



GUITAR

A Gift: The Advanced Acoustic Guitar Ensemble ...is very similar to the top orchestra in a strong high school music program

by Grant Wilcox

The acoustic guitar class, if allowed to mature with care, will resemble the top orchestra in a high school music program. Many of the students will be members their entire high school experience. Strong players will encourage other players to practice harder and new players will simply come out of the woodwork. Just as in a strong orchestra program student success and ensemble success generate school interest, community support and younger people looking forward to their high school years. In our seven years of offering classical guitar at our high school we have averaged one hundred new students each year in our Acoustic Guitar I classes. This gives a solid body of students to draw from for a Guitar II class as well as an on-going Acoustic Guitar Ensemble.

The Acoustic Guitar Ensemble will become

The Acoustic Guitar Ensemble will become a rich mix of multi-age, multi-skill and diverse students coming together to study and perform great music. Just as in the top school orchestra this ensemble provides a formal environment for students to come together in community to reach beyond what they each could achieve alone. This ensemble will provide students the opportunity to work together, to push and challenge each other and to depend on each other to recreate classical masterpieces of music. After concerts I hear many great comments on how people feel about this addition of instruction and just as in the top orchestra I get requests for these students to perform outside of the school within the community.

Students that you work with over time

One of the aspects of music education that distinguishes us from other educators is the fact that our students continue to sign up for our classes and ensembles for years. In most high schools, band, choir and orchestra students study three years. In unique districts like mine I have a few orchestra students who have studied orchestral music with me for many years. No other teacher in our schools has the same students for the time we have our students. This will be true for the acoustic guitar student just as it is for the orchestral student. The teacher/student mentor relationship will be as positive for these guitar students as it is with the top orchestra student.

The high flyer

High flyer guitarists are similar yet different students than in band, choir or orchestra. A small percentage of these advanced guitar students will come from the other music programs; however the vast majority will be students who have not experienced school music

or left band, choir or orchestra before high school. This advanced guitar class will develop the advanced music student just as the top orchestra will nurture the brightest musicians. These advanced guitar students will be seeking new and more difficult pieces and go out of their way to find venues to perform at. The most exciting part of the process of adding classical guitar ensemble is to discover all of these interested new students and the sometimes unexpected top achiever. These top students are not the end we seek as teachers; however they do encourage, add “gee-whiz” and an excitement factor to this new program.

No other instrument has the same potential as the classical guitar

No other single instrument has the same potential as the classical guitar for life long learning, playing less hurt, and the option to play well alone or with others. The guitar has a singing voice yet is an instrument of counterpoint and rhythmic percussion. Even a fine classical guitar is relatively inexpensive. The classical guitar is very mobile and has a friendly learning curve through intermediate literature. As an advanced instrument of study, the classical guitar offers a limitless demand for skill and development.

As a violinist and conductor I absolutely love the chamber orchestra and playing unaccompanied Bach. However I know very few (including myself) who love to listen to much unaccompanied violin. And how many folks wish to listen to wind or percussion instruments alone? In fact most solo music for orchestral instruments was written to be studied and not really to be listened to. To make a point of instruments grouped together—I never want to hear more than two pianos doing anything together, ever. The color and temperament of the classical guitar are almost universally loved as a solo instrument, and the classical guitar in the small ensemble is admired by young people and their parents. In fact it captivates the interest of the traditional and non-traditional youth. It is just a wonder to me why we as music educators ignore the classical guitar as a serious instrument for young people in our schools.

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. ‡