

FROM A GUITAR MAKER'S NOTES:
MY FIRST OUD – A DIARY
by Sebastian Stenzel

Prelude

1989

By chance I hear and see through an ajar door of the concert hall at a Lute convention in Saarbrücken Munir Bashir. I am enchanted.

Eastern 1990

A Persian musician lets me try his instrument. It's the first time I lay my hands on an oud. I feel at home immediately and would like to build one for myself straight away, but it seems more reasonable to learn more about the instrument first.

During the following years

All attempts to obtain an acceptable oud fail: most instruments on sale are cheap "tourist-ouds" from Kairo. If I find an acceptable instrument at all, its price is beyond my possibilities. On one occasion, I was offered a Syrian oud from a well-known German oud player. He had sanded down the soundboard himself and consequently it sounded as if stringed with rubber bands. Nevertheless he was asking a very high price, and I didn't buy it.

Making guitars and being a father keeps me busy, the quest for an oud is on hold.

1996 –1998

Repair work on several good ouds allows me to further study the construction. I am amazed by the similarities to European Renaissance lutes.

The best of these instruments is one by the Turkish maker Faruk Türüncz. Based on two Turkish ouds and my knowledge of European lute making, I make the first drafts and prepare the first elements, among them a soundboard of spectacular bear claw spruce.

2003

In a newly opened shop for saz and oud in Munich I find an usable Turkish oud for 200 Euros – a steal!

2006

I take part in an oud course with the Iraqi musician Shaffan Soleiman.

Fugue

Autumn 2008

A versatile and gifted musician tests a flamenco guitar in my workshop. He likes it so much that he says he would like to buy it, had he not saved money to purchase a good oud, and that it would be a pity I did not build ouds as well. So I tell him about my 18 year-old wish to do exactly that, and I offer him non-committally to make an oud for him. It seems like a miracle: my first order for an oud is commissioned by someone living in my own village.

In the following weeks and months

From the start I am certain about the main features of my oud model: the outline of the belly (i.e. the soundboard) will resemble one of the typical models of European late Renaissance lutes, relatively rounded with broad "shoulders," neither drop shaped, nor triangle shaped, as are many ouds.

The two additional small soundholes most (but not all) ouds have served, in my opinion, to improve balance by lowering the quality of resonance for some of the soundboard modes while simultaneously increasing the resonance frequencies of the air inside the oud.

As I see other ways to achieve improved balance, I plan to make only one soundhole. Doing without the two small soundholes results in what to me seems to be an advantage: lowering the fundamental frequencies of both soundboard and air volume.

Researching the Internet, I come upon a photo of a Hana Nahat oud from 1902, which comes very close to the belly shape I have in mind. Then I find another picture of a Hana Nahat oud on the site of Richard Hankey. Following my inquiry, he graciously sends some pictures of this instrument's bowl, but not of the belly, which I am, of course, most interested in, and refers me to the book he has written based on this oud. I order it immediately.

The following night I have a dream, which ends to my greatest delight by seeing a large part of the original belly of the Hana Nahat oud from the inside.

When Hankey's book is delivered, I do not find anything new to me, which only serves to strengthen my plans.

Some weeks later, I again dream about the oud I'm going to make. The bowl is pulled inwards at the belly, as it were, i.e. the angle between belly and outer rib is more than 90 degrees.

I find this dream meaningful and decide to follow it as this feature is coherent with my concept, where it makes sense to keep the width of the belly small in relation to the bowl.

In the Summer of 2009

I make the final design for the belly shape, which is then transferred to a brass template.

By November,

the form made from alder wood (which I had purchased just for this purpose over 15 years ago) is finished, with upper- and end block in place. The 15 ribs from African blackwood and flamed pear tree are resawn and planed with a scraper plane.

Over the winter,

the work on the oud is put on the back burner, as I have to finish five guitars. A new detail in the guitar soundboard construction proves so successful that I decide to incorporate it also in the construction of my oud model.

My oud model will not be a mere reproduction of good Arabic, Persian, or Turkish ouds: on one hand, it is strongly influenced by my experience as a guitar maker, on the other, it is, so to speak, a reflection of European lute making. My aim is the warm, dry sound of old Syrian ouds, but rather than merely copying other maker's work, I am guided by my understanding of the functional principles of plucked instruments.

State of affairs in April 2010

- Bowl and pegbox are ready for assembly.
- The belly is assembled, the inlays done.
- The neck is still raw.

May 2010

After long procrastination, I decide to use a rosette design I had drawn already 16 years ago for my oud model. It is based on a five star. Not fancying two days spent at the jigsaw, I search for possibilities to have the rosette laser cut or routed. A friend introduces me to the renowned lute maker Günter Mark, who not only offers to rout my rosette with his CNC machine, but also graciously assists my first steps with AutoCad, because the drawing has to be transferred into a vector graphic data file that can be read by the machine. Many thanks, Günter!

The European influence is most distinct in my design of the bridge: I decide on a typical Renaissance shape with scrolls at the ends, only the tie block is oud-like. I am a bit concerned about committing a breach of style here, but I find that this design has a very harmonious unity of form and function, which I have found in no other design.

I have to admit that I am quite proud of my soundhole design, which, just as the bridge, is a European/Arabic hybrid: the rosette design is principally rooted in the Arabic tradition, but its execution rather shows the influence of the Italian Renaissance. The outer ring with the square inlays is a pure, but discreet, quotation from Syrian form language.

The neck is quickly shaped and veneered with African blackwood. Fitting the pegbox takes more time, but fortunately the calculated measurements prove correct.

By the middle of June the rosette is finished. CNC-routing worked without any problems, with some further trimming and chip carving the rosette is finished.

For the binding of the belly edge I make a purfling which corresponds in pattern and repetition with the inlays around the soundhole. Different cutting angles give exactly the desired effect.

I am amazed by the precise realization of my perceptions while making this instrument. It seems my thoughts and hands are guided.

The assembly goes smoothly, as does glueing fingerboard, which - guitar maker that I am - continues almost up to the soundhole, because I don't want to do without the improved stability, or the better playability.

The varnishing is routine, and except for the belly, French polish. The belly receives a coat of wax as is customary with lutes.

No words can describe the excitement I feel putting on the first strings. The first sounds are very promising, but I leave the strings a third below their designated pitch to allow the instrument to adjust to the tension.