

The Guitar Ensemble Model

By Bill Swick

Over a period of two years, Thomas Amoriello published profiles of school guitar programs in his series *Guitar Class in 50 States* which was published on the NAFME website. Reading each article, I received confirmation that not all guitar programs look alike. The opportunity for students to learn to play the guitar are not all the same. The chance a high school student is going to attend college as a music major majoring in guitar has much to do with the quality and content of the teaching, and the experience in high school guitar class.

The current, most common approach to teaching most intermediate and advanced guitar classes is the ensemble model. This has been modeled from band, choir, and orchestra. Students learn to read music during the beginning levels of music education and later focus primarily on ensemble playing during the years following the first year of instruction. This approach has worked fairly well for numerous guitar programs around the country. This approach has also met all of the standards which have been used in the past.

Those teachers who do not follow the ensemble model argue that guitar students need skills that can land them employment once out of high school. The philosophical question then becomes: are we teaching music in public schools for the purpose of brain development and all of the good things associated with music education? Or, are we preparing students for a vocation? If the answer is the latter, then absolutely we should be dropping the large guitar ensembles and focusing on skills most likely to be used in a vocational experience. In addition, guitar teachers will need to be far more qualified at playing, teaching, and modeling the guitar than most are currently.

If we find value in teaching teamwork, collaborative learning, and the sense of belonging to a large ensemble, then we should keep ensembles in the schools. It really stems from one's philosophy of teaching and ultimately the defined goals for student growth.

In the school district I teach in, every school offering an intermediate and/or advanced guitar ensemble is expected to participate in an annual district guitar ensemble festival where each ensemble is adjudicated by out-of-district guest judges. The rating received by each ensemble is included as a part of the directors' annual teacher evaluation. Besides being judged for how well the ensemble performs, directors are evaluated by students' posture, hand positions and ability to perform requested scales from memory. In addition, directors are evaluated on ensemble selection and how well the music fulfills the skill levels for the level of the ensemble. Teachers are discouraged from selecting free music found on the internet and it is noted in the evaluation if this occurs.

The bottom line is directors need to learn the art of selecting ensemble music based on levels of the music in relationship to skills of the students. Randomly selecting music

from the internet because it is free is hardly an art. Ensemble selection should be as thorough as textbook selection. After all, the process of learning ensemble music can and will attribute to the skills defined by the national standards if the music is selected carefully.

Instead of providing a long list of ensemble music, NGDA has provided a listing of ensemble pieces based on which year and quarter the music should be introduced based on the Best Practices for Guitar Education. Each selection is evaluated for key signature, time signature, complexity of rhythms, tempo, and range.

For clarification, year one refers to the first year of instruction. This could be beginning guitar in middle school or high school. There is also an assumption that note reading is part of the curriculum beginning at the start of year one.