



# GUITAR

## Classical Guitar in the High School: A new look at your own knowledge base

by Grant Wilcox

**A knowledge base for the string teacher:** The hardest thing about the classical guitar for any new player is the reading of notation. For the orchestral string player it is a simple matter of a few techniques, practice and guitar note location on the string to reach competency into the intermediate level of classical guitar. The hardest aspect of guitar playing for the most advanced guitarist is also the reading of notation. If you think the violin is hard to read in upper positions because of alternate fingering for the same note, try adding two more strings and almost always reading multiple notes.

**Basic principals of classical guitar playing for the orchestral string players:** We are more alike than we are different. The string music teacher is already a string player who has studied classical instrumental music and has all of the basic principles to teach themselves and their students the beginning and intermediate levels of the classical guitar. The professional string teacher has those skills plus understanding of the nature of string instruments. The process of creating color on a string instrument with a plucked note is the same for a classical guitar as it is the cello. In fact the similarity is so great that if the violin were held “quasi guitar” like called for in some orchestral scores, the function is not different. In fact, the classical guitar is played like the cello only sideways with three fingers and a thumb.

**Only three new skills to add to your string technique:**

To teach yourself and your students you will need just a few additions to your toolbox as a string teacher. *First* a basic left hand technique: thumb behind the guitar neck like on the cello or bass. Do not let your

students hang their thumb over the neck of the guitar. That is a habit as hard as any bad habit to break. Think of a finger to a fret at first and develop a growing ability to play chords starting with only a few and if time permits leading to a thousand variations on our history’s use of harmony. *Second* is right hand technique: this skill requires use of three fingers and a thumb in an alternating manner. Insist that student hold the guitar on the left leg, as this will allow the angle of the fingers to the string to be perpendicular. This will enable your thumb to be extended at a right angle keeping space between your thumb and fingers to make it possible to use rest and free stroke in any combination. When you learn to make the classical guitar sing, it is my guess that you will want to grow and shape your finger nails a little more on your right hand to create different colors. *Third* is the growing ability to read notation on the guitar. That is to: read chord symbols, read increasingly difficult music with three fingers and thumb and play scales for facility and strength. It is my view to avoid tablature at every turn. Tab is a system of learning to memorize a specific piece of music using symbols or diagrams in a stop time format that will have no carry over to the other instruments or musicians.

**No one has a better chance to successfully start the classical guitar than the professional string player:** You already understand the process and know first hand the discipline that is required to read music and the skill required to perform well on string instruments. If you start to teach classical guitar in your high school it will become very popular and many students will sign up for these classes. Ninety per-

cent of these students do not perform in the high school bands, choirs or orchestras. If you start teaching group classical guitar half way through your career you could reach well over a thousand extra string students before you retire. Drawing from your current knowledge and learning a few additional techniques of string teaching you will help enable students to study classical music. In the process you will discover additional students who love instrumental string music; these classical guitar students will increase interest in string music in your school and with just a little effort on your part may continue this process well beyond imagination.

In times of money short falls and budget cuts, here is teacher-load question that Faith Farr asked me, “What would you rather do as a string teacher: be cut in hours, teach in an additional building, add some band or choir to fill in your daily schedule or add classical guitar in your school?”

For me, I added classical guitar not out of fear for my job but to better meet the needs of my students. If you would like to try exploring classical guitar, check out the Aaron Shearer *Classical Guitar* Volume I and II. The pieces are in sequence as the guitarist grows.

Next guitar feature: a formula for classical guitar in the schools. The literacy collaborate model. (Musicians have used this model with great success for years.)

*Grant Wilcox teaches guitar and orchestral music at Brainerd High School. The Brainerd Chamber Orchestra performed at the MMEA State Conference in February and at the ASTA National Conference in March. †*