

A Soundboard Feature Review
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[Learning Guitar Fingerboard Theory, by Robert Phelps, published by Mel Bay Publications, Inc. (for 10 years), is now self-published as the Guitar Workbook]

“As I conceived of the book initially, I was trying to solve certain problems which seemed to be universal among the students coming to me for study. A vast majority of beginning and intermediate-level guitarists function on the guitar with little or no concept of the instrument as a whole. A pianist of age nine can learn the layout of notes visually with little difficulty, whereas a comparable guitar student learns only a few notes in the first position with the structural layout of the instrument obscured. I wished to eliminate this obscurity by replacing it with a concept of the interrelated symmetries of music theory, the movable aspect of fingered patterns and ear training.”

This lofty aspiration heralds the beginning of Rob Phelps' author's forward. In my own experience I have certainly found knowledge of theory and ear training among incoming students to be weak, at best. In addition to the musical-expressive barriers this imposes upon the student, there is the added practical barrier of progress through the academic milieu. The Cleveland Institute of Music, where I teach, has one of the highest theory standards and proficiency requirements in the United States. I have seen

too many guitar students struggle and, occasionally, wash out all together due to the inability to pass their theory requirements. These students were often bright and extremely talented, with good ears and refined musical instincts. Nevertheless, because of theory deficiencies in their backgrounds, they were forced to either greatly restrict their practice time in order to study theory and ear training, or to seek training at another school. I fully support the Institute's, and any school's high theory standards; after all, this makes my job that much easier since I don't then have to do the theory teacher's job as well as my own when trying make a point about interpretation or analysis. However, I have frequently wished that students would come to me better prepared. Rob Phelps' book takes a giant stride in fulfilling my wish.

The book is intended to be used by students at the beginning through conservatory levels. When used with younger students, however, Phelps suggests a couple of modifications; which will be discussed at the appropriate point in this review.

Chapter One starts at square one by introducing preparatory concepts. These include definitions and illustrations of the most basic concepts like pitch, interval, sharp, flat, half step, whole step, etc. Phelps then defines an octave and demonstrates how the guitar fingerboard is set up. He then introduces standard staff notation and his own "Guitar-Staff System." The GSS represents each string's pitches as a separate staff-line. Thus the entire fingerboard is represented by six staff-lines, with the lowest-staff representing the pitches found on the sixth string and the

highest staff the pitches of the first string. The idea is to simultaneously integrate a diagram of the guitar neck and knowledge of standard staff notation. A unique blending of staff notation and tablature, it is an interesting and effective concept. In the GSS, numbers in circles represent strings and frets are indicated by Roman numerals, as in standard guitar notation. The student's first assignment is to write in the pitches for the entire neck on the GSS. After this is done, the student writes in only the natural notes on another diagram

A bit of nit-picking here concerning the engraving of the musical examples: the examples here appear to have been computer type-set and the font used is very crude, with lots of "jaggies." I hope this will be improved in future printings, since, though clear, the examples look a bit rough and are not at the same visual quality level as the textual material presented.

The guitar-staff system is the backbone of the book's approach. As I mentioned above, it is in some ways similar to tablature, with the corresponding advantages of defining where on the neck the notes are to be played. Like any type of notational variant, it takes a short time to become familiar with it, but it has some definite pluses, especially when working with the beginning student. A new student of mine who is bright but badly deficient in reading, caught on to the idea immediately. She was familiar with tablature and easily transferred this knowledge to the GSS. This indicates that this method might be a particularly good one to use when introducing tab-payers to staff notation.

By the end of Chapter One the student is able to draw and name the notes on the entire fingerboard. Phelps stresses that these notes are not memorized yet, but the student can then figure out where any note is by referring back to the GSS.

In Chapter Two Phelps introduces the core of his theoretical approach. This consists of five steps, which are done in every key. The first four are written on the GSS, the last on the regular staff. Almost all playing throughout the book is done by position playing only, with the left-hand fingers always in order on adjacent frets. As Phelps points out, this often does not produce the easiest or most logical fingering, but it helps to produce the clearest conception of the fingerboard.

Phelps illustrates the steps by drawing out each one in the key of C Major. Step one has the student drawing all the notes and their letter names that can be played in the seventh position on the GSS. In step two the student draws a two octave C Major scale in seventh position. The seventh position is used because it is the one location on the fingerboard where a two octave C Major scale can be played entirely in one position. The rest of the keys are also played primarily in locations which allow them to be played in one position, the same fingering pattern as the C Major scale, thus keeping most of the scale and interval fingering patterns the same. This allows the student to make a clear connection between the fingering patterns of the left hand and the various notes, intervals and scales of all the different keys. By keeping the fingering and intervallic patterns consistent, Phelps removes much of the intimidation of the

“hard” keys, those with multitudes of sharps or flats or which in other ways fall outside the normal “guitar” keys. The student then plays and sings (with letter names or solfege syllables depending on the student’s training background) the bottom to top. In step three the student charts the scale’s ascending intervals on the GSS and then writes them on a regular staff. Phelps explains the concept of interval inversions and then gives the student a formula to use to chart the descending intervals (the inversions of the ascending intervals). Step four has the student chart the descending intervals in the C Major scale as in step three. In step five the student writes the intervals on a regular staff in ascending order, the octave first, then a major second, major third, perfect fourth, etc. followed by their (descending) inversions. The student then plays and sings all the intervals. It is essential at this point, however that the students actually read the notes and don’t simply do things by rote pattern repetition when playing the exercises, otherwise much of the value of the book as an aid to sight-reading is lost. These five steps are then repeated in the drills for every key. As you can imagine, Chapter two is the lengthiest in the book, start on p.21 and ending on p. 98.

Phelps suggests modifying the ordering of the steps for younger students, having them do only steps one and two in as many keys as necessary in order to get the ideas down. After mastering steps one and two, he suggests that you then take the student through step 3 in as many keys as necessary until this step is assimilated. Ditto steps four and five. This makes a lot of sense, and I suggest that this approach may even be used with college-level students if they are having difficulty with any particular steps.

Chapter Three introduces the triad. Phelps describes and explains the intervallic structure of the four basic triads (major, minor, augmented, and diminished) and then draws an example of the exercises based on C Major. The student first writes, then sings and plays the two octave major, minor, diminished, and augmented triads, all in the same positions that were used for each key before (with occasional extensions of the index finger to the next lower fret when playing the minor and diminished triads and extensions of the fourth finger to the next higher fret when playing the augmented triad) to keep things consistent with the work in the previous chapter. After this is done, the student writes out the triads based on the scale degrees of the key and then plays and sings the exercises. This process is continued in all keys. Phelps covers the other keys in exactly the same pattern as in Chapter Two, starting each in the position. This allows the fingering patterns of the left hand to remain identical to the C Major example.

Chapter Four deals with chromatic ear training. This basically involves exercises identical to step five of Chapter Two, but instead of just using the intervals found in the key, the chromatic notes of the scale are used as well. This is carried out through all the keys and, as before is both played and sung.

At this point the student has acquired a fairly solid understanding of the fingerboard and its scale and intervallic relationships. Phelps then supplies an Appendix; which expands on some aspects of harmony, introducing the concepts of relative keys, primary and secondary chords, minor scales, and parallel keys. As the last part of the

Appendix, Phelps includes exemplary answers to the exercises in the previous chapters. A student can therefore do an exercise in Chapters 2,3, or 4 and check it with the answers in the Appendix. Phelps hasn't done each exercise in full, he just gives the student the basic information to check his work. This allows the student to correct mistakes but it eliminates any chance of "cheating".

Conclusion

Learning Guitar Fingerboard Theory is well thought out and consistent. If applied as directed it should greatly enhance any student's understanding and fluency in relating basic theoretical ideas to the fingerboard. The presentation avoids unnecessary jargon, and Phelps puts things in a concise and straightforward manner. Some of the concepts are, by nature not easily explained and the assistance of an instructor will be helpful. If the drills, particularly in the "guitar keys" are repeated occasionally the book will also greatly enhance the student's sight-reading ability. Phelps' book would be an ideal text for a fingerboard theory class; it is suitable for use by dedicated students from age ten to adult. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.