

Third Floor - Full of Facts

Derek Hasted's Guitar Ensemble School

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Lesson 2

Setting up an Ensemble group

In this lesson we'll explore how to start an Ensemble Group

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The People

Choosing your partners

Ideally, you are perhaps looking for people with the same ability and commitment. But in an ideal world, the word "ideally" wouldn't exist!

Having the same *commitment* is perhaps the more important, because there is a good selection of Guitar Ensemble Music which is of split ability, with parts at a variety of standards.

Commitment in an Ensemble is two-fold

- Commitment to work on a part at home so the time *together* is used well
- Commitment to attend Ensemble practices regularly

I've stressed "regularly". That's not the same as "frequently", and if anything, the meetings mustn't be too often. Coming together with unprepared music is going to waste of lot of time and cause a lot of frustration. Besides, it's bad enough finding time to practise alone, when you can slip odd half hours into such spare moments as you can. To dedicate a large block of time in advance for a play-through can be quite intrusive on your free time (or worse, on that of the person you live with!)

I reckon that a play-through once a fortnight is optimum. Hang on. You don't know the word "fortnight" ? Sorry - It's this common language thing again! Nothing to do with having battled with a knight in shining armour. It's a British contraction of fourteen nights; perhaps I ought to have said two weeks, and missed the knight joke out, come to think of it....

There's no way that Ensemble playing should attempt to replace ordinary Solo practice. For many people, Ensemble playing is a relaxation, a treat, and the reward for doing all that other, solo, practice.

Ideally, you want to play with people who share your abilities and your lifestyle, so that you can enjoy the social chit chat before and after the playing, as well as feeling comfortable as you play. I'm not going to tell you how to organise your life - I have trouble enough organising mine - but you might find that the Ensemble gels best if you are all in the same age band - twenties and thirties, or fifties and sixties, for example. And don't think that advancing years somehow disadvantages you as a player. An Ensemble generally needs a little more patience and a little more attention to detail than you might be used to in Solo playing. I think you'll find that the wisdom of the years is a positive asset.

Does it work if the group has members of both sexes? I'd give a resounding yes in almost every situation. Ensembles aren't about egos, and a mixed sex group often seems to be able to develop faster and resolve its problems more smoothly, if only because the group tends to be able to list more points of view and discuss them better.

In all events, a good Ensemble will lift the weaker players, not hold back the stronger ones.

An Ensemble practice is much like a real performance without an audience.

If you started Guitar with the wish to be able to "play" something, then an Ensemble is a real and concrete way of seeing that wish come

true.

And if, to finish this section, you have no choice about who is or isn't in your Ensemble group, well, never mind! I've seen some truly deep friendships kindled when adult beginners of mine have started to meet, untutored, to play Ensembles. These are people whose only connection with each other is that they enrolled for the same College course.

Talking of which, it's a joke of mine that each adult College class I teach begins with my observation that there's probably going to be a romance, somewhere in that class before the course is over. And I reckon that's proved to be the case more years than not!

When I die, I think I'm going to come back as Cupid... But read my caution on adultery!

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How many partners should you have at any one time? Does size matter?

What's the ideal size of an Ensemble? I've worked with 'ensembles' from 3 to 37 players, though I've seldom used music in more than 6 parts.

So let me define straight away the use of the word Orchestra in this article to denote several players on each line of music, and the word Ensemble to denote a single player on each line. And then, let me get them all muddled up again elsewhere in this page.

I regard a trio as the smallest group which defines a Guitar Ensemble. "What about Duets?", I hear you ask. Well, actually, I didn't hear you ask, but I suspect you're wondering, nonetheless. There are a number of great differences between a duet and any other size of ensemble....

- In a duet, you *know* who's played the wrong note....
- In a duet, your opinion *can't* be out-voted....
- In a duet, one person *can* dominate the pace, tone and volume...
- In a duet, you don't get the large sound for minimal effort that you get in an Ensemble...
- In a duet, isolated mistakes and buzzes don't tend to get lost in a rich and full sound....

I hope you'll see that there are a lot of advantages, especially with beginner and intermediate players, in playing Ensembles as opposed to duets. Mind you, all of the points above are actually beneficial if we're talking about pupil/teacher duets, where they can aid learning and develop a keen ear in the pupil.

The main problem with an *Ensemble* of any size is one of commitment.

- It is no good planning a practice a week in advance, only to find that Bill's wife has invited her Mother to stay, and how dare he go out for the evening.....
- And it's no good sitting with an empty music stand and an empty chair, wondering why no-one can hear the tune....

There is a related point here, and it's both very simple and very important. If you form a quartet, it's most unlikely that any music you'll buy will make sense if one player fails to make the practice. And if you form a trio, you can't just change it to a quartet without re-equipping yourselves with music. And the music will be the greatest expense in getting an Ensemble off the ground.

I suppose you could argue that 12 is a good number for an Ensemble, because you can play trios, quartets and sextets, but joking aside, the size of a group dictates a lot about what happens to that group in its formative first months.

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The Music

Choosing the right music

It's no good turning up to your first practice with no music!
So it means that you've got to try to purchase something in advance...

"Just pick a piece you like in the right number of parts. That's all, isn't it?"
Oh dear, no!

Much Ensemble music doesn't look too difficult, and there is a temptation to choose something taxing, which has the promise of delivering something truly remarkable. In all probability it will. It will deliver a truly remarkable pig's ear and no amount of fancy fingerwork will turn it into anything other than a well-fingered pig's ear.

That's the point at which everyone assumes everyone else is at fault, and everyone decides that solo Guitar has a lot going for it after all.

Why does this happen? It's quite simple. Firstly, everyone's playing has shape and structure to each phrase. And everyone trying a piece which is new to them will have hesitations and, shall we say, unusual chords. Concentrating on ploughing through a new piece will invariably tie up not only your fingers and eyes, but also your brain, which is trying to control all your peripheral bits and is fairly busy with it, thank you very much.

Put simply, when you are playing a new piece, your brain is flat out. And it's too busy to listen. Far too busy.

Did you realise that you can play an entire piece of music and be so busy with reading and fingering that you don't actually hear it? Maybe not, but it happens, especially if the piece is near to your limit of ability. But stick three or four players together on a hard ensemble, and each will slow down where their part is tricky, (which is invariably where someone else's part is ridiculously easy!) and the whole lot comes apart at the seams because no-one is listening. Indeed, with only your own music in front of you, it's hard to work out what you might be trying to listen to anyway.

So let's take a different view. If you play in a quartet, you are going to get four times the complexity out of the blended sound than the effort you each put in. And so a simple part doesn't, in general, mean you get a simple sound. With skilful writing, the sound which comes out can be both full and intricate for very little effort.

- Pick a piece which looks to be rather too easy for you.
 - If I'm wrong, you'll sail through it and wish you'd something more of a challenge.
 - If I'm right, you'll have a piece which is just right for you.

In either case, you'll spend the evening playing music together.

- If you choose a piece that's too hard, you'll spend the evening holding post mortems and feeling very down.

And the easier music is often less expensive to buy too. How's that for a compelling secondary argument?

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A starter pack of music

Many publishers can sell you a book of Ensembles (generally, the thicker the book, the better the value!), and the more conscientious publishers will grade the pieces in difficulty. Do look at my [Links](#) page to follow the links to such a publisher - Corda - where you'll find over 160 graded Guitar Editions, most containing a number of pieces. How's that for choice?

There is no such thing as a definitive starter pack - what your Ensemble plays is going to depend on your individual abilities, (and whether they are the same as each other), on your collective average ability, and on what mix of private (solo) practice to Ensemble practice you intend to do.

What I suggest you do is let me furnish you with your very first [starter pack](#). How can I address the number of players you have and the standard you are? I can't. So of course it cannot be *the* definitive pack. But click on the [starter pack](#) link. You'll find a number of pieces in a number of parts. None of it will be "just right". But you *will* find a trio you might know, and which I know that I know. Hang on- I'm getting dizzy - I must have a cold in the knows.

By taking a trio which I know works, and which I have tested out on my pupils, and which I reckon you will enjoy, it will at least enable you to get a subjective feel for how the complexity or simplicity of each part maps onto the complexity or simplicity of the whole piece. I've already said that it's important not to begin with a piece in which everyone is struggling to play their own lines. So please, come to my [e-rehearsal](#), and by the end of the session, you will have had a little instruction on a trio which you can take away with you, and some pieces in 2 and 4 parts too.

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It's your Round

I have one more suggestion for the "ultimate starter pack", and it is to pick some rounds - Frère Jacques may be one that you know, and I have a whole host of others. And I mention them because they have several advantages over every other piece you might want to try...

- No player has the "best" part - they're all the same.
- No player has the duff left-over part.
- Everyone has the tune.
- No-one has the difficult rhythm.
- Because each player in turn takes a few bars of tune and a few bars of bass, the round will work even with one player missing

Can there be a fairer and more equitable way to get started? Quite right!

But where does one buy rounds for Classical Guitar Ensemble? I have no idea, but I can tell you that music for Recorders and for other melodic instruments like violin and flute is perfect. Easy to locate, cheap to buy, value for money.

Here in the UK a couple of years back, for example, I found that virtually every Music shop which caters for school musicians stocked copies of

"Flying A Round" - pub A & C Black - ISBN 0-7136-2255-5 £7.99 (about \$13)

Aimed at singers, violinists and recorder players, everything is within the first position (though some benefit from being transposed up a fourth).

Music is likely to be quite an expense in starting a group, and a few rounds are a very cost effective way to have enough low-risk pieces in your bag for the very first get-together.

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Where does one buy Ensemble Music?

If you go into an average provincial music shop and ask for the Guitar Music section, you'll be directed towards a small rack containing such gems as "293 Tunes You've Never Hear Of" and "75 Tunes You Can Strum One Chord To". If you do find a shop willing to hold a stock of what is, to be honest, expensive and slow-moving Classical Guitar music, you can be pretty sure that they will all be solos and duets.

If you do go up to the counter and whisper that you'd like something a little more unusual for the weekend, you can be sure to be accorded that look of disdain which would make a greater man than me simply wither.

"There's no call for *that* sort of thing around here!"

And they're right - there is little demand for Guitar Ensemble Music. Mail Order is often the only realistic option. Be sure that the music will arrive in a plain brown wrapping, looking for all the world like you *did* order something a little more unusual for the weekend. But where do you get it from, and how do you know what to order?

Here's where the Web can be a superb resource. Many shops specialise in Mail Order and advertise on the Web. The more progressive publishers are starting to put incipits - little snippets of their wares - up so you can see what you are buying. If your monitor supports 16 bit colour, have a close look at the wallpaper on this page and you'll see two bars of my composition "Russian Steppes" for Guitar Trio. Hardly a subliminal advert, as the wallpaper doesn't say what it is or where to get it from!

As a starting point, you could look at [Corda Music's Web pages](#) - a whole variety of material from 2 to 8 guitars, and all graded in difficulty from novice to masochist. If you're in the UK, or can pay in Pounds Sterling, there's order details on their Web Pages. If you are overseas, the most effective way is to order the items by credit card from the [Spanish Guitar Centre Nottingham](#), quoting the Corda title and reference numbers.

Apart from being very parochial like this, it's pretty difficult to steer you towards a "good" source of Ensemble music. It so much depends on how good you are, where you live, how much you can afford, and what styles you like. But then, it is *your* Ensemble, not mine, so maybe I shouldn't choose for you!

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Types of score

Ensemble music exists in one of two forms - Full Score and individual parts..

If we were playing in an orchestra, we'd each have parts and the conductor would have the Full Score (and very good eyesight, having seen the size of orchestral Full Score) : there'd be no choice.

We often do have a choice. Well, not really - the publisher makes the choice for us. We often have Full Score. Or Parts. Or both.

- Full Score, as its name suggests, is the full music, so a trio comprises three staves braced together. I prefer Full Score, as I like to be aware of what the other players are doing. Or should be doing... Others find that keeping their eyes scanning the page, one a couple of inches above the other, tends to induce nausea. There definitely *is* a knack to tracing one stave in the midst of many, and there is a huge payoff if you *can* cast an eye to the parts above and below yours to see what you expect to be hearing - it's the best way of keeping tightly in step. If you can't find your part in several staves at one, use a highlighting pen to mark the

The Front of each
 Line of music
 Which belongs
=

 To your part
 So you don't get lost.
 See?

downside is in the large number of page turns. Even with sympathetic typesetting, it's unlikely that the page turn is going to coincide with *all* the players having open strings and a free left hand! Check with the copyright authorities in your country - it may well be **legal for you, the owner of the copy, to photocopy parts of the score so that you can move the page turn to where you want.** But remember that purchasing a full score of a trio does not accord you the right to take two copies for the others in the trio - you'll need three copies - another downside to Full Score.

- Parts, on the other hand, mean that page turns are really quite rare, and those that *are* required can often be set at convenient points in the score, because *your* page turns don't have to be at the same time as the others in the Ensemble. You might feel, initially, that you are **playing independently of your partners, as you have visual instruction and audible feedback on what you are doing, but only audible confirmation of what they are doing.** However, a considerate typesetter will scatter bar numbers, Rehearsal Marks and cue phrases all over your part so that at least you *know* when you are lost...

I've placed a number of works with a [particular publisher](#) who supplies the music in both forms, and this really is the most sensible way. Phrasing, articulation and dynamics can be planned, together, on the Full Score, and transcribed to the parts which are taken away to practise. The Full Score serves as a useful agenda during the post mortem after the first playing....

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Types of Music

Generalisations generally don't work.

But generally speaking, there are two types of Ensemble music for Guitar.

- Polyphonic

Here, each Ensemble player has a "proper", multi-line, Guitar part to play.

On the plus side, you can get a great sound this way, though badly written Ensemble music in this style will sound woolly because of the preponderance of bass notes which can result.

On the minus side, the music is inherently tricky, and often the tricky spots do not coincide, meaning that the music has a tendency to fall apart until it has been tightly rehearsed over and over. Some players might end up with a lot of tricky chord work up the neck if the composer has tried to avoid the woolly sound I've just mentioned.

- Melodic

Here, each Ensemble has a single thread of music, like every line in the orchestra. OK, like every line except the xylophone.

On the plus side, the music tends to "go" at its first playing, and I cannot stress how important this is if your group meets rarely.

There's a second, hidden, plus too. There's the chance to do vibrato, the chance to pull a single thread of music out, the chance to mix tonal variations across the parts, the chance to take intermediate parts right up the neck for a stunningly rounded sound.

On the minus side, it is quite challenging for the arranger to make this style work really well. Indeed, no-one since Bach has *really* got the hang of it. A poor arrangement can not only sound rather anaemic, but the inner parts, in particular, can be indescribably naff to play as they rush around filling in all the harmonic gaps left after the tune and bass have been written.

Horses for courses. I write in both styles, though my preference is to accept the challenge and go for the clarity which the melodic style can give.

My "[Saraband](#)" once attracted the comment "It delivers a lot more than it looks like it would", which is a remark which warmed my heart, because a piece which is easy to play and sounds more impressive than you expect is just the sort of thing which can lift an Ensemble Group to new heights.

(For ordering details, visit my [Shop](#))

Not been paying attention? Shame on you - [Back to Lesson 1!](#)



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