



PRODUCTION
AND TECHNOLOGY



Pitch perfect

Every pitch has to be perfect. Jürgen Ortmeier knows this from his music. As head of liquid coating technologies at Wörwag, he also knows that every new shade of paint has to be perfect. For more than 30 years he has played a crucial role in shaping both the company and many of its innovations. And his passion for playing the guitar is just the right accompaniment – because the hobby and the profession have a surprisingly high number of similarities.

By Michael Thiem Photos by Toby Binder

One last look. Then Jürgen Ortmeier (59) closes his eyes and tunes out his surroundings for a fraction of a second. He turns inward. And then gently plucks the strings. Finger style. The first tones. Chords to float on. Simply gorgeous. He has decided to play “Do kanns zaubere” by BAP, a Cologne-based rock band whose lyrics are written in the local dialect. Then he looks up. But his gaze remains serious. Or let’s say concentrated. Anyone can learn how to play the guitar, but not everyone can develop his level of instinctual expertise. Not to mention passion. “When you make music, there’s no room for other thoughts,” he says, “because then you’ll make mistakes.” And mistakes drive Ortmeier crazy – whether in his music room or in the coatings lab at Wörwag.

Following this little taster of his music, Ortmeier puts the guitar aside. “Making music and developing paints are similar in a great many ways,” he remarks. Such as perfection. In both cases, practice and experience are what count. After studying chemical engineering, Ortmeier joined Wörwag in 1984. Just three years later, he had become a leading member of the company’s paint development team. “I had the opportunity to take responsibility early on,” he recalls. In 1987, Wörwag developed environmentally friendly water-based primers to series production. In the early 1990s, an ever-greater number of plastic automotive add-on parts were being painted in the same color as car exteriors. Wörwag was one of the pioneers here, too, which led to contracts such as the paint for the Smart car. That was a milestone, and the coating system is still in use to this day. A new technology followed in the form of electrostatic coating. In fact, new challenges have never stopped emerging. “The company redefines itself at regular intervals, because there are always new demands, new technologies, and new general prevailing conditions,” observes Ortmeier. And he’s happy with

that. After all, he has now spent more than half of his life with Wörwag. During this time, he has seen a family-run enterprise with 180 people grow into a worldwide family-run company with nearly 1,000 employees.

Persistence and countless evenings of practice are needed to play guitar pieces like Eric Clapton’s “Wonderful Tonight” flawlessly. Ortmeier did not have much time for that in 2003. The lights at the labs, coating chambers, and offices in Zuffenhausen were on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for three months straight. When clients converted to electrostatic application process for base coats, Wörwag’s technology suddenly didn’t work anymore. “The whole company was looking at us,” recalls Ortmeier, who tackled this Herculean task with a 15-member team. New coating approaches, processes, assessments, and formulas were tried out in what seemed like an endless loop. Around the clock. The team’s persistence paid off. Client approval came after three months. As Ortmeier sums it up, “We laid the foundation for a new generation of water-based coatings.” Everyone had worked together, sacrificed their weekends, and shown incredible commitment. This incident is just one example of the Wörwag spirit. Of its family character.

Always in search of solutions, always presenting the best possible results – also for his wife, who likes to listen to him playing the guitar. And for customers. Wörwag offers them increasingly sophisticated overall packages on an ongoing basis. “Our customers don’t just buy a can of paint from us, they buy new paint developments. We sell the applications. We show them how to paint. We help customers in their negotiations with carmakers. We’re there to sort out any problems,” says Ortmeier. If necessary, he might fly at a day’s notice to the USA or to China. Personal contact is important to him. ▶



Precision work: made to Ortmeier's specifications, this guitar is even signed.

Wörwag tries to do things better than other companies – that is the way it operates. “If we just did the same things as the big players, there wouldn't be a place for us,” says this perfectionist, who then proceeds to show us one of his nine guitars. It was custom-made to meet his specifications. The top is made of hazel spruce, the back and ribs from Brazilian rosewood, 12 frets, B-Band and Freewheel tuners. The neck is signed “Jürgen.” His eyes sparkle for a second. Then he lets the first chords dance.

Instinctual expertise resonates in every tone. Precision marks every move. Ortmeier began playing the guitar at the age of 13 – in order to impress a girl. Music has been his companion ever since. “My second life,” he remarks. He retires to his music room every evening, and has watched virtually no TV for the past 30 years. On business trips he often takes a soundless guitar with headphones in his hand luggage, so he can play in his hotel room without disturbing other guests. He gives everything he has – to both his hobby and his profession. Sometimes he writes arrangements, records

his music, adds to his YouTube channel or SoundCloud. Every year he contributes a song to a fingerstyle CD, and takes part in specialist forums. When he does things, he does them right. Which is why he still goes to the lab himself at Wörwag. Because burning topics bring out the chemist in him. “I also simply enjoy discussing different formulations,” he says. Adhesion, flow, and consistency properties, additives, pigmentation, solvent adjustments, and so and so forth. There's an enormous toolbox at hand with a nearly endless number of possibilities. “The art itself and the expertise at Wörwag both consist of finding out which small adjust-

ments will most effectively achieve our aim,” he says. Being open to new ideas is not a bad quality in musicians. As for developers, natural curiosity is virtually a prerequisite for getting things done. And Ortmeier is someone who thinks way ahead. He is convinced that electromobility will change the ways in which cars are painted. Weight-reduced multi-substrate car bodies will

“When you make music, there's no room for other thoughts.”

keep presenting new challenges to paint developers. The processes themselves will change. Ortmeier is sure that ever more plastic components will be installed directly onto car bodies before being painted, which will require formerly separate coating processes to be harmonized. Up to now, steel car bodies have been dried at temperatures of around 140 degrees Celsius (284 degrees Fahrenheit), and plastic components at 80 or 90 degrees (176 to 194 degrees Fahrenheit). “We already have the technologies to combine these processes,” he says. Digitalization will also advance at a rapid pace. Ortmeier is of the opinion that “we'll be able to describe our paints much better with facts, figures, and other data, and we'll need to share this knowledge with our customers for any given batch.” This is because future paint application systems will get the information they need directly from customers or suppliers in order to coat the respective components perfectly. New innovations will appear, but perfection will remain a constant. Ortmeier's second big hobby is photography. Here, too, there are many similarities with both music and paints. But that is another story. ■



Listen to Jürgen Ortmeier:

YouTube

www.youtube.de/fingerstyler1de

Soundcloud

<https://soundcloud.com/user-156209721>

Homepage

www.fingerstyler.de



Relaxation and inspiration: Jürgen Ortmeier in his music room.