

Crafts, professions of excellence

Wood Instruments

Related professional – ANTÓNIO MONTEIRO

Workshop: Luthier (Music instruments with wood)



Figure 1 Luthier interviewed making a wooden musical instrument.

The first wooden musical instrument appeared more than 30 thousand years ago, and, with it, the first luthier. Luthier is the professional who builds and repairs musical instruments through craft techniques. These musical instruments include violins, cellos, guitars (including electric ones), mandolins, among others.

Besides the fact that the first luthier appeared so many thousand years ago, vocation training related with this profession started being delivered in Europe in the Middle Ages and became more “famous” in the Italian Renaissance.

Being a luthier is considered an Art, as these professionals are the ones who can transform pieces of wood into musical instruments with unique sounds. It is also important to highlight that, at the beginning, luthiers

were responsible to work exclusively in the development and repair of string instruments, but they can also work on wind and percussion instruments.

The development of a string musical instrument can take between 50 to 70 hours of work, and it is not a continuous process, as instruments are glued without nails. In this way, it is necessary to respect times in terms of drying (both glue and the lacquer).

Since musical instruments suffer changes over the years, the luthier has a fundamental role in their preservation, since he is the professional responsible for carrying out the maintenance processes of stringed musical instruments.

What are the skills and expertise of professionals in this profession?



Figure 2 Strings of a Portuguese guitar.

This profession requires effective technical knowledge because it is usual that instruments follow specific rules in terms of dimension and curvature, for example, to obtain the desired sound. This effective technical knowledge is also necessary when we talk about repairing instruments, as it is a very meticulous task.

As a profession closely related with music, it is recommended that luthiers have high interest in music and, preferably, know how to play some string instrument(s). It is also recommended that luthiers have skills related with handcraft, especially with wood, and with drafting.

It is important that luthiers engage with key stakeholders and improve his/her professional networks. Before start building or repairing a musical instrument, the luthier needs to make research about available providers, buys the necessary materials and define which techniques will be used. By having a strong network, luthiers may find more option of potential providers.

Also, when the task is related with repairing a musical instrument, luthiers need to deeply understand the needs and preferences of clients. In this way, social skills, as communication, empathy, and active listening, are also key skills to have success in this profession.

Time management is a key soft skill too, as luthiers may work with orders, so it is important to have everything prepared for clients on time.

Some materials used by luthiers

Many of the tools used by luthiers are carpentry and woodworking tools, so they are usually easy to find in building supply stores.

When developing an instrument, it is important to take into consideration the quality of the wood that is going to be used. Some examples of types of wood that have been showing that provide more quality to the instruments include Brazilian rosewood, firs, walnut, ebony and Mpingo.

A widely used instrument is the transposer – it is a piece used to change the basic tuning of a stringed instrument with frets (the “divisions”, usually made of metal, placed perpendicular to the strings of the instruments, and serve as guide elements for the position of the fingers).

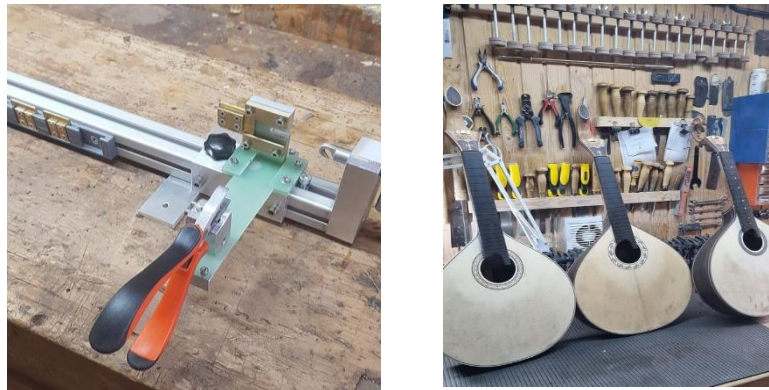


Figure 3 Tools used by the interviewed luthier.

What markets are related to this profession?

As luthiers daily work in the development and repair of musical instruments, it is expected that he/she is a person with interest in music, in general. At least, luthiers need to understand some technical aspects of music, related with wood instruments, to develop instruments with high quality and that will produce the sound that it is supposed to.

Usually, luthiers work in their own workshop or atelier. Although, it is also possible to work in other places as music schools, musical instrument factories and behind the scenes of orchestras, so it is a profession closely related to music and manufacture of instruments.



Figure 4 Portuguese guitar made by the interviewed luthier.

Cultural heritage. Luthiers are the professionals responsible to develop mainly string instruments. Portugal is a traditional country in terms of specific types of music. In the case of Fado, for example, the singer is always accompanied by a musician who plays a very typical instrument – the Portuguese guitar (a string musical instrument). In this way, luthiers can collaborate with several musicians who play this instrument, being part of the cultural heritage of Fado. If this profession disappears, it will be hard to keep traditional Portuguese musical instruments made with wood, as the case of the Portuguese Guitar, that is always used in fado.

Musical events. As a performance of an orchestra. Luthiers can work behind the scenes of orchestras. They are a key actor if something goes wrong in a musical event, being responsible to try to fix problems related with wooden musical instruments.

Education. Luthiers can also implement workshops and provide training actions to teach the art of developing string instruments.

Where to learn the profession in Portugal

The main organization focused on formal education for luthiers is the Academia Nacional de Luthiers (in English “National Academy of Luthiers”). It is a private organization that provides training for future luthiers and that arises because of several requests for the implementation of training actions focused on the building of stringed musical instruments. Usually training actions take the duration of 6 weeks and it is held in Lisbon.

In Sintra, near to Lisbon, there is a Professional School for the Heritage Recovery of Sintra with a formal training in “Technician for the Construction of Musical Instruments”, available since 2021, that aims to promote a new generation of luthiers, focused on sharing experiences between different craft generations. To access this training, participants must have under 20 years old and 9th degree completed at school.

Academia Nacional de Luthiers (in English “National Academy of Luthiers”) - <https://www.academianacionaldeluthiers.com/>

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