

GUITARTEACHER

A close-up portrait of a man with curly brown hair and a beard, smiling warmly. He is wearing a dark, ribbed t-shirt. The background is plain white.

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WILLIAM KANENGISER

Teaches tone production
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William Kanengiser

LAGQ guitarist helps his students achieve better tone and effortless technique

BY SEAN MCGOWAN

Atremendously gifted player in the world of contemporary classical guitar, William Kanengiser has been recognized for his virtuosity and lyrical interpretation of compositions with many accolades, including first prize at the Concert Artists Guild Competition.

Kanengiser, a founding member of the Grammy-award-winning Los Angeles Guitar Quartet, has also recorded several unique solo programs for GSP Recordings exploring a diverse repertoire from Mozart to Bartók and music from Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. His most recent release, *Classical Cool* (GSP), features arrangements of jazz standards and original pieces by Dušan Bogdanović and other jazz-influenced composers.

A HISTORY OF PRACTICAL TEACHING

In addition to his busy recording and touring schedules, Kanengiser maintains a full teaching schedule at the University of Southern California and conducts workshops and master classes throughout the country. A former student of the prestigious USC guitar program, he assumed a full-time teaching position in the Classical Guitar department after earning a graduate degree with high honors. He has also produced two highly acclaimed instructional videos, *Effortless Classical Guitar* and *Classical Guitar Mastery* (Music Sales).

In master class settings and preconcert lectures, Kanengiser eloquently articulates valuable, pragmatic information. He advocates tone, musicality, and artistry as being among the most important attributes of a successful guitarist. “My personal crusade is all about tone production. I feel that for some time, players have sacrificed a fullness of sound and projection for rapidity of fingers.”

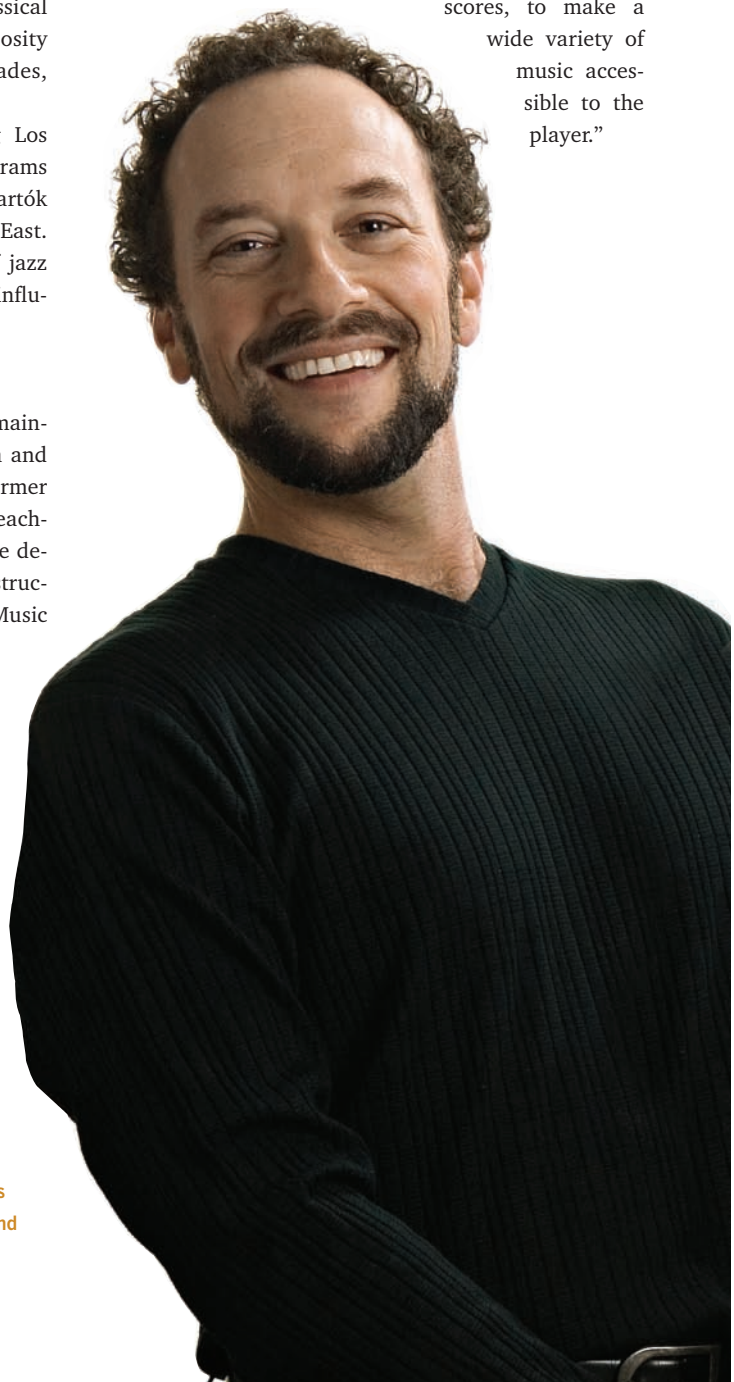
Over the years, teaching has allowed Kanengiser the opportunity to examine his own artistry and communicate it to his students. “As with most guitarists, I began teaching out of the immediate necessity to make some extra change between gigs. I quickly discovered, however, that I really enjoyed teaching and found that it forced me to evaluate aspects of my technique and performance to clearly articulate to others. For me, one of the great joys of my musical life is to see the moment of ‘Eureka!’ that a student gets when a new idea really sinks in.”

“If you can see it in your mind, you can do it with your fingers,” Kanengiser tells his students. “Always be able to play through a piece from beginning to end in your mind before stepping onstage.”

VERSATILITY OF CLASSICAL TRAINING

Like many other guitarists of his generation, Kanengiser was initially drawn to the sounds of rock and pop music, and took up classical as a supplemental means of study. “I began studying classical on the presumption that, if I mastered it, I would be able to play any style. After years, I discovered that I really wasn’t a great jazz or blues player, but the technical and musical discipline that it gave me made it possible for me to cross over reasonably well into the other popular styles.”

Kanengiser quickly adds, “There is certainly a benefit to mastering the ability to read scores, including piano and orchestral scores, to make a wide variety of music accessible to the player.”



KANENGISER'S TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

In his teaching studio, Kanengiser assesses the unique qualities of each student rather than prescribing a uniform, all-encompassing approach: "Some teachers have a very structured, predetermined approach for all students. I tend to be more intuitive and reactive. I try to get a feeling for what the student most needs to work on in their playing at the present time. I also get them to increase their awareness of what their hands are telling them. I like to say, 'It's not so important what you play, but how you play it!'"

While there is increasingly more available in the way of repertoire and pedagogical materials for classical guitar, Kanengiser says that teachers need to be creative and resourceful when addressing performance issues with students. "A comprehensive, didactic system of pedagogy—as it has existed in the worlds of classical piano or violin, for instance—has never really taken hold with the classical guitar. Only recently has a standardization of technique and interpretation been accepted in the United States, due in part to the work of Aaron Shearer, Bruce Holzman, and my guitar guru, Pepe Romero. I'm very encouraged by the steady improvement of the level of applicants we get at USC, however, and it gives me much hope for the future of our instrument.

"Music is one of the few disciplines that still relies heavily on the master-apprentice relationship," he continues. "You simply cannot become a great musician without direct contact with a great teacher. My teacher, Pepe Romero, instilled in me the importance of passing along the lore of the guitar and its continuum. His teacher was his father, Celedonio, who considered his students to be his guitar children and their students his grandchildren. Like a family tree, the line of the classical guitar remains intact as long as we pass its unwritten secrets to the next generation."

How I Teach Tone Production

One of the primary concepts William Kanengiser tries to get across to his students is the importance of good tone. "I really try to emphasize the importance of developing a full, rich sound, one that can be modulated to a wide variety of tone colors," he says. "The guitar has one of the widest palettes of sound available to any acoustic instrument, and I feel that we have to work hard to maximize its sonic potential." He specifically advises students: "Drive that string down a bit into the top to get all the richness and resonance of the guitar!"

MUSICIANSHIP AND SOUND

What does Kanengiser look for in a student? "I'm lucky in that my students tend to be pretty advanced players by the time I see them. I like to see a good foundation of technique and some successful performance experience. Most of all, I look for that intangible quality of musicianship, where a student intuitively knows how to be expressive and truly loves the guitar and music making."

For Kanengiser, sound is his top issue, and he always tries to get students to focus on it. "What do we have without our sound?" he says. "It is the essence of our musical expression and personality. The mechanics of it

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are very specific and scientific, but the most important element, I've found, is the ability to be fully aware of the sound one wants to create and to compare it constantly to what is actually coming out of the guitar. When the two align—voilà!"

EFFORTLESS TECHNIQUE

Kanengiser advocates the cultivation of effortless technique (explored in great detail on his instructional DVDs) and eschews excessive tension, which may lead to injury. Besides tone production, he says, "My other personal campaign is to use the minimum amount of muscle tension and energy to do what you need to do. I don't subscribe to the 'no pain, no gain' philosophy. Instead, I use the 'happy hand' mantra: if it feels bad, it

probably is! Guitar playing should feel natural, comfortable, and enjoyable, as much as possible."

CREATING A FUTURE FOR CLASSICAL GUITAR

Kanengiser, a member of the board of directors of the Guitar Foundation of America (www.guitarfoundation.org), strongly supports the initiative to implement guitar programs into public schools. "The guitar is the most universal and popular instrument in the world. It's crazy that all kids aren't directly exposed to it in schools. The disadvantage of the guitar in a public school setting is that it's not a team sport, unlike band, chorus, or

orchestra. My solution is to establish guitar ensemble programs at schools that combine the solitary act of guitar technique with a large group model of performance. There is a lot of support for this idea, and GFA is actively pursuing corporate funding for expanding the profile of the guitar in public schools." ■

