



BASS

Using Time Wisely – Managing Shifting To Work out the Difficult Passages

by Tom Pieper

While playing along with a sixth grade orchestra recently I wondered how I ever got interested in playing the bass. I started out with the French horn and after several years I was drawn to the “edge or floor” of the ensemble. Having played offbeats for many thousands of measures, and having spent much time counting rests I was struck by the fact that the bass instruments always got to play. I think without this background the bass may not have been as exciting as I then found it to be. In this same rehearsal I was thinking about how the violins could play so many notes in first position that I thought, “how unfair is that.” As bass players, we must become experts at shifting in order to cover the notes necessary to play well. Arranging and orchestration helps the bass player help the ensemble; however, eventually when we get to more advanced repertoire the bass part becomes more melodic and complicated. When we are able to play in more positions accurately, our sense of musicianship and enthusiasm for music increases. Lately I am increasingly aware that all string instruments could benefit from watching how the bassists shift. Let us begin with an understanding of how these unsung heroes of the orchestra manage so that we can improve shifting in all the sections of the orchestra.

A beginning bass player faces many challenges from the start. I have written of the importance of finding an instrument of an appropriate size in a past article, so now I will assume this is a priority. Once we have a good setup, and an idea of the sound we need to play, we soon realize that in order to play the melodies we need to either modify the range, or master shifting. I think that mastering shifting is the better way to proceed if you want to make an impact on the rest of the orchestra, and improve in your own bass performance.

Part 1

Here are two standard ways to approach a beginning scale for the bass. Since much of our beginning strings music is written in D major, we can begin with two fingerings for the D major scale.

Ex. 1

Ex. 2

While being able to play the scale in one position as in Example 1 might seem like a good solution, it is actually more difficult and I believe less satisfying to play and hear.

For one thing it is more difficult to play on the E string because of the thickness of the string and the distance between pitches. The distance between the D and E strings makes the string crossing difficult which also makes it harder to produce a good sound. The E string is also the hardest place to place the fingers down on the fingerboard without feeling that you have to grip very firmly.

Thick string + high action + low notes = little fun.

Finally take out a bass and listen to how this first scale sounds. Is it satisfying for you to hear the displacement of the octave? I want to hear this if I listen to jazz bass clarinetist / flutist / Eb alto saxophonist Eric Dolphy, but not when I hear this scale. If bass players are using a German bow they will probably have a hard time supporting the bass and not having the bow collide with their right leg (remember to keep the bow perpendicular to the string!)

Now before you put the bass back in the corner (bridge inside) play Example 2. This is the scale that all other string players play and as long as we master our shifting, the fact of unity with all strings makes it more desirable to more bassists. Who wants to play a different instrument if you cannot recognize what the person is playing? Since you have now played this you also recognize that the sound of the scale in your head, compared to Example 1, is more than enough motivation for you to learn how to shift better. So here are some things to remember.

- The notes get closer together the higher you go in pitch. (Recognize that the higher in pitch on a bass or cello is the closer to the ground; opposite of violin and viola).
- As you move to shift, it is more desirable to keep your fingers grounded or connected to the string. On bass, remember that if the fourth finger is down it is helpful to keep the other three fingers down as well. I believe this allows you to stop the string more firmly and also gives you a thicker tone with more fundamental sounding.
- When you have to shift a greater distance your hand must move faster. When you have to shift a shorter distance your hand must move slower. (More important is to develop the concept of moving at the correct speed, than too fast or too slow.)
- A portamento is all right at first — make the shift audible but smooth, and eliminate some of the sliding later.
- Use the size of the hand and landmarks on the bass to measure your shifting as well as a metronome to gauge when you must arrive in the new position.
- Get used to the fact that with your strings tuned in fourths the amount of shifting you do will be disproportionate with the other strings (i.e. they can play many more notes without shifting).
- For bass use the first, second, and fourth finger (the third and the thumb are used in higher positions).

Part II

Now look again at Example 2:

We traditionally teach finding first position by playing the open string and then stopping the string one whole step higher. Some people get this right away and others might need some more clarification. You can also find first position by placing your first finger on the nut, putting your fourth finger down, and finally substituting your first finger for your fourth finger. This seems like a long process but it lets you know just how far apart the notes are at this end of the bass, and how much we have to move to shift for lower strings. If you really want to be sure your position is correct now play your fourth finger as a harmonic (touch the string but do not hold it against the fingerboard) and see if you get a clear F# to sound on the D string — B on the G string. If you do, you are correctly playing this position. Now play the first 6 notes in 1st position. Use the same process for the move to 3rd position to play the C# and D. Substitute the first finger for the fourth and then the first for the second before playing the second finger on C# and the fourth finger on D. You may wish to try that a few times:

Ex. 3

Feel the shift

Use this rhythm going up for the last three notes of the scale to isolate the shifting problems:

Ex. 4

Feel the shift

When coming back down the scale follow this procedure. Keep the fourth finger down for the D and just lift the fourth finger off the fingerboard for the C#. It is important that you do this instead of thinking that you must press the second finger down; that finger should already be in contact with the fingerboard and ready to go. Substitute your fourth finger for the first (You are now in 2nd position) next substitute the fourth finger for the second finger (you are now back in 1st position) Play the remainder of the scale.

Ex. 5

Ex. 6

Part III

Good shifting habits can improve by bringing rhythmic variations into our practice. Play the Example 2 scale again but this time play 4 legato quarter notes ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ on each pitch

To gain more confidence in the positions play a variety of rhythms:

Part IV

Many times you will hear someone practicing a difficult passage at a slow tempo, and then speeding it up many times until they reach the desired tempo. This works for some but often we hit plateaus that can be passed through more quickly by another approach. By using different rhythms to improve the speed of your shifting, we can sometimes learn passages more readily. Remember that if you have to shift from 1st to 4th you must move your hand faster than when shifting from 1st to 2nd. It is important that you shift in time and the best way to do so is to use a metronome. Your body is well designed to be efficient and if you do not play with a metronome, your body will allow you to take extra time to get there. After you have practiced with the metronome, your kinesthetic memory may help, however it takes playing it correctly many times before you can achieve consistency. So don't fake it but play with the metronome! Playing with the metronome also allows you to judge the speed of your shift more accurately and eliminates shifts that are too quick and rushed.

Play the following examples with a detache bowing:

Reverse that:



Increase the speed of shifting but not the tempo by playing:



Then the opposite:



And finally try:

This is the example that may prove to be the most challenging. Do not get tricked and place the eighth note on the beat but keep the syncopation exact.

Now play the scale as eighths and then sixteenths. By using the different rhythms you have made your body shift to the speed that is required to get to the next note and position. If you have gone through this process exactly with the metronome your shifting will be more accurate, and your dexterity will have improved.

Part V

Find an excerpt of a piece that has some difficult passage work in it and use this process to improve your execution. You do not have to work on a whole piece but find the parts that are difficult for you

to play; if you cannot find them ask your friends or the director of your orchestra.

- Select a passage to work on
- Decide what positions you will play the notes in (this may be your hypothesis and you may have to find a new position at the end of this process)
- Determine which fingering works best (again you may change and start over again)
- Play all of the notes slowly with the same rhythm (i.e. half or whole notes)
- Play through all the variations presented above
- Play at a variety of tempos
- Go on to the next section that you want to learn

After a short time if you are systematic in your approach you will begin to see great results in your shifting and passage work. Hopefully the rest of the orchestra will notice and ask you, “How are you doing that?” Practicing passages gets easier if you make the effort to work in this manner. This should not be all that you do when you practice, continue to play music with other people, work on songs that you have played in the past, have fun, improvise, transcribe, write a song, and work on all the variety of musical puzzles that come into view everyday. It all comes down to an awareness of all aspects of the music you come into contact with is good for you and for the people you play with. (Now take a break!)

Tom Pieper teaches orchestra at Wayzata East, Central, and West Middle Schools. He is the Electric Bass and Bass Instructor at MacPhail Center for Music and continues to perform with his group SpiritJazz. SpiritJazz, But Now I see... is available at cdbaby.com, tcmusic.net, and at selected stores throughout the area. ‡