

KEVIN RYAN GUITARS

When it comes to custom-building guitars for discerning fingerstyle players, Kevin Ryan has all the right credentials: the years of fine woodworking experience, the background as a fingerstyle guitarist and member of an acoustic band, and the creativity of a former aerospace R&D engineer. Ryan has brought his experience and ingenuity to bear on the organization of his shop, so that he can build close to 50 guitars a year with a little help from his father, while maintaining his sanity, his family life, and his integrity as a luthier. Ever since he designed his first guitar, Ryan has been on a mission to build an instrument with an unamplified responsiveness second to none.

A native of Ohio, Ryan moved to Westminster, California, with his wife, Barbara, in 1984, hoping to turn his career in custom cabinet building into a furniture business. Instead, Ryan ended up working for Northrop, designing and building delicate wood-and-steel aircraft models for wind-tunnel experiments. In 1988, he built his first guitar, finding inspiration in the designs of the classic Gibson J-185, custom guitars by Jim Olson, and Richard Hoover's Santa Cruz guitars. He was soon building full time in his current shop (Kevin Ryan Guitars, 14211 Wiltshire St., Westminster, CA

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Ryan's Mission Grand Concert guitar (starting at \$3,500) is built with traditional woods and standard appointments: ebony fretboard and bridge, koa binding, adjustable truss rod accessible at the headstock, inlaid abalone rosette, and high-gloss nitro-cellulose lacquer finish. It features a tapered, arched back that is a full inch deeper at the tailblock than it is at the neck and a sleek, fast neck with a scale length of 25.7 inches.

The longer scale accommodates alternate tunings, which are often used by fingerstyle players. "When you tune down," Ryan says, "you lose tension in the strings. The most direct route to getting tension back in the strings is to put more in to begin with, which means a longer scale."

The alternate tunings slant makes a difference for former Grammy-winning Wings guitarist and solo fingerstyle wizard Laurence Juber, who frequently uses D A D G A D and C G D G A D tunings. He commissioned his first Ryan after playing one owned by singer-songwriter Al Stewart. "I was intrigued by the fact that Kevin was really going not only for tone, but also for volume in a fingerstyle guitar," he says. "He was building a concert-size guitar with the volume of a larger instrument. I explained to Kevin what I was looking for, what it is about the particular instruments I own that I enjoy, and then I left it up to him. I said, 'Just don't make me anything with Indian rosewood and a cedar top.' Sometime later he called me up and said, 'I made your guitar.' I said, 'Well what woods did you use?' Kevin said, 'Well, it's Indian rosewood with a cedar top.' But the guitar really was exactly what Kevin said it was going to be: a very grand-sounding, warm, dynamic instrument with a lot of projection and a lot of character. I use it for unamplified, live concert situations. It's a grand concert in the purest sense. It has a wide dynamic range, so you can play hard and the guitar doesn't compress too much but really supports you."



A cedar-top Mission Grand Concert cutaway.

Another one of Ryan's goals is to build instruments that are lightweight yet strong enough to survive for "the long haul." He explains why lighter is better. "Bracing serves two functions: providing structural support and maximizing the energy from the strings to the soundboard. The less mass on the soundboard, the less work the strings have to do to move it. It's a compromise between structural integrity and acoustics." He considers rosewoods perfect for sides and backs, and spruces (Sitka or Adirondack) and cedar best for soundboards because of their high strength-to-weight ratio.

Ryan's work is inspired by the players who use his instruments, including six of the ten headliners at last summer's Open Strings Festival in Germany: Peter Finger, Tim Sparks, Woody Mann, Franco Morone, Isato Nakagawa, and Jamie Findlay. "It's been called the golden age of guitar building," says Ryan, "and that's true. But it's probably because it's the golden age of guitar playing. Building for world-class players is one of the greatest motivations."

—Julie Bergman

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