## LETTER FROM NEW YORK

By JULIA CROWE

Evan Hirschelman.

LOS ANGELES guitarist and composer Evan Hirschelman is celebrating the release of his eponymous model steel-string acoustic guitar, which took two collaborative years to come into fruition with the help of luthier John Slobod of Circa Guitars. The timing coincides with the release of his new CD, Water in Darkness, which

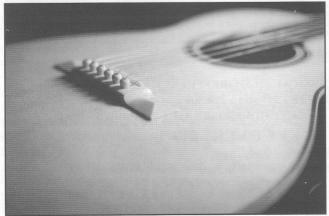
includes original works along with contemporary compositions written by Hans-Werner Henze, Steve Reich and Roland Dvens - and Scott Tennant accompanies Hirschelman on one of his duet pieces and on Steve Reich's Nagoya Guitars.

Of the new guitar, Hirschelman says, 'It is built in the pre-war Martin style, which is the style Slobod is well known for. I worked with him to come up with a responsive steel-string model that classical players could adapt to with than traditional more ease acoustics. It has certain physical

similarities to a nylon-string guitar and takes into account the guitar is meant for players who do use their nails.

The guitar features X-bracing, like other vintage style steel-string acoustics, but what makes this guitar unique is that it is much easier to play and projects a louder sound than a typical acoustic. The top of the guitar, its bracing and finish are much thinner than a standard acoustic, thus the guitar is more responsive with less effort required from the player,' Hirschelman says. 'The guitar also uses a light string gauge, which is necessary for classical players since we don't want to tear up our nails. The string spacing is in between a classical and steel-string neck while the body style has similar dimensions to a classical (000 body style), where the 12th-fret meets the body, just like a classical guitar. This adds a little more bottom end to the sound than a 14-fret guitar.

There are many other qualities which make this



John Slobod guitar bridge.

guitar unique but what I've described is the basic idea. The instrument sounds awesome! It has really rich, deep basses, with a touch of sweetness in the trebles. Even though a classical guitar is my main instrument, I really enjoy playing steel-string, as it has a totally different colour palette. And I would say the same of an electric guitar, too.'

Hirschelman, who studied classical guitar formally at the University Southern California. University of Arizona and Indiana University, composes and performs primarily upon a classical guitar. His piece Lament and Wake is, in fact, featured on the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet's 2005 Grammy-winning Guitar Heroes album.

While I find composing to be musically fulfilling,' he says, 'I also enjoy teaching classical guitar alongside electric guitar at the Musicians Institute (Guitar

Institute of Technology).' Located in Hollywood, California, GIT's most notable alumni include Jennifer Batten. Scott Henderson. John Frusciante of the Red Hot Chili Peppers and the late Jeff Buckley.

This new guitar model came about when one of my colleagues, Jamie Findlay, who is mainly a jazz acoustic guitarist, showed me a beautiful steelstring acoustic made by the Schoenberg Guitar Company. I played it for a while and immediately appreciated the different timbre and textural qualities it allowed me to achieve. The only problem I noticed right off the bat was the heavy string tension, which could easily damage my nails. This was a big concern, particularly because classical guitar is my main focus.

'A few months later I met John while trying out numerous steel-string acoustic guitars at a luthier's consortium at the NAMM show in Anaheim, California. I played one of Slobod's guitars and was very impressed by the sound, playability and craftsmanship. Then I learned he had previously worked as a luthier for Schoenberg Guitars before starting his own guitar company, Guitars. We really hit it off right from the beginning and discussions to build me a guitar followed shortly thereafter.

'I was looking for a guitar that could easily translate between the physicality of a classical and that of a steel-string guitar, including a body style similar to a classical, where the 12th fret meets the body, larger string spacing, and most importantly, a lightly-built instrument with a thin finish so the guitar would be responsive with a light gauge string. The guitar also includes a mammoth ivory bridge, which adds a very sweet sound to the instrument. The woods used are European spruce for the top and Madagascar rosewood for back and sides. John was very helpful in deciding what type of spruce to use for the top. He most commonly uses Adirondack spruce but for this guitar we used European spruce because of the lighter density, which is important since we were trying to make this guitar responsive to fingerstyle playing.

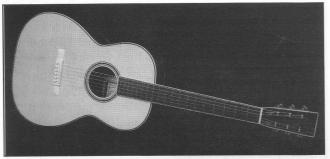
'Originally I played a couple of his instruments here in Los Angeles and then John sent me another guitar to test before he started working on my model. We had many discussions about the specifications and finally came up with this unique guitar, which has surpassed my expectations in every way. Not only does it sound phenomenal - with a large range of tone colours - but it is a steel-string guitar that classical guitarists can use without making too many technical concessions.'

John Slobod, the maker of this guitar, says, 'I build in the pre-war Martin tradition. Many people consider the Martin guitars built between 1929 and 1944 to be the best steel string guitars ever made. Martin was transitioning from gut strung guitars to steel strings. These guitars were built very lightly and they perform brilliantly with modern light gauge steel strings.

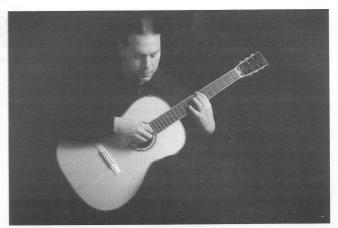
'Modern touches include a lightweight truss rod, a bolt-on, glue-on neck joint, which is structurally solid and easily re-set. Other than that, there are a few aesthetic touches that I hoped would bridge the vintage Martin and classical worlds. I used Ivoroid bindings (Martin) in combination with hand-made wood purfling lines and a small but bold rosette made with segmented rosewood and maple. I left the fretboard blank and used 2 side dots at the 5th and 17th frets.

The differences between a classical and a 12-fret Martin style steel string guitar are vast,' Slobod points out. 'Construction methods differ, as well as the obvious physical, structural dissimilarities you can see both inside and outside the guitars. However, my main concern was to create a guitar that would feel comfortable in Evan's hands, without him having to make too many adjustments to his playing - and to have some of the sweet, round tones that we love in nylon strung instruments.

'We chose a 000 body style that has 12 frets clear of the body. I built a Martin style slot head neck for the guitar, but altered the width and shape to



John Slobod guitar.



Evan Hirschelman.

lessen the "V" and move it in the direction of a traditional classical neck. This was a little tricky at the junction of the headstock and the barrel, as Martin style necks have a lovely volute, or "dart", which rises up underneath the nut slot and strengthens this vulnerable area.

'Although I usually use Red Spruce for my top wood, in this case we decided on a lighter weight wood, as another one of Evan's major concerns was that the guitar be functional with very low tension steel strings. I felt that European - in this case, German - Spruce was the obvious choice. It is extremely responsive to a light touch, has a traditional look, and would work well for low tension steel strings. I voiced the top a bit differently than I normally would, taking into account the body size and shape, the lighter bracing, and also Evan's wide ranging playing style.

'What compelled me to take a chance on building this guitar? I love Evan's playing! And I was looking for an opportunity to try something new and to learn from working with a great musician. I feel it is extremely important for instrument makers to work in collaboration with great players to progress in their craft.'

The guitar was unveiled last month, in November, and is available by custom order directly from Circa Guitars (). After the upcoming 2009 NAMM show, it will be made available at select dealerships. Hirschelman's new book, Acoustic Artistry - Innovative Techniques for Fingerstyle and Classical Guitar (Hal Leonard), will also be released at this time. As a composer, Hirschelman's guitar compositions reflect a diversity of influences and musical genres and in attempting to replicate some of these sounds upon the classical guitar, he sets out here the various aspects of his extended technique, such as tapping, slapping and percussion.

'I review the techniques within the book with instructive exercises using some of my compositions as examples. I am also writing some new studies and etudes for the book, including a polyphonic tapping etude,' Hirschelman says. Bassist Michael Manring, who played with Michael Hedges, contributed a slap etude for the book. For more details on Hirschelman's music, his website URL is: www.theguitarist.net