

Some Skills and Applications for the Liturgical Guitarist Including: Being an ensemble player

The fundamental issue or challenge for liturgical guitarists today is basic competency on their instrument. In fact, this has been the case since the beginning of the introduction of the guitar into Roman Catholic liturgies. Today, though, the repertoire has matured and so the demands on the liturgical guitarist have increased. To do this emerging music justice means we must rise to the artistic challenge before us. The development of modern liturgical music depends, in part, on the ability of liturgical guitarists to make it musically and liturgically effective. Continuing education for liturgical guitarists is no easy problem largely because there are precious few who understand the musical issues specific to liturgy. In other words, the vast majority of those who can help us become competent guitarists have no clue as to how to apply those techniques to liturgical music. The following page contains a chart that hopefully will help you identify what you know already and how else you might use it, and what you don't know and how it might be useful to you in liturgy so that you can ask a teacher to teach you that skill.

Some Skills and Applications for the Liturgical Guitarist

(or: "Why should I put in the work to learn how to do _____?")

SKILL	SOME APPLICATIONS
Group Prayer	<p style="text-align: center;">(FRUITS)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unity of spirit and purpose for an ensemble which shows itself in musical cohesion. The Holy Spirit is the glue that holds a liturgical ensemble together. • Puts focus on <i>ministry</i> in a ministry that is at risk of being mainly focused on the technical aspects of its art and that is at risk of falling into a "performance" mentality. • Opens ensemble members to the grace necessary for people to get along • Makes what we do a true ministry in part by providing for music ministers a faith community within a faith community. A group that prays together grows together and this shows in their interpersonal and musical interactions. The fruits of prayer then become a sign of God's love to the Parish community.
Arpeggios (Picking patterns with pick or fingers or a combination)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To contrast refrain and verse • To add another rhythmic texture to an ensemble's sound • To add variety across songs • To avoid the rut of having all the guitarists doing the same thing • To help keep a consistent beat in a song that has long tones in the melody • To begin a song simply with one guitar, leaving room for building by gradually adding instruments & voices. A song that evolves keeps the congregation involved and interested. • To do a whole song simply with one guitar when appropriate (e.g., "Silent Night" is made for this). Usually meditative songs are best for this.
Scales (for improvising)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can devise bass runs and treble fills - particularly appropriate at the ends of phrases and where there are long notes in the melody. Should be coordinated with others in the ensemble who might do fills (e.g., bass, piano, flute, other guitars) An example might be doubling a bass run with the bass guitar or piano. Unless carefully coordinated, more than one instrument doing a fill often doesn't work. Also care must be taken to identify when to return to chordal accompaniment. The flow of the music should not be interrupted and fills should never dominate or "run over" the melody. • Can embellish or create melodies for instrumental verses

<p>Note reading</p>	<p>etc.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Overall an excellent tool for enhancing a guitar ensemble's ability to lead a congregation especially when there are no instruments carrying or reinforcing the melody. Keep in mind that notes on guitar music are transposed up an octave to fit on the treble clef. This means that to play the vocal line in the correct octave, you have to play it an octave higher than it's written. (It doesn't necessarily have to be transposed to be effective.) ● Playing the melody on intros to songs especially Psalms since it helps congregation and cantor find the melody ● Playing melody on instrumental pieces or for extra verses on songs that run short ● Playing a flute or other C instrument part or even a vocal line (melody, harmony, descant, or some combination) through part or all of a song (here's an idea: play the echo on the refrain of Blest Be The Lord) ● Helping vocalists learn their parts ● Checking out or learning new music ● Reinforce singing by building melodic lines into chord choices (e.g., using chords that have melody notes on top) especially helpful at the beginning of refrain and verse or in situations where finding a note is difficult. (Good piano players do this all the time) ● Choosing chords that have a harmony line in the top note (if your vocalist(s) is(are) strong enough to carry the melody alone this can give the ensemble an interesting sound)
<p>Moveable chord forms (turning open position chords into barre chords)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Greatly expands your chord vocabulary, partly because if you don't know a chord already, you can figure it out ● Can add variety to an ensemble's sound by not playing the same old voicings on every song and/or by not playing the same chord voicings as the guitarist next to you ● In conjunction with note reading can be used to build melody or harmony lines into chords thereby reinforcing singing and enhancing ensemble sound ● Can be used to contrast refrain and verse by, for example, using higher-pitched four-note voicings on the verse and using big, lower-pitched five-and-six-note voicings on the refrain. Could even combine this with an arpeggio on the verse ● Can break up long one-chord passages by changing voicings ● Phrasing chord voicings to support vocal phrasing (AKA using patterns of voicings that parallel rises and falls in the melody).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is absolutely essential to the approach of learning “families” of chords (chord voicings that are harmonically related). An example of a “family” of chords would be all the voicings for G, C, D7 chords on the inner 4 strings. Learning these in harmonic sequence, working your way up and down the neck, enables you to construct an accompaniment that rises and falls with the melody’s movement and phrasing.
<p>Transposition (changing key and/or changing what chords you play)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing the key of song that is too high or too low (like this ever happens!) to sing • With a capo, changing the "virtual key" so you're playing chords (and fancy licks?) you know • When there is more than one guitarist, having one play capo'd up and in the same "actual" key to avoid the rut of everyone playing the same chord voicings. This give variety and fullness to the ensemble's sound. Arpeggios are nice too when capo'd up • If you wish you had a mandolin, capo high (OK, I know it's not quite the same but maybe a twelve string comes close)
<p>Strum Patterns (having a healthy vocabulary of patterns)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can establish a fundamental rhythm that holds ensemble together - especially helpful when other instrument parts lack rhythmic definition • When honed with a metronome can make the difference between an ensemble maintaining or losing control of the tempo • Consider this: the strumming guitar <i>is</i> the drummer. If you want to improve your strumming listen to good drummers and ask yourself: "How does what the drummer is doing support and augment the ensemble?" And "How can I translate that to what I do in my ensemble?" A good rhythm guitarist has the ears of a drummer. • When chosen with an ear toward rhythmic motifs (often-used rhythm patterns) that are built into the melody, can greatly enhance the rhythmic feel of the melody thereby strengthening singing. • Can create contrast from refrain to verse by using different patterns for each or even by using an arpeggio on the verse and strumming on verse • A more advanced skill would be to establish a pattern but adapt it to the movement of the melody throughout both doubling the rhythms and setting them up. This could include doing rhythmic fills or supporting the fills of other instruments. A good drummer does this.

BEING AN ENSEMBLE PLAYER
(skill list above also includes possible ensemble uses for skills)

- *Developing an ensemble ear:* listen to recorded and live music with an ear for the big picture: how do the pieces fit together? How do the pieces "feed off of each other" rhythmically, harmonically, and melodically? What is the "division of labor" between the parts? Try listening to the Beatles (e.g., the White Album) this way.
- *Having an ear for the ensemble sound:* Where do I fit in? What can I do to strengthen the ensemble rhythmically, harmonically, and melodically.
- *Skill building with an ear toward enhancing your ensemble:* Where is the need? This requires vision of what is possible. See first item.
- *Listen, listen, listen.* Two ways of fostering the split attention needed to play and listen:
 1. Play a lot with others. Develop ways of sharing the musical workload. Make what you do fit with what others are doing. When developing an arrangement, start with one instrument, say, rhythm guitar or piano, and add the rest one by one, building on the foundation always keeping the vocals in mind (in ear).
 2. Play with a metronome. This accomplishes two purposes: it improves your time-keeping ability and it fosters the ability to gear your playing to something outside yourself.
- *Tempos:* Be a drummer. Picking appropriate tempos requires attention to the text's rate (can the words be sung clearly and be understood) and meaning (especially the emotions expressed). A poor tempo can put a congregation asleep and kill the spirit of a song, or can do away with participation because they can't keep up with the words. Maintaining a consistent tempo requires nothing short of working with a metronome to develop an ear for tempo. Otherwise, instead of gearing your tempo to an external standard, you end up gearing your tempo to your subjective experience of the music (e.g., you might slow down on the hard parts and speed up on the easy parts because to you it seems like things are happening too fast on the hard parts and are happening too slow on the easy parts.)
- *Coordinating with and supporting singing.* All the skills listed here in one way or another should be aimed at this.
- *Clear, organized, and inviting intros and clear, coordinated endings.* This takes planning. Some notes: On songs unfamiliar to the congregation play the whole refrain as an intro with someone carrying the melody instrumentally. Use crescendos and other organized instrumental cues in conjunction with cantor gestures to mark entrances. Coordinated endings, *including cutoffs*, add a nice professional polish to an ensemble.
- *Mistakes: "spinning straw into gold", "follow the leader", or "the art of making mistakes".* Being able to make mistakes and keep the flow of the music going is absolutely crucial. Having an acknowledged musical leader helps. Having a "what if" plan helps. Working with a metronome with the goal, not of perfection but of keeping the flow no matter what, helps. Eye contact helps. For the acknowledged leader, having blatantly obvious ways of marking the beginning of verses or refrains helps.
- *Keeping it simple and solid when the going gets shaky.* (Need I say more?)
- *Feeding off the rhythms and lines of other players.* (This is both spontaneous and planned)
- *Long tones and spaces in the melody: What to do?* This is one place where an ensemble can shine. This is the place for organized fills etc. The point is to continue and augment the

movement of the music. The best use of this space is to find something that will mirror and/or reinforce the phrasing of the melody.

- *More players means each does a bit less.* Division of labor again. Always keep in mind the overall ensemble sound. Provide space in your playing for other instruments to come through and carry some of the weight.
- *Use space wisely.* Here I'm talking about the use of silence (rests) for rhythmic effect. Often times what you don't play is at least as important as what you do play. Guitar players and especially bass players too often forget this and lose a great deal of rhythmic effectiveness as a result. Silence, used wisely, marks a rhythm or beat as strongly as a note and can even make the notes you play more effective. On occasion, the use of silence by the entire ensemble to mark a rhythm can be extremely effective.
- *Who is the drummer?* Someone has to be. Most often it's the rhythm guitarist. A better situation is when the rhythm guitar and bass integrate their parts together so they together are the "drummer". A keyboard player who can improvise can also add a great deal of rhythmic solidity to an ensemble. Get a drummer and/or percussionist on top of that and you could really cook. Conversely, liturgical ensembles that lack a "drummer" can be deadly to the spirit of a congregation.
- *Who's covering the melody?* On intros and unfamiliar songs, this is a must.