

Starting a District Honor Guitar Ensemble

By Bill Swick

Many school districts have established honor ensembles for band, choir and orchestra. In my early days of teaching guitar, there was no honor ensemble for my students to participate. There was a desire for guitar students to have the same opportunities as all other music students. Here are the steps that were taken to establish an annual district honor guitar ensemble.

In the beginning, there were five middle schools offering guitar classes and one high school offering guitar. There was little difference between beginning middle school guitar and high school beginning guitar. The same was true for intermediate guitar and advanced guitar.

The first effort of organizing an honor guitar ensemble was called Directors' Choice. There was no audition for students. Teachers were able to select the students they felt would work hard on the music and deserved some recognition. The selected music for the ensemble was year-two intermediate trios and ideal for year-two and year-three students.

Guitar teachers were provided with the music and asked to select students and distribute music so there was a balance of parts 1, 2 and 3. We scheduled a Saturday and secured the stage at one of the schools. Selected students from the middle schools and high school met on a Saturday morning for an extended rehearsal with a scheduled performance at 11:00 a.m. Participating students received a T-shirt to wear for the performance and a printed certificate for their participation. Parents and friends attended the performance and the whole thing was over with by noon.

Middle school students enjoyed playing along with high school students and it became a good recruiting tool for the high school. We continued doing this until more high schools in the district began offering guitar. Eventually, there were enough high schools to have two levels of Directors' Choice ensembles, one for middle school and then one for high school. Each ensemble had different music and on concert day, the middle school ensemble performed first followed by the high school ensemble. We did this for a couple of years.

Over time, the middle school students who had guitar for three years started attending high schools that offered guitar. The freshman guitar students were in their fourth year of guitar. This put pressure on the high school directors to raise the bar and offer higher levels of ensemble music and more challenging skills and techniques.

The skill levels for middle schools have more or less remained the same, beginning, intermediate and advanced or years 1, 2 and 3. The skill levels for high school have elevated to years 4, 5, 6 and 7. The high school honor ensemble now requires an

audition process and deserves an out-of-district guest conductor. Participation in this ensemble is now a requirement to move forward to the All-State Guitar Ensemble and the All-National Honor Guitar Ensemble.

The process took years to go from a directors' choice to a qualifying ensemble for the All-National Honor Guitar Ensemble. The inclusion of a district honor guitar ensemble has had many pluses. Guitar students have been given opportunities to play new music, perform with students from other schools, and be recognized for their hard work. In addition, the skill levels in high schools have risen.

If your district does not have an honor guitar ensemble, consider starting one.