



Guitar

The Unique Challenges of Modern Guitar Instruction

by Christopher Henderson

The tremendous surge in popularity of the guitar in the last half of this century is largely attributable to the rapid development of Rock & Roll and other forms of popular music. This has been both beneficial and burdensome to classical guitar instructors; while the widespread favor of music attracts vast numbers of students, it also creates new pedagogical demands.

At the heart of these new challenges lies the appeal of Rock & Roll music itself, especially among teen-age students. Most of us can recall sitting in our high school American History class and learning about the wonderful freedom we have in this country, yet being regulated by rules, policies and curfews imposed by both parents and teachers at seemingly every turn. Rock & Roll seemingly provides an escape from the apparent lack of logic in being told that you are free and that you are not free at the same time. It entails rebellion and the breaking of rules for the sake of breaking rules; it makes defiance fashionable.

More than any other instrument, the guitar is associated with Rock & Roll and its brazen disobedience. Thus, guitar instructors face teaching the standard methods of playing an instrument that has become an icon of nonconformity. Unfortunately, many students become discouraged when they find that the image on the surface of Rock & Roll music does not coincide with what it takes to play the guitar well. The Rock & Roll image tells students that it is okay to disregard even the most basic concepts, such as following routine practice schedules, warm-up techniques, style and formal analysis. The truth is that it is not okay to ignore these and other important concepts. It is the task of guitar instructors to reveal this truth

while maintaining an atmosphere that allows students to develop their individual creativity.

The more willing students are to accept what they are unable to immediately see on the surface, the more successful they will be. Guitar instructors must at least partially break down the superficial images of pop music for their students to begin actually making music. For example, guitar instructors often must rectify incorrect (and sometimes physically damaging) playing techniques that students have acquired by imitating pop music performers. The most common of these is raising the left thumb over the top of the guitar neck. Some instructors might be able to remedy it by convincing students that pulling the wrist out of alignment that far incapacitates the little finger nearly totally, or by quoting Andres Segovia, who said, "The sole redeeming feature of this technique is to display a player's incompetence."

The role of the guitarist in pop music composition and performance is as a single member of a band. Guitar students, especially beginners, who want to learn this style of music often never play a whole piece of music because they never form an ensemble which whom they can perform the work as intended. They find themselves playing only the interesting parts, particularly the blistering solos, of the songs they like. Beginners are enthusiastic because it sounds like the recording but the sense of accomplishment wears thin for those who realize that their efforts will not result in a "complete" experience. It is like taking a literature course and reading only the first two or last two chapters of a novel. Once the classic guitar teacher convinces younger students that they are learning the entire piece solo — a

sort of one-man band — the results can begin to be rewarding.

Unfortunately, the widespread printing of guitar tablature (a notational system discarded in the late Baroque era) has produced a generation of guitarists who cannot read music and as a result are unable to understand any concepts of music theory. Tablature provides only physical information on where the fingers need to be placed to play a particular song, while supplying no rhythm nor anything regarding how the music has been composed. The transition to standard notation from tablature can be daunting and is often relieved by including a tablature version for the first few passes at learning the new piece.

I recently read an article in a guitar publication in which the guitarist for a particular rock band said about his playing style, "those are probably pretty complex chords, but I wouldn't know that." On the surface, these musicians appear to know what they are doing, but looking beneath it clearly shows that this is not always the case.

What can we as professional teachers of guitar do about these recurrent problems? The overall challenge is posed to teachers who want to teach a disciplined approach to an instrument which is so laden with the image of freedom. Some options for solutions appear in the article. The author and column editor invite readers who are familiar with this situation to respond with articles of their own for what can be a continuing series.

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