

CLASSROOM CLASSICAL GUITAR

How curriculum development and teacher training transformed classroom classical guitar in Central Texas and beyond, and, in the process, engaged thousands of middle and high school students in school-based fine arts for the first time.

by Matthew Hinsley

Our biggest challenge was not yet apparent in 2001 when we first began the Educational Outreach Program of the Austin Classical Guitar Society (ACGS). ACGS, a nonprofit organization with broad community-based classical guitar programs, had received a financial contribution to support expert teachers to visit what was then one of two classroom guitar programs in Austin, Texas schools. Our teachers were to provide individual instruction for dedicated low-income students.

Almost immediately, the school's program director – a choir director by training, who was a classical guitar enthusiast – invited our teachers to assist with classroom direction in addition to individual instruction. Our instructors noticed a degree of misalignment between what they felt to be a proper sequence of classical guitar instruction and what was actually happening in the classroom. The main problem was that there was no vast library of carefully graded ensemble music for guitar—unlike what had been developed over the last century for choir, orchestra and band programs. So, with determination, elbow grease, talent, and creativity, our teachers began a collaboration to come up with sequenced repertoire solutions – some originally composed and some fashioned from existing literature – that would allow them to teach the classes effectively.

The program operated in this manner for three years. During this time, it grew from 15 to 85 students and a nearby middle school began a program with our help as well. They had 13 students in the first class. Six graduates had already been accepted to college with scholarship offers. By 2004, ACGS found itself more or less responsible for the musical education of about 100 young people. But we were reinventing the wheel each semester. It was at that point that our biggest challenge became apparent: We needed to develop a comprehensive, A to Z, curricular solution for classroom classical guitar.

The wish list was a long one: Develop a strictly ensemble solution that would allow a teacher to teach from the podium while, at the same time, engaging each student in a common music-making experience; develop a graded sequence mirroring widely accepted methods for teaching individuals, but tailored to the special concerns, especially pacing and common technical pitfalls, that relate to teaching in large groups; maintain a musically expressive focus at all times in the classroom—from the very first notes on the very first day; create a solution for the common eventuality that single classes will contain students with a wide variety of skill levels that need to be meaningfully engaged at the same time; develop theory worksheets and exam components relating directly to the ensemble repertoire at each stage of graduated student development; create graded ensemble sight-reading exercises for all levels; write a comprehensive pedagogical sequence document; and develop a comprehensive library of stylistically varied ensemble music to support instruction at each level.

The Ensemble Solution

While visiting many guitar classrooms, both in Austin and beyond, we observed a wide variety of quality and success. The least successful (from a classical guitar pedagogical standpoint) were classes that employed a wide stylistic focus. These classes tended to operate more like “guitar clubs” than guitar classes. Students were rarely developing the kinds of skills one would associate with a quality school-based music program: music literacy, sight-reading, attention to dynamic/expressive markings, high quality rehearsal and performance skills, etc. And in no cases did we find that these types of classes yielded consistent results in terms of classical guitar technical development. The best technical results we observed involved teachers who led their classes through established method books with all students playing the same thing together. While students in these classes tended to move well and show discipline, the results were not particularly musically fulfilling, and the lack of ensemble playing made entry into these “group individual lesson” environments strikingly different than entry into orchestra classes where students were making beautiful music together. Our solution, we concluded, would have to be entirely ensemble-oriented. We settled on a system of three-part guitar ensemble music for all beginning and intermediate repertoire, including sight-reading.

A Graded Sequence

One of our greatest frustrations when reviewing the published literature for pedagogically appropriate ensemble music, was that while an individual part of a piece of music may be relatively “easy” for the first 30 measures or so, it would often depart into a technically challenging section for the next 30 measures! In some cases, it seemed composers had a general sense of the level they were writing for but, understandably, more often the musical result they were seeking would take precedence over staying within any sort of strict technical guidelines. While occasional technical departures might be manageable when coaching a talented ensemble of three or four players who have private instruction, trying to teach a class of 15 high school students, with no private instruction is only possible when parts strictly adhere to appropriate technical specifications.

We developed a curriculum of nine graduated levels of advancement. With all the music we would create, we would be sure that any part could fit snugly into one of these nine levels. In summary, the skills presented in each level break down as follows:

- Level 1** - Open string reading with “fixed” fingers in the right hand and minimal left hand rote elements
- Level 2** - Reading on strings 1, 2 and 3 in first position (right hand fingers still fixed)
- Level 3** - *im* alternation and string crossing (no new notes)



Level 4 - Bass notes on strings 4, 5 and 6

Level 5 - Combined skills of Levels 1-4 with complexity, add simple slurs

Level 6 - Simple arpeggios

Level 7 - Complex arpeggios and barring

Level 8 - Moderate upper position reading and rest stroke and

Level 9 - Advanced upper position reading

The most troubling technical problems we observed during our survey of classroom students related to the right hand. Problematic right hands were tense, too low, bent down from the wrist, did not “string cross,” had fingers plucking “up and away” instead of moving naturally into the hand, or some combination of all of these things. These issues are hard enough to address one-on-one with students, and they are far more challenging in large class environments. In developing our sequence, we particularly sought precautions to allow teachers maximum facility in developing right-hand technique. Our solution was to dedicate the first two levels to “fixed finger” positions with the emphasis on hand position and stroke quality, followed by an entire level. Level 3 would focus solely on finger alternation and string crossing - two techniques that must be introduced with great care.

Teaching Musicianship

As concerned as we were with careful technical sequencing, we were even more concerned – thanks to the advice of Robert Duke, founder of the Center for Music and Human Learning at the University of Texas at Austin - with engaging young people in the joy of music-making from the very first notes in every class. We had visited a few classes where talented and earnest young guitar teachers were doggedly leading their classes through a series of technical exercises and pieces of music that were thinly veiled technical exercises. In these classes, we heard little that could be described as beautiful, expressive music.

In his book, *Intelligent Music Teaching*, Duke wrote, “Learning efficiency is maximized when all of the elements of [musicianship] are introduced and practiced in contexts that are as much like the final goal as possible. In other words, students learn best when each learning opportunity closely resembles the long-term goal itself.”¹

In developing our library of music in accordance with our nine-level technical sequence, therefore, our guiding principle at all times was to write music, no matter how technically simple, that would be expressively engaging, and that carried ample dynamic expressive indications at all times.

Duke recently said: “ACGS has made a signal contribution to the world of guitar pedagogy. Working from well-grounded underlying principles of human learning and behavior change, and focused on the goal of expressive and refined music-making, the organization has developed a curriculum for instruction that engages learners from their first experiences with the guitar, emphasizing beauty of sound and effective communication throughout the development of technical capacity.”

Teaching to Multiple Skill Levels

One of the toughest nuts to crack is the issue of dealing with students at multiple skill levels in the same class. This sometimes occurs because school administration can allow for only one section of guitar to be taught meaning that “last year’s” level 4 students begin their second year of study in the same room as the current level

1 beginners! We often observed talented students who had studied privately training for years before entering one of our guitar classes. Then, all of a sudden we had level 8 or 9 students, combined with intermediate students and even beginners.

Our solution to this problem was to develop a comprehensive library of guitar ensemble music instructing our composers to write multiple versions of each part appropriate to multiple skill levels. The result? We could have several “part ones” in multiple levels, any one of which could combine with any of the multiple “part twos” we had, that could in turn combine with any of the “parts threes,” yielding countless level combinations! We even asked Web developers to load the entire database online and create a search function wherein our teachers could enter their individual classroom makeup and have scores and parts returned instantly to them, allowing them to meaningfully engage every member of their class at the same time.

The Results

Observing the transformation of classroom classical guitar instruction over the past eight years in Central Texas has been a remarkable experience. While the project is constantly being revised and expanded, the ACGS curriculum was primarily developed between 2004 and 2008. We have built programs in 17 public, private and charter schools, and have supplied our curriculum to many additional cities throughout the United States and Canada. In Austin alone, our affiliate programs accommodate about 750 students each day. Our educators buzz from location to location directing classes, team-teaching, training teachers, planning recitals, and working with small ensembles. We now provide more than 10 hours a week of individual lessons for low-income students, and ACGS owns more than 80 guitars that are on free loan to schools and individuals in need.

Jeremy Osborne, our assistant director of education, describes his experience in this way, “I have to constantly change my role in the classroom virtually each period of the day. One hour I will be working directly with kids and will have complete control over what is being taught in the class. The next hour, I will be taking a backseat, observing another teacher, quietly straightening student wrists, and interjecting with concepts when absolutely necessary. Transitioning between being a teacher and a consultant presents me with a unique set of challenges that, when met, yield the reward of solid progress in a new frontier of music education. The most inspiring part of my work with ACGS is knowing that, through the development of guitar education, we are successfully creating new opportunities for students to have a meaningful relationship with music and art.”

Our enrollment is extremely diverse. We have strong programs in middle and high schools in economically disadvantaged areas of Austin. About 65 percent of our enrolled students are Hispanic and 40 percent are female. Perhaps most interesting, however, is that, according to a poll we conducted in 2009, almost 90 percent of our students are attending school-based performing arts classes for the first time in middle and high school through guitar class. We are not seeing kids that were band, orchestra, or choir students, or “music kids” who have decided to go play guitar instead of, or in addition to, their other musical endeavors. Nearly all of the young people we see are trying performing arts in middle and high school for the first time because they are drawn to guitar.

Travis Marcum has directed ACGS Education and Outreach Programs since 2005: "Over the past five years, I have seen a complete shift in Austin's music education environment. Music teachers that once resisted change in the traditional school curriculum have embraced the guitar as a vehicle for reaching a more diverse group of students who would otherwise never experience music making. Thousands of students, many at risk of underperforming scholastically, dropping out, or even entering the juvenile justice system, have changed their attitudes about learning because of guitar class. They are making beautiful music on the guitar and transferring these skills to other parts of their lives. These students are going to conservatory, teaching in the community, performing at Austin's local venues and around the world. Each day in the classroom, I feel like I am part of something progressive, meaningful, and life-changing for these students."

In 2009, the University of Texas, School of Social Work conducted a social impact study on the program's effects on students in three schools. The study, under the direction of Calvin Streeter, focused on a measurement technique called concept mapping, which seeks to accurately relate the effect of a program through the recipient's own words. Sixty-seven statements were made by students in our program that were then sorted, categorized, and evaluated by the entire student population.

We learned a number of interesting things during the course of the study. One of the more interesting aspects was that "self-esteem," as a concept, was ranked as the most important overall by both teachers and students. Common themes included: "The class gave me many new experiences;" "I like playing in front of people;" "It's given me more confidence;" "It gives me a feeling of accomplishment;" and "I feel proud of myself." Another concept that ranked high on the list, "unique learning environment." This included such statements as: "This class has more interaction with the teachers – everyone gets attention;" "It's easier to ask for help in this class;" "It doesn't make you feel dumb if you don't get it;" "It's okay in this class if you don't understand;" "I like that we play in pieces or sections, so we are all needed;" and "Everyone messes up in this class sometimes, so it doesn't feel bad to mess up in this class." Improved self-esteem, feelings of belonging, and safety in music class are things that we, as music teachers, intuitively know to be natural results of great music education. It was great to see these ideas reflected so clearly in the work of independent researchers.

Observations

Once we decided to venture into curriculum development, it didn't take long to develop an outline for what we hoped to accomplish. It seemed reasonable to expect, given enough time and the resources of talented educators, that we would be able to create the materials we envisioned. What we were not prepared for, however, was the degree to which diverse, modern young Americans would flock to the classical guitar, stick with it, and become passionately engaged with it. Indeed, in 2003, many people we spoke with thought we were crazy to promote a purely classical guitar curriculum. The sentiment we encountered, and still often run into, was that very few young people would be interested in the guitar unless they were playing classic rock or pop music.

What we've learned in the intervening years, however, is that classical music on the guitar has a powerful ability to attract and retain diverse students to school-based music study. Some

students we've encountered are playing music for the first time, some have played classical guitar before, and others play rock and pop styles on the guitar casually or with private teachers. For the vast majority of students, the beauty, intricacy, and challenge of learning expressive music on the classical guitar, combined with the contextualizing structure of performances or competitions, develops a deep, permeating passion for the art form. While excellent and pedagogically-sound courses in pop guitar playing do exist, we now know that classroom classical guitar classes, when administered appropriately, can be incredibly potent vehicles for bringing new and diverse students to school-based fine arts.

Over the 10 years that ACGS has been involved in public-school guitar education, we have become aware of a number of remarkable, inventive, passionate, and successful educators who have been building similar programs in other parts of the United States. The stories we hear, from California to Nevada to New Mexico to Oklahoma to Florida to Virginia, are similar: large numbers of students, from diverse backgrounds coming to music study – and sticking with it – through guitar classes. A community-based nonprofit organization involved in curriculum and training, we are overjoyed by the number of choir, orchestra and band directors (and non-guitarists) from across North America who have become successful class guitar instructors. They are adding guitar sections to their course loads and substantially building their enrollments. We're also thrilled to see new jobs created for classical guitarists who are certified educators, as schools begin hiring full time guitar instructors to meet the rising demand.

Several years ago, an education reporter from a local Austin newspaper attended a class at a brand new program and wrote a front page story on what she saw. She ended the article with a quote from a senior classman who was taking guitar for the first time: "It's the first thing that's really interested me," he said, "it just motivates me to come to school because I want to come to this class."

Note

1 Duke, R. A. (2010). *Intelligent Music Teaching: Essays on the Core Principles of Effective Instruction*. Austin, TX: Learning and Behavior Resources.



Matthew Hinsley, Ph.D., was trained as a classical guitarist and vocalist at the Interlochen Arts Academy, the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, and the University of Texas at Austin. Beyond performing and scholarly pursuits, Hinsley has cultivated two primary professional interests: to enhance the way young classical guitarists are trained in America, and to transform the way arts organizations serve our diverse communities. As executive director of the Austin Classical Guitar Society, Hinsley has raised well beyond \$1.5 million in support of broad concert, outreach and educational programming. He was a lead author in the ACGS' curriculum (GuitarCurriculum.com) that serves thousands of young students throughout North America, and founded the ACGS performance outreach program. Hinsley's private studio has produced students who have three-times advanced to the final round of the prestigious Guitar Foundation of America International youth competition, including the winner in 2006.