

Music Trades

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Showing off some of the new Romero Creations ukuleles, Pepe Romero Jr. flanked by his guitar hero father and artist Daniel Ho.

ROMERO CREATIONS REDEFINES THE UKE

Taking the humble uke to new levels with innovative design and a master luthier's vision

You might say Pepe Romero Junior has guitar in his blood. With their roots in Málaga, Spain, his grandfather, father, and uncles were knighted by the king of Spain for their virtuosity. His father, in particular, celebrated classical and flamenco guitarist Pepe Romero Sr., has recorded more than 100 albums, performed for U.S. Presidents and royalty around the world, taught at U.S. universities, and authored a widely used classical guitar method. It's no surprise that the younger Romero is a player, but he found his true calling as a builder of Spanish classical guitars.

Now, in addition to the ultra-high-end custom instruments he builds by hand, his recently launched Romero Creations produces lines of affordable classical guitars and ukuleles unlike anything else on the market. Romero recalls that in 1997, just before his 19th birthday, "I found myself and my passion" with the completion of his first instrument, under the guidance of master builder Dake Traphagen. Later that year he informally founded Pepe Romero Guitars and commenced a deep, even obsessive years-long immersion in the craft, studying in Spain and Germany with acclaimed master builders Miguel Rodriguez, José Romanillos, Manuel Contreras II, and most extensively Edmund Blöching. And when he returned home, whenever



The Romero Creations line of affordable high-level guitars and ukuleles.

he felt stymied by a particular design or building challenge, he was mentored by Yuris Zeltins, revered luthier and founder of The Blue Guitar in San Diego. He also benefited from constant feedback from his father, uncles, and cousins on every guitar he made. He sold his first guitars in 1997.

Pepe Romero Guitars is still a one-man shop in California, where its namesake personally and painstakingly crafts every custom instrument by hand, producing about 15 bespoke instruments a year. Romero built only guitars until 2011, the year he, his wife, and two-year-old daughter took a vacation in Hawaii. They all fell in love with the islands—and the ukulele. When his wife and daughter each asked Dad to make one for them, he resolved to learn how.

From the beginning, he approached the project using the same fine woods, tech-

niques, and design methods he had studied with Europe’s master luthiers, ultimately creating what was essentially a miniature classical guitar with four

DELIVERING THE RICH TONE, SUSTAIN, AND PLAYABILITY OF A TENOR, ALL FROM A CONCERT-SIZE UKULELE, IT EARNED THE NAME “TINY TENOR.”

strings. Both the process and the result were dramatically different from any other on the market. Though encouraged by his first effort, characteristically, he wanted to learn more. Lacking the critical “review board” he had with his family of classical guitarists, he found expert guidance in six-time Grammy-

winning artist Daniel Ho, chosen for what Romero calls Ho’s “classical approach” to touch and tone production, saying “the sound he’s producing is unique in the ukulele world.”

A bond and close friendship developed between the two, and Ho began performing and recording with Romero’s ukuleles. In 2012, Ho challenged him to create an instrument that offers the sound and feel of a tenor uke but with a smaller, more portable body. In addition to shortening the instrument with a more compact headstock, experimentation led him to a more radical solution: eliminating the waist and upper bout. The resulting body was “all lower bout,” which projects the full rich fundamental tone of the instrument, with no loss of clarity or cut. And with no parallel walls, the wide-bottom, tapered body eliminates standing frequencies, yielding a more

even tonal response over the full range of the instrument. Delivering the rich tone, sustain, and playability of a tenor, all from a concert-size ukulele, it earned the name “Tiny Tenor.”

Ho fell in love with the instrument. And echoing former Guitar Center CEO Larry Thomas, who owns several Pepe Romero guitars, he advised Romero to “scale up” his operation beyond his personal output of roughly one instrument a month. The Tiny Tenor became the inaugural product with which Romero Creations was launched in 2013. While Romero handles all the luthiery, he’s assisted by business partner Smiley Kai, who manages the operation’s accounting.

Both of Romero’s motivations for starting the company pertain to making his unique design approach accessible to many more players. There is currently a four-year backlog on custom-made Pepe Romero instruments. (“I do what I love to do,” says Romero, who has “no interest in taking on employees—and it takes as long as it takes.”) Those ukes run from \$3,000 to \$4,000, and guitars from \$12,000 to \$14,000. Although Romero Creations offers a small selection of intermediate ukuleles made in China, its high-end, all-solid wood instruments are manufactured in Vietnam. Annual production is between 1,000 and 1,500 instruments. Ukulele retail prices range from \$600 to \$1,300. Guitars are just under \$2,000.

Romero approached playing the ukulele from the perspective of a classical guitarist, focused not on strumming but on fingerpicking and single line playing. This also informed the way he designed his instruments. To avoid the cramped left hand he experienced playing standard ukuleles, he gave his instruments a wider fingerboard that allows greater freedom of motion for cleaner and more intricate chording. “You need room in the left hand to fret positions without touching the strings on either side,” he explains. This also facilitates a much easier transition to uke for guitarists.

Romero Creations ukuleles also feature a classic Spanish heel, which Romero believes promotes a more natural and musical transmission of energy from the plucked string to the fret, bridge, and body of the instrument than a standard dovetail joint. And in another feature



Pepe Romero Junior working in his one-man shop in San Diego, CA.

adopted from his handmade Spanish classical guitars, Romero ukes are distinguished by a proprietary reverse fan bracing pattern briefly explored by celebrated luthier Miguel Rodriguez. In his tireless study of the craft, Romero acquired and analyzed one of Rodriguez’s experimental guitars with seven fans radiating out from the butt of the instrument toward the soundhole—opposite from traditional fan bracing orientation. When he first heard about this design, Romero “thought it was impossible,” but was “enchanted” by its distinctive

ROMERO APPROACHES THE UKE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A CLASSICAL GUITARIST, FOCUSED ON FINGERPICKING AND SINGLE LINE PLAYING.

sound. “It provides the structural strength of a conventional fan brace holding the arch,” he explains, “but it allows the area in front of the bridge to vibrate more freely.” The results include enhanced overtones, clarity, and sustain. This feature is found not only on his custom-made Pepe Romero brand instru-

ments, but also on every Romero Creations production model—and it is found on no other instrument currently on the market. The full Romero Creations product range comprises six-string classical, parlor, and baritone guitars and all sizes of ukuleles including the Daniel Ho Signature Tiny Tenor Six-String—described as “perfect for the guitar player who wants a ukulele sound or a ukulele player looking for the benefit of two added bass strings”—and Daniel Ho Signature Six-String Baritone, called “an amazingly full and rich sounding “mini guitar,” tuned E to E.

A variety of wood types are offered. One generating exceptional demand is spalted mango, whose wild grain patterns are matched by distinctive tonal properties. “Typically the ukulele is a bright, punchy sounding instrument,” says Romero. “Koa and mahogany, which we also offer, have that inherent brightness. Mango produces maybe a shade less volume, but it has a beautiful warmth and roundness, more like a classical guitar.”

The ukulele has always exuded a fun and casual vibe typically associated with informal performance settings. As value-priced ukes—and uke brands—have proliferated over the past decade,



From the Romero Creations line, the Replica 3532 (left) is a factory-based copy of Pepe Romero's hand-built tenor uke. The unconventionally shaped Tiny Tenor model ukulele is offered in a variety of distinctive tonewoods including solid spalted mango (left) and solid koa.

the success of Romero Creations' decidedly high-end instruments, with their premium all-solid tonewoods and larger price tags, suggests there is another, less saturated market. "I'm not opposed to first-time players," says Romero, "but my target customers tend to be musicians who already have a ukulele but are searching for a better instrument with better sound. Sound is paramount. But they also want it to feel good and be really playable. I don't want my customers to look at a Romero Creations ukulele as just a tool; I want them to be inspired by it, to pull it out of the case because they can't wait to hear it again."

Elderly Instruments owner Stan Werbin, who has been selling Romero Creations instruments for about four years, says his customers are drawn to their quality and unique designs. "Their construction and bracing give them a different sound from a typical ukulele—in a good way."

For years, Pepe Romero Jr. was solely responsible for the instruments that bear his name. As he first weighed the notion of developing a production-level line, in Asian factories outside his direct control, his overriding concern was that anything short of stellar instruments could tarnish his custom line's reputation—and everything he'd worked for since he was a teenager. The price points he could achieve were irrelevant, he decided; he sought only the factory that could guarantee the best quality. Production costs at the one he ultimately selected were "much higher than at any other factory" he evaluated. But its workers already knew how to make fine instruments, so he didn't have to teach them the fundamentals of Spanish classical guitar construction; all he had to do was get them to execute his designs. With full faith that specs and controls will be maintained, he suggests that quality control issues typically arise

"when company owners demand that the work is done faster and cheaper. I didn't haggle over rates, I don't care how fast they make [my instruments], and I don't care how much it costs. I want them to make the best production level guitars and ukuleles on the market, every time."

Still fairly new to the market, Romero Creations products are selling best in boutique shops. "All ten Romero Creations instrument designs are different from everything else on the market," says Romero. "We need people who will understand those differences and spend a little time telling their customers about our design choices and why our instruments sound the way they do. We're offering instruments with the quality that stands next to my own custom-built instruments' reputation. We just have to put out the best products possible."

www.romerocreations.com