

CLASSICAL GUITAR TUTOR BOOK

A new learning resource for students of the guitar

By ROBIN THODEY

GUITAR-METHOD is a contentious issue. Debates on the subject tend to become increasingly exacerbated when focusing on the instrument's teaching at grass-roots level. So the appearance of a new guitar method offers plenty of scope for discussion. Recently, Robin Thodey, a Durham-based guitar tutor who studied at the Guildhall School of Music, has put forward a new guitar-method that presents a step-by-step programme of study contained in a single edition. Thodey is a lutenist and guitarist who is a featured performer on four Rose Recordings compact discs. She teaches in schools, colleges and universities across the country and has also worked for the Gateshead Schools' Music Service.

The book, *Classical Guitar Tutor Book*, is designed to equip beginning students with the necessary skills to attain Grade 4 with the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music exam syllabus. The contents are divided into six units that progressively develop students' technical, expressive and performance skills. Each unit is divided into a series of lessons that represent a discreet focus for practice. The book comes with a recording of musical examples, and together these serve as a scheme of work for the guitar tutor who may appreciate guidance for teaching the instrument. 'An individual unit is divided into a series of lessons which, in turn, may represent the focus of more than one week's study', says Thodey. 'Each lesson identifies teacher's notes (the actual scheme of work, outlining a series of exercises with related notes for their teaching; and student's notes (practice instructions to the student relating to each of the exercises'. While the tutor book is intended for both teachers and students, Thodey is careful to point out that it is important that students are initially guided through each unit by the teacher.

The job of collating and processing all the materials necessary to produce such a book is both time consuming and challenging. So most who attempt the task have at least a strong reason for doing so: 'My students sailed through their Associated Board examinations and I thought how wonderfully gifted they all were. Hundreds of students I taught. Then, it occurred to me that perhaps the way I was teaching them was OK too'. So it was with this observation in mind



that Thodey began the task of working on a new tutor method. In the first place, she carefully recorded the learning habits of her students in order to gain some insight into the study process: 'I took notes of each student's progress, noting the technical difficulties as they arose, identified the mental and physical coordination of the brain using eight fingers (not LH thumb, or RH little finger) and six strings. Boys not yet eleven years old had underdeveloped motor control; girls were fully developed by nine or ten years. Progress lay in the ability to read music accurately, if not quickly. Accuracy was essential in reading music.' The emphasis on sight-reading ability that Thodey touches on here is often considered of paramount importance to the student guitarist by teachers, some of which advocate the skill ahead of all others at the developmental stage:

'A child, or student, who is able to sight-read with accuracy gains enormous confidence and this confidence motivates and leads him with excitement to the next set of difficulties. The student is then so excited by the music that he easily masters any new problems. This positive attitude is crucial to constant progress, and it is based on the ability to sight-read accurately.'

One of the key issues related to guitar teaching is tone production. Introducing the finger nails to right-hand technique normally occurs at a later developmental stage, a tradition Thodey upholds: 'The sound, in order to be beautiful, is to be made with fleshy fingertips, not with young nails which are soft, break easily and sound terrible. Exercises to strengthen the right hand fingers,

with the wrist in a high position using supported strokes, give the best possible sound. My students practised RH exercises ad infinitum. And it paid off. The examiners loved the sound and always commented on the mellow and pleasing tone, so unusual with the classical guitar in the early stages with young players.' In addition to tone production, another physical aspect of technique which is frequently up for discussion is when to introduce left hand barres into a student's study regime: 'When the student's left wrist is strong enough to hold the index finger straight and rigid across the fret board, then barres may be fully introduced. To introduce the barre too soon, with a bent finger, puts strain on the upper arm.' In the case of the latter, it is often the case the instrument's size plays a significant role in what can realistically be achieved by an instrumental student. The use of smaller scale instruments is greatly advocated by a number of teachers, not least at the Yehudi Menuhin School for young musicians. So how does Thodey address this point: 'I agree wholeheartedly with the use of the smaller instrument. Guitars are beautifully made in half and three-quarter sizes and the young student is able to develop naturally with his own size. When the smaller instrument is outgrown, then introduce the next size up.

When it comes to the actual content of the *Classical Guitar Tutor Book*, many of the studies that Thodey uses in her work are derived from the nineteenth century composer-performer tradition. The guitarist's reliance on this repertoire for technical progress today is self evident, so what justification does Thodey give for continuing its use?: 'Carulli, Carcassi, Sor and Giuliani among others are the classical guitar composers. This is their music for their instrument. If one begins with the masters, then one attains a deep knowledge and feeling for the beautiful music of the nineteenth century for guitar. The simple pieces they wrote are exquisite, and a student deserves to study these pieces'.

Of course the effectiveness of any tutor method is demonstrated through the pupils themselves. The notion of a correct time at which to start learning the guitar is challenged by the extent to which the various skills involved in playing can be acquired at a given age, and a flavour of this is shown in the discussion above. This point is something Thodey has really begun to explore over the years, with promising results: 'On coming to live in Durham in 1999, I began teaching guitar as part of The Gateshead Music Service and in every private school possible. The pupils got younger – they were desperate to learn to play at five years old. They even came with toy guitars. The tutor book I had compiled all those years ago was published by Gateshead and used as the source teaching material for classical guitar in their 99 schools. My little ones devotedly studied their exercises, gave recitals at school,



Robin Thodey with diploma student David Clappison.

entered local competitions and won many prizes. One boy, having won numerous silver trophies, from ten years onwards flew through Grade 8 at 12 years old and won the Senior Strings Prize (at 15 years old) at The Royal Grammar School in Newcastle. He is now at university studying Chemistry. Freya, just 13 years old, passed Grade 8 last term and will continue studying with me for her Dip.ABRSM. Already she has performed in a film made for the World Heritage Site in Durham. Other excellent students have achieved distinctions and merits in Grade 8, at 15 years old.

The *Classical Guitar Tutor Book* can be purchased for £15.00 (plus postage) directly from Robin Thodey at the following address: info@robinthodey.co.uk. An idea of what this book actually is, for those considering buying a copy, may be shown with Thodey's own summary of her work contained within the closing pages of the book itself:

'Having worked through this book with diligence, the student is now technically prepared to begin working on the syllabus for Grade 4 (ABRSM). Indeed, Ex.54 was a listed study in this syllabus. Now, scales and arpeggios will provide the student with formal training.

This tutor book will give the student a masterly flourish to his/her future of examinations and performance. Again with diligence, he/she should be able to attain ABRSM Grades with distinction.'