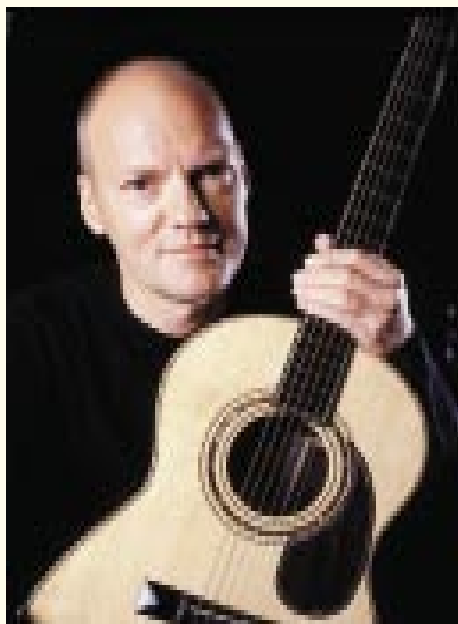


WORLD CLASS CRAFTSMANSHIP

Danish custom-made Kehlet guitars

By guitarist Finn Olafsson



Finn Olafsson showing the Kehlet Folk DeLuxe guitar

The acoustic steel-stringed guitar is an American invention - as most guitar aficionados will know. The oldest guitar manufacturer in America, Martin & Co., developed the first steel-stringed instruments in the nineteen twenties, and the concept was quickly picked up by other US manufacturers. The guitars have undergone constant development since then. The fact that America no longer holds the exclusive rights to the world's eminent guitar makers is the subject of this article.

A few years ago I took my two Martin D-45's to guitar maker Ole Kehlet to have new pickup systems fitted. I readily confess that back in 1979, when I bought my first D-45 - the ultimate model from Martin & Co. - I believed that I would never have to buy another acoustic guitar. This proved true for many years, but during my visit in Ole Kehlet's workshop that day, he asked me, "How come you don't play Kehlet guitars?" A very direct question. It seemed to demand a prompt answer, so I said, "The answer is right there on your work table. Can you really make guitars as great as D-45's?" As promptly, Kehlet replied, "Of course." He explained that it all depended on whether I was willing to spend money on the right kinds of wood.

Kehlet had no finished guitars in his shop at the time, but soon after three guitars were returned from an exhibition at Copenhagen's Museum of Musical History, and for the first time I had the opportu-

"Even the top US manufacturers have a hard time matching them."

nity to play a Kehlet guitar. This was what you might well call a de luxe version, made of the finest woods and with the most handsome inlay work imaginable.

It is well known that first impressions are important, and I was extremely impressed with these guitars right away. They are incredibly comfortable to play, with extremely fast action, they are perfectly in tune (which unfortunately is fairly unusual, even for highly recognised guitars), and the overall standard of the craftsmanship is superb. Even the top US manufacturers have a hard time matching them.

One small folk model, a 'Kehlet Folk de Luxe' impressed me in particular. Right there, I ordered a 'Kehlet Folk' model - built to my own specifications, as far as types of wood, inlay work and other features were concerned.



Finn Olafsson with his Kehlet Folk Rio guitar

Since then, I 'accidentally' happened to buy several other Kehlet guitars. After working with one for some time, I found that they were becoming indispensable to me.

A custom-built guitar doesn't come cheap - on the other hand it is an enormous advantage that you alone decide what to spend your money on: Do you want to spend it on the wood and thereby the sound of the instrument? Or on the ornamentation? Abalone and mother-of-pearl inlay work are very time consuming and costly processes. You can choose from different types of headstock, bridges and machine heads, just as you can design your own inlay work, like in a tattoo parlour!



Finn Olafsson playing his Kehlet Folk Vintage guitar

In comparison, most mass-produced guitars in general stick to standardised choices of wood and ornamentation. This often means that if you want a guitar with a really good sound, you also have to go for lots of extras. Consequently, at the end of the day it may be cheaper to have a guitar made for you than to buy a mass-produced one.

In all fairness, it should be mentioned that Kehlet Guitars does offer a 'Basic' version of all models. They cost around 25,000 Danish kroner, a price that compares favourably with the best mass-produced guitars. All 'Basic' models are made of mahogany and feature fewer extras - but the quality, as with the more expensive versions, is outstanding.

As it turned out, my trip to Tølløse that day was to change my life as a guitarist dramatically. I've never been so inspired to play and compose new music as when I laid my hands on Kehlet's guitars. There is nothing as inspirational as sitting down with a good guitar - and it's a lot less heartbreaking than when your sweetheart leaves you! And it's a unique experience to discuss and envision the options with the builder himself - while the work is in progress.

MUSICIANS PLAYING KEHLET:

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