

Double Bassist

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DANIEL HACHEZ
THE BASS MAKER WITH THE MIDAS TOUCH

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THE MIDAS TOUCH

PAUL ELLISON travels to the mountains of New Mexico in search of bass maker Daniel Hachez's gold medal-winning formula

It's Friday afternoon in late November, the day after Thanksgiving Day, and it's starting to snow. In a workshop up in the mountains in north-eastern New Mexico, outside the village of Tijera, the American bass maker Daniel Hachez is completing his 33rd double bass. In spite of the snow, a wildfire in the same mountain range has just consumed some 7,500 acres of land, and continues to burn within eight miles of here. During previous fire alerts Hachez and his wife had stacked their valuables by their front door in preparation for evacuation, but this afternoon all is cosy and relaxed inside Hachez's tidy studio.

Hachez has another reason to be relaxed: this year he collected his second International Society of Bassists (ISB) Maker's Competition gold medal for bass and Convention Favourite award, having scooped the same prizes at the 2003 event. His trophy cabinet also contains a silver

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medal, a Certificate of Tone and a Special Achievement Award from the 2005 ISB Convention, plus a gold medal from the 2000 Violin Society of America International Competition. So what traditions, methods and inspirations lie behind Hachez's prize-winning double basses?

PE: Tell me about your training.
DH: I am self-taught. In my early teens I would go to a guitar shop in Costa Mesa, California, which sold traditional Spanish guitars by makers like Marcello Barbero and Jose Ramirez. My brother was learning flamenco guitar at the time, and I was captivated by the sound of these great instruments. I went to the shop every day and begged the owner with all sorts of questions, and soon after my father, who had taught me the woodwork, encouraged me to build my first Spanish-style guitar.

When I was 20 I met a lady in Santa Monica who ran a lute society and needed some instruments. She showed me X-rays of lutes which helped me understand how they were put together. I had previously made a lute after seeing Julian Bream perform on one, and I went on to make over a hundred of them as well as other early instruments

including a baroque guitar-like instrument called a vihuela, based on what little I knew about it from woodcuts and drawings.

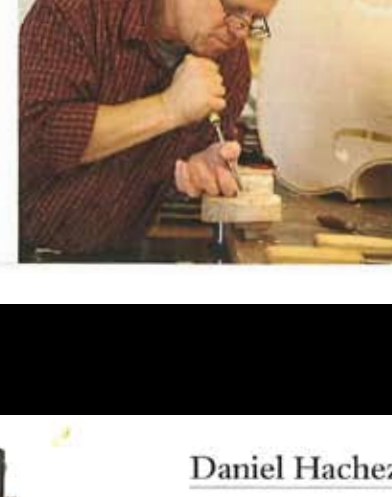
PE: What made you take up bass making?
DH: In 1972 I moved to Albuquerque and was self-employed as a lute maker. I met Don Robertson of Robertson & Sons Violin Shop at an event where we were both giving talks. By 1982 late orders had dried up so I started working for Don. My first assignment was to repair a bass, and I became fascinated by these instruments. I stayed with Robertson's for 18 years, receiving training in the repair, setup and restoration of violins, violas, cellos and basses. Then in 1999 I started making my own basses.

PE: Are your instruments a continuation of a particular bass-making tradition?

DH: No, I'm drawing on what I learned from the instruments in the [Robertson & Sons] shop – by taking them apart and figuring out how they were made. Some had a great sound; others great aesthetics: for example some of the old Italian basses sound great but their shapes were lumpy and not beautiful; while many of the old

French basses were perfectly proportioned and detailed but had different tonal aspects to the Italian basses. I was determined to make a bass that was aesthetically pleasing and sounded good.

PE: Describe the models you make
DH: I decided to stick with just a couple of models – I can keep improving within the framework of just these two designs. My large model comes from the makers Domenico Busan or Domenico Montagnana. It's really wide across the upper and lower bouts, so I can get the volume and sound I'm looking for while



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keeping the string length at no more than 42 inches, which I think is essential to be comfortable to play. The response becomes slower if the depth of the bass exceeds about 8 inches: the sound seems to go round and round inside the bass as though it can't find its way out. Old Panormo basses are really deep through the ribs and have an organ-like sound but no upper end at all. Aesthetically it's important that the upper bout is proportional to the lower bout, so I make the upper bout fairly wide.

The smaller model I make takes after Joseph Rocca, with a great big sound and an unusual shape. Upper basses have very round, almost circular upper bouts, whereas mine has more of a sloping shoulder. Also, like Rocca's basses mine has very long C-bouts and the lower corners angle outward more than the upper corners, which reflects my interest in accelerating [increasingly widening] curves. This concept is central to my bass designs – I like each curve to look as though it has motion and direction.

PE: Tell me about your 2007 ISB Convention gold medal-winning bass
DH: It is based on the maker Busan. It is constructed from eastern red maple and Sitka spruce from the northern Pacific coast. I was able to really have fun with the inlays and ornate purfling because I was not constrained by any customer design requests. I felt that I could express some of the ornamental ideas that I have become fond of through my interest in Renaissance instruments.

PE: Describe the setup of your instruments.
DH: A double bass challenges what the human body can comfortably play – very large instruments like those by Abraham Prescott or Jacobus Hornsteiner sound huge but are hard to play. To avoid this my basses are built around the setup. For example my concept of fingerboard camber [the curvature of the fingerboard] grew out of my adding C-extensions to the fingerboard. I put the same amount of curvature all the way across the fingerboard, which I prefer rounded rather than bevelled, with a flattened area under the E string. I like the curvature of the bridge to follow the shape of the fingerboard rather than the other way around. With the D-neck [so-called because when the player's thumb is in the curve of the neck their first finger will be

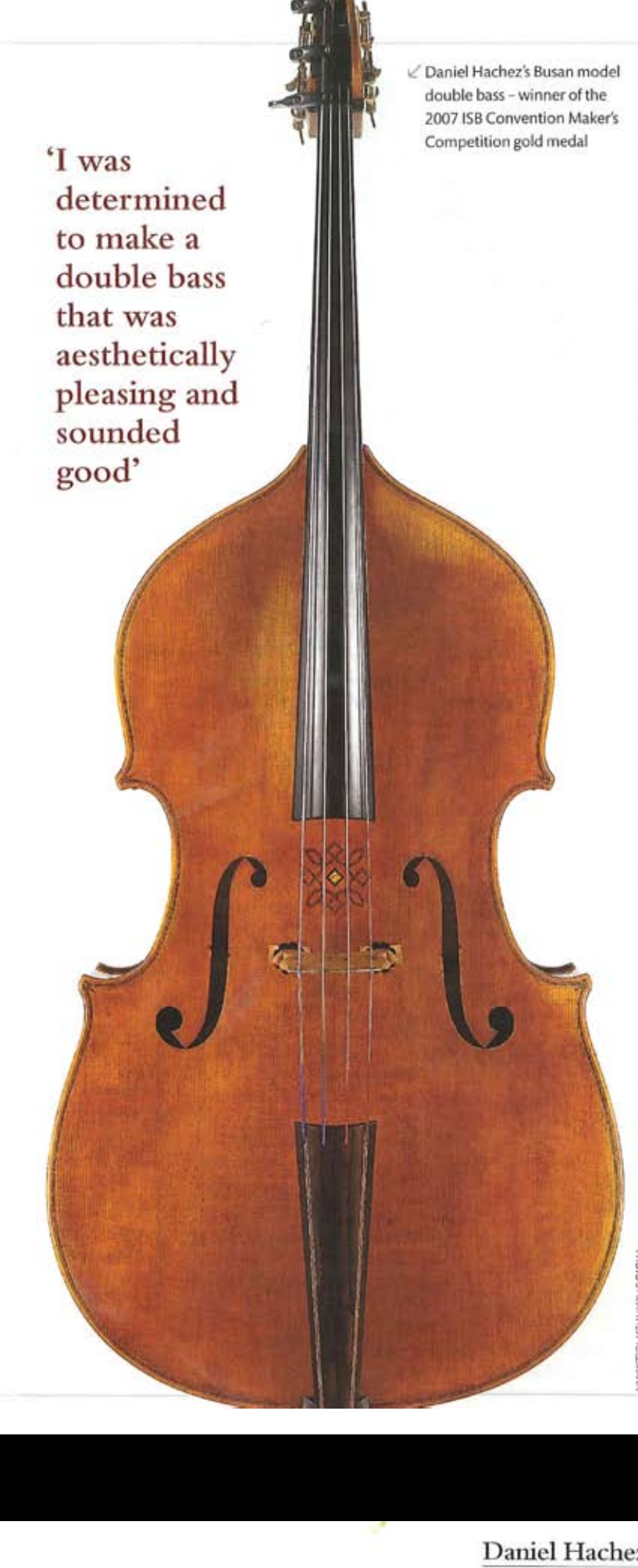
'I was determined to make a double bass that was aesthetically pleasing and sounded good'

guitar with curly maple binding, and it gives a 'jewelled' look to the edge. I also like some of the details used by Renaissance instrument makers. How they loved everything striped and embellished!

PE: What about your tailpieces and f-holes?
DH: The tailpiece on your Michael Albani bass, with its Renaissance fluting and stripes, gave me an idea for my tailpiece. The f-holes don't come from a particular instrument or maker. I remember seeing a Storioni bass, which has f-holes that I really liked, but I didn't duplicate them. With all these details I multiply the design in terms of the curves and where they go.

PE: How have your bass designs changed?
DH: Having going up and down like a crash-dieter! I noticed this with a lot of old makers, even Stradivari. In their earlier years they made higher and higher-arched instruments, then as they got older they made flatter plates. This got [number 33] has a much lower arch than the earlier ones. I also started with a lot of over-stand [the distance the neck holds the fingerboard away from the body], which I consider to be one of the important aspects of a setup. But neck projection has come down since I've been using a smaller bass-bar. A lighter bass-bar creates less stress on the instrument and allows it to vibrate more freely.

✓ Daniel Hachez's Busan model double bass – winner of the 2007 ISB Convention Maker's Competition gold medal



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on D on the G string] the neck heel should be about three inches thick, but in some new basses I've seen the neck heel is up to four inches with a huge radius, making it unclear where the thumb comes to rest in the curve of the neck. I also have the neck canted higher on the G-string side.

PE: Which woods work best?
DH: I prefer eastern (north American) red maple – which is said to be closest to European maple. I find it's harder to get the sound I'm looking for using big-leaf maple. The tops are made from Sitka spruce from right along the upper-Pacific coast, from trees that are individually culled from the coastal islands. I can still get the results I want with other woods, but it's a lot more work. I'm most comfortable with these.

PE: What inspires your scrolls and purfling?
DH: My scrolls are constantly evolving. The scroll on bass number 33 [workshop picture] has three flutes: at the back where the scroll joins the neck you can see three sections: the neck and the two sides of the scroll. I continued the lines from there. As I mentioned earlier, the curves all over the instrument are accelerating curves rather than radius curves that will form a circle.

The idea for the curly maple purfling came from some of the great old guitars I've seen. I have a copy of a Julian Bream

guitar with curly maple binding, and it gives a 'jewelled' look to the edge. I also like some of the details used by Renaissance instrument makers. How they loved everything striped and embellished!

PE: What innovations have you developed or are developing?
DH: I put a graphite rod in the neck which deters the neck from warping. The added rigidity also prevents the neck from vibrating contrary to the body, which I think adds to the sound. Right now I am building a brace-less bass – an idea which came to me when I was making a bass with walnut back and ribs. The back is relatively thick and flat, which makes the bass heavier but helps to reduce stress on the instrument. The grain of a brace runs the opposite way from the back, so for example old German basses with thin backs and braces self-destruct from the way the back and the braces pull perpendicular to each other when the wood expands.

PE: Which instruments most inspire you?
DH: I love the shape of Gary Karr's bass attributed to Amati, and that of a Oreste(?) Cavallini from the collection of the Curtis Institute, which I repaired. Your Albani is a beautiful bass. And I can see why players like the Quenoi shape, with really sloped shoulders, but I didn't want to make something with such an extreme shape.

PE: What is your advice to young bass makers?
DH: Once you get into the mode of making something you need to stick with it in order to stay good at it. Give it your all and you can really master it. ■