



BASS

Adding the Bass to your Family (How big a car will you need?)

by Tom Pieper

Welcome to the world of bass playing. Some of the world's greatest bassists have different stories of how they began to play. Ron Carter, the pre-eminent jazz bassist started out on cello and became the first African-American bassist to play for the Rochester N.Y. Philharmonic before joining the Miles Davis Quintet in the 1960s. John Entwistle, bassist for the rock band *The Who*, started out playing the French horn. Scott LaFaro was supposedly a mediocre tenor saxophone player in Geneva, N.Y., until he picked up the bass and revolutionized the role of the bass player in modern jazz history before his untimely death in 1961. Bass virtuoso Edgar Meyer states that:

“My father played the bass and from age two or three I was very interested in playing the bass. I don't remember anything much before five years old, but there are pictures of me with a broom pretending it was a bass.”

Advocacy for teachers

For those of you who play violin, try to remember how it felt to hold a violin under your chin the first few days, months, or year of your playing experience. As with the violin, viola, or cello, to properly balance the bass it must be the correct size for the student. We have two main obstacles to overcome here: most schools do not have a great variety of basses of differing sizes that can fit all children, and most children are attracted to an instrument that is much bigger than they should be playing. If you are smart about where to spend money for your orchestra I think you could justify the initial cost of some smaller basses as an investment in the sound of your orchestra and program. This approach gives students the option to start bass early or to switch over if they develop an interest later. The younger starters will have more years experience of successful bass playing because of well fitting instruments, and the later starters will have the advantage of a peak in interest when they have heard the younger players doing well. All will give you a more varied and experienced bass section,

which brings up the whole sound of your ensembles.

While it is true that the larger instruments generally have a better sound than smaller instruments, some very good sounding small instruments are now being produced. Having small basses set up properly will “sell” the bass to students who gravitate to a larger instrument. Here is what to consider:

- 1) Organize your budget to include buying some well-made and set-up smaller basses; do not be satisfied with what you can rent.
- 2) Hire qualified luthiers and insist on correct string height that allows students to play the bass in both the lower (money) and higher (solo) positions.
- 3) Make sure that the bridge is cut so that the strings can be isolated and students do not hit two strings at once.
- 4) Encourage students to purchase their own good sounding and functioning basses instead of using whatever they find laying around in an attic.
- 5) Feature the bass section when playing a concert. (You may only have one or two players, but imagine when you have four or five!)

As well as starting young students on small basses, consider who could and should make the switch from another instrument. I have had an especially successful year with students who wanted to continue on violin while beginning the bass. Think of how good this is for the students, the ensemble, and for you. These students have a much better understanding of bow weight and placement, a better understanding of pitch, and will develop an awareness of two of the main voices in an orchestra: the bass line, and the melody. By becoming more familiar with the other instruments in the orchestra they will begin to hear “across the orchestra” and blend their sound with the other sections while maintaining a rhythmic connection between the two most important parts. Ray Brown often talked about the “bass melody” as an integral part of the composition. What the bass can offer

the other string players is the art of shifting — we have to do it all the time — a foundation to tune to, and the rhythmic integrity to propel the ensemble along.

What else is different? Think of all the time that we teach violinists about hand position, and how often we start out in the keys of D or A. For the young bassist we have to deal with string crossing and shifting to even complete one D major scale. For other keys we have to deal with the incredible difficulty of pressing down on the E or A string, crossing strings, and shifting. What is easier for bass is realizing that we do not have to worry about “low twos” or back and forward extensions. Bassists have the advantage of having one finger per note; if the hand is already in position, the finger shape does not have to be moved to play the accidental. (E.g. on the D string, we play E with 1, F with 2, and F# with 4). Bassists do have to work harder at keeping the bow parallel to the bridge throughout the complete bow stroke, and must realize that heftier strings require being played closer to the fingerboard than their smaller cousins.

Ask the potential crossover players some of these questions:

- 1) Are you interested in continuing to play your other instrument?
- 2) Is this a way to get a fresh start because you are unwilling to put in the time on your current instrument?
- 3) Why are you curious to play the bass? (I was drawn to the bass for two reasons: all of my friends were playing in rock bands and this allowed me to play with them and, I had played the French horn for five years and had never been able to play the downbeat, only the after beats!)
- 4) Do you have a willing parent with a large enough car to cart the bass around, and the kindness to help you carry it to rehearsals and concerts?

Basics for New Players

For students who are new to the bass or are switching from another instrument, here are some strategies and certain key elements of bass playing that will help you become

successful in a short amount of time.

Make sure the bass is the correct size:

- 1) Players should be able to reach around the bass with the left hand and hold on to the end of the fingerboard.
- 2) The bass should be able to be balanced on the inner left thigh.
- 3) Make sure that the bow rests on the strings slightly higher than the mid-point between bridge and fingerboard.
- 4) The knees need to be somewhat relaxed, not locked.

Rufus Reid's *The Evolving Bassist* has some of my favorite beginning exercises for the bass. The open string exercise begins with four whole notes on the E, A, D, and G strings and back down. The whole etude progresses to sextuplets and from one string crossing every 4 measures to multiple string crossings per beat. The author has included 10-12 pages, so there are enough examples for practice and variety. What I like most is the focus on the four open strings. This develops an awareness of the relationship of the open strings to the musical staff that is very helpful for new readers to the bass clef, and for cellists who play the clef but are used to tuning in fifths instead of fourths.

As you practice the etude:

- 1) Put the bow mid-way on the string between the bridge and fingerboard.
- 2) Let the natural weight of the bow rest on the string.
- 3) Make sure that you can see the string move slightly as if you are "cocking" the bow while leaving it on the string.
- 4) Tilt the bow in the direction of the string crossing.
- 5) Release the bow and use enough speed to produce a fundamental pitch.
- 6) Use a mirror to make sure that the bow stays parallel to the bridge, does not arch, and does not hit the upper or lower bouts. On the bass, a string crossing is very critical due to the thickness of the strings. If you try to cross to another string without enough weight you will either hear the first partial, another partial, or just an unfocused scratchy sound. Strive to hear the fundamental.

Reid's etude also works well to develop a one and two finger pizzicato technique. When playing pizzicato on the bass:

- 1) Anchor your right thumb on the side of the fingerboard.

- 2) Stay within the bottom three inches of the end of the fingerboard.
- 3) Aim your pointer finger downward and stay in contact with the string during the active stage.
- 4) Pull through the string and let your finger rest on the next string; don't pull up from the string and move into the air. (E.g. if playing on the D string, pull through the string and rest your finger against the A string.)
- 5) Pull with enough energy to achieve a solid fundamental tone.
- 6) For a two-finger technique rotate the fingers slightly toward the scroll, but not perpendicular to the string, and alternate the first two fingers.

Adding the Fingers

After open string crossings, the next most valuable thing is to play the chromatic scale on the G-string without any string crossing. By removing string crossings, students can focus on shifting and start to master this element of bass playing. Since the notes of the bass are far apart we must shift often and be consistently accurate when we do so. When shifting:

- 1) Keep your hand in a "C" position, as if you are holding a plum.
 - 2) Bassists play pitches with the first, second, and fourth fingers, so the first and second fingers need to spread apart and the third and fourth fingers need to be close together. Use the "bass player's handshake:" hold your left hand one foot in front of your face; spread the first finger apart from the second finger; make sure that the thumb is opposite the second finger and pointing in the same direction or slightly down (not hitchhiking); pull the hand toward you, place the first finger directly between your eyebrows, and place the second finger in that groove between your nose and mouth. Now transfer this hand shape to your bass.
 - 3) When the first finger is in contact with the string, keep the other fingers close; when the second finger is in contact, make sure that the first is also touching the fingerboard; when the fourth finger is in contact, all fingers should be on the fingerboard
- To play the twelve pitches of the G

chromatic scale, you will play in half, 2 1/2, 4th, and 6th positions:

- 1) Play the first four notes; maintain string contact; lower your elbow and let your hand follow your elbow to the next position while maintaining the same shape of your hand. Be careful to note that your thumb is still opposite the second finger and in a relaxed, "non-hitchhiker" shape.
- 2) Repeat twice more until you get to the octave. This is traditionally where bassists use the third finger since the fourth is shorter and harder to squeeze into place next to the second finger. Try it; it works well.

When playing the descending scale (or going up in terms of floor to ceiling) all the fingers need to be in place and you lift them off the string. When shifting, allow your elbow to once again lead your hand while maintaining contact with all the fingers and a relaxed thumb. Play the scale with a *metronome* and play half notes, quarter notes, ♩, ♪ and ♫ rhythms.

Final Things to Think About Later

- 1) Try the French bow both for matching sound with the other strings and the ease of playing on the E and A strings.
- 2) Make sure that your wrist is not locked so that you keep the bow parallel, instead of arching higher at the beginning and ending of the bow stroke.
- 3) Learn all you can about bow placement and play at the correct part of the bow for the sound that you are asked to produce.
- 4) Learn what sounds you want to produce yourself and continue to experiment — you may discover something that works better.
- 5) Search out a teacher who plays the bass and watch and listen to good bass players when you see concerts.

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