

MMEA: “Free Bassing” with Rosemary Poetzel reported by Cristina Seaborn

With fifty string basses in the class at MMEA, we all had a chance for hands-on participation in this dynamic two hour bass class. Rosemary Poetzel from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, covered a year’s worth of lesson plans, including fall of the second year.

Our first challenge was to balance the bass on our belly with our hands free from holding up the bass. Standing to the right side of the bass is a beginner’s position. The “bass player salute” taught us left hand position: 1st finger between eyebrows, 2nd finger on tip of your nose, 4th finger on your lower lip, thumb in your ear. For extensions, open your mouth and the pinkie got extended!

We were instructed to touch the top of the bass scroll before setting our left hand position on the finger board, always with a relaxed approach.

We learned to pizzicato with our right arm following through to the right side of the bass, rather than plucking above (or perpendicular) to the bass for the follow through.

To set the height of the end pin on the bass, the player should be able to reach down to touch the bridge with an extended right arm. The player would be in the beginning bass position with the right side of the bass leaning on their belly.

The French bow hold required the pinkie to cover the dot on the frog, the thumb to remain bent and flexible, and other fingers were slightly spread over

the frog. The German bow hold was recommended for students “with long arms, or students switching from violin, viola, or cello.”

Our teacher was quite demanding with us to keep our bows straight. She gave us each ping pong balls to balance on our bow while playing. We had to hold six beat notes and dotted quarter notes to perfection since we were already “6 month” bass students.

A really fun way to learn shifting to positions was introduced by learning harmonics. We played the bugle call for wake up in boot camp. After learning the harmonics in the top half of the string, we learned the same harmonics on the bottom half of the string.

We advanced to thumb position and learned all our repertoire up an octave. The music was the same; only the fingering was different. We didn’t have to read ledger lines.

The most fun part of this master class was being tested for all our skills. If you failed the test, you went to the “back of the class.” She liked this quick one minute private lesson and assessment of each student, and it also kept the students moving through the class carrying their bass. The tasks for the test were: balance your bass; touch the scroll; put your left hand in position on the fingerboard; play the first song; snap on the rests; keep all four fingers down when you use the 4th finger; *don’t smile!*

Vibrato was taught by playing four down bows on an open string and doing four waves with our left hand. Eventually, the waves were converted into silent four beats of vibrato on the fingerboard. The thumb was anchored and the hand waved. Then the finger would be put down, but still no bow was added until weeks had gone by. We were told that the problem with vibrato is using the bow. Finally, when students had a look of boredom on their faces, it was the time for the challenge of using the bow on vibrato.

This is the first time she let students use one finger at a time. Long notes still had to be counted to their full duration.

Rosemary Poetzel ended the class with “Do you want to try ‘Free Bassing’? The kind I want to show you is legal, but it’s still addicting.” We played a walking blues bass line and volunteered to improvise a solo.

Rosemary Poetzel offers a one week bass workshop in June at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

Cristina Seaborn is pursuing a Masters in Orchestral Conducting at St. Cloud State University. She is interested in jazz string ensembles, gives workshops on improvisation, and writes for string orchestra. Contact her for copies of her self-published arrangements in fiddle, Celtic, Cajun and jazz styles. †