



# GUITAR

## Individualized Instruction in the Class Setting And Life Long Learning

by Grant Wilcox

This process of individualized learning for music students in public schools is not private lessons for each student or a teaching method that will cost the district more money. This individualized process or frame of mind begins with the assumption that all people learn yet are ready at differing times and will learn at different rates. This is true of students of the same age with the very same interests and goals.

### **Back to the basics: are the fundamentals correct?**

*No average— it must be correct for each student*

This starts with the basic checklist of posture with instrument, intonation, tone production, timing, right and left hand placement, energy and advances to the subtlest of nuance. These are the very first questions for the young student and yet are always remembered by the most skilled performer. These basic principles are important questions for each student and do not vary from student to student because they are fundamentals. These are not questions that you can ask and then grade on an average. Because these questions are fundamental, when left unlearned they pose a flaw to agreeable playing. In orchestral string playing the hierarchy of first questions to be asked of the student and later by the student of themselves as a part of the principles of competent string playing are: Is it in tune? Is the tone as good as can be produced today? Is the timing lined up so that the music can be played with others? A problem with any one of these three basic fundamentals is a fatal flaw and nothing else really matters until the problem is individually solved. In guitar the aspect of intonation is solved for the most part if the instrument is correctly tuned.

### **If it is good enough for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra...**

The musicians are not just goofing around

before the concert starts. When the members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra take their seats they warm up, some look over a difficult passage, some review transitions and others choose a warm up routine that maybe unique to them. Before the tuning note and the arrival of the conductor the musicians are doing important individualized work. Much the same as in the individualized classroom setting this can seem a little unorganized but this situation is far from unorganized. This individualized instruction may in fact be the most beneficial and time-effective way to progress. The question simply is: Organized for whom? Is the organization for the teachers' need of control and quiet or the differentiation of the student needs, ability and pace? Just as in the case of each musician warming up, if each student is active and works on task at level at the appropriate pace, it is perfectly planned and very organized. The pre-concert actions are a natural progression from the practice room to the performance just as differentiated learning in the class setting is a natural progression from the practice room to the practice room.

### **Competent string players make for competent ensembles**

A little extra effort and constant maintenance in setting up the individualized learning environment will encourage each player to progress at a suitable pace. All students learn at different rates but do they know that? Do they know that it is not only OK but in fact good to progress at an individual pace? The teacher is always looking for the signs of readiness for the next step. The teacher is working with the students constantly as they need help and the teacher is monitoring the student effort to see that the effort is consistent with the student's ability. Students are always encouraged to be active in the learning process. The passive student is the first to give up because they really have not started the learning process as they

wait to react to the teacher. All beginning students are at different places in development after the first day. In any typical class of mine—guitar or in orchestra—the students are separated by 20 pages within the first month of class. Students starting on the same page on the first day of class will in some cases be books apart by the end of the first year. If they all worked at the same time at the same rate on the same song how effective would that be? How many students would be held back and how many students would be made to look, and more importantly *feel*, incompetent?

### **A process based on rapport and success**

Quality teaching is all about the approach. Putting the students first and having the learning rate determined by the students' readiness, builds the cornerstone of success in learning. Learning after all is the only authentic way to judge our success as teachers.

As we place the learner first in the evaluation of our teaching we have to take into account where the student is, how much they have improved and the student's comfort level as to pace. This relationship of learner to task builds a rapport that lives with the student as long as they continue to study. This process in public schools is not private lessons for each student or a teaching solution that will cost the district more money. This individualized process or frame of mind begins with the assumption that all people learn yet are ready at differing times and will learn at different rates. The impact of this individualized model has implications that far out live the teacher-student relationship because it is the learning process that is the emphasis. After all, if our students play in tune with good tone on beat who cares how fast they progress? At best the teacher can only help the students established a rapport to want to continue the journey of instrument mastery. At worst the teacher can be the

reason the student puts down the instrument. This is true for my beginning guitar students, senior violinist going to Eastman and everyone in between.

*Grant Wilcox teaches orchestral music at Brainerd High School. This past year he offered: Chamber Orchestra, four sections of Classical Guitar I, two section of Classical Guitar II, two Section of Classical*

*Guitar Ensemble, First Orchestra, Sinfonia Orchestra and independent study before and after school. His guitar ensemble performs between orchestras at each of his orchestra concerts. †*