Guitar Academy

John Williams: *'I think what we need is a whole different way of teaching…* 'Fingerstyle Guitar' – May/June 2002.

The need for a new guitar method

Music education has developed greatly in recent years with the trend being towards a broadening of approach. The general acceptance of this has recently found expression in 'A Common Approach 2002', a publication by the 'Federation of Music Services', with the declared aim of encouraging a more 'holistic approach to teaching and learning'. In considering the best examples of common practice it suggests templates and programmes of study where the teacher is urged to follow a multifaceted methodology embracing not only technique, music reading and repertoire, but also ear training, ensemble and improvisation. The teacher is also encouraged to instil an appreciation of many styles – classical, popular, folk, ethnic, etc. This represents a formidable challenge to the teacher, not least because the various method books available have not kept pace with new educational thinking.

In over 20 years of teaching guitar I have become very familiar with most of the methods on the market. Some of them I admire to the extent that they have influenced my own teaching, but I have always been frustrated by how much they leave out despite a number of them claiming to be 'complete'. I have yet to find one that covers all the important areas, which I feel I can use confidently without the constant nagging thought that my students are somehow being short-changed.

Combining the best from both the classical and popular traditions

There seems to be a big divide between tutors for classical guitar, which concentrate on developing technique, music reading and repertoire; and pop, where the focus is on working on chords, song accompaniment and improvisation. I am not alone in believing that this divide should be broken down. The world's foremost classical guitarist, John Williams, recently said:

'The first part of learning would have to include all the different techniques that other kinds of guitar playing incorporate…learning to play accompaniment, sort of chord bashing if you like.'

– John Williams, 'Fingerstyle Guitar' – May/June 2002.

The value of 'accompaniment…chord bashing' is often overlooked by classically orientated guitar teachers. The simple act of strumming a rhythmic accompaniment really helps develop a strong sense of pulse, something frequently lacking in classical players. Studying chords also reinforces an understanding of harmony. There are many other areas usually associated with learning pop/rock that the classical guitarist would benefit from, particularly in the area of improvisation. The 'classical' teaching fraternity is now beginning to show more interest in this area but there is still little available in the way of teaching materials.

On the other hand the pop guitarist can learn much from the classical tradition. Guitar tablature is fine as far as it goes but no substitute for traditional notation. Quite apart from its own limitations only a small portion of music in available in tablature form. The guitarist schooled only in tablature, as indeed many are, will struggle in the company of literate musicians and flounder hopelessly if studying music post GSCE. But most of the pop orientated books make little or no attempt to teach traditional notation.

The best music teachers achieve a good balance by introducing ensemble, improvisation, ear training etc. by way of a supplement to whatever tutor book being used, but achieving this balance takes time and effort. It is all too easy to devolve responsibility to the tutor book which, given the limitations of many of these, can be equivalent to depriving the student of essential 'musical vitamins'. In assembling this tutor I have tried to guard against such musical malnutrition by providing what I consider a balanced diet: reading, repertoire, technique, theory, songs/chords, improvisation, ensemble, ear training – all designed to nurture the growing student and maintain them in the pink of good musical health!

What is different about my tutor

1 It is more 'complete'/'holistic' than any other tutor
2. Teacher/pupil duets
3. Popular and accessible tunes
4. Technique: Sound advice with high quality illustrations
5. Songs/Chords
6. Ensemble Section
7. Improvisation – being creative with scales
8. Written Tests
9. Ear Training
10. Exercises to encourage composition
11. Homework Page
12. CD included
13. Website resources and links
14. Self-Tuition: made possible with detailed explanations, clear illustrations, and a CD
15. A lively, humorous style
16. Stylish presentation

1. **It is more 'complete'/'holistic' than any other tutor**: How to read music, theory, technique, chords/songs, ensemble, improvisation, ear training, a C.D with backing tracks – no other guitar method includes all of these in a single volume.

2. **Teacher/pupil duets**: While usual for other instrumental tutors this is not the case for guitar tutors. There are a few books with teacher accompaniments for some of the tunes but my book has accompaniments for all of the single note melodies. Adding a harmony part really helps bring the tunes to life and the teaching process becomes far more enjoyable for teacher and pupil alike. The duet approach also helps establish a good teacher/pupil relationship with the pupil being given an extra incentive to play the tunes up to tempo with the correct rhythm.

3. **Popular and accessible tunes:** Great care has been taken in choosing the tunes. I have only included those that have elicited the best response from my students. Although there are many original compositions, most of the tunes consist of the 'greatest hits' of the student repertoire. There are certainly no 'filler' tunes to be skipped as found in many other books.

4. **Technique**: I advocate the development of conventional classical technique as providing the best foundation. This addresses all aspects from general posture to the best position for the hands, and tone production. It provides a solid foundation which can, if required, be modified at a later stage to suit specialist styles. There is nothing very original here but I do stress the importance of acquiring the correct habits from the very beginning. I have commissioned a top artist to provide line drawings illustrating good technique. The importance of acquiring good technique is underlined by a double page spread entitled 'Technique Revision' (Bk 1, pg 24-25). This draws attention to a number of common mistakes as well as reminding the student, in a fun way, of how best to hold their hands.

I also recommend 'rest stroke' in the early stages when playing single line melodies. There are two schools of thought here: Some teachers prefer to begin with 'free stroke', arguing that it is the main stroke used for finger-style playing, as indeed it is; but most teachers seem to agree with me and, when teaching children, begin with rest stroke. Beginners pick up rest stroke more easily; it gives a stronger tone and facilitates a relaxed right hand. Free stroke is a more complicated stroke which comes into its own when playing in an arpeggio style. It is not immediately necessary (or even apprpopriate) for playing single line melodies and, in starting students with free stroke, there is always the danger of introducing unwanted tension into the hand. I do, however, introduce free stroke at a fairly early stage – as soon as the student has completed the eight treble notes, G-G in first position. At this important transitional stage (from book 2) I give very precise instructions on free stroke technique, which are reinforced by detailed illustrations. There is, of course, no reason why a teacher can't use my tutor and start with free stroke. It is important to be flexible and some of the older and more capable students acquire the knack of free stroke quite easily. It is, perhaps, a case of 'different strokes for different folks!'. Indeed, where possible, I like to introduce free stroke at an early stage by including supplementing arpeggio based pieces and exercises to those in my tutor. However, in my opinion, the safest and most effective option when teaching most children is to begin with rest stroke.

5. **Songs/Chords**: Most students taking up the guitar do so in order to play their favourite pop songs. Nevertheless, many guitar tutors do not include chord study/song accompaniment, preferring to focus entirely on developing notational skills. This can be quite discouraging and limiting to many students. *Guitar Academy* comes with its own song supplement. In this supplement I have taken great care in choosing songs that have a wide appeal. Most of them have been pop hits at one time another but are in fact all traditional. Young children can find chords quite difficult so I start them very much at the shallow end with songs comprising only one chord, advancing to two, three etc. As they learn each song they are given an appropriate strumming rhythm and in most songs also a finger-picking pattern. By the end of book 2 they have learnt the 15 basic open chords as well as having a library of strumming/finger-picking patterns that they can apply to other songs they choose to learn.
6. **Ensemble**: Students love the musical and social interaction of ensemble playing. Most teaching in schools is actually done in small groups of three or four where there is an obvious opportunity and need for ensemble playing. However, ensemble playing is not usually addressed very well in most tutor books, if at all! My tutor has its own dedicated ensemble supplement of trios and quartets. Most of the pieces are written in trio form. This works well because a teacher is able to play 2 parts if teaching individuals or if there are absentees. I have also integrated improvisation into most of the ensemble pieces.
7. **Improvisation**: Mine is the only guitar tutor aimed at children to include improvisation. Indeed, it seems the only tutors that deal with improvisation are aimed at the intermediate/advanced adult student with an interest in jazz or heavy rock. There is nothing available for the younger student in the early stages of learning. Improvisation comes naturally to children and failing to encourage such a natural and creative impulse seems to me to be a serious shortcoming of the traditional 'classical' approach. Students who are encouraged to improvise from the start do not develop the fear of improvisation that besets and holds back many a classical guitarist. Working on such skills also improves classical guitar playing as the student develops a better musical ear, sense of rhythm, phrasing, and most importantly of all, a stronger musical personality. Nearly all music teachers acknowledge the importance of encouraging improvisation. It is part of the musical curriculum, but where are the teaching materials?
8. **Written Tests**: They are a very useful way of assessing the pupil's understanding of subject matter. My students enjoy these and they give some variety to the lessons.
9. **Ear Training**: This takes many forms. Perhaps the most basic of these is simply singing and a whole supplementary song section is included to encourage this. I have also added the lyrics to the single note melodies in the music reading section. This makes it seem more like music to children and encourages them to sing along as they play. Students really enjoy playing the 'Copycat' game (Bk 1, pg 19) where they test each other's aural awareness by playing short tunes using a limited number of specified notes. Another ear training method used is leaving out certain notes of well known tunes for the pupil to fill in 'by ear' (e.g. Happy Birthday – Bk 1, pg 20; Twinkle 'by ear', Bk 2, pg 13). Playing by ear is essential training for all musicians but, curiously, one that is ignored in nearly all tutors. I have also included an ear training page in each volume, dealing with interval, chord and time signature recognition. The associated tests can be heard on the accompanying CD. There are now many excellent ear training resources on the internet and I have provided several useful website links.
10. **Composition**: The encouragement of this is not usually incorporated into tutor books, although music educators consider it a vital part of musical development. In addition to leaving empty staves for the students to notate their own ideas, I have included a 'Question and Answer' exercise (Bk 1, pg 26). This helps the student consider how to structure a tune. Of course the pieces incorporating improvisation encourage a more spontaneous compositional exercise: As Stravinsky rightly said; *'Composition is only frozen improvisation'* – imaginative teachers can easily create many compositional exercises from this section**.** I have also included a graphic score (Bk 2, pg 22) to encourage a more open style of composition.
11. **Homework Page**: Most homework pages I've seen in tutors ask the students to write down how long they've practised in the week. Sometimes the student gives an honest answer; at other times they'll undermine the whole process by making extravagant claims that have little basis in reality. An ensuing interrogation can lead to the teacher feeling like a policeman, while the student feels little better than a criminal! Guilt can easily come to the fore with practice being seen as a burden rather than a pleasure.

I prefer to put the focus of the homework page on specific targets rather than time: I simply tick the pieces they are to practise and then put another tick + date alongside when I have heard the piece played through competently. This works much better than I ever imagined. I can quickly remind myself what my pupils are studying, the parents can see what their children should be working on, while the kids have a target and enjoy seeing the pieces ticked off (it feels like progress!). The process is very quick, doesn't cut into the lesson time, and everything is kept nicely focused.

12. **CD included**: I have really noticed an improvement in my students since including the CD with the tutor. It inspires them to practise more. An accompanying CD has become the norm with music tutor books. It is especially useful for students using the book without a teacher. What sets my CD apart is:
i) The pupil and teacher parts are recorded on separate stereo channels. This means the balance control can be used to isolate each part with the student being able to duet with the teacher at home.
ii) Backing tracks for improvisation.
13. **Internet resources and links**: The whole of GA Bk1 is now online in *Sibelius Scorch* format: this enables the student to view, listen, and also adjust the speed of the music to a comfortable 'playing along' tempo, while also hearing the tunes with the teacher accompaniments. This online resource is particularly useful to students who struggle keeping up with the performances on the accompanying CD; teachers will also find this a very useful resource to encourage students to practise more.

    The extraordinary development of the internet has resulted in a great many useful guitar related sites. I have included a directory of some of the best of these, with helpful information.
14. **Self Tuition**: While there are many guitar tutors on the market there are only a few that are suitable for self-tuition, and these tend to be very heavy on text. I have avoided wordy explanations while providing all the relevant information in an easy to read style. The important subject of good technique is dealt with thoroughly and supported by high quality illustrations. Moreover, the accompanying C.D includes all the pieces/exercises, as well as providing backing tracks for improvisation.
15. **A lively, humorous style**: The presentation in most guitar tutors, certainly classical guitar tutors, is rather formal and dated. I have chosen an informal style which I feel communicates much better with the students of today. In my own teaching I find a little humour goes a long way and have written the tutor very much as I teach.
16. **Presentation**: This is a tutor book that also looks good. The line drawings illustrating technique are of a superior quality to those in any other equivalent book, and each tune is accompanied by a separate, full colour illustration. It also has a very eye catching cover.

Conclusion

This tutor has been written and developed over the last 5 years with constant additions and revisions. Certainly, there can have been few tutor books that have been so thoroughly road tested. I have also been fortunate in having the advice and encouragement of many distinguished guitarists and professional guitar teachers who have made various helpful suggestions. They have all been very enthusiastic as have my students and also the parents of my students.

There is always room for improvement and I hope to develop the tutor further in subsequent editions. However, in bringing together a variety of subjects not usually found within a single volume, I believe I have written a tutor that reflects prevailing views on good instrumental teaching and one, hopefully, to which the word 'holistic' might be properly applied. My objective has always been to write a method that produces not only a good guitarist but also a well-rounded musician. In so doing I have found it best to combine teaching techniques from both the classical and pop/folk traditions. For these reasons I believe that Guitar Academy makes an important contribution to guitar education and deserves to be a success.