



# Guitar

## A New Vision for Guitar Education

### Part I

by Jason Vanselow

A trip through a bin of guitar method books at any local music store will reveal a couple of different things about learning to play the guitar in America. In that bin you can find ways to learn almost any style of guitar playing. And as you flip from book to book, you could make a couple of observations. The first is that the quality of the writing and the repertoire varies drastically from book to book. Your second observation might be that a large percentage of the books deal with “getting started” and get players to a point where they can play five or six songs or “signature licks.” You might also notice is that there are two styles of notation — standard notation and a tablature system called tab — and that there are no (or only a few very basic) general music concepts taught.

These observations point out both the successes and failures of guitar as a whole. The positive is that guitar has succeeded in being a visible instrument that has the opportunity to succeed in a huge number of situations and that the guitar education system has found a way to put guitars into people’s hands and encourage them to play. The downside is that the guitar education system hasn’t set a standard of quality in the books that it uses, developed a body of repertoire or methodology for an intermediate or advanced student, nor educated any of its students in the area of general music fundamentals.

There is something on the horizon that could both utilize the successes of guitar and improve the quality of the average guitar education.

The Minnesota Music Teacher’s Association (MMTA, the local chapter of Music Teacher’s National Association MTNA) has been serving the community for one hundred and fifty years by providing a basic path of study for instrumentalists and singers. For each instrument there is a program that sets

standards for repertoire, technique, and music theory that a student must meet. A student moves from one level to the next by passing an exam that covers those standards. This is a system of musical education that been proven to work, but until now there has been no program for guitar. Working in conjunction with MMTA, Christopher Kachian, Jeff Thygeson and Jason Vanselow have developed a syllabus that can provide a basic guitar education that emphasizes fundamentals in both guitar and general music.

The MMTA guitar syllabus was developed based on four goals for guitar education in whatever specific form it takes. First, it aims to increase the musical literacy of guitar students of all levels: not just guitar literacy, but general musical literacy. Second, it aims to set up a goal-oriented system of education in which students go through a learning process, succeed and are rewarded for their success. Third, it aims to promote a solid system of education that can balance the eclectic (and sometimes eccentric) manner in which guitar tends to be taught in music stores and schools around the country. Fourth, it aims to produce guitar players who understand and love music as much as they understand and love guitar.

These goals exist to answer some basic needs in guitar pedagogy. Guitar is hard to learn. Not only because of its innate complexities, but also because the guitar community has no set of complete or unified approaches to teaching. Part of this stems from the fact that guitar has an oral tradition that stretches back hundreds of years. Yes, teachers who spend half a lesson struggling to show a student how to play a rock tune from a recording are actually following a tradition.

Throughout history, guitar has existed in one form or another. It hasn’t

always had six strings and it hasn’t always been tuned in fourths, but it’s always been present. Part of the tradition of the guitar is from the grand parlors and royal courts. There were court composers who used guitars and lutes to accompany singers or dancers or to celebrate the monarch of the time. This part of the tradition was written down. Although there’s a twist. Because of the number of different types of similar instruments and different ways to tune them, tablature became a way for a player to recognize where to put their fingers without having to decipher what note they were actually playing. This became a huge part of the tradition of guitar, especially recently with the explosion of guitar mags who pride themselves on the transcriptions of the latest hits. The problem is that when the royal composer used tab, it was just a notation device; they knew how the piece of music worked because they wrote it. When a twenty-first century teenager picks up a song written in tab and has no idea what the rhythms written above mean, the results can be chaotic. This isn’t the teenager’s fault necessarily, but rather an unhealthy quirk of how guitar is learned today.

Now if we go back to the time of the royal composer, outside the castle walls, there’s a village in which someone is practicing diligently on a song that their teacher taught them or that they wrote. The difference between this person and the royal composer is that their entire education is by ear. It’s a learning tradition passed down through the generations. Both are equally valid ways to learn the instrument. They both have their strengths. But each of them separately are only half the story; the player who learns to read but neglects the oral, aural, and improvisatory aspects of their education is missing out on the rewards of listening to music

and applying it to their instrument. On the other hand the person who learns only aurally, can speak and understand the language of music but has no idea how to read or write it or any idea of its history. Both of these skills are important to the education of a musician and the aim of the MMTA syllabus is to get guitar players to focus on the whole education.

The program works like this: the syllabus consists of twelve levels that serve the absolute beginner through a student who would be ready to enter college as a music major. Each level consists of a graded, multi-genre repertoire list, a list of theory terms and questions that relate to the repertoire, ear-training requirements, a list of technical skill requirements, sight reading requirements and basic questions about the music the student is playing. A student taking part in the MMTA program

would be required to perform one to three pieces from the repertoire list in front of an adjudicator and then pass a general music exam based on the qualifications listed in the syllabus for that level in order to move on to the next level.

At the outset, it needs to be stated that this is not a cure-all method book that replaces other methods or even niche market favorites. And at first, going through this process of preparing and testing might be unfamiliar and even a little bit difficult for both a student and a teacher, but there are advantages for both in this learning process. This is a way of teaching that embraces and encourages the diversity of the guitar while encouraging students to learn universal musical concepts. This syllabus and this method of teaching are simply a resource and a guide, a spine to which a teacher can attach

whatever types of bones they feel are right for the student.

The next part of this article will deal with strategies for implementing the MMTA syllabus in a lesson.

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