

Ensemble Masterclass

Derek Hasted's Guitar Ensemble School

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Masterclass 1

In this class, we'll explore how to arrange music for Guitar Ensemble

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This masterclass © Derek Hasted 1998 - please enjoy!

Should I read this?

This rather pompously named "Masterclass" is for people who might like to know some of the proven hints and tips for writing and arranging Ensemble Music for Guitar. As such, it has a rather narrow audience, and if it holds no interest for you, please feel free to leave the [Masterclasses](#) and come into my [Classroom](#) or my [Rehearsal](#) room.

If you are interested, than I do assume that you know a little of the theory of music, ideally by formal instruction, but failing that by knowing enough about music that the intrinsic building blocks of Solo Guitar music strike you as self-evident.

And if, having read all this, you come to the conclusion that it's a lot of hard work, then you'll know why I'm only giving away a few [freebies](#) on this site, and I'm rather hoping that you purchase some of my [published](#) works!

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Tonto

The skills of arranging music for Guitar are many and varied.

The additional skills of arranging music for Ensemble Guitar are many and varied too, but I'm going to see if I can help teach you some of these additional skills, at least at a novice to intermediate level.

This isn't a definitive treatise on arranging, it's...

- A way to get you started.
- And to get you thinking.
- And, I hope, to get you inspired.

If you can't arrange for Solo Guitar, this page really isn't going to help you much!

But why is the section called Tonto?

Well, you see, Ensemble music isn't about writing for Solo Guitar - that needs a Lone Arranger....

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Why oh why D-I-Y?

There is a whole range of excellent, and more importantly tried and tested, Ensemble Music out there in the wide world, and producing your own arrangements is a labour of love.

There's that very pertinent quote - "I don't know why a man dedicates a year of his life to writing a book when you can buy one for \$10"

But there are times when Do-It-Yourself is most satisfying and the end result is hand crafted just the way you want.

Maybe too, if you can see what goes *in* to an Ensemble arrangement, you'll have a better feel for how to get it back *out!*

Whether you are a teacher wanting to tailor music to your particular players, or whether you are one of the Ensemble players, wanting to capture a favourite piece for your group, there are, to paraphrase a proverb and issue a Government Health Warning all in one go, more ways of killing an Ensemble than strangling it.

It's one thing to arrange or compose a solo and then find it's impossible to play and the bit you *can* manage sounds like a tape being played backwards. It's another to gather together a whole lot of players and ask them to produce a sound like 4 tapes being played backwards. For a start, there's a lot of explaining to do at the end of the first run through!

From picking a piece which will "go" to making the best sound you can with 'n' guitarists of ability 'x', there are some hints and tips which I'd like to pass on, if only to avoid that situation which I have witnessed, where a budding composer has collected some willing players and they have sat in a circle, with good intentions and... and... produced, well, nothing much at all really.

Apart from some very sad expressions.

And people looking at their watches.

And each other.

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Picking a piece which will go

If you sat in on my earlier Lesson, you'll know that it is important not to have delusions of grandeur about how complex the Ensemble music should be.

I recommend single-line music while you find your feet.

And generally speaking, at least in recent history, the first piece a composer writes is not the one which is the pinnacle of his achievement, and against which all subsequent efforts are compared. So don't begin by arranging the one piece you really want to arrange. Try something easier. Like walking, talking, or eating your lunch without dropping it down your shirt, arranging is a skill that you have to learn. Fortunately, your gravest mistakes can be made in the privacy of your own home, freeing you from the musical equivalent of dropping scalding coffee in your lap on your first date.

For a first attempt, music with a *steady pulse* in 3/4 or 4/4 time is probably more likely to go well than a compound or irregular time.

Don't rip off someone else! The laws on copyright vary from Country to Country, but in broad terms, whilst an arrangement of a well-known piece might be your own blood, sweat and tears, every copy you sell, every audience who pays to hear it, is making money on the basis of the piece's existing fame. Therefore, if the piece isn't in the public domain, either get permission to arrange the music, or don't arrange it.

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How many parts?

As you can see - arranging a piece in six parts is going to be twice as much work as arranging it in three. (Actually, it's even more than that, and I know that from experience!) If you have a dozen players, do you need a dozen parts? The answer is a resounding no. From the point of view of who plays what, there are only so many notes on a Guitar that can all be part of a consonant chord. Let's have an example - if we take the chord of E, we can fit about ten notes into that chord before we start introducing duplicates. And if we acknowledge that the melody has to move up and down, then the number of notes available to us is about eight. More players than this and we shall have to give them duplicate notes. So if you have, as I do, about 30 players in your group, you really can't write 30 different parts, all using different notes!

Don't feel that it's essential to write lots of parts. Each additional part tends to add progressively less to the overall sound, and increases the complexity of the rehearsal as well as the risk of mistakes in the score!

Start modestly. If your first efforts leave you wanting more, you have done well. You'll have the confidence, experience and skills to try something a little more complex.

If your first efforts die a death, you'll have the reluctance of your fellow players to overcome, next time you produce a new arrangement!

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Derek's List of things not to do

It's an unusual teacher who concentrates on the negative, but sometimes listing the things that don't work is quicker than listing the things which do. And, by all accounts, I'm a pretty unusual teacher anyway!

- Don't have bass notes too close together.
It will sound gruff and muddy.
It's better to exploit an Ensemble's ability to spread chords across the whole Guitar than to try to cram a quart of chords into a pint of notes (if that's not the worst analogy you've ever come across).

- Don't duplicate notes at the same pitch across the parts.
Tuning problems will be accentuated.
Two players playing the same note is a wasted opportunity for a fuller sound.
- Don't give novices difficult rhythms.
The lack of "thinking time" in an Ensemble will make it fall apart.
- Don't split a rhythmic motif across the parts.
It's tempting to make an "oom-chunk" accompaniment easier to finger by giving one part the bass or "oom", and another the chord or "chunk", but novices find that repeated playing "off the beat" is very difficult, especially if the performance is, shall we say, going a bit "off the beaten" track anyway!.
- Don't skimp on cue phrases and rehearsal marks.
Think about the overall sound from the point of view of each player. How is a player going to manage his entry points?
- Don't worry about the rules of harmony.
I'm sorry. Did I really say that?
Yup! In a trio, in particular, the need to get the chords you want takes precedence over the rules of harmony.
Have a look at my [Saraband incipit](#), and you'll see parallel fifths in the Incipit between parts one and three in bar one of the extract. That's partly because the lack of a fourth part restricts the choices that are available for each part, and partly because it gave me the tune and bass lines I really wanted. If you are a purist, you might need reminding that most listeners in the audience aren't going to demand their money back if they hear a minor travesty of musical theory, but they are going to like a Trio that sounds good. I'm not advocating writing any old rubbish, but I am advocating putting the overall sound and the ease of performance above the cerebral exercise of scoring an A+ for theory.

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Accentuate the positive

OK - that was the downside. What positive tips do I have?

- Do imitate
If there's something you like, study it and find out how it works.
In addition to a good supply of ready-to-serve Ensemble music, you can make your own from some simple ingredients. Recorder consort music is always worth a look. Do remember that the Descant (or Soprano) recorder, and its cousin the Sopranino, are transposing instruments, and they play an octave higher than written. And don't forget that the Guitar transposes the other way. Some simple mental gymnastics are needed to place Treble (untransposed) and Descant (transposed) onto a Guitar without the music sounding inside out and rather gruff.
- Do add style
Lifting the harmony (especially the bass line) up an octave on the repeat is an easy thing to accomplish in an Ensemble. So try it. Or try removing a part to help the *piano*, or dropping it an octave to aid the *forte*.
- Do less
If you are writing single melodic lines, it's quite important to attend to the rests as much as the notes, since clarity of sound is as much about what you don't hear as what you do. Use rests with confidence.
- Do add variety
Rotate the tune among the players.
Or, from Einstein's point of view, rotate the players amongst the tune.
- Do add a big finish
A unison, or octave unison, introduction into the final refrain is a very effective way of focusing the audience on the final assault on the music.
- Do explore
If you are a parent with a child learning an [orchestral instrument](#), why not include them? Be aware that some instruments, like the alto sax, are in Eb, and the easiest thing is for the guitarists to place a Capo on fret 3.
Other instruments, like the trumpet, clarinet and tenor sax are in Bb. Either transpose that part, or adopt one of three more drastic measures...
 - Tune the guitars down a tone, and play soft, mellow music.
 - Fit a Capo on fret ten and play like the hunchback of Notre Dame
 - Remove a few inches of tubing from the wind instrument.
- Hey - the last one's a joke, you know!
- Do write at the right level
If you have a mixed ability Ensemble, write at mixed levels, or some people are going to be bored senseless while the others break out in a sweat. Or worse, everyone is bored senseless. Or even, forbid the thought, that everyone is bored senseless with breaking out in a sweat.

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Postscript

Arranging music for Guitar Ensemble is not for the faint-hearted.

Producing an arrangement which is simple enough to work first time, yet musical enough to satisfy, is time consuming. And how!

There's a beautiful proverb -

"Something is finished, not when there is nothing more to add,
but when there is nothing more to take away"

Let that be your guide.

Sculpt your music so that it has a clarity, a purpose and a pure simplicity.
The true beauty of music is in its elegance.



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