

The College Guitar Ensemble: *it takes a lot of pluck.*

Why a Guitar Ensemble?

Universities seem to have a talent for developing musical entities that for all practical purposes, cease to exist, or never did exist outside of the ivy covered halls. Often entire curricula are designed around these anachronistic or "made-up" ensembles. Why then would any thinking person be an ardent advocate of the college guitar ensemble. Couldn't the needs of the guitar students be better met in the already established big band and combo programs found in most schools? In a perfect world, the answer is a definitive "maybe". In reality there are several good reasons for the development of the guitar ensemble. Often, the proverbial necessity is once again the mother of invention. In many programs, the guitar students outnumber their bass playing and drumming peers. In many cases there are not enough ensembles available to offer each student a playing opportunity. The lab band, after all, can service five trombone players but only one guitar (two if they trade off and spend half of their time sitting out). The number of combos in a program is usually determined by the number of functioning bassists and drummers. If your guitar players outnumber the others, then you have a problem.

Although the great road bands seem few and far between anymore, the professional guitarist will still get the occasional (more occasional than most of us would like) call to play a dance band gig, pit orchestra or show. The college lab band probably provides the closest approximation to any of these "real world" situations. The problem for guitarists is that, if they are fortunate enough to get into the band, they will spend nearly all of their time playing rhythm guitar. That is not to say that rhythm guitar is not a very noble function, but put some lines in the chart and many student guitarists are not up to the task. This problem is compounded by several factors. Stringed instruments are inherently difficult for developing good reading reflexes, since every time you shift your hand, all of the notes change fingering and there are multiple locations for each note. Furthermore, while their horn playing colleagues were in the elementary school band, the guitar players were playing in their garages, frightening the neighbors. Arrangers are often reluctant to write lines in a guitar part for fear that they will be mangled (the lines, not the arrangers). Understandable as this may be, it further contributes to the lack of experience on the part of guitarists.

To the rescue comes the college guitar ensemble. This type of group provides guitar students the opportunity to focus on reading, blend, balance, articulation, and other skills in which they may lag behind their horn playing counter parts. It also provides some additional "comping" time, particularly if the group is piano-less.

Since the ensemble needn't be any larger than a good sized combo, there is also plenty of space for solos. The guitar ensemble can combine the best elements of lab band and combos, and offer a playing opportunity for many more students.

The Set Up

As soon as possible, acquire a sound system. Each guitarist playing through his own amplifier will not only be a sonic nightmare, but you will spend most of your rehearsal time setting up. A mid sized amp with a mixer can suffice. If possible, a stereo powered mixer or mixer/power amp combination and a pair of speakers is best. Having all of the guitars run through a common system affords you several advantages. First, the director can act as sound man, boosting levels as needed for solos. Second, the group can share a common effects loop. A chorus effect used sparingly works well and a little reverb does wonders. Seat your guitars in a semicircle with the lead player in the middle. If your running in stereo, pan the lead to the center and the lower parts to the sides, just like they sit. Bass and drums set up directly behind the guitars. Your speakers should be located far enough back so that everyone in the group can hear. Since no microphones are used, feedback is not usually a problem.

Repertoire

Once your group is up and running, you will need some charts. Arrangements for 5 guitars and rhythm are available from UNC Jazz Press, Staves Music, and Jamey Aebersold. Although charts written specifically for guitars sound best, there are many other options. Charts written for sax section, 5 trombones, or combo charts for mixed horns work well too. Make it an assignment for each student to write out his own part. This will sharpen their transposition and notation chops without making extra work for you. Jack Petersen has had a great deal of success playing big band charts with 15 guitars, first at the University of North Texas and more recently at the University of North Florida. If you would like to write your own arrangements, most common voicing techniques sound just fine played on 5 guitars. Encourage the students to write, and recruit members of your jazz arranging classes to write charts. Finally, spend some rehearsal time doing "head" charts. Particularly for a fusion style composition, this is fairly straight forward. For example, have one player play sustained chords while another plays a "picky" rhythm part. Have two players double the melody in octaves while a third makes up a harmony part. Then off you go, arrangements while you wait. Be creative.

Rehearsing the Ensemble

Once your group is beyond the point of working out notes and rhythms, much of your rehearsal time will be spent on articulation. A common problem is the excess ringing of notes, particularly sympathetic vibrations of open strings. Have your

students finger all section parts with stopped strings only and get into the habit of using their right hand to keep the open strings quite. The director and the lead player need to determine where slurs (hammer-ons and pull-offs in guitar jargon) should occur and this should be consistent through out the section. Also be aware of cut offs. Since guitar notes fade so quickly, sloppy cut offs may not be as apparent as with horns but accurate cut offs can do much to clean up your ensemble. Finally, don't forget to do "head" charts and leave time to open up some charts for solos.

Breaking the Monotony

Whether your group is a guitar combo of only a few players or a guitar big band, guitar ensembles, like any same instrument ensembles, suffer from the problem of lack of variety. When writing your arrangements, use other textures like solos and duos. When the ensemble is playing, have the guitar soloists stand so the audience can tell who is playing the solo. Electronic signal processing can be effective, but can also sound out of place in a straight ahead jazz setting. The addition of a piano to the rhythm section adds another color but can also take away some "comping" opportunities for the guitarists. The use of an auxiliary percussionist adds a lot to the sound of the group, particularly on latin and fusion charts, while keeping the sound "open". Non-guitar playing guest soloists can do a great deal to break up the monotony on a concert as can the addition of a horn section. Replacing the saxes in your lab band with 5 guitars makes for an exciting concert. Programming a few unaccompanied guitar solos or duos between ensemble charts also gives the audience a break from the ensemble sound.

Conclusion

The formation of the guitar ensemble is bound to result in more capable guitar students. These students will not only enhance the jazz program as a whole but will be more likely to succeed as professional musicians. The only drawback will be that lab band directors will no longer be able to get the guitar player to turn down by putting a chart in front of him.