



BASS

Bow Choices

by Tom Pieper

As bass players we are presented with a different challenge than all the other instruments in the orchestra — we have a choice between playing the French or German bow. Sometimes a choice is made by chance, by what our friends play, or by what our teacher has decided. I think it is best to make the choice based on the requirements of the music you will be playing, and the historical successes that have been achieved with either bow grip. The last thing you want to do is make your bow decision just by what is available to you. I hope this article can be used as an introduction to the different bows so that you can make an informed choice.

Being informed means that you take advantage of all the information that is out about bass playing. If you do a google search of the French or German bow you can come up with 1,030,000 and 1,180,000 articles on each bow. If you look on blogs you can find 2,966, and 1,855 respectively. Go to performances of professional orchestras and notice what choices the bass players have made. If you are brave you can go up and ask the players why they use the bow that they have. Go to music stores that know about bows, or the orchestra room at your school and try different bows out. In short, make an investment in your decision, and commit to doing the research because the bow you choose will determine how quickly you can become a great player, and an asset to your orchestra. Please do not order the cheapest bow you can find on the Internet and accept that as your choice.

German vs. French: A Brief History

The underhand grip of the German bow is an outgrowth of the bow used for the gamba. Domenico Dragonetti, a contemporary and friend of Beethoven used this underhand bass grip. Other notable players who use the German bow include Gary Karr, James Vandermark and Slam Stewart. German bow players have always felt that they can get a lot of power and tone from this grip, on the G and D strings. There

has always been a contest and debate about which bow is best. Bottesini was one of the first soloists to use the French bow. This was the grip first only used by violinists and violists. In his day he felt that the French bow gave you greater control and mobility. Edgar Meyer, Christian McBride and many of our modern premier soloists play with the French bow. You can frame the debate like the difference between the PC and the Mac, with equally passionate opinions on either side. Imagine the current commercials about operating systems and substitute a French bow and a German bow. Like computers, the truth is you will find bassists using both grips in exceptional ways

So now that we agree that you can accomplish great things with either bow lets begin to dissect some of the attributes of each bow. The French bow is similar to all the bows used for the other members of the orchestral string instrument family, and is played with an overhand grip. The German bow has a larger frog and is played with an underhand grip. Regardless, all bass bows are shorter and broader than cello, viola, and violin bows. For pedagogy, it was thought that the German bow was an easier bow grip for beginners, so many young bassists started with the German bow. When they became more advanced and “serious,” the students could switch to play the French bow. Having seen many poor German bow grips and having worked on mine with some very good teachers I would say that it is a misconception that one bow is easier to grip than the other. Like all techniques that you learn, holding the bow is critical to your sound production, and to giving you the flexibility required to play your instrument at a successful and enjoyable level.

Holding the Bow Basics German Bow

1. Hold your right hand in front of your body with a slight bend of the elbow. Your palm is facing out and your fingers are slightly spread apart.

2. With your left hand hold the bow in front of you. The tip is pointing down and the frog is pointing up. The hair is facing to the right and the wood facing the palm of your left hand.
3. Tip your right hand so your palm faces down, and place the bow between your pinky and thumb. The thumb is on the wooded left side, and the pinky rests on the Ferrule, or little silver piece of the bow. Notice that the thumb and pinky are opposing each other and maintain an arc around the bow. The three middle fingers will now hover above.
4. Bring the pointer finger to the stick and allow it to touch the thumb like when you hold a pencil and let the two other fingers rest on the inner edge of the frog. Please note that the palm is still facing down.
5. Wrap the two remaining fingers around the frog. The two will rest on the inner edge of the frog. *Do not let any fingers hook or grip between the frog.* Grab the middle of the wood bow with your left hand and rotate your right hand 90 degrees so that your palm is facing left and the bow is parallel to the ground. The screw will now rest on the top of your right hand.

Take some strokes with the bow and allow the fingers to move freely to assist to pull the bow for a down-bow, and to push for an up-bow. *Make sure you are holding the bow on the tip of the thumb and pinky.*

French Bow

1. Hold your right hand in front of your body, palm facing up with your hand open and fingers slightly spread apart.
2. With your left hand place the bow across the second joint of your right hand (i.e. closest to your palm) the tip is pointing to the right and the frog is pointing to the left with the hair facing out and the wood facing toward you.
3. Draw your fingers together and let

the second finger touch the Ferrule of the bow. Without squeezing your hand place the thumb on the stick where the frog and stick of the bow come together. The thumb is bent with the tip facing the left and the knuckle facing to the right. (I.e. anti-hitchhiking position)

4. Rotate your hand 180 degrees so that the palm faces the ground. Place your left hand on the top of the middle of the bow to help balance and take any stress off of your right hand.
5. Take some strokes with the bow and keep the thumb loose and flexible when changing from down bows to up bows.

Whatever bow grip you choose, make sure your right hand stays curved and keep your thumb bent so that the “hinge” moves both ways to anticipate and facilitate the bow direction changes.

Different Bowing Basics: Try These Out

The chart will use the two different bows on some standard literature from the *Essential*

Elements books to give you a basis for comparing how the two bows feel. Certainly you could use different examples; this is just a start for you to compare how the bows work for you and what advantages or obstacles are presented. After you go through these, pull out bass parts from your concert and ensemble repertoire and try the two bows in context.

Things to Always Remember with Either Bow

- Start with the bow on the string.
- Put weight into the string.
- Release with enough speed and continue to move the bow.
- The bow moves faster near the fingerboard and slower near the bridge.
- Keep the bow parallel to the bridge throughout the bow stroke.
- Have the correct bridge and string height for the job.
- Flat hair gives you the most fundamental in your sound (not hearing the harmonic but the lowest note). If any tilt away from flat hair is used, the wood is “higher than the

hair,” i.e. the wood is tilted toward the scroll, not the bridge.

Final Debunking

Myth 1 — Bases need different bowings than the upper strings in the orchestra.

Sometimes the requirement of the bass parts, string crossings, thickness of strings, range, shortness of bow makes a difference but not always. In a level playing field the violins bowings would compare well to bowings needed to produce good sounds on the bass, cello, and viola.

Myth 2 — Since basses are not as skilled or start later they should play pizzicato first.

A pizzicato bass may sound better at first without the bow because of the fullness of sound, but all string players need to be encouraged to pick up the bow. Within a short amount of time bass players can learn to use the bow efficiently to produce a pleasing sound. While everyone on the planet would rather not listen to a beginning string player play with the bow for the first

BOWING	Essential Elements	GERMAN	FRENCH
Detache	Red #186	As long as you “squeeze the fingers on the down bow, and push the fingers out from the palm on the up bow this is also easily done. If any muscles are locked in place it becomes more difficult. Harder to do on the lower strings.	With the thumb bent and anticipating the bow changes it is a very easy stroke to use. Easy on all four strings.
Staccato	Red #182	Easy on all four strings, A little “bouncy” compared to the French bow.	Easy on all four strings. The length of note is easy to control.
Martele	2000 #44	Powerful sound on all strings especially G and D. Overall a deep and rich sound when playing “in” the string.	Easy on all four strings, especially E and A. If you do not use the weight of your arm you may not get a focused attack.
Spicatto	Green p.41	Much more difficult to control; the bow bounce is much greater and it is harder to keep bow close to string. Harder to maintain when crossing strings.	Bounce is easy to control on all strings, both in terms of dynamics and at varied speeds.
Hooked	Blue #126	As long as you release some of the weight this stroke works well.	As long as you release some of the weight this stroke works well.
Col Legno	Red #64	Works well on all strings. Because of the heavier frog you may be able to produce a little more sound.	Works well on all strings.
Pizzicato	Blue #97	When holding the bow, pizzicato is easy with first two fingers. Tip points to the ground. Since the bow has to travel 180 degrees, it is difficult to return to arco.	When holding the bow pizzicato is easy with first two fingers. Tip points up at the scroll traveling 90 degrees.
Improvised Solo in a Jazz Style	“A whole other topic”	Good.	Better since the bow stays “into” the string easily.

few hours of his or her playing career, the same could be said about beginning brass or woodwind players.

A Final Word

As a bass player you have some information and a plan to determine your bass bowing preference. As a conductor / teacher you need consider the bow that you are most comfortable with so that your students benefit the most from your experience. If

you start them on “two separate instruments” it makes modeling and instruction harder to demonstrate for all your students. So, going out on a limb here I say if you are a fantastic German bow player and can inspire your students and orchestra, go for it. If, however it is important for your bassists to advance and have a consistent sound as the other instruments in your orchestra, the choice should be obvious — have them play the French bow.

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