



GUITAR

A “No Nonsense” Approach to Standards in Orchestral Music

by Grant Wilcox

Not all State and National Standards are to be Taught in Every Class

Many teachers are unclear in their understanding of the standards for the performance class. Not every standard in math, science or music for that matter are designed to be taught in just one class offering. How silly would it be to teach every aspect of every subject in each class offering? In fact, some standards cannot be even introduced until sufficient knowledge has been mastered. To be clear, the standards that are embedded and appropriate in a performance class deal with sound musical performance practice. Those tasks and skills that lead to meeting the needs of the student of musical performance are the standards that should be set and labored at efficiently.

A number of years ago we had a member of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra as a guest soloist and in the course of a last rehearsal I was talking about one of our members needing to transpose in a section to cover a part. Our guest said, “These students can transpose?” And went on to say, “I can’t do that.” Transposition is a nice skill to have, but that skill is not in anyway a standard for a string player in a professional orchestra.

The standards listed are those that are appropriate for the “performance class.” The unaddressed standards are topics that fit into a music history, music theory or a music appreciation class. Those standards not evaluated in our performance class are very worthwhile standards but suited for other offerings and more important, they are not appropriate in the orchestra performance setting and they will only get in the way of our students’ performance skill development.

The National Standards in Music Education for the Teacher of Orchestral Music

2. Performing on instruments, alone and with others, on a varied repertoire of music.
5. Reading and notating music.
7. Evaluating music and music performances.

The Minnesota State Standard for the Teacher of Orchestral Music

Strand III: Artistic Process: Perform or Present Music

Standard 1: Perform or present in a variety of contexts in the arts area using the artistic foundations. Rehearse and perform an existing single, complex work, or multiple works of music from a variety of contexts and styles alone and within small or large groups.

Brainerd Orchestral Music Curriculum— Based on State and National Standards for Performance Music Assessment and Evaluation

- **Intonation:** Student is playing in tune
- **Tonalization:** Student is improving tone production and the student is creating the best tone that they can today.

- **Rhythm:** Student is performing the notation correctly and the student can perform alone and with others.

Sight-reading, phrasing, technique and advanced musicianship are all based upon the interdependence and mastery of the fundamentals of intonation, tonalization and proper rhythmic execution.

Curriculum

Standard and new masterpieces of music from around the world composed over the past 400 plus years are studied and performed by various orchestras, small groups and in classical guitar class.

Instruction

Individualized instruction, sectional rehearsals, large group practice, self-evaluation, peer evaluation and large group instruction is utilized to develop mastery measured on an individual basis.

Each day the student is observed playing in tune, performing with good tone and using correct rhythm; this evaluation is monitored by student and teacher. In this process the orchestral student is asked to constantly refine, interpret, translate, rehearse, reflect, present and perform music as designated in the guidelines of the National Standard for performing music.

We all know that many other things are important in fine music making such as breathing and sound preparation, correct bow stroke depending on the style period, phrasing, color, speed, dynamics, the list goes on. None of these things matter if the pitch is not correct, if the tone is not good or if the rhythm is not correctly lined up.

In Summary

The good news in our profession is that when we are successful with our students and ourselves, the skill and standards achieved are clear for everyone to see and hear. If we do not prepare our students to play in tune, with good tone or in the correct rhythm, this lack of success is also very clear for everyone to witness. We are blessed and lucky in that, if we require our students to demonstrate the proper fundamentals, we have done most the work in our standard.

As long as we have our students study and perform a wide variety of great music with mastery it will all make sense to administration, other teachers, parents and to the stakeholders of our community. In this practice there is no non-sense and in the grand view of the world of sound what higher “standard” is there?

Grant Wilcox teaches orchestral music at Brainerd High School. This past year he offered: Chamber Orchestra, four sections of Classical Guitar I, two sections of Classical Guitar II, two sections of Classical Guitar Ensemble, First Orchestra, Sinfonia Orchestra and independent study before and after school. Grant’s ensembles have performed at the ASTA National Orchestra Festival, MMEA State Conference, Tier II Festival and the MENC National Convention. †