



GUITAR

New Ideas in Guitar Education

by Jason Vanselow

In the summer of 2001, a group of guitar players wrote the first widely used edition of the Minnesota Music Teacher's Association (MMTA) Comprehensive Guitar Syllabus. These guitarists and teachers, led by Christopher Kachian, wanted to create an approach to teaching guitar that could provide a student and a teacher a viable educational path that started when the student picked up the guitar and ended when the student was ready for professional level concert literature.

Kachian and his group had several goals in mind for this syllabus. First, they wanted to have a path that emphasized musical literacy. Guitarists have long been left out of quite a few musical conversations because they simply have not received much knowledge outside the world of guitar. Segovia, Bream, Chet Atkins, and a host of rock and jazz players brought guitar into the realm of those conversations, but guitar pedagogy is only beginning to catch up with those personalities to maintain that position.

Second, the group wanted to have a system in which there were a number of short-term goals for the student to meet along the way. MMTA has already had a long history of success using the strategies of literacy and goal-accomplishment, so their program seemed to be a good one for the guitarists to emulate.

So, the guitarists, using the MMTA program as a model, formed theory requirements, found and graded repertoire (primarily from classical sources), and formed the syllabus.

The syllabus was published in the spring of 2002 and has been in use since. Although the number of teachers and students using the program hasn't been as high as might have been hoped, a number of new teachers have come on board and have brought many new opinions and ideas.

One of the biggest questions about style concerns the use of a pick versus the use of fingers. Most rock and jazz players use picks, while classical players and Chet

Atkins devotees use the tips of their right hand fingers, while even others use a pick attached to each right hand finger. This creates a new challenge for the MMTA guitar program. Because the repertoire that the group originally chose came primarily from classical sources, players who use picks, or aren't otherwise inclined to play classical guitar, are left out of the process.

Another group that has shown interest in the MMTA program but has problems with integrating it into their own programs are teachers of the Suzuki method. The Suzuki teachers, because they integrate reading notation into their lessons after they have done months of ear training can't bring their students into the earlier levels of the MMTA program.

These new minds and new ideas have presented some new challenges for the future of the MMTA guitar program. For instance, how can the MMTA program join forces with the Suzuki teachers to create a chain that can sustain a student all the way from their "Twinkle" studies to sight reading and performing on a professional level? Another challenge is finding material that covers all of the musical styles that are being taught, promotes the goal of literacy rather than guitar specific methods, and is consistently in print.

One approach that is being considered is to do away with the repertoire lists as they currently exist. The repertoire that is currently required comes primarily from the curriculum of the Royal Conservatory in Toronto. Although these pieces are a wonderful representation of what exists in classical guitar, they do not serve the interests of the wider guitar world. An alternative for this is that there would be a required piece, or choice of pieces, provided by MMTA to the student that is generic in style but demonstrates the required level of proficiency. These pieces would be commissioned by the MMTA guitar program and written with specific theory and technical skills in mind. In addition to the required

piece, a student would be required to play two additional pieces that the student and their teacher believe shows the strengths of the student's playing abilities.

Another idea that is being talked about is reworking the theory and technical skills requirements in the early levels. Part of the reasoning for this is the interest from the Suzuki teachers. The Suzuki method has been very successful in getting young children to play guitar. These are the very children that the MMTA wants to help succeed and help create a long-term interest in guitar and in music. It would seem beneficial to MMTA and the Suzuki teachers then, to create a point for the two programs to merge to create continuity for students. The real challenge in this idea is how to bring together two different pedagogical theories, one that relies on ear training at the very beginning and throughout a student's development and one that puts ear training as a secondary skill. Merging these two theories together will be one of the biggest challenges that this group faces.

The MMTA guitar program has had some early success and is now looking to enhance itself and become attractive to a wider audience. The beginning goal of musical literacy is still the primary focus of the program but it has been shown that there are many ways to reach that goal. The next step for in this success is to find common points between teachers that teach different methods and different styles. Finding these common points while maintaining the integrity of the original goal can only mean success for this program.

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