



Guitar Ensemble in the Classroom

The more we play together the happier we'll be...

The benefits of guitar ensemble performance.

By RG Rhoades

Public and private schools provide both instrumentalists, including bowed strings, brass, wind, reed and percussion players, as well as vocalists with an ensemble performance experience through orchestra, band or mixed chorus, respectively. It is not unusual to find additional specialized groups for these musicians such as jazz band, brass ensemble, percussion ensemble, or select chorus. In my locale one finds handbell choirs in many churches and as part of our local parochial school music program.

In contrast, there typically exists a single open spot for the guitar player if s/he wishes to play in the jazz band. These observations are not to be considered an indictment of our school music programs, but rather to highlight the emphasis placed on ensemble music performance.

Some may consider that I am “painting with a wide brush”. It may appear that I am overlooking the exposure to guitar offered by many general music classroom teachers at the elementary and middle school levels. And what about the “guitar clubs” that are made available to high school students during the school activity period? Although these efforts are to be applauded, these programs are typically “informal” and do not parallel the orchestra, band and chorus models which are often times graded activities for which the student receives credit toward graduation.

THE PROOF'S IN THE PLAYING.

In order to play guitar in jazz band I had to be in marching/concert band. During my two years with this group I played cymbals, bass drum and bass trombone. Our jazz band actually gigged (we played formal dances), and the marching/concert band toured Europe for twenty-one days! Reflecting on my own experience, the time I spent in marching band, concert band and jazz band benefited my musical growth in ways that solitary practice with my guitar could never have achieved.

This background proved its value when I went to college where I encountered my first guitar ensemble, an instrumental group that heretofore, I had never even heard of. I was quite comfortable with performing in the group setting, following a conductor, and sight-reading music, all aspects of the ensemble experience. What a thrill to be able to play, not as part of a rhythm section, but as one of the main ensemble instruments!

WHERE DO I BEGIN?

Whether you are a private studio instructor or teach in an academic setting, creating a guitar ensemble can appear to be a daunting task. There are a myriad of questions to be asked and choices to be made. Should students be grouped according to age or ability?



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How many students can/should be in an ensemble? What type of repertoire is available and where can it be found? Can the instrumentation be mixed to include classic, acoustic and/or electric guitars? Shall picks be used and, if so, what gauge?

Each ensemble director must make their own decisions based on their unique circumstances, but here are some observations I have made during my thirty years of teaching and directing my own guitar ensembles. The best choice of repertoire for a group can be achieved after the following considerations are addressed:

1. **Size** – You can't effectively play quartet literature with three players, but you can play a trio with a dozen guitarists! Having multiple players on each part is standard practice in the string orchestra. It works wonders to add richness to the guitar music, too.
2. **Ability-level** – In the school system, students are grouped according to grade and age, but the guitar ensemble need not follow this protocol. I have found it necessary to have ensembles of mixed ages and ability levels. With a little creativity, I have discovered ways to challenge advanced players even with the simplest of materials.

Consider the following:

- a. Play the music in a different position.
- b. Play the music without using open strings.
- c. Transpose the music 8va at sight.
- d. Add harmonics if appropriate.

Conversely, a difficult selection may be made easier with the use of a capo. If a piece of music is in the key of C major and the lower guitar part requires the student to play the root tones of I, IV, and V, they will need to play fretted notes displayed in a low register, all of which require several ledger lines to notate. With a capo positioned at fret III these same letter name notes (C, F, G) can be played on the open strings (5, 4, and 6, respectively), enabling the student with a minimum of experience to actively participate and contribute to making music! Using this technique will require the C major music to be transposed, but, with a computer and free notation software (e.g. Finale Notepad available at <http://www.finalemusic.com/products/finale-notepad/>, Noteflight available at <http://www.noteflight.com/login>) this task is no longer the time-consuming chore it was in the past.



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3. **Age** – High school students rarely find “Hot Cross Buns” to be a compelling repertoire selection. Select music or arrangements of music that will capture and maintain interest.
4. **Musical style** – I’ve encountered guitar ensemble literature of all styles. A plentiful source of music can be found in transcriptions of 2, 3 and 4-part vocal music from the early Renaissance era and chorales from the Baroque period. This provides a wonderful exposure to music that would not often find its way to the guitarists’ ears. Adaptations of classical themes are often easy to locate. I have played music originally written for string quartet, brass ensemble or solo guitar transcribed for guitar ensemble. Personally, I have written ensemble arrangements of popular holiday songs, hymn tunes, songs by contemporary pop and Christian artists, as well as composed a simple blues tune and some other material.
5. **Instrumentation** – Guitar ensemble music need not be limited to single note lines. I will often include a rhythm guitar part and bass part if appropriate. Multiple rhythm guitar parts can be created by having a second rhythm player use a capo and transpose accordingly. This is a common technique used in recording studios to give added body to the sound and is most effective in live performance, too.
6. **Source** – The market for guitar ensemble music is a fraction of that for other instrumental groups, but it’s growing all the time. Thanks to technology, there are numerous sources of guitar music that are only a download away!

A surprising number of people have chosen to share their music for no charge or for a very modest fee. Examples of these sources include:

- a. Finale Showcase
http://www.finaleshowcase.com/showcase/fs_home.asp
- b. Score Exchange
<http://www.scoreexchange.com/search?q=guitar+ensemble>
- c. Derek Hasted
<http://www.derek-hasted.co.uk/takeaway/>
- d. Classroom Guitar Tutor
<http://www.classroomguitartutor.com/freeresources>



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Well-known commercial publishers, such as Mel Bay, Hal Leonard and Alfred Publishing, include guitar ensemble literature in their catalogues. A search of the Internet will reveal a wide variety of titles from which to choose.

WHAT IF...?

You have enough students and music, but don't have a large enough rehearsal space? Or you are unable to coordinate schedules so that all participants can attend rehearsal? Yes, obstacles do abound, but don't give up. If you can't resolve these issues, (which I have faced over the years) here's a work around.

I use my computer system to digitally multi-track each student or group of students, individually during our time together. Of course, this precludes a recital performance, but using the "faux" ensemble method still provides students with many benefits of the traditional ensemble experience. They have an incentive to practice, they hear how their part fits with the whole, and they learn how to play "under pressure" when the red record light goes on.

At the conclusion of this process the tracks are mixed and the finished product can be shared with all the students. Consider this approach if you are unable to conduct a large group performance because the students are in different classes or even different buildings.

PREACHING WHAT I PRACTICE

Summers I often teach beginning group guitar classes for the Milton Hershey School and the Suzuki Institute of PA. My instruction time ranges from all day classes to classes of less than one hour. The ages are usually middle school through high school, encompassing grades 7-12. No matter what the circumstance, before the end of the week these students are prepared to perform a few songs in a recital setting.

Each ensemble performs several songs from repertoire that includes songs I have written for beginning players, folk songs, blues, and "pop" material. The students are typically quite proud of their accomplishments and no one has the performance anxiety often experienced with solo performance. The audience is often quite impressed with both the amount and scope of material these students prepare in such a brief time.



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The benefits of ensemble performance are unassailable and should be made available to all guitarists. I encourage you to take the effort necessary and provide your students with the overwhelmingly enriching experience performing music in a guitar ensemble.

For free classroom resources, including music and instructional videos and more, visit my website at <http://www.classroomguitartutor.com/freeresources> or simply scan the QR Code found below –

