



# Bass

## When You Can't Stand it Anymore

by Paul Ousley

I have been getting a lot of signs of my advancing age lately: my kids would rather play with their friends than with me and I now know what a 401K is. I have tried to fend off the relentless march of time by going to the gym. A few months ago, one of my knees finally said, "Enough already!" The required surgery left me unable to stand at my bass for any length of time. I was forced to visit an old friend, my stool.

Most bass players experiment with sitting and standing. Some develop a strong preference for one or the other. Others simply adjust to specific circumstances. For example, I once had a stand partner who was a full 15 inches shorter than I am. If either of us had adjusted the music stand to our liking the other would have been unable to watch the conductor — not a bad idea in that particular situation. I *sat* to accommodate my partner. Just recently I played on a stage that was too small for the basses to sit.

Doing one or the other exclusively can be variously hard on legs and other parts, especially for long rehearsals and practice sessions. It is certainly advantageous to be comfortable playing either way. But I have words of caution for both.

For those young players who choose to stand, the balance of the

instrument is critical and somewhat elusive. If the bass leans too heavily on the left thumb, shifting becomes nearly impossible. An unintended technique for shifting often develops. The player learns to throw the bass slightly forward and then catch it again when the fingers reach their target! This is a frequent inspiration to try sitting. The ease of balance and subsequent shifting that are gained by sitting are similar to those of a violinist or violist who gets a shoulder rest. And just as on the upper strings, one should be able to take the left hand away from the neck without the instrument falling — whether sitting or standing.

Standing while playing can feel somewhat liberating and there are those who claim that the tone projects better if the instrument is more upright. Given that most of the bass tones are too low to be directional, I suspect that the improvement of projection has more to do with the comfort and preference of the players making the claim than with any acoustical phenomenon. The tone of a sitting player may be negatively influenced by something else. This brings me to my second word of caution.

As the left foot rests on a rung of the stool, the knee and/or thigh make contact with the back of the bass. This

can cause the sound to change color or volume. On some basses this makes no detectable difference. On many instruments that have good tone (a vibrant body) the change can be remarkable. The amount of muffling contact can vary from a couple of inches to a foot or more depending on the dimensions and position of the bass, whether it is a swell back or a flat back, and the dimensions of the player's legs.

The simple solution is a violin Playonair® shoulder rest positioned for the left knee. The pay-off for seated players is an improvement in tone that can be dramatic.

In the meantime, I encourage students to try playing both ways. It can lead to discoveries about the ways the player and instrument interact. Be warned that if you choose to sit, you have to carry around your own chair and plenty of witty come-back lines for those who will make "under the chin" comments directed at your shoulder rest.

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