

Laurent Brondel Guitars

New England-based luthier fuses original designs with vintage American tone.

By Teja Gerken



Luthier Laurent Brondel plays a model B-3 guitar built with a red spruce top and cocobolo back and sides in his rural Maine shop.

LUTHIER LAURENT BRONDEL builds beautiful steel-string guitars in his rural Maine shop, but his journey to this station of his life has been a circuitous one. Born and raised in Paris, France, Brondel began playing guitar as a child, and by the time he was in his teens, he was playing in bands, before going on to make a living as a teacher, session player, and music producer. By the early '90s, his musical focus had shifted to electronic music, and he recorded several albums for labels in Europe and the USA; he was still working in this medium when he moved to New York City in 1999. But moving to Maine a few years later had him longing for acoustic sounds, and before long, he was in search of the perfect tone, buying and selling and studying scores of vintage guitars. Ultimately, the self-taught Brondel started building his own guitars, becoming so skilled that Dana Bourgeois hired him to work in his shop. In late 2007, Brondel decided it was time to go out on his own, and since then, he's developed a highly original approach to the classical American flattop design.

Can you describe the sound you're aiming for in your instruments?

In order of importance: perfect balance in all registers, wide dynamic range, quickness of sound, clarity, sustain, projection, and power. They're all interrelated. In terms of tonal signature, I aim for the right mix of fundamentals and overtones for the best possible note separation, while keeping a certain richness, especially in the low registers.

A Brondel A-2 built with a Carpathian spruce top and cocobolo back and sides. The A-2 starts at \$6,100.

Is there any particular instrument (vintage or contemporary) you've modeled your sound on?

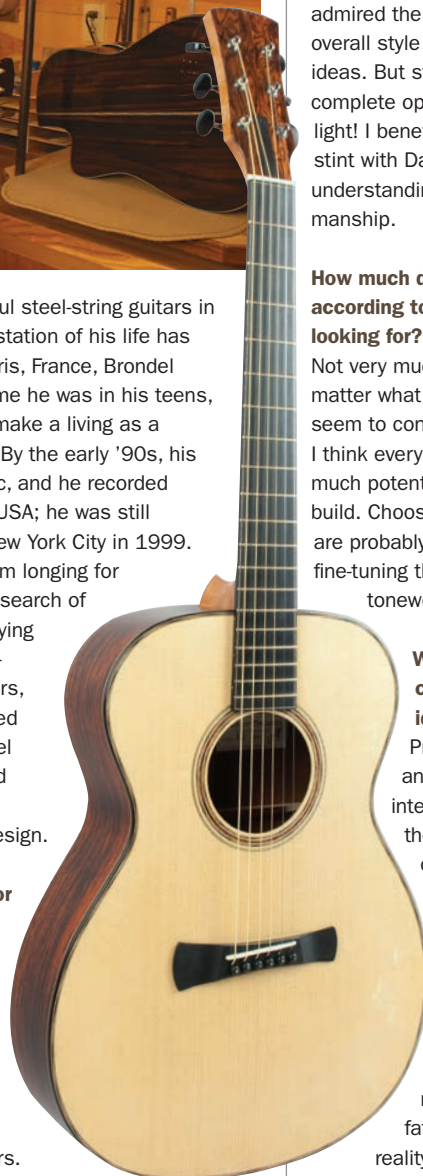
It is hard to escape the prewar Martin paradigm when building steel-strings; the best examples are a form of ideal for me. I particularly favor the smaller, lightly built guitars of the late 1920s, like O's and OO's. But the OM is probably the most versatile. For modern builders I've always admired the originality of Stefan Sobell's overall style and tone and Rick Turner's ideas. But structurally, I build at the complete opposite spectrum: thin and light! I benefited immensely from my short stint with Dana Bourgeois, both in terms of understanding how guitars work and craftsmanship.

How much does your tonal goal change according to what your customer is looking for?

Not very much. I have an ideal, and no matter what small changes I make, they all seem to converge toward the same ideals. I think every builder tries to squeeze as much potential as possible out of every build. Choosing a guitar size and platform are probably the most important steps in fine-tuning the tonal signature, followed by tonewood choices.

What part of your design contributes most to your tonal ideal?

Probably the way I tune the top and the back and how they interact, meaning the thickness of the wood and how bracing contributes to what I want to hear when I strike the free plates. I use a lateral arch on the top and back, rather than the modern domed plates, and besides greater structural strength, I believe it allows my guitars to be more responsive in the mids and fatter in the high registers. But in reality with a stringed instrument,



especially a guitar, it would be impossible to isolate one or a few components and think they have a finite influence on tone and structure. It is a whole and it is more the interaction of components—how they are assembled, influence each other, and form the overall style of building—that defines a builder's tonal signature.

Do you think your instruments are best suited for a particular kind of player or style?

I do not think so. Since I aim for balance and an ultrasensitive but solid instrument, the tone changes according to the player's technique more than anything else. They're versatile, but unmistakably flattops (although nothing is flat on them!) with a bit of an archtop tonal edge and fatness. They're suited for polyphonic and/or contrapuntal music, but also for single-note playing and even strumming.

Is there a particular instrument style you consider to be your specialty?

My OM-influenced A-2 is the one I built the most. However, I build ten different models, 12 and 14 frets to the body, and even a Size 3 parlor guitar. I also started building solid-bodies in the early Fender paradigm, because I just love it. For me personally, as

a player, the ideal size is probably a concert, preferably a 14-fret 00, but I could live happily with an O or an OM.

What do you like most about that kind of instrument?

The size seems ideal in terms of physical comfort for me, the tonal balance and power works well with my low voice, and it is very portable.

What's your favorite combination of tonewoods?

Probably some kind of spruce, European or red, with one of the ebony or rosewood species. But I think the tonal differences between tonewoods are highly overrated.

Are there any unique design or structural elements you've developed?

I don't think so. I view my work in the continuity of what has come before, so perhaps it is more a question of refining certain features and what my ears want to hear. Lutherie is an ancient and mature art, and the highest potential only comes with a delicate balancing act on the part of the builder. Some of my building choices can appear unorthodox, but I did not invent anything. Aesthetically I tend to be influenced by Renaissance and Baroque instruments.



Details of the Brondel A-2 (clockwise from left): The guitar's interwoven rosette; the back of the headstock, featuring Schertler tuning machines; and the slight arch Brondel gives his guitars' tops and backs.



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Brondel's D-3 model uses a small dreadnought-shape body and is available in 12- or 14-fret configurations.

Describe the guitar you provided for our video and pictured here.

It is an A-2 with a 25.6-inch scale. The top is Carpathian spruce and the back and sides are cocobolo. The neck is Honduras mahogany; the fretboard, bridge, and bindings are African ebony. It has my arrow motif on the rosette and top purflings, accented with amboyna burl on the rosette, end wedge, and heel cap. It has a $1\frac{25}{32}$ -inch nut width, $2\frac{3}{8}$ -inch bridge string spacing, and a slender neck. Like all my instruments it is constructed with mostly hot hide glue and the thin finish is oil varnish.

AC

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