



GUITAR

Classical Guitar in the High School:

A Formula for more Success

by Grant Wilcox

Selling your building principal on the classical guitar:

To begin with, you will have almost twenty percent of your student body ready to sign up; the parents of these students want them to have skills and to study interesting and useful subjects. Nearly ninety percent of these students who will sign up for this music class are not members of high school band, choir or orchestra. After all principals like students to have full schedules filled with classes that they like and will work hard in. Your building principal is already sold on the idea of adding classical guitar in your high school — he or she just may not know it yet.

When will I have time to add this class?

We string teachers could ask that question about anything, like: staff meetings, extra events, sectional rehearsals, or private lessons to hard working low-income students to name a few. We as string teachers just do it. In our string program students are encouraged to take private lessons outside of school and we teach class instruction only during the school day.

As a private studio teacher for over 30 years I know: if the student does not maintain regular practice, the lessons are of very little value. To be cost effective and meaningful private lessons must be taken on a regular basis with ongoing careful practice or the lessons are just not worth it. I would not be able to give my students that kind of attention nor would my school district be able to pay for this instruction. In my school I would have to select special students to teach or give everyone a few lessons and forget what I know about the serious study of music. We all know that administrators and our peers wonder about the value sign-up lessons. In my school if I took all of my orchestra students and divided up an hour between them over a school year each student would receive a little over a half an hour a year. In contrast when I deliver two sections of classical guitar in that same time block over a school

year I am giving nearly 50 students over 80 hours of music instruction each. If I do this more than one hour a day I will double the effect. My thinking is: how can I not have time for these students?

The course offering in the school catalogue:

It is as simple as: *Acoustic Guitar I — acoustic guitar is the study of non-electric guitar; the student is required to read music, learn chord progressions, develop right hand finger technique and study basic theory as it relates to the classical guitar.* I have each student registering write up a statement on why they should be enrolled in the class and I keep the letters in the event that I need to remind them of my expectation and why they signed up for this class.

The Literacy Collaborative Model:

The Literacy Collaborative Model is a format for teaching performance-based skills and reading utilizing individual progress and assessment with a small and large group component. Reading teachers have coined this model in the past few years. Musicians may not have invented this process but we have used this model for hundreds of years with great success. A name better suited may likely be “The Learner-Centered Collaborative.” The successful teacher will use this process with the student in mind. It is my strongest belief that, “Learning is more important than teaching.” In fact: Learning cannot take place before readiness and readiness is a manifestation of learning. Teaching therefore should be done in collaboration with learning and readiness.

The Learner-Centered Collaborative Model:

This format works and serves the most dedicated music student or the beginner very well. The process is learner oriented and requires an active learner. This teacher is constantly looking for readiness through individual assessment and never teaches the next concept until the previous learning is demonstrated.

From the moment the student enters the class setting they are expected to be active, to tune with care and go to work on their own. Students meet in the large group setting; however it is the individual work and the one-on-one assessment that measures the need for more effort or the readiness for the next step. The small group enables the individual to practice together in real time with others of like skill and to grow as a performer.

The class is set up like this: All students play together in the large group daily to receive new concepts and instruction. At least once a week each student is assessed individually, this measurement serves as a base to monitor progress and establish a grade. The class then splits up so that each student plays in at least one small group to match his or her skill level. While students are in the small groups the others have time to work on their own individual needs.

Fundamentals every day:

Chords, right hand technique and scale passages to warm up; the chord changes are played together in an even meter; each student can start the change as needed to make the chord change on the down beat. Students who are faster can wait for the very last second to make the chord change while those who need more time may have a beat or more to change chords. Then we double the speed, and double it again until I change the chord progression. Next we do right hand technique. After the pattern is mastered we add more chords to the pattern. By this time everyone is awake and warmed up. We then read classical guitar notation, we read all together at a level everyone can handle until I lose a number of the students. We then break into small groups based on the page the student is on in the book. I work in turn with each group asking for student input as to starting page, speed or if we need to repeat a study.

Individual assessment:

One-on-one time serves more than just as an evaluation tool; it is a time to talk about

problems, special needs and to make corrections un-noticed in the group setting. The students all know from the first meeting that the class will be run on an individualized basis and they will be graded on progress. If they hope to move to another class they must successfully complete a book in the semester. The individual assessment and the active learner process can build a collaborative effort that may live well beyond the

class and the teacher if continued.

Next feature: A look at method books, texts and music for the Classical Guitar in the high school classroom.

Grant Wilcox teaches orchestral music at Brainerd High School. This past year he offered: An early bird String Quartet class, Chamber Orchestra, three sections of Classi-

cal Guitar I, one section of Classical Guitar II, one Section of Classical Guitar Ensemble, First Orchestra and Sinfonia Orchestra. His guitar ensemble performed between orchestras at each of his orchestra concerts. In 2007 The Brainerd Chamber Orchestra performed at the MMEA State Conference and at the ASTA National Conference in Detroit MI. ‡