



GUITAR

Why Classical Guitar in our High Schools: Over Two Hundred Good Reasons.

by Grant Wilcox

The classical guitar is a perfect fit in our high schools as much so as singing or as playing a band or orchestra instrument. MMEA has set its mission to offer music in our schools for all students. In fact 90 percent of the students who will sign up for acoustic guitar class will be students who have not been members of the high school choir, band or orchestra. Many of these students have been turned off to great music somewhere along the way.

As string teachers we do not add many new students outside of transfer students to our orchestras in high school. In effect we work with the same group of students for 3 to 4 years depending on our school. By adding the acoustic guitar to our string music offerings, we will give almost three times as many students the chance to study great string music.

In our string programs we cannot offer a one-semester class in orchestra and keep an orchestra program alive. We could not nurture string players or build an orchestral group even on a one-year basis. It is my view that it takes a very serious violinist years — more than high school — to develop the skill to create a singing tone for performance. On the classical guitar, an average student can perform the same music very well after a year. Many of these are students, who without our expertise, could grow up not really knowing what “Bach is” let alone having the skill to read and perform Bach.

The sheer numbers I think are amazing. Using a number of 100 traditional string

students as a base — (*The ratio will work starting with any number; I just selected 100 because it is a round figure and near my numbers*) — the numbers are: For every 100 high school string students that you teach over three years you will work with less than 175 different students over a three year period of time. The string teacher who teaches 3 semester hours of classical guitar a year will teach 225 students over that same period of time. The total numbers of string students who can be influenced with classical music over three years is nearly 400. Principals, superintendents, board members, parents and most of all students love these classes. Plus these classical guitar kids, who would not have studied classical music, come to orchestra concerts, perform classical string music, will grow up to pay taxes and could vote for bonding levees.

I am not talking about “auto-harp guitar” where the student puts chords down with one hand and strums the daylight out of the strings with the other. Classical guitar study is the reading and decoding of classical music to perform on an instrument that is played with two hands in much the same way the cello or viola are played. The cost of a classical guitar that will produce a warm singing tone could be as little as \$200 while the cost of a violin that would produce a singing tone would run over \$1,000.

As music teachers, we all understand the discipline of reading music and the positive effect it has on students. Beyond reading music comes the challenge of the synthesis process to transform notation

into music and the mastery that leads to polished performance. After I started my classes I found out that my assistant superintendent is a guitar player, an “auto-harp” type player. Every time he walks through my room during one of my classical guitar classes he smiles and says, “What a gift to these students.”

Music, and more important classical music, is about connection first and understanding second. It is about connection based on interest and an attraction that may, if we work hard enough, lead to skill and performance ability. Neither this process nor this music magic is for only a few but it belongs to every string player who is interested, perhaps more than double the number that we currently serve.

Grant Wilcox teaches orchestral music at Brainerd High School. This year he offers: an early bird String Quartet class, Chamber Orchestra, three sections of Classical Guitar I, one section of Classical Guitar II, one section of Classical Guitar Ensemble, First Orchestra, and Sinfonia Orchestra. The guitar ensemble performed Telemann and Bach between orchestras at his fall orchestra concert. This winter the slow movement of the Vivaldi Guitar Concerto is programmed with his Chamber Orchestra. The Brainerd Chamber Orchestra is performing at the MMEA State Conference in February and will also be performing at the ASTA National Conference in Detroit this March. Grant serves on the MNSOTA board as Outstate Representative. †