



GUITAR

Modern Approaches to Guitar Education

by Jason Vanselow

Although this is not my first contribution to *String Notes* (I have been a guest columnist twice in the past) this is my first as the regular guitar columnist. I would like to thank Faith Farr and the American String Teacher's Association's Minnesota Chapter for the opportunity to write about guitar issues. Like in my two previous columns and in much of the work that I have been involved in over the last few years, it is my intention to focus these columns on teaching strategies that can enhance the guitar education experience for both the student and instructor.

I am now reaching my 20th year as a guitar educator. In those years I have taught people of all ages and different levels of playing. And while there is no one way to teach everyone, there are definitely some strategies that I have found to be successful with a wide variety of students.

And while I am a classically trained guitarist and have embraced the technique and the sound of this style of guitar playing, it is undeniable that the broad appeal of the guitar is not necessarily genre specific and this idea needs to filter into guitar education as a whole, particularly when we are teaching beginners in a classroom situation. When I say this, I do not mean to suggest that lovers of Sor and Giuliani need to kowtow to Woodstock era Hendrix freaks. Nor does this work the other way around. Each of these approaches contains specific skills that bring out the best of the guitar. These specific skills are the types of examples I would like to examine in this column.

I realize that I run the risk of alienating a few purists out there when I make these statements, but I believe that the recent history of guitar and guitar education in the broader culture will support my conclusions about this.

Throughout the past century, guitar has established itself in almost every genre of music. Andrés Segovia and Julian Bream established a presence in the classical world for guitar; Les Paul electrified the guitar and led the way for other greats such as Charlie Christian, Les Montgomery and Pat Metheny to flourish in the jazz world; Hank Williams and Merle Travis cemented the role of guitar in country music, and Robert Johnson led to Chuck Berry who led to Eric Clapton who led to Eddie Van Halen who led to John Mayer in the blues and rock arenas. And through the work of players like Michael Hedges and Andy McKee, forms of music have been created that can be played only on guitar.

Along with the prominence of guitar in popular culture, a recognition in academia that musical forms such as jazz and pop music have a place in secondary and higher educational settings has created huge numbers of opportunities for guitar students of all ages. Colleges, for instance, began realizing the existence of a demand for guitar programs in the late 1960s. Since then, it has become possible at most colleges and universities to learn to play guitar as part of a student's general studies or even earn an undergraduate or graduate degree specializing in guitar. And in the last decade or so guitar education has begun to be a part of junior and high school music curriculums.

This move into almost all levels of education is a boon for guitar lovers and students everywhere. It also has expanded the number of people who are teaching guitar. For instance, in Minnesota, it is generally required that all teachers in primary and secondary education be licensed through the state. Typically, pursuing a career as a K-12 music teacher means teaching band, orchestra, or choir, ensembles that generally

do not use guitar on a regular basis, which makes it an unrealistic career goal for someone who plays only guitar.

With the entry of guitar into the K-12 curriculum though, many students are getting their first exposure to guitar education in a classroom setting taught by teachers for whom guitar may be a second instrument, or in some cases might be learning guitar in order to teach it.

While this fact is getting a number of different positive and negative reactions in the guitar community, it is undeniable that the K-12 classroom is becoming an important place for guitar education. This is in terms both of the number of possible students and beginning students having access to teachers who understand how to teach even if sometimes they are teaching their second or third instrument.

And as is the case with many teachers, the style of music that they like the best or are most accustomed to is transferred to their teaching style. And really, there isn't anything wrong with this. But one can never tell with any given student what type of music will capture their interests and so at the beginning of their experience it is worth exposing them not just to chords or not just reading, but as many of those different experiences as is possible.

In writing this column I hope to engage with guitar teachers of all types who are either looking for new approaches to guitar education or are looking to share their experiences.

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