For Canadian luthier Sergei de Jonge, guitarmaking is a family affair. His wife handles the business end of things, and four of his six children as well as a son-in-law help him build guitars and teach lutherie classes in the family’s home shop 20 miles outside of Ottawa.

De Jonge’s work is anything but conventional. In the mid-1980s he built a reputation for constructing guitars with 14, 15, and 17 strings, and he still builds a couple of multistring instruments per year, though he focuses mainly on concert classics. Unsatisfied with standard designs, he’s continually experimenting with bracing patterns and other design elements, and he prefers to build guitars one or two at a time so they maintain their individuality. “Compared to most guitar makers,” he says, “I make guitars with my bare hands.”

Since the mid-’90s, most de Jonge classics have been crafted with lattice-braced tops rather than more conventional fan bracing. De Jonge says that lattice bracing affects both tone and structural integrity. “Almost any classical guitar you look at that’s a few years old is rippled across the top,” he explains. “Lattice-braced guitars don’t do that, and they don’t lift up as much behind the bridge. They don’t have as warm a tone as a fan-braced classical guitar, but they do project better, and the tone is really satisfying in a concert hall.”

Another structural detail de Jonge is known for is his unusual bridge design. “I think there’s a basic flaw in the standard classical bridge,” he says. “The wings are carved round, although the strength is really needed at the edges of the bridge. My bridges are more hollow in the middle, and the strength is at the edges. I got the idea in the early ’80s and then saw

By Simone Solondz
that John Gilbert was using something similar, so I decided to try it.”

Although the family is better known for its classical guitars (daughter Joshia’s
classicals were wowing the guitar world when she was still a teenager), steel-string
guitars—mostly small-bodied instruments intended for fingerstyle players—account
for about half of the de Jonge output. De Jonge’s first steel-strings were round and
classically shaped (perhaps because one of his early mentors was Jean Larrivée).
He continues to build this model, his standard steel-string design, but he’s also
added an OM model similar in shape to the Martin OM. “That’s really a fluke,” he
says, “because I didn’t look at the Martin before I designed that shape!”

The family now builds about 40 guitars a year. Sons Alan, Sagan, and Rubin, who
have all contributed ideas and guitars to the de Jonge line, are currently studying
away from home, but they do try to put together an instrument or two when
they’re home from school. The classical guitars are all built by one pair of hands
(and labeled with the builder’s name), while the steel-strings, labeled “De Jonge
Guitar Company,” are more of a group effort. “I supervise every stage, and I’ve got
my hands on every one of them,” says Sergei, “but they can be largely built by
Sagan or Rubin or Pat.”

Pat Hodgins, Joshia’s husband, essentially married into the family business.
Before meeting Joshia he had “no clue” about building guitars, but her passion for
guitar construction immediately rubbed off on him. “Pat came to stay with us,” Sergei
recalls, “and he never left!” Pat and Joshia recently had a baby, so they now split their
time between the shop and taking care of their son. Joshia’s output has slowed
down, and she’s developed an interest in French polish. “I like that it’s natural,” she
explains. “It’s a lot nicer to not have the fumes. Everybody’s getting into it, even on the steel-
strings.”

Joshia and Pat also take turns helping teach Sergei’s ongoing lutherie class, an intensive, four-
week course that costs $3,200 US, and they continue to learn from the experience. “Showing some-
one how to do something makes you realize what you know and what you
don’t,” Joshia says. Her father concurs, adding, “Some of the ideas
students come up with I wouldn’t have thought of myself. I learn something in almost
every course because the students have fresh and open minds. They’re not indoctrinated with the standard ways of
doing things.”

But Sergei seemingly has no problem keeping his mind open. He’s currently pro-
ducing steel-string guitars with adjustable necks, which allows the action to be easily
tweaked with the turn of an Allen key at the heel. And he’s experimenting with
sandwich-top guitars, which feature two extremely thin slices of wood separated by
light inner bracing. On the classical side, he’s receiving quite a few direct orders for
cutaway guitars, a model so unorthodox that his dealers refuse to carry it.

De Jonge steel-strings start at $6,500 and classics at $7,500. They can be pur-
chased direct or through a few select dealers, including Beverly Maher, Gryphon
Stringed Instruments, and The Luthier’s Collection. His waiting list is currently
about eight or nine months long. “I don’t want much more than that,” he says. “I
don’t want to look way into the future, to know that I’ve got to build such-and-such
a guitar in three years. I want the freedom to change designs.”

Pat Hodgins (pictured) and his wife, Joshia de Jonge, help teach Sergei’s ongoing lutherie class.

Pat de Jonge, setting up a guitar (above), works on every steel-string in his shop.