

# The Larrivée Tradition of Handmade Canadian Guitars

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Although metal-string guitars have existed since the 17th century, the modern flat-top<sup>1</sup> steel-string is a product of the Industrial Revolution. In the mid-19th century, C. F. Martin began to manufacture flat-top steel-string guitars in the United States. Martin's goal was to design a guitar that could adequately accompany singers (Bégin, 49). Until the late 1960s, Martin was the only universally accepted style of steel-string guitar, and there was no North American tradition of hand-crafted guitars (Cumpiano, 50). Luthiers who tried to make their own flat-top steel-string guitars always ended up making copies of Martins. The steel-string tradition was identified entirely with the United States. Canada was not even on the map of respected steel-string guitar builders.

Until the late 1960s, if an independent North American builder discovered something new, he usually kept it secret. For early builders, lutherie was not an art: it was a living (Cumpiano, 50). As a result, innovative techniques died with their inventors. This pattern changed when Montreal-born Jean-Claude Larrivée, a former automobile mechanic, became a luthier.

Like Martin, Larrivée was not afraid to experiment; he also had the confidence to share his new discoveries. As a result, Larrivée has inspired many gifted luthiers in Canada to do the same. When a particular Canadian luthier makes a discovery, he or she shares it with other luthiers. In this way, the craft progresses on a national level. This approach, coupled with the steady support of accomplished Canadian musicians, has resulted in Canada now having an abundance of world-renowned, independent, steel-string guitar builders and a reputation as one of the most important countries in the international market of handmade steel-string guitars.

## Three Top-Ranking Pupils

Of Larrivée's pupils, three rank with the finest makers in the world: William "Grit" Laskin, David Wren, and Linda Manzer. All apprenticed with Larrivée, openly credit him with pioneering a uniquely Canadian tradition, and are now based in Toronto. **Grit Laskin**, Larrivée's first apprentice in 1970, explains:

When I worked with him, he'd only been making guitars for about three years, and he and I worked together. There was nobody else. There wasn't a big workshop. It was a typical master/apprentice relationship, and when I left, he slowly began taking on other people and growing into a production line.

Laskin's trademark inlay work is obviously inspired by Larrivée's, but more intricate and elaborate: "He has expanded it. He does pretty wild-looking inlays. His inlay work is very, very interesting. He doesn't duplicate inlays. He does one of a kind, each one" (Larrivée). Inlay work on musical instruments has been a tradition since before the Renaissance, but Laskin's approach is unique in drawing more on illustration art than on musical instruments. Laskin uses mother-of-pearl, abalone, ivory, sterling silver, and various burl wood veneers: "I use whatever materials are necessary, be they woods, precious shells, or other natural substances, to reproduce as accurately as possible the inherent colours and shades of the subject I am inlaying" (1987, 41).

Laskin actually engraves tiny lines in the various shells and woods to represent details such as facial features. One of his most astounding inlays has been displayed by the Canadian Museum of Civilization in *Opus*, Carmelle Bégin's exhibit of hand-made Canadian musical instruments. Based on the Grimms' fairy tale, this inlay depicts Rapunzel on the headstock. Her hair (rendered in maple, ash, and walnut) unfurls down the fingerboard, her lover using the frets to climb up to her (Bégin, 50).

In today's handmade guitar market, ornamentation is very important, and Grit ranks as one of the best in the world. Laskin's guitars have also earned high praise for their beautiful tone. Canadian folk legend Stan Rogers writes on the jacket of his album *Turnaround*: "Special thanks to Grit Laskin, luthier, who built one magnificent guitar."

**David Wren**, another world-class Canadian luthier from the Larrivée school, has earned the master's highest praise: "He worked for me for five years, and he was by far the very best that ever worked in the shop. He is very, very talented." Wren regards Larrivée highly too, crediting him with Canada's eminence in steel-string guitar making:

The uniqueness came from a steel-string guitar-builder who had an open mind, but his background was classical. Hence, we had mosaic around the soundhole instead of pearl. Dreadnought<sup>2</sup> was not the predominant shape. It was more of a classical guitar shape exploded into a larger shape. I think a lot of the slant on the Canadian scene was because the nucleus of the scene in the earlier days was [comprised] of people who were heavily classical-guitar influenced in their steel-string guitar design, and it just happened that one of them, Jean Larrivée, fostered a very open attitude. If somebody gives you information freely and is very open, you tend to be that way when someone approaches you. It's been good for the whole scene here, that's for sure.

Wren worked with Larrivée from 1973 to 1977, when he returned to his hometown, Toronto, and began making guitars independently. He has since earned a reputation as one of the finest makers in the world and has built guitars for Bruce Cockburn and John Allan Cameron in Canada, and for Joan Baez and Jackson Browne in the United States (Miller 1992b).

Aside from Larrivée himself, the most important pioneer in Canadian guitar-building is **Linda Manzer**. Manzer worked with Larrivée from 1974 to 1978, when she, like Laskin and Wren before her, went to Toronto. Since then, Manzer has demonstrated courage similar to Larrivée's in her willingness to experiment and break new ground. Her most lauded accomplishment to date is a 42-string guitar built for the United States jazz musician, Pat Metheny. The instrument, appropriately dubbed "Pikasso," supports more than 450 kilograms of pressure from the strings, for which Manzer, like Larrivée before her, designed an entirely new bracing pattern. The guitar has three necks. Its layers of piano-like sounds and its unlimited tunings push even the most accomplished players into uncharted territory (Revkin, 66).

Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn, who has commissioned four instruments from Manzer, says, "After I played this guitar from Linda, I got rid of all my other acoustics. I didn't need them anymore," and Pat Metheny says, "She has a very advanced sense of what makes an instrument in the broadest sense of the word. There is something more happening than just the wood and the strings and the bone" (Revkin, 66).

Manzer now makes several types of guitar, including arch-top jazz guitars and classical guitars. In addition to Metheny and Cockburn, she has made guitars for Gordon Lightfoot, Carlos Santana, and Canadian classical guitarist Liona Boyd (Miller 1992a).

### **Larrivée's Career, Reputation, and Influence**

Larrivée learned the fundamentals of guitar construction from a German Torontonian, Edgar Münch. Münch immigrated from Germany and spent five years in Canada before returning home. Larrivée also spent time in New York with Manuel Velasquez, who is arguably the finest living classical maker (Cumpiano, 51). While Larrivée was learning his craft, there were several fine classical guitar makers in western Canada, most notably Canadian native Michael Dunn. A Vancouverite, Dunn is famous for his brilliant and refined replicas of guitars made by the legendary Italian luthier, Mario Maccaferri. In Canada, the classical tradition and such fine adherents as Dunn had a profound effect on Larrivée.

At first, Larrivée made classical instruments. However, the demand created by the rock and folk-music explosion of the time prompted his shift to steel-stringed acoustic guitars (Revkin 64). Larrivée's classical background is obvious in the style of his guitars. The Larrivée body has rounded shoulders, a thin waist, and a broad belly, features that ever since have distinguished most Canadian acoustic guitars. Usually his guitars have a mosaic of tiny coloured pieces of wood around the sound-hole, a feature formerly found only on classical guitars. Whereas the strings on a classical guitar create approximately 90 pounds of tension, those on a steel-string guitar produce about 150 pounds (Laskin 1987, 25). As a result, Larrivée had to make modifications. He used thicker pieces of wood and invented a unique bracing or "strutting" system. In

Linda Manzer's words, "The most difficult part of designing a guitar is finding the delicate balance between keeping the instrument from ripping apart, while at the same time keeping the instrument as delicate as possible."

Directly or indirectly, almost all Canada's builders have been influenced by Larrivée's courage in experimentation, the style of his instruments, and his openness with information. Larrivée's courage to experiment originally set him apart:

I created this unique sound through experimentation. Because I wasn't influenced by the American guitar companies, I did everything on my own. I went to Martin, I looked at what they did, and then I came back and redid the whole thing. It is just my nature. I'm just that type of person. And then once we hit on something, we stopped and improved on what we had. The input from every employee who apprenticed at that time helped generate that specific sound. They would make a mistake, for example, and it would turn out to be a good mistake. Take the shape of the guitar, for example. We'd build a dozen guitars and then we'd alter the mold and make it a little bit rounder, a little bit squarer, and eventually we ended up with the Larrivée shape.

Laskin said: "We didn't just copy Martins, which was the very common route for American builders until maybe fifteen years ago. There weren't that many people making original shapes and original designs that were just as good, but different." Manzer added: "Larrivée pioneered a new style of steel-string acoustic guitars. He didn't copy Martin. He came from it as a classical guitar builder.... He developed his own style of strutting which gives Canadian guitars a very unique sound in general.... Canadian builders haven't been influenced by Martin, which has allowed us to go off in other directions with a lot of support from each other." Larrivée's willingness to experiment led to the unique style and sound of his guitars:

[The sound of the Larrivée guitar] is very bright, very balanced, and very loud. But the big thing is that it's very balanced. With any one of these guitars, even down to a dreadnought, you can walk into a recording studio and virtually just sit down and play without any major EQ. They can put the board in virtually a flat response and have no problem whatsoever. That's what makes the guitar so unique.

Larrivée's openness with discoveries has been the key factor in the success of Canadian luthiers over the past twenty years and has helped steel-string guitar building succeed on a level that has been national—not merely individual. David Wren describes the extent to which Larrivée has shared information which luthiers in the past would have hidden: "Edgar Münch is where it all started, but it is Jean's attitude of being open and sharing information and generally helping people who are just starting out, including people who aren't officially apprentices of his, that really fostered the whole Canadian scene, as far as I'm concerned."

As a result of Larrivée's openness, hand-made steel-string guitars in Canada are related to one another, each stemming from the original Larrivée

style, just as American steel-string guitars stem from the Martin style. The luthiers are good friends; anyone who makes a discovery shares it with the others, so that all might move one step closer to building the “finest guitar in the world,” a challenge which Grit Laskin says “is what it’s all about” (1987, 40). They do not compete against each other, but rather, with each other, always urging each other on toward the same goal. David Wren illustrates this camaraderie in an anecdote: “When I was first starting out, when I first left Larrivée, I was going in direct competition with Grit [Laskin], and yet he threw a big surprise party for me and collected enough money from everybody to buy a big spray outfit for me. I mean, there was that kind of openness and support.”

Linda Manzer explains the excitement and positive attitude Larrivée’s openness generated:

Larrivée was the only person that you could study with, and there was a tremendous amount of enthusiasm and support. It didn’t pay well, but that didn’t matter. There was an incredible community spirit, and a lot of us who worked together with Larrivée twenty years ago are still very good friends. We sort of pioneered making a living doing it, because it is very difficult to make a living as a luthier.

In addition to Larrivée’s courage to experiment and his willingness to share information, an external factor helped Canadian luthiers establish the Larrivée tradition. According to Linda Manzer:

Part of the health of the Canadian guitar building society is also the open-mindedness of the players. When most of us were in our formative years trying to make a living, the players were willing to try new types of guitars. This is partially because the guitars are built in their native country and partially because Martins are American guitars. I think there is a little bit of national pride involved.

Early on, Stan Rogers, Bruce Cockburn, and many other Canadian musicians gave the novice luthiers unfaltering support, desperately needed if they were to succeed in giving Canada a steel-string guitar building tradition it could call its own.

## Conclusion

Pioneered by Jean-Claude Larrivée and refined continuously even now by him and his gifted disciples, the flat-top steel-string acoustic guitar-building tradition in Canada is now regarded as one of the finest in the world. The best praise of Larrivée comes from his most innovative pupil, Linda Manzer:

If not for Larrivée, I’m sure none of us—I’m certainly sure I wouldn’t have been building the types of guitars I’m building. I would have probably been building, like everyone else in North America, Martin copies. We weren’t under the wing of Martin guitars because we weren’t told that Martin was the only way to build a guitar. We saw what Larrivée was doing, and that gave us a lot of freedom to explore, and the players came right along with us.

Larrivée's courage in technological innovation, his attitude toward sharing secrets, his extremely talented apprentices, and the support of the Canadian music world combined to put Canada permanently on the map as a respected and established member of the international community of lutherie.

## NOTES

1. "Flat-top" designates guitars (or mandolins) with thin, flat pieces of wood reinforced with bracing as their top woods.
2. "Dreadnought," the traditional Martin-style body shape, has a broader waist and shoulders that are more square than the body of a Larrivée or classical guitar.

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**Résumé:** *Zak Morgan montre dans le détail l'influence du luthier canadien Jean-Claude Larrivée, un innovateur dans la conception et la fabrication artisanale de guitares acoustiques à table plate et cordes d'acier. Larrivée a formé des luthiers de renommée internationale tels que Grit Laskin, David Wren et Linda Manzer. Morgan soutient que ce qui prime dans l'apport de Larrivée, c'est la tradition d'ouverture qu'il a établie parmi ses disciples.*