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Simon Denton excels at fusing his love of furniture making and music

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July 2018





Simon's award-winning 'Dickie Bow' credenza sideboard, which is made using solid pau rosa and steamed Swiss pear, sitting on a solid wengé plinth

MAKING MUSIC & FURNITURE

Peter Sefton Furniture School graduate **Simon Denton** tells us of his plans to forge a successful career combining his two lifelong passions: music and furniture making

Graduating from the Peter Sefton Furniture School last year having undertaken the one-year Professional Long Course, Simon Denton's 'Dickie Bow' credenza sideboard certainly helped him to stand out from the crowd, but as I learnt, when he's not working with wood, he's actually a freelance cellist, playing with some of the UK's best orchestras. Simon tells me that he's been lucky to see many different countries, touring as part of the job, as well as making many friends along the way.

When asked about his background, Simon comments that he can pin-point discovering a love for woodworking to a BBC Philharmonic Tour to Japan in March 2011: "It's a long story as to why I was alone in Tokyo that day, but after an unprecedented earthquake and tsunami to follow, all our concerts were cancelled. Over the next few days, many people who played in the orchestra made their way out of the hotel for some much needed retail therapy, which was when I discovered a little shop full of handmade bowls



and sushi dishes." Simon explains that all were made using cherry and some in walnut, with the pieces being unique, signed, and individually boxed by the owner. "Over the next few years," he says, "I began looking into the possibility of learning some woodworking skills and last year my uncle informed me that my great granddad was in fact a cabinetmaker working in the High Wycombe chairmaking tradition, and along with my granddad, was a keen woodturner." Now Simon could be certain that woodworking was in the blood.

Fusing passions

Having learnt about his link to music, I was eager to discover if Simon's career as a professional cellist has influenced the pieces he has either made so far or will go on to make, to which he comments that there are many attributes in learning a musical instrument that are transferable to making furniture, but certainly a keen attention to detail and a lot of patience are high up on the list. Simon tells me that he's found designing furniture to be a liberating experience,

as most of the time, as an orchestral musician, it is a 'group interpretation' that is most successful: "Having the freedom to fully commit to my ideas has been essential to my enjoyment of the whole process. Perhaps, from this point of view, my career as a cellist is most influential."

Simon also speaks of his aim to marry his career in music with that of furniture making, and, as he explains, being freelance allows him to take on projects as and when he has finished the designs. "I can't see a future without music or furniture making now," he finishes.

Award-winning pieces

When asked how it felt to be awarded two prestigious prizes upon graduating from the Peter Sefton Furniture School – the 'Favourite Piece using Wood Machining' prize, sponsored by Felder UK, along with the 'Visitors Choice' prize, awarded to the favourite piece as voted for by visitors to the School's End of Year Show – Simon says that the final day exhibition was an overwhelming experience for the students, with



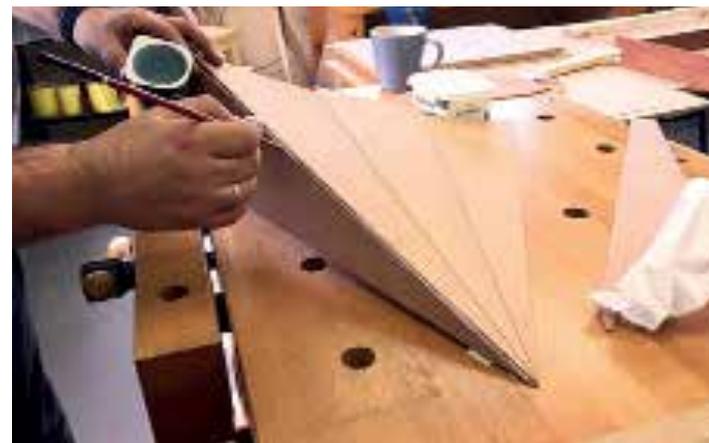
Stool with ash frame, pau rosa top and dowels



Ripple sycamore table featuring traditional drawer with copper 'ring pull' handle



Simon receiving his certificate from Sean Feeney at the 2017 awards ceremony



Gluing Swiss pear constructional veneers for 'bow-tie'

so many visitors engaging in their work. "Most makers are very critical of themselves and so to win anything was a genuine shock, but I was very happy. I was particularly honoured to win the 'Visitors Choice' prize; it's great to see so many people enjoying your furniture and sharing the end result with you."

When asked why he chose to make a credenza as his final piece, in Simon's view sideboards offer the chance to really express a sense of interior design with the choice of timber and the style involved in the details. "Being drawn to Mid-Century Danish furniture, I set about on a rather ambitious project in making my 'Dickie Bow' sideboard, which uses pau rosa, quartersawn Swiss pear and quartersawn wengé." From a technical point of view, Simon says the main challenge was in achieving the 'bow-tie' design on the centrally located doors, which required calibrating his own constructional veneers at 2.5mm and piecing the shapes together with a small 45° chamfer at the edges to create a 'V' groove at the joins. "Fielded panels would have

compromised the design as would using standard veneers at 0.6mm. From a purely physical point of view, the sheer size and weight of the pau rosa boards were a challenge and involved lots of late nights to ensure I finished it on time."

Simon thinks it could just be a coincidence that the bow-tie shape jumped out to him, but it is something he has been wearing as a performer since he was a child, and so most likely locked up in the subconscious somewhere. "I wanted the sideboard to have a contemporary design that was new, but also to achieve this with symmetry. Using asymmetry as a tool for creating something new is often seen in sideboards, but the challenge was to break up the usual rectangles and squares. I wanted to somehow use the lines created by the doors and drawers in a different way and incorporate them into the design," he says. The bow-tie concept led him to the idea of adding a kind of fourth dimension to the piece using the element of perspective. In the end, the idea was to show the drawers on the outside emerging from a single point in the centre of the piece.

Retro meets Japanese

In terms of the ethos behind his designs, Simon comments that it's probably too early in his career to have a fully developed sense of design; however, he does try to have clarity within each project. "Lately I must have been designing with retro glasses on as my sideboard has a 1920-1930s Art Deco pinkish style colouring, which is all set within a frame that has the feel of a 1950s television." As well as being influenced by this design era, Simon also finds Japanese woodworkers fascinating as well as those influenced by Japanese methods, such as Alan Peters. "His furniture is timeless, and almost constantly relevant." Another furniture maker Simon is drawn to is Hugh Miller, whose pieces he first saw at the Celebration of Craftsmanship exhibition back in 2016. "I like to follow his work," says Simon, "as he is also heavily influenced by Japanese techniques."

Simon admits that he's always drawn to the creative side of woodworking, but some tools, such as the spokeshave, lend themselves



Telephone shaped veneer hammer with African blackwood handle



Figured ash handle with 'honey bee' detailing



Preparing pau rosa surface for spray lacquer finish



Working on a large piece requires some improvisation!



Simon playing cello for an album recording back in 2016

to mostly using touch and feel to shape a detail. "I also like the fore plane as it practically sings when set up nicely," he tells me. When making or designing a piece, Simon's intention is to always combine woods that complement one another: "I want to attract the viewer's eye for the right reasons and in the right way. In this case, one is drawn to the intense swirly grain of pau rosa as a feature wood, and to the design aspect on the Swiss pear. The pear wood takes a 'step back' as a timber." In Simon's view, the choice of timbers used draw attention to themselves in various ways. Working with the timber's natural figuring is important from an aesthetic point of view but, when making joints, can cause problems if you ignore this during the making process.

A multitude of design ideas

In terms of the piece he's currently working on, at present Simon is in the process of designing a music stand: "I'm all too aware of the problems musicians have with existing models and hope to solve one or two within an elegant design." He is also looking over the dimensions of a Baroque cello bow for which he has plans to experiment with using more dense timbers. Both projects are music-related but a bespoke ladder, chair tables and a double bed will also be going on in the background. Simon says that when contemplating other possible pieces to make, everyday objects seem to creep into his work. For example, he is influenced by anything that has a strong sense of design or style: "My landlady's old-fashioned telephone was the inspiration behind my

reworking of the traditional veneer hammer and a classic Coke can ring pull was the brains behind a bespoke copper drawer pull on a bedside table."

The future

When asked about his plans now that he's graduated, Simon informs me that he immediately set about finding the right workspace in order for him to continue his woodworking: "I am fortunate to have a large cellar space and work has finally started on renovating it into a usable workshop, and it should be ready to kit out very soon. I would definitely be open to working under a professional furniture maker I admired, however, as there is so much to learn and, of course, many projects require an extra pair of hands."

Last year was undoubtedly full of exciting firsts for Simon, but he says that to design and make an award-winning piece of furniture was probably the highlight. "Arguably the toughest part was taking the leap of faith and having a year away from music by signing up for the course, and this decision was only made possible by the support of HelpMusiciansUK, to whom I am eternally grateful." Simon's ultimate aim is to successfully juggle the two careers side-by-side, but in terms of woodworking it's important for him to design pieces that help develop his skills further. "There is so much to learn and therefore I plan on spending a long time trying." It's clear to see from having spoken to Simon, however, that a happy future for him will definitely involve both of his passions, and the results of that journey are likely to reveal some truly interesting pieces. ✂