

# 'Almost unreal': Gift of guitar collection opens new worlds for ASU music students

By Sarah A. McCarty, ASU News  
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When award-winning Italian guitarist Davide Picci arrived at Arizona State University as a doctoral student in the Fulbright Program, he was looking for the right guitar to prepare for an international-level competition.

Thanks to the School of Music, Dance and Theatre's special collection of 51 guitars — a gift to ASU valued at \$1.4 million from Sheldon Urlik, a significant international collector of classical and flamenco guitars — he was able to handpick an instrument that would work for him.

"I chose the Martin Fleenon guitar because I immediately felt a strong connection with it from the first time I played it," Picci said. "I am very lucky to have the chance to choose from such an incredible guitar collection, and I am truly grateful to ASU for this opportunity."

[Martha Masters](#), assistant professor of guitar and president of the [Guitar Foundation of America](#), gave Picci the opportunity to select a guitar after Urlik donated his collection to ASU in 2024.

"The process of selecting a guitar is quite complex," Picci said. "It arises from the unpredictable nature of liking something, involving indeterminate elements."

He said, at first glance, what he looks for is playability: "It should feel natural and allow me to find my own voice."

This voice includes both color, timbre and dynamic range and responsiveness.

Then, he considers size: "I am quite a big guy, and using a relatively small guitar would be problematic for me."

"Finally, there is the matter of feeling, which is impossible to explain," Picci said.

Masters said when Picci arrived at ASU, he worked through a few guitars in the collection to find the right instrument to use in competitions.

“It is making a difference in what he is able to express from the stage,” Masters said. “I am excited to hear the changes in his playing because of the instrument.”

(Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAsVCRWLxZk>)

## The student experience

“As Pepe Romero said, ‘Every guitar is a teacher’ — and it warms my heart to know that these instruments are still teaching,” Urlik said.

Masters said Urlik is thrilled that students are playing all the instruments in the collection and that these instruments are appreciated by students who do not have the capacity to buy a quality instrument of their own at this stage of life.

For many students, access to a truly professional-level guitar would have been out of reach, according to Masters.

She said a great instrument responds with sensitivity, projection and color — qualities that empower young players to refine their technique and artistic voice far more quickly. She likened the process to giving a computer science major a state-of-the-art computer: The tool itself accelerates their learning.

“These guitars are doing exactly that for our students, and the impact is already visible,” Masters said.

Luis Rodriguez, a Bachelor of Music in music therapy student, said having access to the collection has changed his playing.

“After years and years of playing on my beginner entry-level Cordoba, I had been told numerous times by instructors I had ‘outgrown the instrument,’ but I couldn’t afford an upgrade, so being able to rent a world-class guitar through the ASU collection was transformative to my playing,” said Rodriguez, who has been playing a 1990 Thomas Humphrey guitar.

“The Humphrey gives me a wider range of colors, volume and expression in my playing, and it feels like going from painting with just primary colors to having an entire palette, and it’s allowed me to grow musically in ways I didn’t think were previously possible.”

Picci, along with other students in the ASU Guitar Program, also had the chance to play some of the more historical guitars from the collection in the School of Music, Dance and Theatre’s “Recuerdos de España” (Memories of Spain) concert last semester.

“Playing these historic guitars gives me a rare window into the sound world and technique that earlier generations of guitarists knew firsthand,” said Caleb Bailey, a second-year Doctor of Musical Arts in guitar performance student. “Each instrument has its own personality and responds differently — not just from one another, but from the modern guitars we’re used to today. That contrast has deepened my understanding of tone, phrasing and touch. The experience shapes how I approach my own instrument and broadens my sense of what the guitar can express.”

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### Want to hear some of the guitars?

[ASU Guitar Night](#)

Tuesday, Feb. 24

7:30–9 p.m.

Katzin Concert Hall, Music Building

Tempe campus

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The historic classical guitars played at the concert included an 1869 Francisco González, a 1926 Antonio Emilio Pascual Viudes, a 1956 José Ramirez and a 1968 Manuel de la Chica.

“Working with guitars from this collection, especially the 1926 Pasquel Viudes I performed on in November, has opened up a new layer of learning for me,” said Veronica Kreeger, also a second-year Doctor of Musical Arts in guitar performance student. “The Viudes has a deeply traditional sound that reshaped how I think about repertoire from its time — the colors speak differently, and the instrument taught me more about what the music wants. That kind of experience is rare for students as having access to guitars like this is not typical, and it’s changed the way I approach interpretation and tone on my own instrument.”

## The collection

The collection spans more than a century, from the 1869 Francisco Gonzalez guitar to a 2015 instrument by Marshall Brune.

Rather than contrasting traditional and nontraditional guitars, it documents the evolution of traditional lutherieThe making of wooden, stringed, musical instruments — such as guitars, violins, lutes and mandolins. — from early instruments built before standardized design practices, with broader variation in sound and appearance, to later guitars whose more consistent construction supports the projection sought by contemporary performers.

Most of the guitars in the collection date from before 2000. The Martin Fleeson guitar Picci has been playing is from 1981.

Luthier Richard Bruné, proprietor of high-end classical guitars and initial appraiser of the collection, praised Urlik’s collection.

"Shel Urlik was an unusual collector among the many international collectors I have known over the last six decades in that he was very ecumenical in his collecting, giving equal attention and importance to the guitars used by flamenco players in addition to those we now call ‘classical’ guitars, a term which only began to commonly appear after World War II," he said.

“His tastes and instincts were impeccable, and [his book](#) documenting and presenting this collection is an absolutely essential part of any modern scholar’s library,” Bruné said. “His contribution to the story of the guitar is priceless.”

**It feels like going from painting with just primary colors to having an entire palette.**

—

**Luis Rodriguez**

Bachelor of Music in music therapy student

Urlik also wanted his collection to illustrate the evolutionary story of the Spanish guitar from the creation of the seminal Torres model originally aimed at the gypsy flamenco community to its transformation and dispersion into a truly international instrument universally recognized today as the “classical” guitar, according to Bruné.

“Having this remarkable guitar collection at our fingertips feels almost unreal,” said Alfredo “Freddy” Vazquez, a first-year Doctor of Musical Arts in guitar performance student. “Each guitar carries its own voice, personality and history, inviting new colors and interpretations every time I play. It’s the musical equivalent of an artist opening a box of pigments once used by Rembrandt or Van Gogh.”

Masters has known Urlik for more than two decades through her work with the Guitar Foundation of America, and when Urlik was ready to sell his collection six years ago, he reached out to Masters for help. Urlik sold almost half of the collection independently, and then chose to donate the remaining collection to ASU. He also supported the possibility that some of the instruments that are more interesting for collectors may eventually be sold to support maintenance of the guitar collection, guitar program scholarships and visiting artists.

Audiences will have the opportunity to hear more instruments when students perform on more guitars from the collection at the [ASU Guitar Night concert on Feb. 24](#).

“The chance phone call that presented the opportunity of Arizona State University to become the new host for these instruments was a lightning stroke of luck for me, ASU and the musical world,” Masters said.

[Lynne MacDonald](#) contributed to this story.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

<sup>1</sup> The making of wooden, stringed, musical instruments — such as guitars, violins, lutes and mandolins.

## Main image



School of Music, Dance and Theatre doctoral student Davide Picci, from Italy, plays Agustin Barrios Mangore's "Mazurka Apasionada" on a rare 1981 Martin Fleeson classical guitar. Next to him are an Antonio Emilio Pascual Viudes guitar and a Rafael Casana guitar. The guitars are part of the Sheldon Urlik \$1.4 million donation from his international classical and flamenco guitar collection. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

## Gallery





A Manuel Ramirez guitar, circa 1910, is part of \$1.4 million donation to the School of Music, Dance and Theatre from collector Sheldon Urlik.



The ornate head stock of an Antonio Emilio Pascual Viudes guitar, made in 1926, is part of the Sheldon Urlik \$1.4 million donation to the School of Music, Dance and Theatre.





A closeup of a Rafael Casana guitar, which was made in 1910, is part of the Sheldon Urlik \$1.4 million donation from his international classical and flamenco guitar collection.