



GUITAR

Ensemble Playing in Class

by Jason Vanselow

Ensemble playing is something that I've talked about in this column in the past and is something I advocate including in the class as early as possible. In my class, because of time constraints and other issues, most of the ensemble playing occurs in the context of the whole class and tends to consist of playing lead sheets (melodies and chords) rather than pieces with two single line parts.

So, three times each semester I break the class up into groups, give them a duet or a trio to play (generally with two people on a part), and have the groups perform for each other. I generally accompany the performances with a discussion about what things that they've learned in the class helped them with this small group experience.

This gives guitar students the experience of a typical band, choir, or orchestra student in which they learn to prepare their part beforehand, listen to the other parts as they are playing, and actively communicate with the other members of the group both verbally and musically in order to create a successful performance of the piece. And as much as guitar education is changing to include more ensemble playing, it is still a relatively new experience for a beginning guitar student who generally learns to play solo material or chords on their own.

Over the last ten to fifteen years there has been a boom of publications of guitar ensemble music that can provide a wealth of pieces that can work for this activity. Aaron Stang and Sandy Feldstein have a very good series of books out that feature traditional and familiar melodies that are well arranged. Frederick Noad's book of duets and trios from the Renaissance period lives up to his usual standards. And I cannot recommend highly enough Randall Nye's *The Guitar Ensemble: A Collection*.

But I also advocate for a "do it yourself approach" of either composing or arranging for your own students based on what you believe are pieces that they will relate to and enjoy playing. This can be a little daunting, but I'd like to share with you a simple way to get started in the process of producing your own material so that you can personalize your classes rather than burden your students with yet another arrangement of *Ode to Joy*.

Fernando Sor (1778-1839) was a Spanish composer and virtuoso guitarist who is now known primarily as a composer for solo guitar. Considered the greatest guitarist of his time and a reputable composer, Sor wrote music for all levels of guitar playing, including a teaching method and more than 100 etudes for all levels of students.

Within those etudes there are a series of pieces that are appropriate for a solo guitarist who has been playing for a year or two. These pieces are composed in a two or three voice texture that contains relatively complex melodies and active accompaniment parts. These pieces can also be made to be challenging pieces for beginning ensembles.

For example, look at measures 9-12 of Op. 31, No. 5. Figure

1 shows this four bar passage as it is written in the original etude. Figure 2 is how the piece could look once arranged as a trio.



Figure 1

As you can see in the original piece for solo guitar, in this four bar phrase Sor provides an active melody that requires the student to play in both first and second position and also features a three-voice texture. This can be a challenge for a beginning solo player. But as we can see in Figure 2, if we view this piece as a trio, the melody could also provide a challenge to a student who has been playing for a few months, knows his or her first position notes, and is starting to explore playing in second position.



Figure 2

The two accompaniment voices most of the time act together rhythmically but also contain more independent moments. Both voices need to deal with rests as well as sharps, either from the key signature or from accidentals. But neither of these parts would be overwhelming to a player who is still becoming comfortable with playing in first position and dealing with accidentals.

Many of Sor's etudes can work in this way. He wrote many of these etudes with the idea of exploring the range of possibilities of playing in first position that combined harmonic and melodic ideals of the classical era but included part writing with contrapuntal characteristics.

Sor's pieces provide an excellent example of how to layout two or three interesting parts for students and using them can be an excellent jumping off point for your own arranging and composing for guitar ensemble.

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