

Graded music for classical guitar

Dr Christopher Pepler www.guitarsa.co.za



Classical Guitar (CG) enthusiasts often debate the need for some sort of grading system for CG music. Some folk contend that it is unnecessary, but I think that it is a helpful concept. My reasons are:

1. It helps me to select new pieces if I have some idea of my current level of play and available pieces that match this level.
2. It helps me to plan progress to higher levels of play.
3. It is useful when seeking to enrol in workshops or master classes.
4. It gives a satisfying sense of progress.

However, all grading systems present some irksome problems. Firstly, assessing the difficulty level of a piece of music is subjective and depends a lot on the assessors experience and level of play. As a result, different assessors can grade very differently. For instance, www.tonebase.com lists Tarrega's Capricho Arabe as a beginner's level piece while www.guitarburst.com gives it an advanced level rating. This is an extreme example and I have found that a more common problem is that internet music teachers often rate pieces higher than they actually are. The second problem is that several graded lists, particularly the major music schools, contain pieces found only in collections that are not freely available on the internet. A third problem, for me at least, is that pieces listed contain technical challenges but are often not musically attractive.

Here are some options available to those who want some sort of informal grading system:

1. There are collections available for purchase, such as Stanley Yates' 'Graded Repertoire for Guitar' books One and Two', but there are some distinct limitations to these sorts of collections. They are not cheap, the grade levels are very broad (easy, moderate, and challenging), and you pay for many pieces of music that you may not like and probably will not use.

2. Pearson have produced a booklet called 'GCSE, AS and A level music difficulty levels booklet' which you can find at <https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/A%20Level/Music/2016/Specification%20and%20sample%20assessments/GCSE-AS-and-A-level-Music-Difficulty-Levels-Booklet.pdf>
It has a section for CG listing some 700 pieces in composer alphabetic order and showing each piece's Level from 1 to 9. They describe levels 1 to 4 as 'less difficult', level 5 as 'standard' and levels 6-9 as 'more difficult'.
3. Jean-François Delcamp has made a large collection of graded music available to members of <http://www.classicalguitardelcamp.com/> These pieces are arranged into twelve sections from D01 (easiest) to D12 (most difficult).
4. Bradford Werner has also listed a limited number of graded pieces in three categories and you can find these at <https://www.thisisclassicalguitar.com/sheet-music-for-classical-guitar>
5. I have also attempted to group a very limited number of suitable CG pieces into Basic, Transitional, and Intermediate – see www.guitarsa.co.za
6. Probably the most useful tool I have found so far is the 2,300 piece graded database at www.guitarburst.com. This site has excellent search features and grades each CG piece between 1 and 20. Levels 1-5 equate to pieces for beginners, 6-10 for intermediate players, 11-15 for advanced players, and 16-20 for professional performers. This database is particularly useful in that it provides ratings for both technical difficulty and ease of reading, plus the highest position on the keyboard, the era of composition, and details of sources of the actual music.

My best advice would be to use guitarburst.com as your basic grading resource and to supplement it with the other resources mentioned.

To help you fine-tune your grading system I suggest you divide the levels into the following basic structure:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Beginner: | guitarburst.com levels 1-2 |
| 2. Elementary: | guitarburst.com levels 3-4 |
| 3. Transitional: | guitarburst.com levels 5-6 |
| 4. Lower: | guitarburst.com levels 7-8 |
| 5. Intermediate: | guitarburst.com levels 9-10 |
| 6. Higher/Advanced: | guitarburst.com levels 11-15 |
| 7. Master/Professional: | guitarburst.com levels 16-20 |

The average amateur player will only be interested in the beginner, lower, and intermediate levels because advanced and professional players will probably not need any sort of grading system.

Search guitarburst for pieces that you can play fluently in order to get an idea of your current playing level. Then, either select additional pieces from this group or from one or two grades above your current level. Don't be tempted to reach too far beyond your current ability as this may well frustrate and demotivate you.