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BILL SWICK

Building an Award-Winning Guitar Program



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This resource can help you with some of the practical details of launching a new ensemble.

A few years ago, I was given the opportunity to write a book for Oxford University Press. The proposal came to me something like this: “We have the title, the number of pages, and the format. We just need you to provide us with 50,000 words of content.” The completed project is *Teaching Beginning Guitar Class: A Practical Guide*. It is a nuts-and-bolts guide to teaching beginning guitar in a classroom environment. The book was written with the non-guitar-playing music educator in mind. As a supervisor of more than 60 public school guitar teachers, I had plenty of exposure to teachers who were

given the daunting task of teaching guitar even though they had no direct experience. Based on reader feedback, teaching guitar in the classroom has become a little easier for the many who have used this book.

The experience of writing a successful book for a major publisher made me think about what else I could share from my 42 years of teaching guitar. Considering that I was more or less on the ground floor of teaching guitar in public-school classrooms and have won numerous awards over the years, I thought perhaps I could share some ideas how to build an award-winning guitar program. I wrote

a proposal and sent it to Oxford. The initial response was that the title, *Building an Award-Winning Guitar Program*, was too restrictive and would have a limited audience.

It was suggested that the title be *Award-Winning Alternative Ensembles*. I remember my friend and colleague Anne Fennell being repulsed by the name “alternative ensembles.” She successfully pushed to replace that reference with “innovative ensembles.” I suggested as a title: *Building an Award-Winning Innovative Ensemble*. At the time, we put the title on hold. Meanwhile, the manuscript received a green light, and I went to work writing a guide on how to build an award-winning music program, keeping all of

the innovative ensembles and programs in mind.

One of the first things I did was to make a list of regular activities that I currently do as a classroom music teacher for which I had no preparation in college as a music education major. Surprisingly, the list is rather long. For a start, there is classroom management. Also, on my list are scheduling, structure, organization, fund raising, festivals, travel, concerts, not to mention banking! There are performance uniforms, promotion, social media, YouTube videos, and community service. What about IEPs and 504s and parent conferences? And how about recruiting and student retention? And I have to include inventory and instrument maintenance.



Photo by Patrick Bowen

I decided to address each of these topics to better prepare the next wave of music educators and help them understand all of the many roles associated with classroom teaching. The focus was never intended to include pedagogy or how to teach guitar. Instead, the focus has remained on all of the many individual tasks involved in building and sustaining a program — be it guitar, mariachi, rock band, handbells, bluegrass, music technology, steel drums, piano, show choir, etc.

Undoubtedly, *Teaching Music* readers are familiar with where to find and how to teach content. This guide is designed to create a music program that will stand out in your school district and your state.

Students and parents will want to be a part of your program once you put these principles in place.

One might imagine that an award-winning music program would have ample plaques, certificates, and trophies on display sharing the program's success. While this may sound superficial, trophies have a way of saving programs and promoting advocacy. Before dismissing the shallowness of trophies, plaques, and certificates, remember that administrators do not end or discontinue successful programs that bring recognition to their schools.

During an open house or classroom visit by parents and other community members, if the walls are donned with gleam

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and glory, it is assumed that one has created an award-winning program and parents want their children to be involved. They want their children on a winning team and are happy to tell others that their children are in an award-winning music program at school.

An award-winning program can have many looks. A trophy is generally an indication that the program has accomplished a certain task. Maybe the program has not yet participated in events that share recognition of this nature. Maybe there are no events that present trophies for accomplishments in the innovative areas. If not, what is the director doing to bring recognition to the program? In the book, I include 30 things directors can do to bring recognition to their program, along with many other lists to assist in accomplishing various tasks.

As the manuscript neared completion, we once again exchanged ideas for a book title. The publisher felt the title should represent my

close association with guitar. So as a subtitle, we agreed on *A Guide for Music Educators* in hopes to include all music educators, particularly the ones teaching innovative ensembles.

Although there is a slant towards guitar, readers can easily replace the word “guitar” with any instrument: The content is applicable to any music class. Its principles are broadly relevant to any and all music educators hoping to create a unique program that stands out in the community. If you are going to build a music program, why not make it an award-winning one?

Both books, *Teaching Beginning Guitar Class* and *Building an Award-Winning Guitar Program* are available at global.oup.com/academic and through Amazon.com. ☰

BILL SWICK, who recently retired after 42 years of teaching guitar, writes guitar ensemble arrangements, supplementary teaching materials, and method books. He operates Guitarintheclassroom.com, which publishes guitar classroom materials and offers a free weekly newsletter for secondary guitar teachers.