“Lacote à Paris”.
Lecture given at the occasion of celebrations of St. Cecilia, patron saint of musicians and luthiers, in Mirecourt November 22, 2003, for the “GLAAF”. Groupement des Luthiers et Archetiers d'Art de France.

Around the late 18th century, historians began to take a benevolent interest in the lives and works of luthiers, examining their instruments and analysing the way instrument design interacts with the history of musical practice, responding to the aspirations of musicians, the demands of composers, and shifts in musical taste, expressed by the public and the patrons who commissioned musical works. This historical interest would encompass instruments, materials, varnishes, techniques, influences, affinities, and workshop methods, from the early instrument makers of the 17th century through to spectacular contemporary designs and mass production in countries like China. And it would considerably further our understanding of instrument making, instrument makers, and their contribution to our cultural heritage. But this conscientious historical work has been largely biased toward violin makers. Our knowledge of the great guitar makers is still highly incomplete. For example, there are very few studies and even fewer publications on René Lacote, one of the greatest French guitar makers of the 19th century. Little is known about Lacote’s youth, his apprenticeship with Pons, or his early days as a luthier in Paris, around 1820.

We do know he worked from various Paris addresses, but never too far from his renowned violin-maker colleagues: Rue Montmartre, rue Neuve Saint-Eustache, rue de Richelieu, Place des Victoires, Rue de Grammont, Rue Louvois, and, finally, Rue des Martyrs. He made many instruments, and was much in demand by the musicians of his time. Indeed, Lacote’s guitars are still hugely appreciated by today’s musicians, a hundred and fifty years after his death. The many Lacote guitars remaining today are all different, a fact that reveals the master’s constant quest to improve performance and playability, through developments in manufacturing technique, innovative features and rare materials. As violin-makers, Lacote dates his instruments on his paper label.

In his *Dictionnaire universel des luthiers* ,covering mainly string quartet instrument makers, René Vannes refers to Lacote as the “Stradivarius of the guitar”. But before we go on to examine the innovations and techniques that lie behind the supremacy of Lacote guitars, we should first take a look at the education Lacote received from master luthiers practising in the 1800’s. The first Lacote labels date to around 1819 and mention an apprenticeship with Pons. So we should perhaps begin with this renowned family of luthiers.

César Pons (Pons senior), 1748-1831. Luthier at Grenoble, was renowned chiefly for his organized hurdy-gurdies and lyre guitars, though he also made a few violins. He “made every sort of musical instrumen” (sic), as written on his paper label. Two of César Pons’ sons became luthiers. The elder, Joseph (also referred to as *Pons Aîné)*, was born in 1776, baptized in 1781, and worked in Paris, initially under the name *Pons fils*, then under the name *Pons aîné à Paris*, from 1810 to at least 1835. As well as guitars, he made sumptuously elaborate lyre guitars, some featuring rosettes or pegs incrusted with semi-precious stones. In 1812, Napoléon’s wife, Empress Marie-Louise, commissioned him to make a guitar —the De Monte— for her favourite musician and composer, the Italian Mauro

Giuliani. This superb instrument has spent the best part of a hundred and fifty years in a London bank vault, but Paul Pleijsier and Gary Southwell eventually got a chance to examine it thoroughly, and readers of their fascinating article would discover similarities between this remarkable Pons and the later work of Lacote, who was not yet in business, especially in the neck/heel and head joints, the famous wingnut tuning pegs, and the soundboard bracing, all Pons innovations.

The spectacular bridge moustaches decorating the soundboard are probably a homage to Italy, the musician's homeland. Emperor Napoléon I had proclaimed himself king of Italy in 1805, and his long-awaited infant heir, adulated by the people of Paris, bore the title "king of Rome". After annexing Italy, Napoléon had pillaged the Italian museums, bringing back his favourite pieces to the Louvre. And he encouraged French craftsmen, including luthiers, to follow the court of his reigning sisters and set up shop in major Italian cities like Rome and Turin.

All European instrument making from 1800 to 1820 was influenced by Italian musicians and their demands. This is true of the guitar, which became a six-string instrument, and the violin, which, along with its bow, also underwent major changes. Many French luthiers pursued respectable careers in Italy.

The "De Monte" guitar commissioned by the French empress confirms that Joseph Pons was the highest-profile luthier in Paris at the time. Virtuoso players were eager to play his instruments, which were modern, stylish and technically advanced enough to satisfy their most rigorous demands. Joseph Pons' work does not reflect the highly traditional style of his father, and we believe that both of César Pons' luthier sons served apprenticeships with Maréchal, the renowned Paris luthier who claimed the title of inventor of the lyre guitar.

In a fine 1815 drawing by Ingres (Fogg Art Museum, Harvard), showing a homely gathering of Lucien Bonaparte's family, we see one of the ladies playing a Maréchal lyre guitar, which in many details -including the moustaches, the bridge and the general design- resembles the instrument made by Joseph Pons for Lucien's sister in law, Marie-Louise.

Joseph Pons was not working alone at this time, and we believe Lacote was apprenticed to him around 1810, at the age of twenty-five, along with Guillaume Martin. Curiously, though, while we do know Lacote served his apprenticeship with a certain "Monsieur Pons", there is no absolute certainty as to which. Joseph Pons was probably only slightly older than Lacote, but he was working in Paris, making modern guitars for the Court and other prestige clients, and frequenting leading musicians, whereas his father, César, stayed in Grenoble, making more conventional instruments. It therefore seems safe to assume that René Lacote learned his trade with Joseph Pons in Paris. And even if it turned out that he started an apprenticeship very young with Pons the father, it is nonetheless certain that his later work would be substantially influenced by Pons the elder son.

There are also several fine guitars signed *Pons Jeune à Paris*. We know that Louis-David Pons, the second of César Pons' sons registered as a luthier, there were nine sons and five daughters, worked for a time in Paris following his apprenticeship with Maréchal, probably while César was still working in Grenoble. It was doubtless around this time that Joseph Pons dropped the *Pons Fils* brand in favour of *Pons Aîné*, making room for his younger brother, who signed his instruments *Pons Jeune* while in Paris.

During his Parisian years, most of Louis-David's guitars resembled those made by his brother Joseph. This, indeed, is the case with the instrument depicted in the Ingres drawing and kept at the Nuremberg museum. Louis-David was probably working under supervision from his elder brother, because instruments by both makers are made to the same templates, and use similar bracing and similar woods.

From 1819, we find fine guitars signed *Pons London*, again with no first name. The omission is doubtless deliberate, and we might assume that the Pons brothers shared a London workshop,

working there either in turn, or in response to economic or political conditions, up till César's death in Grenoble in 1831.

So around 1820, we find Joseph Pons *(aîné)*, Guillaume Martin, René Lacote and Louis-David Pons *(jeune)* all working from their own workshops in Paris. All four luthiers had worked at the same bench at some stage, and all showed similar working methods and made similar models. Curiously, the similarity in approach even extends to the rather unfussy cut of the labels inside the instruments.

Lacote set up shop in Paris around 1820, and his guitars very soon proved immensely successful. They were meticulously made, with a quick, responsive sound. The outside was always perfectly finished, while the inside was fairly rough, with tool marks. As learned from Joseph Pons, and in common with Guillaume Martin and both Pons brothers, he would fit a longitudinal brace to the right, under the soundboard, which improved the sound quality, the range and the reach of the higher notes, a function later to be performed by the fingerboard.

Just ten years earlier, the guitar had five double courses and a glued bridge, but no bar under the bridge to reinforce the soundboard. Arrival of the six-string guitar would mean a larger surface area for the bridge and the fingerboard. At the time, strings were held in place by bridge pins passing through both the bridge and the soundboard. So an early development on the six-string guitar was a bar under the bridge to prevent deformation caused by the pull of the strings.

And to help the neck joint withstand the increased string tension needed for a more powerful sound, makers began to key in the neck to the top block. (For exactly the same reason, we find a sharper angle used on violin necks.)

After 1805, Joseph Pons began to put one more bar between the bridge and the bottom block.

In Italy during this period, some very fine guitars were coming from the Naples and Turin schools, and the six-string format had been commonplace since around 1780. Italian guitars were more avant-garde than their French counterparts. They were ornately decorated, with large and complex bridge "moustaches" in ebony or turtleshell, and instruments from the Turin school had a more bulky bridge, which stiffened the soundboard, giving it more inertia.

Italian musicians were highly regarded in Paris at the time. Drawing inspiration from their instruments, Lacote decided to modify the brace between the bridge and the bottom block, making it thinner in the middle. The two thicker branches would thus stiffen the soundboard much like the characteristic Italian moustaches. (scaloped brace).

Lacote would use this bracing scheme throughout his career: a special brace below the bridge, and small longitudinal braces under the prolongation of the fingerboard, if the fingerboard itself did not reach onto the soundboard.

And he would consistently use one of two neck joints: either a solid neck with integral heel, joined to the body in French or Spanish style, or an ebony-veneered neck in lighter wood (lime or willow) and solid ebony heel with distinctive round joint. This method, learned from Pons, gave a larger gluing surface area between neck and heel than the classic joint practised at Mirecourt, enabling it to better withstand the string tension. The faultless rounding of the neck and heel was obtained by turning.

The Pons-Lacote collaboration also brought changes to the guitar back. Most instruments later than 1820 would have a one-piece back, avoiding the need for a joint and central rib. The soundboard, however, would remain in two-part bookmatched form. And in the 1820's Lacote and Pons would start to use veneered backs in spruce, a light, responsive, resonant wood. We should also remember that one of the main factors behind the quality of Pons Aîné and Lacote instruments was the use of meticulously seasoned wood, which ensured the sides would not split.

Lacote was not just a luthier but an avid researcher too, constantly developing new guitar models and

investigating ways to improve what was becoming an increasingly popular instrument. On the many guitars and seven-string instruments, "heptacordes", "guitare sur pied", he built, he sought improved fretting, intonation, and tuner performance (with pegs and the later tuning machines). He registred many patents about his inventions or modifications, and was always listening to musicians, like Aguado, Carulli, Sor, Coste, Legnani, and some others, and probing their needs. In 1826, with the guitarist and composer Fernando Carulli, Lacote filed a patent for a ten-string guitar, baptised the *décacorde*.

This instrument, thoroughly described by Danièle Ribouillault in *Cahiers de la Guitare*, was only moderately successful; musicians probably found it too difficult to play, and too far removed from the usual format. But this did not discourage Lacote, who followed up the Carulli instrument (five fretted strings plus five extras bass strings) with a number of variants: six fretted strings plus four floating bass strings on the fingerboard; seven fretted strings plus three floating bass strings on the fingerboard; seven fretted strings plus four floating bass strings off the fingerboard; six fretted strings plus three floating bass strings off the fingerboard; and seven fretted strings plus two floating bass strings off the fingerboard.

Lacote's new instruments were as meticulously finished as usual, and the head design was inspired by the famous bissex (a sort of lute guitar) made by Paris luthier Naderman in 1773, and currently kept at the *Musée de la Musique* (CNSM) in Paris (n° E2372).

In the 1830's, Parisian life was in a turmoil. The bloody *Trois Glorieuses* riots of 1830 had been followed by a terrible cholera epidemic in 1832. Social structure was shifting in favour of the bourgeoisie, industry was developing fast, and there was a very strong undercurrent of social violence. Parisian luthiers were finding it difficult to make a living, and many of them left to try their fortune in London, alongside their Italian counterparts, also in exile from the economic and social difficulties at home. Indeed, Britain would provide refuge to luthiers from all over Europe throughout the nineteenth century.

Around this period in Britain, it was current practice for "music sellers" to sell instruments to the public. Whereas musicians in France would always deal directly with the luthier rather than going through a merchant, the music seller held a perfectly honourable place in London's thriving music trade. Lacote therefore concluded a deal with Robert Cocks, making very fine guitars with the "Cocks" label inside and the "Lacote" brand stamp on the head. Cocks went on to become a very important music merchant, and around 1853, he'd even start selling violins by Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume.

The "Sor" label is explained by the fact that Sor was a huge star in London from around 1825 to 1830, a very important composer and musician, and the darling of the music "*salons"*. His knowledge of the guitar —very much a Spanish instrument, culturally speaking— was unsurpassed, as was his technique. His exercised an immense musical influence, and enjoyed immense success. We note that Spanish luthiers had been making six-course instruments since around 1775, and Sor, the son of a Barcelona merchant, had started playing on his father's guitar at an early age. Malou Haine tells us how instrument makers would pay top musicians to play their instruments in concert, and how the music trade, instruments and sheet music, was permeated by a complex system of gifts and commissions. So the small "Sor" label does not indicate that the instrument was part of Sor's private collection. It was printed on the same very thin paper as other Lacote and Cocks labels, and simply indicates an endorsement by the maestro. This confirms the impact that Sor's name could be expected to have on sales, and shows the gratitude of Cocks and Lacote to the virtuoso who played on instruments bearing their labels.

Britain was undoubtedly a major market for all makers of guitars, citterns, mandolins and plucked string instruments in general. After booming production in France from 1820 to 1835, there are few instruments dated 1835 to 1850. But in London, the guitar vogue was at its zenith. Judging from the

many instruments from this period, demand ran high. While keeping his Paris address in Rue de Louvois, Lacote also opened an outlet in London, at 102 Ebury Street, near 1845 and gave some guitars to sell to others english dealers.

As we have seen, though Lacote could hardly be called the inventor of the modern guitar, he was a major force in its development, gradually adapting and transforming the traditional interior construction of the instrument. This shows through in the two main models for which Lacote is renowned. He made a guitar with a special fingerboard allowing precise independent adjustment, fret by fret and string by string. But musicians would be discouraged by the highly complex tuning procedure, and despite the undeniable merit of his invention, Lacote would make few instruments with this feature.

Lacote's first model, made from his early years up to around 1830, is greatly inspired by the work of Joseph Pons. It is usually in mahogany, satinwood, or rosewood, and features ordinary or locking tuning pegs. Some of these guitars are decorated with elaborate purfling, while others are more sober, almost to the point of austerity. The second, more personal model, has a larger head and enclosed tuning machines. These guitars are frequently in satinwood, rosewood or mahogany, and occasionally in maple, and are often on the large side. Both models use Lacote's characteristic bracing, side struts in pine, and top and bottom blocks in lime, slightly concave to lighten the weight. Between the 1830s and 1850s Lacote offered several patterns for his bridges, more or less decorated with mother of pearl.

At the national exhibitions of 1839 and 1844, Lacote was a medal-winner alongside his colleague and neighbour, the gold-medallist Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume. Both luthiers would mention this honour on their labels.

Like some of his French and Italian violin-maker contemporaries (including Vuillaume), Lacote experimented with various wood treatments to give a warmer, more figured, appearance, highlighting the grain pattern on the varnished body and unvarnished soundboard, and giving a better sound.

Like many other instrument makers of the time, Lacote is also a music dealer and sold some instruments he did not made himself: for exemple a cello which bore a paper label made especailly for the quatuor instrument, and a cornet branded "Lacote à Paris". As some of his colleagues he made guitars for a few major merchants who would sell quality instruments in major cities with conservatories, music *salons* or concert halls. These instruments would be signed by the merchant rather than the maker.

An example is this very fine 1830 guitar bearing the label "Jacquot à Nancy". It is undoubtedly a Lacote, and a guitar with exactly the same bridge, signed Lacote, is kept at the *Musée de la Musique* in Paris (exhibit E980). A sister instrument was exhibited at the universal exhibition "*Rétrospective du Centenaire"* at Paris in 1900, and another very similar signed guitar, with very fine head featuring enclosed tuning machines, is shown in the work by Alex Timmermann.

This other guitar, labelled "Linard", shows unmistakable signs of being built by Lacote. So who was Linard? A violin maker who wanted to sell a quality instrument very much in fashion but who lacked guitar-making experience himself? No, more likely, one of the several merchants who would commission instruments from major luthiers for sale under their own brand.

Label : *"Le sieur Linard tient un assortiment de musique.*

Pianos, Violons, Guitares, Flûtes, instruments en cuivre de toute qualité

A Pau, place Henri IV, sous les arceaux" .

"Mister Linard keep a large choice of music

Pianos, Violins, Guitars, Flutes, Brass instruments of all qualities

In Pau, place Henry the IVth, under the Archs".

The rosette was bought at Mirecourt, from one of the many instrument supplies merchants selling pegs, purfling strips, rosettes, tuning machines, cases and the like. The head graft is simpler than on the finest Lacotes. This type of instrument, will often be described as "made in the workshop of…" or "made under supervision by…". Descriptions such as these refer to unsigned instruments made under supervision by the master craftsman, either for a reseller or as an entry-level model.

Just like there are many unsigned guitars that are definitely authentic Lacotes, there are many fake Lacotes signed with fake labels and fake stamps; counterfeiting has been suffered by all the great luthiers since the seventeenth century. A few years ago, the market threw up a stock of large sheets of false labels, printed around 1900, imitating those of major European luthiers like Vuillaume, Chanot, Lupot and Pique. The only guitar maker to have the dubious privilege of being included on this treasure trove for period counterfeiters was Lacote. The lucrative trade in counterfeit musical instruments, ranging from vulgar copies made with varying degrees of craftsmanship up to fairly sincere homages to the great masters, has always been biased toward violins. Ironically, it says much for the workmanship of René Lacote that he was the only guitar maker considered worthy of having his labels forged, back in 1900. Of course, it also says much about the probable number of fake Lacote guitars out there!

René Lacote had officially registered only one pupil : Huel. We know that Huel, son of a violin-maker, was a very good maker of guitars and violins, he worked in Lacote's workshop. After his apprenticeship, he opened his own workshop in Rennes. In 1845, his workshop was taken over by Bonnel, and Huel joined Lacote in Paris. We attribuate the rare label *"Lacote et Cie"* to Huel. At this period Lacote is an overworked artisan with his parisian workshop and the london shop, and a business partner is welcome to help him. We know few branded guitars by « Huel », but his work is equivalent to Lacote's work.

A certain Valance signed his guitars *"Valance Jeune"*, adding in pencil, visible through the soundhole, the misspelt note *"ailève de Lacote"*, claiming pupilship to Lacote. This claim seems highly improbable, because a successful craftsman of Lacote's calibre would be most unlikely to lend his name to such ordinary guitars, which never show any of the innovations or details characteristic of the Lacote workshop. Valence left several guitars in the purest Mirecourt tradition. They are well-built enough, but have nothing in common with Lacote's output. We are left with the distinct impression that Valance must have been a shrewd impostor seeking to benefit from Lacote's reputation. Moreover, even though he worked some time in the workshop of Lacote, Valance is identified as a luthier in Mirecourt and the archives of the city retain many traces of his workshop and private life.

From 1840 onwards, skilled luthiers making guitars to traditional techniques at Mirecourt would begin to introduce some of Lacote's innovations. Some would adopt the locking tuning pegs, which are also found on instruments by Italian luthiers. But these soon gave way to the left and right strips of three tuners, which were cheaper and easier to fit.

By 1850, French guitar making had reached its zenith. The French school was led by Lacote, a highly respected craftsman who worked with some of the greatest musicians of his time. The guitar had become a fashionable *salon* instrument, and this status was even more pronounced in Britain and Austria. In Paris, there were hundreds of guitar teachers, players, composers and enthusiasts.

But around 1860, guitar making in France began to decline. Mirecourt production was virtually restricted to pre-industrial guitars made in large factories, like that of Jerome-Thibouville-Lamy. Inexpensive guitars were being imported from Germany. And there were virtually no craftsman guitar-makers left in Paris. After 1860, Italian luthiers continued to make guitars to their own traditional practice, with their characteristic bracing and assembly techniques. French luthiers, meanwhile, were making the model developed and popularized by Torres in Spain, with its fan-bracing. By the turn of the twentieth century, craftsman-built guitars in France all followed the

Spanish model, leaving Lacote to stand as innovator, virtuoso and last great name of the French school.

Far from offering a comprehensive account of the life of this brilliant and industrious craftsman, this lecture sketches a brief outline of Lacote's work in Paris, from his early days with Pons in 1810 to his last known guitar dated 1868. There is no existing biography of Lacote, and we know nothing of his childhood, youth, education or family life. Though the large number of guitars he left testifies to a very long and successful career in Paris, little is known of the relationships with his illustrious colleagues of the period. We have no information on how his workshop was run and who he worked with, except some names written inside on the soundboards. We know nothing of his necessary commercial exchanges with Britain . And there is very little information on his cooperation with the composers and musicians who made up the immensely important Romantic movement in art and culture, or of his social success in the turmoil of Paris from the reign of Napoléon I to the early days of the Third Republic.

It is our hope that his extensive legacy of fine instruments will eventually yield fuller information on the person who made them, and that we won't have to wait too long before some historian, biographer or musicologist gets round to a fuller investigation of the life of this exceptional luthier, who managed to reconcile the best of traditional know-how with a strong creative spirit perfectly attuned with the epoch.

Reminders of the key innovations that Lacote resumed from his master Pons
- the small vertical bar under the sound board on the treble side
- the first bars at the lower part of the soundboard
- the first 8 shaped heads, inspired by the fine Neapolitan guitars
- the magnificent " butterfly " pegs, made of silver or brass,
- the almost systematic use of a tuning machines on the heads,
- the back veneered on spruce, a lightweight resonant and stringy wood.
- The use of sumptuous veneers,
- The very special assembly of the neck on its heel and its large gluing surface

Then later,
- the beginning of the wedging of the neck-heel in the upper block,
- The particular profile of the lower scaloped brace under the soundboard,
- the increasingly frequent use of a mobile and adjustable saddle on the bridge.

Some guitars by Lacote who illustrated this conference :