



GUITAR

Classical Guitar in the High School: From Rocker to Reader and Beyond

by Grant Wilcox

The first year the acoustic guitar is offered in the high school about 50% of students are drawn to the class because they have a guitar and have not figured it out. The other half of the class will be first-timers, never having a performing music class before. The first year only you will have a few students who join because they strum or thump a guitar and think everything else about the guitar is easy too. You may find that a few special education teachers are pushing your class to some special education kids without knowing that you will be learning to read musical notation, which to some kids is another language. You could avoid this mix-up by a visit with your counselors and the special education department—not to exclude these young people but rather help with the choice.

This class will be as difficult or as easy as any music class in the high school. One of our school principals stopped me in the hall and asked about her son and his interest in my Acoustic Guitar I class. She said, “My son and I have heard that this class is not easy, and that some think it is quite difficult.” I had to explain that the class would be difficult if her son did not apply himself or if he tried to avoid what we were doing. This is true of every class offered in our school. The great part for us is that we have the opportunity to offer something many students have interest in, can excel in and continue with their entire life.

The year before we offered classical guitar in our high school my peers tried to discourage and block the addition of this class within our building. What was really a turf issue was masked as a philosophical difference about what music in our school is all about. These people had the view that music was for the few and finest. It is my view that what we study makes us what we are. The first year we offered the class we had an additional 80 students sign up for music in our building that year alone. The numbers have grown each year since. The number registered for acoustic guitar in the '08-'09 school year is over 170 students. We exclude freshman from this class and offer classical guitar to students in grades ten through twelve. The total number of additional students studying classical

music in our school outside of band, choir and orchestra over a four-year period will exceed 400. Most important these are students who will not perform music simply by rote but rather will learn to read music on an instrument through the study of classical music.

There are many rewards to starting students on the path of reading and playing an instrument but when you see a young person transformed that is a special event. When you help move a kid from “Folk to Baroque” you smile very big for a long time and say to that kid, “well done.” At this point I am hooked; I look forward to next time I am part of the transformation. This does not happen to every kid, nor should it, but it does happen to a fair number of students and you will remember every time it does. It may come in the simple request for more interesting and complex music, or a statement like, “The music I played before was so repetitive and simple.” It is so rewarding when you witness the student to whom you gave a Bach cello suite a few days earlier returning starting to play Bach on the guitar. Don't get me wrong—there are still those kids who come to play in the orchestra room area while I am eating lunch and I hear the acoustic guitar played like a drum or an autoharp. I don't worry; it takes awhile for the effect to happen and we teachers have to be patient. But once you take part in the transformation of “Rock to Bach” it is more than just that kid who has seen across to the other side.

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 Classical Guitar I, one section of Classical Guitar II, one section of Classical Guitar Ensemble, First Orchestra and Sinfonia Orchestra. His guitar ensemble performs between orchestras at each of his orchestra concerts. Grant's ensembles have performed twice at the ASTA National Orchestra Festival, five times at MMEA State Conference, four times at the MNSOTA Tier II Festival in Orchestra Hall and at the MENC National Convention. †