



GUITAR

The Classical Guitar Ensemble

Bringing the Traditional and Non-Traditional Music Student Together

by Grant Wilcox

The guitar ensemble is a natural progression from interest in an instrument and skill development to performing music together. The process is natural and happens with almost every instrument that is learned and played. The difference between the traditional orchestra instrument and the guitar is that the instruments of the orchestra in almost every school are recruited and taught simply so that those students will play them in the school's orchestra, but starting the guitar and developing guitar skill is learned for its own sake much like the piano. I could not imagine an ensemble of 12 or so pianos playing together. But I do know that the sound of 12 guitars playing in ensemble is very delicate, practical and beautiful.

Instruments for the Sake of Musical Expression

I believe it would be great if we taught string instruments for their own sake not just to build ranks in our orchestras. As important, it would be great if we created ensembles for guitarists, not just leaving them on their own simply to copy popular music or to make stuff up for themselves. If we were to value through study and course offerings *all* instruments in our schools, we would see the number of interested students rise exponentially, we would have more ensembles and we as music teachers would more than double the number of our students reading music notation.

The guitar ensemble I speak about will lead to discovery of not only new students within your school but also musical ability in students who had little or none before this new opportunity. The next natural step in this program development is students who will be successful and excel; these

students will not only find more meaning in school but administrators and parents will notice. In the search for music diversity and exposure, I have my guitar ensembles perform at orchestra concerts. I find that including this performing ensemble in our concerts makes a great break between orchestras and is enjoyed by everyone; for some this performance becomes the highlight of the concert.

The High Flyer's Place in the Ensemble

An exciting stage in the progression of a new Classical Guitar Program is the emergence of the high-flyer. Strong programs will have them from time to time and when we are careful as directors it works out well and they propel our program to a new level. I am not talking about the "A" or upper-A student but rather the student whom we are blessed with who may go through our program only once every 20 or so years. Every instrument has them; however it is just so very rare to see them on classical guitar because we in schools do not offer the serious study of guitar to students, nor do many students really know anything about this instrument. Thus we see the classical guitar super-kid hardly ever. This alone is not reason enough to start the teaching of the instrument in our schools; rather it is such a great plus to reach all levels of student at all social-economic levels in a very low cost program that is simply a no-brainer.

Ensemble Music for Classical Guitar

The music for the classical guitar ensemble is vast and only as limited as you will make it. Almost any music that can be learned and played on any instrument can be learned, studied and performed by the clas-

sical guitar ensemble. The classical guitar is a non-transposing instrument and one huge difference that is so very positive for guitar students is that it does not take ten years to learn how to make the classical guitar sing like the guitar's relatives in the violin-cello family.

In our last concert this past spring we featured three J.S. Bach string trios for 12 classical guitars. The color of sound I liken to a cross between the harp, harpsichord and a pizzicato cello; what young person, parent or administrator would not love that. At the same spring concert our Chamber Orchestra performed the first movement of the Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto* and the first movement of the *Concertino for Classical Guitar and Orchestra* by Ferdinando Carulli. These are the kinds of pieces that bring listeners out of seats the moment the music stops. Just as the violin concerto with care and planning may find a voice in the high school orchestra program, so too may the classical guitar concerto bloom and flower out of the high school classical guitar ensemble.

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 Tier II Festival in Orchestra Hall and at the MENC National Convention. ‡