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LISTENING  TEST  
WITH PETER BERNSTEIN



## Archtop? Koentopp!

An introduction to Chicago archtop luthier, Dan Koentopp by Thomas Cray

**A**t first glance Dan Koentopp (pronounced “kane top”) appears surprisingly young. A few minutes of conversation, however, reveal that his hunger for knowledge has supplemented his experience well. I’ve had the opportunity to see and play a half dozen of his guitars, often within a day of their completion and then, again, months later, and I’ve learned much about Dan and the instruments he’s building in his workshop on the northwest side of Chicago. Nothing brings more joy to him than hearing his guitars played and the pool of local guitarists eager to test-drive his instruments no longer fits in my living room. Dan and I initially became acquainted over the phone and via email. When we first spoke he was in his last week of a three year apprenticeship at Darnton & Hersh Fine Violins in downtown Chicago. His workshop was nearly finished and he was excited to complete his spray booth and begin building guitars full time. He had two archtops nearing completion and I looked forward to meeting him when they were ready and having the opportunity to see and hear the quality of the instruments he was building only 20 minutes away from my home.

The day finally arrived and our first meeting proved well worth the wait. A self-described introvert, Danny, as he’s known by his friends, is actually quite sociable and we immediately settled into an easy routine. He had three guitars for me to play that day, two recently completed, and another that he built a few years earlier, on loan from its owner.

Dan’s latest instruments made it abundantly clear that he had no intentions of being another Benedetto clone. He had his own sonic and aesthetic ideas to explore, and our dealings over the following year would reveal that Dan builds for players and I’ve witnessed first hand as suggestions from customers found their way onto his next guitars.

From the custom shaped headstock, providing a perfect asymmetrical frame for the easily recognizable logo, to the triangular tailpiece found on his extraordinary Oval Hole Chicagoan archtop model, it’s obvious that aesthetics are as important to Danny as the playability of his instruments. And consistency is second to none. Each of his guitars I’ve played have had a balance

between strings, comfort up and down the neck, and provide a sublime playing experience acoustically as well as amplified.

The tops of his guitars have a pronounced curve and re-curve and are light and responsive yet hold their character throughout all the seasons. Even a harsh Chicago winter has little effect on the set-up and playability of Dan’s guitars. These instruments are lighter than you might expect when reaching for one, which contributes to the tactile user experience they provide, sans amplification. These responsive guitars vibrate with the sound they produce and the player finds himself with the desire to coax further sounds from them.

Koentopp Guitars may be a new addition to the custom archtop market but they are definitely one demanding further investigation. His prices are lower than most and Dan’s skills earned while restoring Stradivari are found in everything from the bracing and purfling to the shape of his necks and headstocks.

Parting with his instruments can be melancholy - after months of building Dan usually contends with only a day or so to set-up and play his guitars before they are greeted by their new owners and are off to begin life in their new home.

Koentopp Guitars are custom guitars. Every instrument is made to the client’s specifications. That said, he has narrowed down his models to three basic starting points: The 16", shorter scale (24.75") Blue Line, the 17" Chicagoan (offered with standard f-hole or oval hole options), and Koentopp’s signature Amati model, named and styled after the violins and cellos Dan found his initial inspiration from. A former student of the classical guitar, Danny has built three stunning nylon string instruments but his passion is in carving tops, and he seems to have barely scratched the surface of where he can take his guitars. Ever exploring, ever learning, all indications are clear that a new renaissance in archtop guitar building is underway in Chicago and Dan Koentopp is setting the standard.

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Amati

17" arched-top body (Venetian cut-away option)  
 3" side depth  
 Hand carved and graduated, Master Grade top of Engelmann or European Spruce  
 Hand carved and graduated Master Grade European Maple Back with matching sides  
 Hand cut Amati style F-Holes  
 X-Braced or Parallel braced Top  
 Fine, 7-ply purfling with Maple binding  
 Three piece Flamed Hard Maple Neck  
 25" scale  
 1 3/4" Bone Nut  
 Ebony Fingerboard with 12" radius  
 Standard or Classic Curved Fingerboard Extension option  
 Signature Mother Of Pearl Tab Inlays  
 Hand carved Ebony Saddle, Tailpiece, & Finger-rest with  
 1-piece (cello-style) bridge option  
 Waverly or Schaller Tuners

FINISH: Nitrocellulose Lacquer (Natural, Honey Blonde, Cherry-Burst, Tobacco Burst, or Violin Red) with French Polish option available.



Chicagoan

17" arched-top body with Venetian cut-away  
 3" side depth  
 Hand carved and graduated, Master Grade top of Engelmann or European Spruce  
 Hand carved and graduated Master Grade American or European Maple Back with matching sides  
 Modern Style F-holes  
 X-Braced or Parallel braced Top  
 Fine, 7-ply purfling with Maple binding  
 Three piece Flamed Hard Maple neck  
 25" scale  
 1 3/4" Bone Nut  
 Ebony Fingerboard with 12" radius  
 Classic Curved Fingerboard extension  
 Signature Mother Of Pearl Tab Inlays  
 Hand carved Ebony Bridge, Saddle, Tailpiece, & Finger-rest  
 Kent Armstrong Pickup (optional)  
 Endpin Jack with rear strap mount  
 Schaller Tuners

FINISH: Nitrocellulose Lacquer (Natural, Honey Blonde, Cherry-Burst, Tobacco Burst, or Violin Red).



Blue Line

16" arched-top body with Venetian cut-away  
 2.5" side depth  
 Hand carved and graduated top of select Engelmann, Sitka, or European Spruce  
 Hand carved and graduated High figured American or European Maple Back with matching sides  
 Modern Style F-holes (binding optional)  
 Parallel braced Top  
 Fine, 7-ply purfling with Maple binding  
 3-piece hard maple neck  
 24.75" scale  
 1 3/4" Bone Nut  
 Ebony Fingerboard with 12" radius  
 Standard Fingerboard Extension  
 Unadorned fret board with side position markers  
 Hand carved Ebony Saddle, Bridge, Tailpiece, & Finger-rest  
 Kent Armstrong Floating Pickup with Volume & Tone Controls  
 Endpin Jack with rear strap mount  
 Schaller Chrome M-6 Tuners

FINISH: Nitrocellulose Lacquer (Natural, Honey Blonde, Cherry-Burst, Tobacco Burst, or Violin Red).