

GUITARTEACHER

John Stropes

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By Ben Woolman

How a dedicated teacher and scholar created the world's only college-level program in fingerstyle guitar.



John Stropes with the late fingerstyle master Michael Hedges. Photo courtesy of John Stropes

Back in the early 1980s, guitar teacher and historian John Stropes concluded that the world of fingerstyle guitar—encompassing such diverse instrumentalists as Leo Kottke, John Fahey, and Michael Hedges—needed, in his words, “a college-level program and accurate transcriptions of its most significant repertoire in order to flourish.” Stropes worked steadily toward that goal throughout the ‘80s and ‘90s, as chairman of the guitar department at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music, and as the publisher/author of exacting fingerstyle transcriptions (most notably the books *Michael Hedges: Rhythm, Sonority, Silence* and *Leo Kottke: Eight Songs*) through his company Stropes Editions (www.stropes.com). Now Stropes is finally realizing his vision of guitar education: as director of guitar studies at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Peck School of the Arts, he leads the world's only college program offering both BFA and MM guitar performance degrees in fingerstyle guitar. Though only in its third year, the program will soon move into a new state-of-the-art facility, Kenilworth Square East, housing rehearsal spaces, a stunning recital hall, a screening room, and audio and video production studios.

Multimedia Teaching

Stropes' approach to guitar instruction reaches far beyond the fundamental one-on-one interaction between teacher and pupil. He incorporates audio and video recordings of artists' performances to enhance the learning experience. Since 1982, Stropes has collected videos of concerts, workshops, and interviews with scores of guitarists, including Kottke, Hedges, John Fahey, Taj Mahal, Pierre Bensusan, John Renbourn, and Sergio and Odair Assad. “We can watch what the artists are doing and understand the subtleties,” Stropes says. “We can get it right. We are, in essence, learning directly from the artists themselves.”

Changing the Equation

In addition to private lessons, master classes, ensembles, and classes in theory, history, composition, sight-reading, technique, and guitar pedagogy, Stropes creates new challenges every semester as part of a much broader mission. “When expectations are static,” he says, “students usually figure out some clever way to just get a good grade. That's not life.”

One such assignment is to accurately transcribe a guitar piece of the student's choice. “Being able to transcribe a piece is

really a vocational component for this program, and it has been an eye-opening experience for the students," he says. "They quickly understand what a challenge it is, the attention to detail that is required. It's like a great puzzle; it feels so rewarding when you finally get into it and get it right. It will be great to have a batch of people who can transcribe at a high level and make more fingerstyle music available."

Stropes also engages students with music journalism, which encourages them to think more deeply about how fingerstyle guitar fits into the broader picture of music. "Guitar majors must write and produce a half-hour radio show on a topic related to fingerstyle guitar," Stropes explains. "They have to do the research, put their thoughts together, write a script, and then produce the program." The students' finished work is then broadcast locally.

Keeping It Real

Stropes sets exceptionally high performance standards for his students. "When a student comes in, you feel a strong sense of responsibility," he says. "Why has this person chosen to come here, to ask for my help? A student is here for a serious purpose, or they wouldn't be here at all. What you owe this student is an honest opinion, and that is where you can't get away from saying even the most difficult things."

Raja Chaudhuri, professional WTA tennis coach and a long-time student of Stropes, comments that it can be tough for a teacher to balance "that straight honesty without being discouraging." He finds that Stropes "inspires you to find a path, so that whatever you need to accomplish seems very, very possible. He handles his students like he's handling an inner genius that they may not even realize exists. He's just there to point it out, to encourage it, if you are willing to do what you have to do to let it be exposed."

Along with fingerstyle guitar, students in the guitar program can specialize in jazz (led by faculty member Don Linke), classical (René Izquierdo), and flamenco (Peter Baime). Working with Stropes, these teachers established a baseline for all students. Stropes says, "We took an oath to keep it real—to always work toward every student understanding that it's important, it's music; and to never allow students to just go through the notes and pretend that it's OK if I play like a 'student' today and maybe tomorrow I'll figure out how to put some life into it. At the end of the day, this is the only way anybody can be happy, a teacher or a student."

The Future Is Now

"The exciting thing about guitar is that it's a new field in a lot of ways, and it seems like we are just at the beginning of a great period," Stropes reflects. "A lot of what we do is new research. Students are in a position to write a paper and then have it published. It's significant beyond just being another assignment. Once there are enough people together with a common vision and enthusiasm, you can feel it reach a critical mass. This guitar program is larger than the sum of its parts."

John's Advice: Choosing Repertoire

When selecting music for his students, Stropes likes to "visualize what a student will accomplish by working with a particular new composition or study. Like the Icelandic inventor Chester Thordarson, I run the experiment in my mind. I picture the student playing each note. I try to select repertoire that will provide students with an opportunity to face up to their weaknesses. The diligence required for success in this program is a quality that will serve students well in life."

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