



BASS

11 Steps For a Better Sound From Your Bass Player

by Joe Mish

When new students come into my studio for their first lesson, regardless of ability, we work to improve their sound. This article is just a “survey course” in getting students to produce a good sound on the double bass. Each step could be an article itself. I usually work to fix the easiest things first and use my judgment as to what step to address with a student.

Step 1. Bass rosin is different. Inevitably I have had many bass students come to me with rosin that more resembles violin, viola or cello rosin than the stuff double bass players use. Often, with just a couple swipes of “real” bass rosin a student’s sound will improve immensely. My preference is for Carlson’s Swedish, but Pops and Kolsteins are also very good. Once students start using bass rosin, getting them to use the right amount and keep the strings of their instrument clean is the next step to a consistent, resonant sound. Students who use too much rosin or neglect to clean their bass strings will often end up with a “catch” in the attack of the note.

Step 2. How old are those strings anyway? Students who play a school instrument are at the mercy of their school’s supply budget. Often bass strings seem to get neglected and are left for years beyond their useful life. If those bass strings date back to the Reagan Administration they are not going to sound very good. Bass string are expensive to replace, but instant rewards can come to the student with new strings. The bass will respond better, sound brighter and all of a sudden it is not such a chore to tune with harmonics. It is quite impossible to tune with harmonics when the strings are false, because the harmonics will be out of tune in addition to the jumps in pitch with even the smallest amount of adjustment of the gears.

Step 3. Invest in a good bow and maintain it. Encouraging new bass students towards the purchase of their own equipment is an important step for gauging their commitment to the instrument. A student who uses school equipment is

often stuck with the whims of the school district’s budget. If a bass bow hasn’t been rehaired since the 1st Bush Administration, a good sound is just going to be hard to get. Often a student’s first step toward owning their own instrument is the purchase of a decent wood bow to replace the fiberglass or worn-out Brazilwood bow that came with their school bass. Again instant rewards can be had as students can feel the resonance of the string or do some finesse bowing that they simply could not manage with a low quality bow. I also encourage students to protect their investment with a bow case. I have learned the hard way how fragile the bow is and how clumsy students can be when transporting them.

Step 4. Invest in a good instrument and maintain it. I have already hinted at the maintenance angle, so let’s talk basses. How many violinists, violists or cellists do you know who play on a “laminated” instrument. Laminated, huh? That’s plywood. There are at least two problems with plywood basses: the wood is too thin to get a good sound and it is too thin to maintain the shape of the instrument. I will not encourage a student to get a plywood bass; they just don’t last, no matter how good a deal they may be. I have seen too many start to fail after just a few years. If a student is going to commit to buying an instrument they need to buy a carved instrument that is built to last. Is this easy? No, but I could write a couple of articles about purchasing basses (mostly learned from my mistakes). Students with a good quality instrument can make tremendous progress in sound without a lot of help from their teacher.

Step 5. Set-up for success. The set-up of a double bass, like any string instrument, is critical. If the strings are too high it can be difficult in lower positions and impossible to play in upper ones. If the strings are too low, it can be difficult to play loud or pizzicato. If the finger board is not “dressed” or planed correctly there may not be a correct height for the bridge. A good, well-cut

bridge is the first priority for a correctly set-up bass, and if you can afford it (and find a good repair person) an adjustable bridge is a great investment. The key is finding a repair person who knows how and has practice in the set-up of the double bass. They are different from their smaller cousins. Again, a properly set-up instrument can allow students to be successful (especially in position work) with techniques they were not successful with before. Another important part of the bass set-up is an endpin that is long enough for the player and thick enough to be stable. An endpin that is at the right length can again provide instant rewards for the student.

Step 6. How do you hold the bow? Whether one chooses the French or the German style bass bow, using the correct bow hold is critical to student success in creating a good sound. No matter which bow you favor always remember that they both have their own advantages and disadvantages. I recommend teaching the one you use the best, because you will better understand how to address its issues as they arise. I am in the German bow camp and am convinced it is the best bow for all students. I know there are people who feel differently; (that might be a good future point-counterpoint column). Just like all string instruments, an incorrect bow hold will lead to some flaw in technique. When students have technical problems with articulation or tone, inevitably there are some flaws in their bow hold which can be addressed. It will not eliminate all problems, but a correctly held bow will allow solutions to occur.

Step 7. The relationship between the bow and string. This is another incidence where the double bass is just like its cousins: the sound produced by the player is determined by the relationship of weight, speed and contact point. I have read numerous well-written articles (and books) on this subject and you should too. Regardless of the author’s perspective (instrument), they ring true for all the bowed string instru-

ments.

However the double bass does have some of its own unique problems. Among the three most common are too fast a bow speed, too high a contact point (often over the finger board), and an angle other than 90° between the bow and the string. These three problems constitute 90% of the tone production problems that I have addressed with students in the school setting. The solution is getting students to pay attention, develop awareness and monitor their own progress. This is best done with easier or well-learned music. When addressing this facet of string playing, I usually give students an article to read about it so they think about it, refer to it, digest it and then experiment with it.

Step 8. The details of articulation.

This is an area where we need to help our students become life-long learners. The first steps are pizzicato vs. arco, then staccato vs. legato, then the basic articulations (all those more common French and Italian terms) and from there it opens into a seemingly never ending palette of nuance (all those French and Italian terms that send us running for the *ASTA Dictionary of Bowing and Pizzicato Terms*). The most important thing to stress with students is detail. Make sure they play with intentional articulations and not just play however the notes come out. This starts with holding students accountable for correct imitation of articulation, then moving onto notated articulations, then

into deciphering non-notated articulations and finally (hopefully) making stylistic decisions of their own.

Step 9. Changing strings, shifting and intonation. Many times I have to decide which fingering with the left-hand gives me the best sound with my right-hand. If a player's shifting is secure they may be able to play more of a passage on the same string; however it is usually more common to stay in position (when possible) and deal with string changes in that passage. This is the trade-off all string players face, but it is more acute on the double bass because one can only reach so many notes without shifting. I try to help students to understand when to do what as they are preparing their solos and etudes. The key to decoding this step is usually intonation. Which ever way the student best plays a passage in tune usually gives them their best sound. Another idea for this area is that when I am getting students to work on intonation, I try to get them to listen for their best sound. Like all string instruments, the double bass "sounds" best when it is played in tune.

Step 10. The key to double bass vibrato is the forearm. My bass teacher in college, Dr. John Schimek, has written a great article on the problems encountered when teaching double bass vibrato (*American String Teacher*, Summer 1993 pp. 65–66). I usually try to work with students on vibrato when they have a good firm hand position with rounded (rather than collapsed) fin-

gers. Like the other strings instruments, a balanced hand position is a prerequisite to any successful work on vibrato. The primary motion for double bass vibrato must be initiated by the forearm in a wider, rather than faster, up and down motion. The shoulder and upper arm are held still while the elbow acts as a pivot for the forearm. On the other end of the forearm the wrist remains straight and does not pivot. Often students try to vibrate from the hand and wrist, but bass vibrato starts with the forearm and goes to the hand.

Step 11. All you really need is tenacity.

These steps are a guide which you can use to help improve the sound of your double bass students at school or in the private studio. The last step is tenacity because that is what it takes to make things better: whether it is getting good equipment for our students, demanding a proper bow hold, being very detail-oriented about articulation, helping a student to become more aware or teaching them a new technique. Like anything in life, if you expect the best from your students (and yourself), your students can't help but succeed in improving their sound.

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