

# TRIBUTO PARA UN GENTILHOMBRE

## A personal tribute to José Romanillos to mark his 70th birthday

By ELEFThERIA KOTZIA

THE distinguished guitar maker José Luis Romanillos Vega celebrated his 70th birthday on 17 June. In Spain, a big party was given in his honour. A book was presented to him, containing greetings from all over the world. It was quite an occasion. Eleftheria Kotzia, who plays one of the unique instruments of the legendary luthier, offers her own tribute.

### **José Romanillos: The Person**

I first heard about José Romanillos in the late 70s when I met Julian Bream, who was giving a recital in Athens. After the concert he invited me to play for him. Having complimented me on my playing, he asked me what guitar I was playing, remarking that I needed a better guitar. He advised that I should sell it and acquire one by José Romanillos, the maker of the guitar he had used in concert that evening. Given that the recommendation to buy it came from the master Julian Bream, who had earlier played so brilliantly and produced a wonderful sound, such advice was impossible to ignore. Needless to say, I got into contact with José shortly afterwards and placed an order for a new guitar.

A few months later I met José in his workshop and took possession of 'La Anthonia', a guitar that has been with me ever since. It has been all over the world with me, being used constantly from 1979 until 2000 at all my concerts and to make my various recordings. I could not have asked for a better instrument and it remains to this day my most cherished and loved possession.

From the first moment we met, it was evident that José was a man of strength, warmth and spontaneity, with a great passion for not only guitar making but its history too. I feel so lucky to have had the opportunity to meet him, and I retain fond memories of many conversations regarding a wide range of subjects. On the guitar he could expound at length regarding the sound and projection of the instrument; the importance of wood selection, the different characteristics of woods etc.

One of the most fascinating conversations we held was about the main factor influencing the sound of a guitar. Was it the guitarist or the guitar maker? I cannot recollect if our discussions on the subject were ever resolved. He was also concerned about the position of the guitar maker in the music world; he felt their profile needed to be raised, and he succeeded in this by writing his book on Torres, a formidable achievement.



*Left to right: Eleftheria Kotzia, Marian Romanillos and José Romanillos.*

Somehow in a world that was increasingly turning more towards the materialistic, with people working and relating to each other in ever more frantic ways, José could invariably find time for you as a person and made you feel almost part of his family. He was unfailing in his personal generosity to me, both as a friend and also as a luthier, giving freely of his time and expertise to help



*José Romanillos and Julian Bream.*

me. I was treated much more as a friend rather than as a business acquaintance and was always made to feel very welcome in their home.

As I came to know him better, it was evident that he was also someone who was devoted to his wife and family, wanting the best for his sons. Over the years I made several visits from Paris to his home and workshop, and both José and his wife Marian always treated me with unfailing courtesy and kindness. I still vividly remember the view of the countryside from his workshop window in Dorset and the characteristic smell of the wood, while in the background José would be working with a quiet sense of purpose.

#### **José Romanillos: His guitar making**

As mentioned above, I acquired my beautiful guitar from José in late 1979. Since that time it has travelled all round the world with me on tour, being subjected to the usual rigours of travel, changes in temperature, differences in humidity as well as some rough handling by airport baggage handlers!

Although capricious after travel and needing some time to settle, once warmed up and given the right auditorium the sound produced could be really magical. Despite all that the guitar has been subjected to over the years, it has still performed marvellously for me, keeping its rich tone and balance. This in itself is a fitting tribute to José Romanillos' remarkable skills as a luthier,



*Sergio Abreu and José Romanillos.*

and demonstrates the quality and workmanship he is able to produce in his guitars.

In closing this personal reflection of my experiences, I would like to thank both you, José, and your wife Marian very much for your friendship over the years. I wish you a very, very happy 70th birthday (and many more to come!)