

Onward: Bringing Finger-Style Guitar to Other Universities

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1 Introduction

The world of finger-style is faced with a beautiful problem: there is currently only one university program in the world which offers a bachelor's level degree in finger-style guitar. It is beautiful because there is a program which has the foresight to offer a program. It is a problem because the fate of finger-style guitar in the university is intimately intertwined with the success of this program and its graduates. From an extreme viewpoint, this program could be viewed as either the catalyst for the flourishing of finger-style in the university or the death knell for finger-style guitar. The intention of this paper is to establish a foundation upon which a proposal for a similar finger-style guitar program at a university can be built. This proposal can take many forms. I will be examining numerous possibilities for how a proposal could be constructed.

This topic is massive. This paper is a personal journey and it can be reflected in the language used in this paper. I am not going to be able to address each detail of a proposal to a university. While conducting the research for this paper, my aims shift, my tactics change. For instance, after speaking with Michael Chapdelaine, my vision of the future has changed. I plan on redoubling my efforts as a performer/composer as my avenue by which I may enter academia as a finger-style guitar instructor. Such changes as this are not to be viewed as hindrances to the completion of a paper. They are deeply related to the purpose of this paper.

2 Tactics

This section will examine the different manners in which it seems, to me at least, that I might be able to convince a university to offer or reveal the importance of offering an undergraduate degree in finger-style guitar performance. The first is to situate the instrument and its manner of performance within its contexts as a way to show the historical significance of the style. Second, I will attempt to look at how the style is existing in the present and how it might exist in the future as a way to anticipate its future successes. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I will discuss different ways in which I can development as a performer, composer, and scholar as a means to establish my own significance in relation to the style. I deem these to be tactics which I should have in my back pocket, if you will, in case I am ever in a situation in which I might need to demonstrate the significance of the style or of myself.

2.1 Situation

This tactic takes two forms: first, the history of the guitar; second, the history of finger-style guitar as a genre of music. I will not spend too much space in this paper going into a detailed history of either of these subjects.

The purpose of situating the guitar within its contexts serves multiple purposes. First, it reinforces my own understanding of and abilities to discuss the historical components of finger-style guitar as a manner of playing the instrument and as a genre. Second, this is an area in which the scholarship is not as robust as it could be: the history of finger-style guitar is yet to be written. Third, deep knowledge of these subjects may aid in the pursuit of revealing the significance of finger-style to individuals who do not know anything about the guitar or finger-style in particular.

2.1.1 The History of the Guitar

This section of the situation tactic will go into detail on the development of the steel-string six-string guitar along with an examination of its predecessors, the seemingly mythic *guitarra latina*, the renaissance guitar, the vihuela, the baroque guitar, and the early six-string guitar. This section would be similar in focus and breadth to the Finger-Style Guitar: History & Performance class offered at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee by John Stropes.

2.1.2 The History of Finger-Style Guitar

This is one of most exciting areas of interest to me as a scholar. A history of finger-style guitar has not been written as of the writing of this paper. I have been formulating theories on how to discuss the history of finger-style guitar. The most convincing way, to me, to discuss the history borrows from studies on feminism.¹ In the historiographies of feminism, authors frequently use the term ‘wave’ to describe groups of contemporaneous feminists (i.e. 1st wave feminists, 2nd wave, etc.). In the case of finger-style guitarists, I believe that the history would begin with proto-finger-style guitarists who could be considered the first wave. These proto-finger-style guitarists would be individuals such as Arthur ‘Blind’ Blake, Huddie ‘Leadbelly’ Ledbetter, Charlie Patton, Lonnie Johnson, Robert Johnson, Maybelle Carter, and others who were playing the guitar with their fingers and not a plectrum during this era. If I were to produce a paper on this subject, I would most likely start by limiting the scope to the history of finger-style guitar as a genre in the United States. Even limited the scope to finger-style guitar as a genre might suffice.² It is important to understand one’s historical contexts. It is from these perspectives that one might be able to anticipate future developments of the genre.

2.2 Projection

I see this tactic as having two subsections, the near-present and possible futures. The near-present would examine the changing landscape of the business of music. More specifically, I would attempt to find some numbers, real data, on the presence of finger-style guitar on YouTube and other internet sites as a way to establish the ubiquity of finger-style guitar. This information would help project

1. It appears that Martha Lear of *The New York Times* was the individual who coined the term ‘first-wave feminism.’

2. The plectrum-style compositions of Michael Hedges propose a curious case in this respect. Perhaps not dissimilar to proto-finger-style guitar compositions such as “Guitar Chimes” by Blind Blake, plectrum-style compositions by notable finger-style guitarists could be considered finger-style in an honorary sense.

the status of finger-style in the future. The goal of this research would be reinforce my perspective toward the future in a way that I can energize those around me to the unique possibilities of offering a finger-style guitar performance degree.

2.3 Personal Growth

After the interview with Michael Chapdelaine in which he said that he thought that I would need a D.M.A. in order to be hired as a tenure-track faculty member in guitar performance, the personal growth tactic become much more important to me. I realized that Chapdelaine might have been referring to classical guitar instruction in relation to his recommendation of a D.M.A. This leads me to believe that one way into academia as a finger-style guitar instructor could be through establishing myself as a performer and composer within the genre. This could perhaps fulfill an experiential requirement for employment.

2.3.1 Composer

A marker of success in the world of finger-style guitar as a genre is the performer as composer. The artists who are success who do not compose are in the minority. Their number can be counted on one hand. The finger-style guitarist as composer is a unique component of finger-style guitar. This generative characteristic of finger-style guitarists is one of the major characteristics which sets it apart from classical guitar.

I have taken private lessons in composition. I have received several recommendations for books which aim to assist in the composition process. One such book is *Learning to Compose* by Larry Austin and Thomas Clark.³

2.3.2 Performer

2.3.3 Scholar

This component of personal growth was discussed briefly above. I believe that it is possible to find a niche within the field of ethnomusicology with a study of the history of finger-style guitar as a genre of music. A published article in a scholarly journal can only assist in garnering a position in finger-style guitar instruction. I would imagine that there are few guitar instructors at an institution of higher education who also have published articles in scholarly journals.

3. Larry Austin and Thomas Clark, *Learning to Compose: Modes, Materials and Models of Musical Invention* (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1989).

- 3 Intitutions**
- 4 Interviews**
- 5 The Speech**
- 6 Conclusions**

References

Austin, Larry, and Thomas Clark. *Learning to Compose: Modes, Materials and Models of Musical Invention*. Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1989.