

Ensemble Masterclass

Derek Hasted's Guitar Ensemble School

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Masterclass 2

In this lesson I'll explain ways to include other instruments

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A sloping-shoulders, no-money-refunded, all-encompassing disclaimer

Please remember that I'm writing for the less experienced Guitarist. But do remember that we were all less experienced once - unless I'm talking to the first person to spring from the womb playing Villa Lobos.....

But who is most likely to read an article about how to arrange for Guitar and other instruments?

- Someone who already knows how to do it,
- Or someone who'd like a few ideas to help them get started?

Right! A few ideas it is. Which is why this article can only scratch the surface. It never reaches the soft furry underbelly of a detailed treatise about arranging Guitar music for all other instruments in the world today.

I've restricted myself to some simple generalisations. You might disagree with them, you might find examples where I'm wrong, but if nothing else, treat this article as that way to get started that I promised you.

There *is* no single ideal way to include other instruments in your Guitar Ensemble, but this Lesson might just get you thinking...

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Setting the Scene

The aliens are coming

Sometimes, the chance comes up to form an Ensemble with aliens.
No, not real aliens, just people who don't play Guitar.

Or with your children.

I suspect they regard *you* as an alien anyway, but if they are young enough still to be having instrumental music lessons at school, then your encouragement and your involvement with them is one of the greatest gifts you can give them on their journey with music. But the chances are they're not learning Guitar.

So can you mix other instruments in with a Guitar Ensemble?

Yes you can, and it can be a lot of fun, provided that you're aware of one or two of the possible pitfalls.

This is a short Lesson on some of the simple steps you can take to make a mixed Ensemble succeed.

As with so much in music when you first try something new, if it doesn't go "just so" straightaway, it's easy to get dispirited. Here's some hints and tips which I hope will help you get ready for that first time.

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Buying ready-done music

This is the most obvious and apparently the most sensible suggestion - finding music that has been laid out to suit the particular characteristics of the instruments you are gathering together. It will have been tailored to the demands of each instrument, and will have been put together and tested, and all the problems ironed out, before you even start to wrestle with it.

You'll find that the Guitar has been teamed up very successfully with voice, flute, recorder and other melody instruments. But it's usually only as a duet. And the chances of finding music for, let's say, the sort of Ensemble that might arise if you bring musical children into an established Ensemble are, to be honest, rather remote. I mean, who is going to write a Suite for 2 Guitars, a recorder and a bassoon? And if, by some remote chance, they do, says *Derek*, *fearing a deluge of complaints that two guitars, recorder and bassoon is the greatest growth area in Ensembles ever*, will it be the right standard?

And it's no good asking the interlopers simply to play the spare Guitar part you have in your trio....I can hear in my head what it's going to sound like with a bassoon playing a gentle guitaristic arpeggio accompaniment.

Parp Parp Parp Parp Parparpar Parp...

So maybe this wasn't such a simple idea after all....

Oh, I still think it is, and I think I can help! I've played in mixed-instrument Ensembles before, and there are quite a lot of things we can sort out between us.

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Which is the alien?

When you blend instruments together, especially if you are trying to recycle some music, which one is the one that has to make all the compromises? For example, if you add a clarinet to two guitars, and you have on the music stands some guitar music for three guitarists, is it as simple as saying to the clarinetist "Play this" ?

Or not?

With the exception of the piano and its keyboard cousins, most musical instruments are monophonic - one note at once. This, of course, tends to prohibit many instruments from taking over the music for an "arpeggio-style" guitar part. But in [Lesson 2](#), I've drawn attention to the melodic style of writing which can make Ensemble Guitar so easy to do and such fun to play. A lot of this melodic style music can be played by the typical orchestral instruments with only minor adjustments (no, I don't mean changing all the chords to E minor!) which I'll mention later in this page.

Sometimes the "new" instrument has to make the adjustments and concessions, but sometimes it is easier if the guitarists do - and I'll explain this too.

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Guitar and...

Guitar and Bass Guitar

This is great fun when it works. (Oh, but I mean the conventional bass guitar, not the one you'll meet in my [Orchestra Pit!](#))

Many of the [Ensembles](#) I write have the lowest part suitable for a Bass Guitar, and my regular Ensemble Workshop usually has one or two Bass players.

A Bass Guitar is a 4 string instrument, and the 4 strings are tuned the same as the bottom four strings of a Classical Guitar, but one octave lower. The neck length or scale is about 25% larger. In a small Ensemble, an acoustic Bass is ideal. For a larger group, an electric Bass should be considered, because the sound of an acoustic Bass is limited by the fact that it's not as large as it ought to be for its depth. In modern parlance, it lacks welly.

If you are wondering about introducing a Bass Guitar, let me give you some pros and cons....

- On the Plus Side...
 - You'll get a sound which will delight you and which will go a long way to helping you keep strictly in time, at least as you learn to listen more carefully.
 - Any Classically trained Guitarist can pick up a bass guitar and play it, especially if you read it in the treble clef. It means you play from the exactly same music as the lowest Ensemble part - nothing else to buy, and no transcription to do.
- But be careful about...
 - Unless your bass player is a treble clef reader, you will have to copy out the parts into bass clef.

- Some electric Basses are rather nasal - this is their way of getting "punch" from a small speaker. A large speaker - typically 15" - will give you the depth you require and help prevent the sound from intruding on the registers of the other parts.
- Bass carries alarmingly well - through walls to the neighbours, and at a Concert Hall, to the back row (but without the other Guitars!). It's hard to judge its volume, so err on the side of caution and have it too quiet rather than too loud.
- Never allow a Bass to leave strings ringing on. A new note with the residue of an old one sounds dreadful. Apoyando (rest stroke) plus considerable tactical damping is a must.
- Don't ask a bass guitarist to play two note music - it will sound far too rumbly and unpleasant.
- Replacing the lowest part with the Bass Guitar may make an empty sound because the bottom part is now too far away to connect with the remainder of the parts. Consider an ordinary Guitar on that part too, but not too loud, in the same way that much Church Organ music has the pedal part duplicating the bottom part in the left hand.

Why so many minuses? On balance, is it a bad idea? No - I like the sound, but it's important to bring these extra considerations to bear, because otherwise you'll not get the best from it.

If you have to transcribe your music into bass clef for the bass player, and if you are unfamiliar with the bass clef, then any good music theory book will explain that the staff or stave looks the same. The only differences are

- That the clef sign is different
- That which line represents which note is different
- That the geometric shape of the sharps or flats in the key signature is a little different
- That the lowest note on the bass guitar in the bass clef looks like Middle C does on the treble clef.

Treat yourself to a good theory book in any case - it will answer all your questions about notation and musical signs that you might not understand fully.

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Guitar and Piano

Piano is about the only common self-contained instrument, other than the Guitar, which can support tune, bass and accompaniment, all in one go. Guitar and Piano as a potential combination looks to be very common, if only because much Piano music has Guitar chords added to it, especially if you buy popular sheet music from the charts. Even though a Pop group might have performed with Guitars, all you can often buy is the so-called "Piano reduction and Guitar chords".

It's important to pick up on a few points.

A piano playing a simple guitar part always sounds, in British parlance, unspeakably naff. Almost without exception, you cannot give a pianist a guitar part and expect much back in return, musically. The piano sustain is different to a guitar, and single notes are rather lacking in definition.

The Piano tends to occupy all of the compass of the Guitar, and a bit more besides, and it does so at quite a volume. It doesn't necessarily leave much for the Guitar to contribute. For this reason, one successful way of combining the instruments is to use the Guitar as a *rhythmic* addition to the piano, rather than a *harmonic* addition. It sticks in the craw of many a Classical Guitarist, but a strummed steel-stringed Guitar, fulfilling some of the role of a drummer's Hi-Hat cymbal, is often the only noticeable addition to the sound of a piano that a Guitar can make. Just regard it as a chance to practice those rasgueados!

Piano music, partly from its evolution from the organ-based accompaniment to four-part harmony singing, and partly from the way in which it's easiest to move the fingers in the hands, tends to fill each bar of music with chord progressions, in which each note has a new chord underneath it. Even long-standing music of great simplicity, some of the early Church Hymns for example, will have several chords per bar. Guitar music as an accompaniment to singing, however, at least of the Folk kind, tends to make do with a single chord, strummed repeatedly, or arpeggiated to fill the bar, against which a melody weaves its way, creating the occasional discord or suspension on its way to the end of each measure or bar.

But put the two together, and there will be discords all over the place - not so much notes which clash violently and obviously, but more as a general muddiness and lack of clarity.

In general, the Guitar goes better with a single-note instrument. Sorry!

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Guitar and melody instruments

By melody instruments, I really mean instruments playing one note at once, from the piccolo at the top to the double bass at the bottom. Because of this range, it's necessary to slip the instrument into the appropriate place in the playing hierarchy. The human ear tends to regard the highest note it hears as being the tune, and therefore to give a piccolo a bass part is going to work harmonically, but not melodically.

Watch out too, that most orchestral instruments are *very* loud indeed compared to Guitar, and that many of them are quite difficult to play quietly, especially the upper registers of a brass or woodwind instrument. This tends to imply that many of them are best suited to the melody part, for a number of reasons....

- If the melody is a little loud, it doesn't affect the balance of the piece as much as if an inner part is too loud.
- If the melody has a different *timbre* it doesn't affect the balance of the piece as much as if an inner part does.

- The Guitar is quite a low instrument, and most orchestral instruments are above it in pitch.
- Virtually every orchestral instrument has unlimited sustain, which is at its most useful in the tune or bass part.

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Transposing Instruments

What?

A Transposing Instrument is one in which the note which comes out isn't the same as the symbol on the page.

In strictest terms, the Guitar itself is a transposing instrument, because what comes out is an octave below the notated music. And it's not that uncommon for instruments to transpose - the Descant (soprano) recorder transposes the other way.

But more curious are the orchestral instruments for which the note that comes out is close to, but not the same, as the notated music. I know that sounds more like the definition of a novice Guitarist playing badly, but it's actually a musical fact that needs taking into account.

Some transposition - for example within the British Brass Band - is there to make the player's life easy. All Brass Band instruments have the same apparent fingering and the same apparent compass on the page, meaning that a player can change from one instrument to another with ease (ideal when children are learning Brass instruments). The downside is that it makes the job of the composer or arranger harder, and that, unfortunately, is what this Lesson is about!

Other instruments, within an orchestra, are simply an "odd man out" - their part is apparently written in a different key.

Fortunately, with the exception of the A clarinet, virtually all transposition is for Bb or Eb instruments, and we can explore these in a little more detail.

You'll also find a paragraph or two on arranging for transposing instruments in my "[How to Arrange](#)" lesson.

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Bb Instruments

These include trumpet, soprano and tenor sax, cornet, flügelhorn, baritone horn, euphonium and brass band trombone, but beware that the brass band instruments have different names across the world. What I know as a tenor horn, you may know as an alto saxhorn, so check with the player before you start writing or arranging music for them!

A Bb instrument, by definition, is one which plays a Bb when the music says C.

If you are planning to ask a Bb player to play one of the melody Guitar lines in your Ensemble, then by and large, you should simply rewrite their (guitar music) part out for them one tone higher - which also means adding two sharps (or removing two flats) from the Key Signature. The more competent Bb players can often do this in their head - transposition is one of the skills required in the upper grades of certain Exam boards.

Trouble arises when you are in the Guitarists favourite key of E, and you provide your new colleague with a piece in six sharps. Sometimes, one can be clever, play dirty or whatever you wish to call it, and write out the music in a "fake" key. But it doesn't often yield much improvement. Here, for example, you could transcribe their music not into the key of F# (six sharps), but into Gb (six flats). Now I know which I'd prefer (just!) and retranscribing like this does admit a huge chance of error, but it's a way out sometimes.

Another way out which one can only try on "melodic" Ensembles - those with each part in single notes - and that is to change the key of the whole Ensemble. If you were lucky, then transcribing all the Guitar parts down a tone *except* the one you have given to the Bb player, would achieve the desired result. But generally, a small upward change is the easiest. Downward changes have a habit of requiring notes which have just fallen off the bottom of the Guitar. Given a piece in the key of E, I might consider re-arranging each part in the key of G - one sharp - (and giving the Bb instrument something in the key of A - three sharps). Or I might consider going down a tone to D - two sharps - and preventing problems with missing notes in the bass line by asking the player to tune down the bottom string.

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Eb Instruments

These include the alto and baritone sax, tenor horn and Eb tuba.

An Eb instrument, by definition, is one which plays an Eb when the music says C.

By and large, you should rewrite their (guitar music) part a tone and a half lower for them - which also means removing three sharps (or adding three flats).

But there is an easier solution. Get down to your local Music Shop and buy a box of capo tastos (I like the Shubb capo for elegance and ease of use). Get everyone to fit one on fret 3, and away you go. Done and dusted. By placing a capo on fret three, every notated note that you play comes out 3 semitones higher, the same as the Eb instrument.

A Capo works just as well with chordal or arpeggio accompaniments. Anything can be played Capo 3, and with the exception of a little shortage of space around the capo'd ninth position (which now comes off the neck and onto the body), it's an easy step to take. Just let me offer one hint. If you have dots on the neck, do *not* look at them - they don't move when you add the capo! If you do this often, and your players need dots, use a hole punch on a Post-It (sticky) note and stick the "hole" on the neck - it's easy to move - just don't forget which setting you've got them in!

"Hey", I hear you cry. Well, actually, I don't. But you might be wondering why I didn't suggest a capo for Bb instruments. It's a good question. And there's a good answer. Try playing with a capo on fret 10 and see how *you* get on....

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This concludes my little Masterclasses.

There is so much to tell - I can only scrape the surface.

Maybe I can't give you many answers, but I hope I can give you *inspiration*.



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