

Reading in the Guitar Classroom

by Randy Haley

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Imagine the following scenario: you've been asked to teach a newly established music course at your school. Several classes of eager students have been registered and a room full of new instruments has been purchased. As September nears and you begin to formalize an implementation plan, feelings of anxiety materialize as you consider the following circumstances - you have no repertoire or group methods, no opportunity to share curricular discussions with colleagues, and you've likely received no pedagogical training on the instrument you are about to teach! You must begin this new teaching assignment with virtually no available support network. An improbable scenario? Unfortunately, the reality facing classroom guitar educators across Canada often parallel these dire circumstances.

While the demand for school based guitar education continues to increase, quality resources remain sorely insufficient. As a result of necessity, guitar educators have become adept at arranging ensemble music, developing class methodology, and in some cases creating course curricula. As can be expected, classroom strategies and outcomes vary significantly in guitar classes throughout the country. In the absence of reliable, trusted resources, where does a guitar educator start? What are the components of a successful guitar lesson plan? How do I achieve effective rehearsal techniques? What level of performance should I demand? Should the students present concerts? What technique should I promote? Optimal balance between solo and ensemble play? How do I teach reading skills? Should I teach reading skills? These are but a few of the questions the conscientious educator must address. Over the next several issues, I hope to confront some of the challenges facing the classroom guitar teacher. To begin, I would like to broach the topic of music reading in the guitar class.

One of the common frustrations shared by guitar teachers is the challenge in developing music reading skills. Why read music? Reading is an integral aspect of music study. The ability to understand notation provides the guitarist with an opportunity to explore a significant number of musical styles, allows interaction with other musicians, and is essential to building solo and ensemble skills. Reading literacy is invaluable and will serve the guitarist regardless of their musical pursuits. In the Guitar class, students with limited reading skills will find it difficult to contribute during ensemble play and may become frustrated or worse, a distraction to the committed readers.

Although students may be tempted to resort to tablature if given the opportunity, very little music is available outside of the popular genre and "tabs" generally neglect to incorporate rhythms, dynamics or articulations. My suggestion would be to avoid the use of tabs as the primary source for reading music in the classroom. Tabs can be used as a

quick fix during a pop unit. However, when adopted as the sole method of reading, they only serve to isolate guitarists, further distancing us from the larger musical community. Why do so many guitarists struggle to read music? I've discovered a variety of reasons. For many students, especially those playing exclusively popular styles, tabs are readily available on the internet for virtually any song. A significant portion of popular music is guitar specific and students usually focus on the interesting guitar riff, solo section or chords – all areas of strength in tabs. Students interested solely in popular styles have very little use for standard notation while the trend in guitar publishing is to offer increasingly fewer notated titles. As a result many guitarists often spend little time outside of class using, and thus developing, traditional reading skills. In comparison, the clarinet student interested in supplementing class material, will further her reading ability by delving into the many available titles, both pop and otherwise, offered in standard notation.

Because of the melodic and harmonic potential of the guitar, students are often expected to divide their reading study between several distinct areas of performance. Ensemble reading generally concentrates on single melodic lines while solo guitar works emphasize the guitar's harmonic capacity. Consider the plethora of chord symbols confronting the guitar accompanist in popular and jazz styles and you begin to appreciate the incredible demands placed on the musician striving to become a rounded guitarist.

From a reading perspective, the guitar presents other unique challenges. With a range surpassing three octaves (four if you consider available harmonics and potential for detuning), guitar students are expected to tackle an extensive range. Nearly two-thirds of the guitar's commonly accessed pitches appear on ledger lines. Although guitar music is presented in the treble clef, sounding at the lower octave, it would seem a more appropriate candidate for the grand staff, opposed to the confines of a single clef. Another quandary facing the guitarist is the weighty issue of position play. First position, as an example, refers to the available notes on the first four frets of each string. Because of the guitar's open string tuning (E A D G B E) most musical phrases can be performed at the same pitch in at least three different positions on the instrument (e.g. 1). Every guitar method book I've viewed begins by establishing first position reading on the guitar. Students can easily invest a year or more honing their reading chops on the two-octave plus range of first position play. Imagine the shock students receive upon the realization they are now expected to "relearn" reading on the guitar in as many as five or six additional positions, as new keys are introduced and upper ranges expanded! I've often pondered the rationale behind introducing first position play to the novice reader and suspect there are guitar educators who have also contemplated the initiation of fifth or seventh position study prior to developing the first. The guitar's expansive range and multi-positional play are significant factors often overlooked by non-guitarists. It would be entirely unrealistic to expect guitar students to progress at the same rate as students pursuing reading in a less demanding environment.

Regardless of which position you decide to introduce to your students, establishing reading skills requires a significant commitment from the student and teacher. Developing and reviewing reading in a variety of positions should form an integral

component of guitar curriculum at all grades. The goal after year one is to develop fluency in one complete position. Once achieved, students can begin to access a wide range of simple solo and ensemble arrangements.

In the Classroom

Assuming students have a rudimentary knowledge of note and pitch fundamentals, the first step should be to cover fingerboard basics. The ability to conceptualize the fingerboard from a horizontal and vertical perspective is vital to establishing pitch location on the guitar. Vertical proficiency is the ability to identify all pitches in a given position while horizontal knowledge refers to the capacity to name the fret location of all pitches on an individual string. Developing an understanding of the horizontal pitch configuration on each string is a logical starting point and should precede the seemingly arbitrary organization of notes specific to a particular position.

Take a few moments with your students to discuss the musical alphabet (A-G) highlighting the location of the whole and semitones between these seven pitches. It often helps students to visualize this pattern with the aid of a piano keyboard. On the guitar, a semitone is the equivalent of one fret while the whole tone produces a distance of two frets. Moving to the guitar, students can apply the pattern of whole and semitones to identify all of the natural note name locations. As a group, complete a one-octave ascending and descending modal scale moving horizontally up and down one string. Initially it may be wise to repeat each pitch four times before moving on to the next. After successive tries you may want to experiment with increasing the tempo or decreasing the number of repeated notes. A daily warm-up routine that incorporates this exercise through all six strings should improve fingerboard knowledge essential for position play and is a great way to begin promoting ensemble cohesiveness.

During the initial stages of reading development, consistent attention to review and assessment are crucial. Flash cards are an excellent means for reviewing and assessing student progress. Staff and pitch flash cards are quite useful and can often be purchased at most music outlets. Teachers may also consider creating a series of flash cards depicting the string and fret gridiron. Once you've developed the template - six string lines intersected by five fret lines - make copies and place a dot on each card representing a note for the students to identify. These activities make efficient use of class time and can quickly gauge student comprehension. There are also many outstanding (and free!) music rudiments and guitar software tutorials available on-line that offer a fun approach to learning the fingerboard. A particularly useful site is www.musictheory.net/. In addition to offering basic music theory lessons, a guitar fingerboard trainer is available to help students name pitches on the guitar in a variety of positions. Students can test their knowledge and receive instant feedback. Testing for proficiency can have a powerful impact on performance and should be conducted on and off the instrument.

With fingerboard knowledge firmly entrenched, the next step, and it's a big one, involves the transfer of written notation into sound. Music consists of two fundamental principles – duration and pitch. In an effort to mitigate the difficulties in addressing rhythm and pitch elements simultaneously, I advocate rehearsing them separately when possible.

Hand clapping is a useful method for promoting note and rhythmic facility without having to worry about the myriad intricacies of playing an instrument. For beginning students, an effective strategy involves exploring the relationship between notes in a given meter. To begin, place a large whole note on the whiteboard. Directly below, place two half notes, followed by four quarter notes, and so on, progressing through the pattern until you reach the sixteenth note. Once completed, each line should reflect the requisite number of notes in one measure of common time. Establish a group pulse by asking the students to tap their foot to the quarter note beat. With a steady beat in place, point to the whole note line on the board and have the students clap the note. After several measures of feeling the whole note tap versus clap relationship, and without breaking the pulse, move to the half note, quarter note, and so on, continuing down through each subsequent line. Students always enjoy this activity and it can be fun to test their skills when moving from the whole note, directly to the sixteenth note line. This “hands on” approach to exploring the inherent relationships between note values will also benefit students by promoting an understanding of meter. As you progress with this lesson, you may elect to increase the tempo, try different meters, and incorporate rests. Activities that work to develop and sustain a group tempo are always encouraged and help to lay the foundation for ensemble play.

If you are using a class method book, you’ll likely need to supplement the number of exercises devoted to reading on each string. Initially you should limit the scope of any exercise to the available notes on a given string. Again, regardless of which position you are teaching, select a simple and consistent rhythm. The focus should be on finding pitch location, with minimal emphasis on reading rhythms. To that end, a simple one page study may involve only 2-3 pitches, notated using simply half and whole notes (e.g. 2). Longer duration notes are advantageous since they force the students to internalize the pulse rather than use their “fingers to count” – a common tendency during repeated quarter note sections. The half and whole note rhythms also give the students some breathing room before they reach the next pitch. Keeping the above parameters in mind, you may want to assign students the task of composing additional lines to be included in the class reading routine. In addition to learning about notation, students will enjoy listening to the class perform their own creations. Once the students have mastered the given notes on each string, the exercises may evolve into lines that incorporate notes on adjacent strings and even an open string pedal point, alternating with fingered notes (e.g. 3).

Invariably, some students will acquire reading skills at a much quicker pace than their classmates, and expecting them to continually review a position they’ve mastered can become tedious. A possible solution is to have the more skilled readers move on to a higher position to involve students of all levels during this routine. Because the identical notes can be played in several positions, the accelerated learner can be challenged to explore new regions of the fingerboard. Reading development should be a collective activity and can easily accommodate the use of differentiated instruction in the classroom.

Building reading comprehension on the guitar is a challenging endeavour that requires a measured understanding of music rudiments and fingerboard knowledge. Tangible results rarely occur immediately and like most tasks are best served in smaller portions over a prolonged period. An approach that is varied and at times novel can help to sustain student interest during this process. Employing a multitude of strategies, given time and encouragement, reading skills in the Guitar class can flourish.