inviting smile, and we introduce ourselves. We enter directly into the workshop, a room approximately 14'x20' that feels as much like a museum as a place where something new, beautiful, and highly desirable is being created. Clients have been waiting a long time, at least twelve years, for the next Fleta guitar. Before we can begin to



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take in the fullness of the workshop, Gabriel leads us down a narrow hall to a windowless but comfortable inner room where we imagine new guitars are played for the first time.

The old workshop where Ignacio Fleta made the guitars that would attract the attention of Andrés Segovia, John Williams, and other noted classical guitarists was at Calle de Los Angeles, 4. That is where Gabriel and Francisco Fleta, Ignacio's sons, learned the craft, and Gabriel Jr. played as a child and built his first guitar. Ignacio Fleta died in 1977 and Francisco's allergies to wood dust prematurely ended his guitar-making career in 1992. Gabriels Sr. and Jr. moved to the current address in the mid-1990s.

"When I was a child I liked often to visit my family's shop and play and watch them work. Naturally I played with wood scraps. When I was about eight, I remember carving a little Moai totem from Isla de Pascua (*Easter Island in Polynesia*) using chisels, knives, files, and scrapers.

"During summers when there was no school, I would go to the shop. When I was thirteen, I began making a guitar. It took four years, and my father worked every part with me. Whenever I was able to, I worked on that guitar. I still have it (*Photos*, p. 51). It's made of leftovers from the workshop, rare wood for back and sides that is not typical to use. The top is western red cedar."



COURTESY OF JOSEP MELO

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Once Gabriel had made his first guitar, he began to play. "I studied classical guitar for about five and a half years. Now I play a little, only enough to hear the guitars. If you don't play every day, the level goes down. My father studied and played both classical guitar and violin-family instruments and my grandfather studied violin."

I could not help but wonder what sort of weight is this, growing up in a family of famous instrument makers. His grandfather was one of the most revered classical guitar makers of the 20th century, and Gabriel Jr. learned literally at the workbenches of his father, grandfather, and uncle. Most of us are first-generation makers and very deliberately (however naively) chose to make guitars. It's hard to imagine the pressure one might feel.

"When I was working at the shop during the summers, I was thinking, 'OK. Maybe I could be a doctor, or another thing,' but as I continued to work there, I realized that I would really like to be a guitar maker at the end of high school."



Above: Ignacio Fleta with his two brothers in their violin shop on Calle de la Virgen prior to 1925. Left: Ignacio with his sons Francisco and Gabriel Sr., probably in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Right: Gabriel Jr., Francisco, and Gabriel Sr. in the late 1980s in the Calle de los Angeles shop. Below: Gabriels Sr. and Jr. soon after the move to Calle Farrell in 1996. Bottom left: Gabriel's first woodworking project, a small carving of an Easter Island totem. Facing page: Gabriel Fleta holds his almost completed guitar. A discreet sign hangs over the workshop door: Fleta Luthier (see inset).



We hear someone at the front door and Gabriel excuses himself to answer it. The paintings on the walls surrounding us draw our attention, in particular, several showing a different workshop with views out a front window, each revealing a different season, and on the wall behind where Gabriel has been sitting, a portrait of Ignacio Fleta. When Gabriel returns a few moments later we ask about the artwork and learn that the artist herself was at the door, and she is his mother, Esperanza Jiménez Monclús. We wish we could have met her, but she has left. However, her presence is felt not only in her work displayed on almost every wall, but also later when we move into the main workshop room, where her easel, pastels, and work-in-progress await her next arrival, likely the following day.

How do you manage a long waiting list? Granted, it's not a common problem for most of us. Gabriel, who is in his early fifties, tells us that he has "only" a twelve-year waiting list. "If a person wants a Fleta guitar, I put their name on a list, and one year before I start it, I contact them."

Apparently there is no down payment to be added to the list, and when he contacts them, he finalizes the price, receives a down payment, and records the specifications: top wood (European spruce or western red cedar); back and side wood (almost always Indian rosewood, never Brazilian); scale length (almost always 65cm); neck shape, width, and taper; string spacing; and so on.

I'm curious about his own wood preferences. He admits to a preference for cedar tops, but says, "In this moment, if I was a guitar player I think I would like a cedar top and a spruce



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COURTESY OF GABRIEL

top. (laughs) It's difficult. Cedar tops sound so deep and rich in harmonics, but spruce tops sound so clear, deep and rich, too. The choice must be up to the player I'm building for. For back and sides, I prefer Indian. The best was Rio or jacaranda (*Dalbergia nigra*) but it no longer exists. It was prohibited in 1992 (CITES) but even before that, it wasn't good. It was too fragile and cracked too easily."

Josep Melo adds, "A heavy problem with Brazilian rosewood is that the oil in the wood has evaporated. It's very similar to glass. It cracks easily."

Gabriel agrees, "It is more difficult, but also more beautiful. But what is most important is that a guitar is played and that it lasts. The more you play it, the more it becomes alive. That is why I would prefer Indian rosewood, even if Brazilian was legal."

I asked Gabriel if he uses Spanish cypress at all. "No. It's very difficult to find any."

Marta adds jokingly, "You'd have to go to a cemetery and take wood from there." Jeff and I are wondering aloud what this means, while Gabriel, Josep, and Marta laugh. It turns out that Spanish cypress was commonly used for coffins back when it was more available.





COURTESY OF GABRIEL FLETA



COURTESY OF GABRIEL FLETA



COURTESY OF GABRIEL FLETA

This is Gabriel's first guitar, made in the Fleta shop under the tutelage of his father Gabriel Fleta Sr.

Facing page, left: a painted portrait of Ignacio Fleta. Right: The artist, Gabriel's mother Esperanza Jiménez Monclús.

Bottom: The Fleta workshop is not only where Gabriel makes guitars, but also where his mother paints every day.



CYNTHY BLITTON



1968 Fleta

The back and sides are sealed, but not the top, and the spruce and cedar layers of the bridge patch reveal its contour. The composite panoramic view shows the hefty two-piece end block, side supports and transverse bars locked into the kerfed lining, and nine fan braces fitted over a contoured bridge patch. Note the consistency with the 1975 Fleta (facing page) built seven years and 176 guitars later.



ALL THIS PAGE BY CYNTHY BURTON

Earlier that day, Jeff and I visited Casa Luthier (casaluthier.com), a multipurpose guitar store, performance space, and small museum dedicated mostly to guitars of famous 20th-century makers, especially those working in Barcelona (Garcia, Simplicio, Fleta). The store is jointly owned with Escola Luthier d'Arts Musicals, a music school located next door. Students benefit from exposure to the store's collection and even give concerts on some of the guitars. In anticipation of meeting Gabriel later that day, I was particularly interested in the museum's two Fletas: a 1939 that is clearly in the style of Torres inside and out, and a 1975 that is representative of a later design, not much different in size and shape to Gabriel's nearly completed guitar we were to handle a few hours later. The transition from the Torres *plantilla* to the larger, more rounded *plantilla*, different bracing pattern (including the change from seven to nine fan braces and two angled transverse bars below the soundhole), and very different building methods began sometime in the mid-1950s. Reportedly the impetus came from Ignacio's exposure to a live radio broadcast of Andrés Segovia playing Bach. He was captivated, and decided to switch his emphasis from building mostly violin-family instruments and the occasional Torres-style guitar, to dedicating most of his energy and that of his sons, Gabriel and Francisco, to making guitars. It makes sense that part of the transition included using techniques borrowed from his forty-five years of violin building. (For readers interested in an in-depth description of the design evolution that followed the mid-'50s commitment, see R.E. Bruné's 1999 article.¹) Ignacio was close to sixty when Segovia, four years his senior, began performing with Fleta guitars. A very young John Williams followed along with many other well-known guitarists, and the long queue began that Gabriel is still working on today.

As for how Ignacio and his two sons worked together, R.E. Bruné wrote that they "assisted Ignacio, and according to their own correspondence, there was never an instance of any guitar being made by one or the other exclusively. Always they worked as a collaborative team."¹ In the same article R.E. wrote that sometime around 1964, Francisco and Gabriel finally were recognized on the label, and it was changed to how it reads today, "Ignacio Fleta e hijos" (Ignacio Fleta and sons). The mid-1960s is also when Fleta began offering western red cedar tops, which quickly became associated with Fleta guitars (as with Ramírez guitars), thanks to Andrés Segovia's patronage. It would be the early '70s before young Gabriel began to spend his summers in the shop, although it would be another several years before he started his first guitar. Today it is obvious that "Ignacio e hijos" are present in his work regardless of his name's absence from the printed label. (See photo of the current Fleta label on p. 55.)

Gabriel Sr. died in early 2013 at age eight-three, and his son tells us that it's been a difficult year for his family. His father came to the workshop for some hours every day right to the end. And his eighty-three-year-old mother continues to come daily.

Given the evolution of Fleta guitars, I was very curious about Gabriel's situation now that he is on his own. No individual guitar maker I've ever known makes the same guitar every time. Aside from that being a physical impossibility, it's simply not in the nature of creative artisans to make cookie-cutter instruments. I wondered if Gabriel felt restricted by the long tradition he inherited and by a long list of people waiting for their guitars. The question was difficult to formulate given the circumstances, but Gabriel offered: "It is a long tradition, an evolution that started with my grandfather and is very slow. I am following that tradition, and I am making only

little changes. What's most important is to keep the Fleta sound, every note, and perhaps to expand the sound without losing anything. I am always seeking more precise high notes, a deeper sound, and more presence and sustain, without sacrificing anything."

The presence of Catalan pride is ubiquitous in Barcelona, and I asked if Fleta guitars were "Catalan" as opposed to "Spanish," and if so, what does that mean? A rapid discussion followed, mostly in Catalan. Gabriel made it clear that he's following in the tradition of his family, who came from a French violin-building background. Josep, who is passionate about his Catalan heritage, also joined in.

Gabriel hesitates, first speaking in English, "It's difficult.... The guitar I make is about my family, and I think this is from a French system. Because my grandfather began by making violins, this method is natural for him as a concept."

José adds, "They make the body and the neck separately. This is the system in Catalonia, and it seems that your grandfather was the first person to use this form of construction for classical guitars. And then Raúl and Ismael Yagüe and many others have since used the same system."

At this point Josep starts speaking rapidly in Catalan, and Marta keeps up with the translation as best she can, "An organization of Spanish guitar makers was formed ten or twelve years ago. It's only for makers who build in the traditional way, top face down, Spanish heel/foot, neck integral with body. In order to be a member you cannot call yourself a Catalan builder, or build in the way the Fleta family has done. The purpose of the organization was explicitly to exclude Catalan makers from participating in national or international shows.

This group formed in the south of Spain, around Andalusia, but also included some very elite makers like Ramírez in Madrid. In effect they are saying, 'We are the best; the way we do it is best; nothing else is possible.'"

But why, I wondered aloud, do they need such a group, when, after all, they have Torres on their side?

Marta answers, "It's a way to protect and distinguish themselves from the rest of the world."

José, switching to English, "It's the Spanish character."

Gabriel adds, "Torres was the first explorer."

Marta continues, "Both Josep and Gabriel are saying that the Spanish method of building the guitar is from a long time ago. They (traditional Spanish makers) haven't tried to do it in a better way, to improve it. But the Catalan makers are looking at the way violins are made and applying it to guitar making, and it's a much easier and more practical way to work on guitars. For instance in the Spanish method, when you finish the guitar with the neck attached, it's more difficult, and you have to cover the body of the guitar, and it's easy to damage it."

José and Gabriel continue to elaborate on why they prefer the "Catalan" way of building. Josep says, "Any problem with the neck (building the 'Spanish' way) is a disaster, because the neck and body are the same."

And Gabriel adds, "The (Catalan) method is good for me, because I really can build the guitar like a house, and every part is accessible for repairs, too. It's much easier than with the Spanish method. And it's much more flexible and takes much less shop space. For me, it's really more efficient, then I can take longer to build the guitar. (laughs) I can be more of a perfectionist."



1975 Fleta

Left: The substantial neck block of the dovetailed neck shows end grain in its vertical orientation. Most of the upper bout of the top is reinforced with thin plywood or cross-grain, solid-maple veneer, and a few millimeters of cedar top are visible around its edge. Right and below: The treble side of the top is stiffened by two transverse bars below the soundhole. Although both are slanted downward from bass to treble, the lower one is set at a much greater angle.





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Top right: This ancient bass scroll was discovered behind a piece of furniture when the shop moved to its current location twenty years ago.
Facing page: Several views of a nearly completed new Fleta guitar.



CYNTHY BURTON



JOSEF MELO



JOSEF MELO

Speaking of perfectionism, there is perhaps no area in constructing an instrument that shows that quality better than the finish. All Fleta guitars are French polished.

"In this moment I use only shellac with no additives. My grandfather first finished his guitars with varnish similar to violin, a varnish mix between oil and alcohol. In the 1990s, my father and I experimented on the back and sides with oil varnish with shellac over it. Sometimes it worked; other times little cracks formed." (laughs)

As we walk back to the main shop area, I want to know about the next generation of Fletas. Perhaps there is a future guitar maker? Gabriel has two children, a girl and a boy. "My girl is twelve years old. She likes music and plays clarinet, but has shown no interest in building guitars. But my son is nine, and he plays the trumpet. I hope he will come to the shop and pick up some tools — perhaps..."

We enter the main shop room we glimpsed earlier. It's crowded with projects underway. On the main bench, where the best light filters in from outside, lies a nearly completed guitar (facing page). On an adjacent bench is a vise holding



an almost-finished bridge, presumably for that guitar (facing page). A very sharp chisel created from a file lies next to it. There's a stack of maybe a hundred bridge blanks, perhaps newly arrived from a wood storage area we haven't seen. Gabriel offers, "I'm still working with woods that my father and grandfather selected; woods they bought thirty years ago. Every ten years I buy more wood."

Regretfully, we realize that it's already time to leave. I'm again struck by the colorful scene before us. We could be back in 1897 when Ignacio Fleta was born. Except for the presence of a few power tools, we're surrounded by well-used, scarred workbenches cluttered with lovely hand-worn tools, paintings of places and people, guitar and violin parts, and an almost finished guitar awaiting its bridge. The past seems



Left: Not without humor, the old fiddle form is right at home as an artifact, harking back to Ignacio's beginning as a violin-family maker trained in the French style sometime between 1910 and 1920.

Right: More humor with the message on a tile left over from the former tenant, a tile-maker: "The work is sacred. Do not touch."

Facing page: Pile of bridge blanks and partially tooled blanks, with two bridges close to completion. Alongside the usual files, chisels, and bits of sandpaper, note the very sharp (yes, it will cut hair) file converted to chisel (upper right).

to commingle agreeably with the present, including Gabriel's mother's chair, easel, and pastels. Near the door, a signed color photograph of Pablo Casals hangs by a color tile, which Gabriel says they salvaged when he and his father moved into this space, formerly a tile-maker's shop. Gabriel laughs at the irony as he translates the Catalan words on the tile, "El trabajo es sagrado: No lo toques" — "The work is sacred: Do not touch it."

Notes and Further Reading

1) Bruné, R.E. "Guitars with Guts." *Vintage Guitar*, June 1999. This issue of R.E.'s regular column is dedicated to Fleta guitars. Although out of print and difficult to locate, it is rich in both Fleta history and construction details helpful to makers.

2) Urlik, Sheldon. *A Collection of Fine Spanish Guitars from Torres to the Present*, Second Edition. Sunny Knoll Publishing, 2015. The Urlik collection includes two Fleta guitars, a 1960 classical and a 1963 flamenco. The second edition of the book is a treasure-trove of information including detailed color-accurate external photographs; thickness measurements of the top, back, and sides; bridge specs; woods used; bracing patterns; and all major dimensions. (See "Reviews" in AL#126.)

3) Moorish, John and Fowles, Paul, et al. *The Classical Guitar, A Complete History, Featuring the Russell Cleveland Collection*. Balafon Books, 1997. Moorish and Fowles author a four-page section on Fleta guitars that includes details and measurements regarding a 1975 Fleta. The same guitar's interior photos can be viewed on p. 53.

4) Hamilton-Brown, Alex (director/producer). *I Am a Guitar*. DVD. Filmed in the 1970s, it shows Ignacio Fleta and sons Gabriel Sr. and Francisco at work at the old Calle de los Angeles 4 shop in Barcelona. Available from artsonfilm.com.





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