



GUITAR

Starting a New High School String Program: And what to do when your peers are against it

by Grant Wilcox

I had the opportunity this summer at the MNSOTA All-State Orchestra Teachers Workshop to talk with a friend who is a veteran string teacher from a large school district with a reputation for having one of the top-notch high school music programs in our state. My friend's comments were, "I have tried to start a serious guitar program in my school but my colleagues are against the idea and block the start of a guitar program."

I know this problem so very well first hand. It has happened to me far too many times in the past 28 years. It happened when I started the Brainerd High School String Program with the vocal opposition of two music staff who did not want a string program in their school. I have felt this frustration as recently as this year in the struggle to build additional programming for string students; I am reminded just like it was yesterday of "high school colleagues" gang-ing up to block the guitar program in our school five years ago. We have an orchestral program and a classical guitar program in our school because of determination, the notion that it was very good for kids and that young people would make these programs successful. To this date we have had many thousands of string students study in our orchestra programs. As important, in the past four years our high school has had over 500 different Brainerd students learn to read and perform music on classical guitars. More important this large number represents students who would not have had the interest or opportunity to study an instrument or classical music in school without this program.

The actions of your colleagues are wrong, selfish and unfair to students.

The politics your peers engage in are wrong on many levels, will hurt many students and in turn music education. The hundreds of students my school has given musical opportunity to through these acoustic guitar classes have not come from band,

choir or orchestra; they have come out of the general student body and these are students who have given up on or been turned off to music in school. Students are students and the interests of each are important. The needs of my top violin students are not more important than the needs and interests of my first year guitar students. In the big picture, we as teachers never know the lasting impact we will make on students. Classical music for all or many more successful students is well worth the effort. What orchestra director would stand in the way or try to block the establishment of a percussion ensemble, drum line, theory class, piano lab, chamber singer ensemble, jazz choir or a music history class? How would working against these new programs in anyway help orchestral music?

The fears of your colleagues are unfounded.

As your peers get in the way of the development of new popular string programs they display a tendency that has been in our genes since the time of the caveman. This negative and non-cooperative behavior arises from fear. These folks are afraid of losing turf, of students choosing other music activities over their own programs and are afraid of you being even more successful. It has nothing to do with the needs of students, parents or the community; this turf protection is selfish, greedy and plain wrong. These folks have nothing but fear to justify their bias as they strive to stifle your extra efforts to help additional young people.

In fact:

As a new program is added in a music department, the level of interest and involvement in existing programs does not diminish. This is so important, it is worth noting again: *as a new program is added in a music department, the level of interest and involvement in existing programs does not diminish*—in many cases existing programs

have new growth as well. This is true when an orchestra program is added to a department where a band and choir program only existed. It is true with the addition of a theory program, keyboard program or a percussion ensemble. These new programs do not take away from the established music program; in fact they bring new life, may add new students and develop a more diverse music department.

More music choice brings about diversity and more student involvement.

We have outstanding successful music programs in our state. We have ensembles that perform as well as ensembles anywhere. However, more than half of our students do not find a musical voice in our schools' band, choir or orchestra programs alone. Truly a strong music program would not be a program with only band, choir and orchestra. Our schools are in place to meet the needs and interests of our students and to help prepare them for life after school. Let us encourage our peers to build programs together based on the needs and interests of young people. Our colleagues who are selfish with unfounded fears about turf need to be reminded that diversity has kept music alive for thousands of years. Whether starting a new string program, adding a second ensemble, or working to start a classical guitar program you are not alone and like me you may need the help of your local school board, community leaders and building administration to help some of your colleagues see beyond bias and unfounded selfish special interests.

Grant Wilcox teaches orchestral music at Brainerd High School. This past year he offered: Early Bird String Quartet class, Chamber Orchestra, four 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 his orchestra concerts. †