



# B a s s

## Endpins: Near the Root of All Evil

by Paul Ousley

When I see young bass players who look as though they might tip over at the slightest breeze, whose bows don't travel straight on the strings, or whose shifts are jerky and inaccurate, my inclination is to look in one place: down at the end pin. Because so many are in various states of disrepair, it is a good place to start looking for causes to the seemingly unrelated problems mentioned above.

Because bassists do so much shifting, the freedom of the left hand is critical and the role of the endpin is even greater. I remind my students that violinists and violists place the instrument under the chin in such a way that they can take both hands away without dropping it. Cellists do much the same thing...except not under the chin. Try asking a young player if he/she can remove the left hand from the bass. If the bass falls backward, chances are very good that the weight of the bass has been leaning against the player's thumb. This makes it difficult for the player to shift easily — if at all!

Ironically, the stance for bass players is much less clear cut than the posture for other instruments; there are almost as many approaches as there are players. But if the endpin doesn't work, possibilities are severely limited. A bad endpin can prevent the bass from being situated at an optimum height and angle.

Most cellists figure out some way to combat this problem early on because the angle from the end pin to the floor is so acute. Most memorable for me was the technique used by one young cellist at a youth orchestra audition. She sat down, set her music on the stand, tightened her bow, and then pulled from her pocket a rock stop. She calmly looked up at the panel and said, "Excuse me."

She then gave the disk a voluminous spit and promptly flipped it over to smack it on the floor. Apparently, the moisture arrested the slipping.

Bass players who don't have endpins that are secure and adjustable often compromise unwittingly on the balance and position of the instrument. Usually, they have to stand the bass up more and more vertically until it doesn't slip. If a player chooses to tilt the bass, all manner of ropes, wires, screws, clamps and rubber stoppers are affixed to the chair, the instrument or the floor.

If the endpin is not adjustable to the correct height, players have to slouch to place the bow properly. Once tired of that, most young players stand up straighter and draw the bow either too far from the bridge or at such an angle that it prevents good sound rather than creating it. If the person is over six feet tall, the shaft has to be particularly sturdy. An acquaintance of mine who stands to play and is 6' 8" looks as though he is drilling for oil, but the bass is at the perfect angle and height.

Bad endpins can have detrimental affect on players at every level. We have all seen players lose the grip on the stage floor, usually during a solo or audition. I recall one player's bass skidding across the floor during rehearsal. It not only bounced like a drum roll, but it had a nearly discernible pitch. The conductor stopped and glared at the timpanist, "You are in the wrong place!" The timpanist calmly replied, "You stopped the orchestra at bar 126. I don't come in until 132. Besides, my timpani are tuned to F and B-flat. The sound we all heard was somewhere between a G and a G-sharp." Shuffling feet gave the timpanist an unde-

niable vote of confidence. The conductor never did figure out what had happened.

A creative, entrepreneurial classmate of mine at Eastman designed and built a near lethal end pin attachment. The razor sharp tip was made of tungsten carbide which is the substance used to cut diamonds. It was fantastic! One could play on marble or cement without being given the "slip." At one time, it was being used by about half the members of Eastman's three orchestras. It was too good to be true. The stage manager at the Eastman Theater figured out that the increased damage to the cello/bass side of the already well-worn stage was being caused by this new attachment. He was tipped off, you might say, by my stand partner. Her bass, which was particularly heavy, had driven the carbide tip so far into the floor that when she tried to dislodge it, the entire attachment came off the bass and stood in the floor like a sundial. The stage manager banned the attachments. The life of the endpin was shortened in favor the Theater floor.

If the screw is stripped or the shaft is bent and difficult to slide in or out, break down and replace it with any one of several types of quality endpins. Even an inexpensive bass should have a reliable endpin.

Most of us don't look down at the floor while we are teaching. But for the sources of some very basic problems, it is the perfect place to start.

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