



# B a s s

## Low Fingers: Not Just for Low Frequencies

by Paul Ousley

I was taught (by several different teachers) that the fingers should stay low, that is, close to the fingerboard, when they are not depressing the strings. Over the years, I have noticed a great deal of latitude afforded some young string players. I have long thought this approach should be fundamental to playing and teaching. To my astonishment, I have learned that the reason for this promiscuity is that teachers place different degrees of importance on this subject.

All too often we see young players treating the open strings as though they were flapping in the wind. They straighten the fingers to avoid being hit by the flying metal. I found it being taught this way by one teacher. He admonished the student to lift the finger off of the string as though it were a bird flying away. I wonder how long it took that student to learn not to do that! Still others execute open strings in this manner even though they have been taught not to.

I think most teachers and players will agree that the shape of the left hand is critical to the ease and accuracy of playing. By shape I mean: the curve, spacing, and angle of the fingers to the string. Still some teachers allow students to lift the fingers to astronomical heights in favor of wider vibrato or less tension. The problem is that these players tend

to do this in all circumstances not just those where wider vibrato is desired. To my way of thinking, this wastes motion, reduces accuracy and makes it unnecessarily cumbersome to play faster passages.

In its simplest terms, the notion I would like to promote is that the fingers should not have to be more than a half-inch or so from the strings. There are, of course, many more specific (and in my case, more zealous) applications. The fingers can always be one note, one shift, or one string crossing ahead of the music, much the way we learn to read ahead of where we are actually playing.

It may help to suggest a change of mind. Many players think of the fingers as being up until we find a place to put them down. I suggest that we think of the fingers as being down in a specifically designated place until we need to lift them. When we do lift them, they also have a specific location to be. They are either over the next note or string that they are going to play, or they are at least hovering over the string. In other words, the fingers should be over the next note rather than the last note.

Players of the violin, viola and cello are less sympathetic to this idea because they cover significantly shorter distances and the strings are so much more eas-

ily depressed. I would like to raise the question to all string players: how do we teach a cure for these "spidery" fingers? There are clearly some effective ways to do so — witness the playing by many of our students. Still, I am troubled by the idea that some are short-changing their potential by allowing themselves to fly off the handle.

We are all fortunate to have students who need only a hint to incorporate an idea into their playing. And we have students who need more direction in what we want them to learn. I have used mirrors, video cameras, and a few techniques which are too complex to put into writing to help students effectively increase their accuracy while decreasing their fingers travel time. But, I am interested in some more ideas and responses. Please contact me: Paul Ousley, 706 West Third Street., Northfield, MN 55057, 612-330-1513, 507-663-1900, ousley@augsborg.edu or ousley@stolaf.edu

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