



BASS

Bass on Top

How duets can help us stay there

by Tom Pieper

As players of the double bass we are always put in situations that put more demands on our playing than most players of other instruments. We constantly transition from playing in our lowest range as a supportive ensemble player, to mid and higher ranges that still have to cut through the sound of the group to be heard. Melodic material also has to be played at the same speed as the violins, trumpets, alto saxophone, and the voice. Most people do not remember the harmonic progression or the middle voices of a song, they remember the melody. Technically we are challenged with shifting more often, and having to play on strings that are thick and are tuned closer together than the other strings. Perfect 4^{ths}, while cool for jazz, are not as natural to our ear as listening to open 5^{ths}. They are heard in the overtone series as the 23rd partial whereas the 5th is the 3rd partial.

Piano and guitar players also have many demands; however they can function alone and often do. Typically they do not have to work out the details of ensemble playing as often as bass players (e.g. intonation, shared rhythm, style, unisons). Horn players and guitar players play the melody and perhaps improvise a solo. Bass players need to accompany others, play solos, improvise bass lines, know the melody, and interact with the whole ensemble to create a feeling of swing. While pianists and guitarists are also responsible for many parts of the tune, bass players play within the confines of perhaps three notes in a chord. Generally it is only practical to play two. We also have to deal with placing fingers in a most specific location to have the chord be in tune. Our range prevents us from articulating our visions easily. This is why I think we have a greater challenge than the other instruments and why I have chosen to share some helpful concepts and duets to help in these areas.

Duets of course have been around forever. Two people sing in different octaves and you have a duet. Rounds and canons are the basis for much of the world's music, which leads to polyphonic, contrapuntal,

and homophonic settings. With duets, from beginning to more advanced, the players start to expand their perceptions of music and start to enjoy playing with others. How cool is that!

In *Teasing Dance* by Bela Bartok, two basses play a varied duet that offers interest to both the players and the audience. Imitative entrances catch the listeners' ears and the close range of notes offer a challenge to the players of both parts. (Example 1.) This particular duo can also be played at pitch or an octave higher without presenting too much duress for the players.

Minuet by J.S. Bach is a more traditional sounding duet. Because millions of pianists play this piece, it is recognizable

to many players. It is very important to play music on the bass that other students play as well. This shared community of music making works for string, piano, rock and jazz players because it gives us a common language to enjoy and compare are efforts with. Jazz and Suzuki have much in common because of their shared music between all instruments, and their respect for their oral traditions. This duet is very imitative and composed in an expansive texture that has players moving in contrary motion. (Example 2.)

Some reasons that duets work so well are that when you play anything well on bass alone, it sounds pretty good. If you play the melody of a Charlie Parker song

Example 1. Bartok, *Teasing Song*, arr. Kurz

Example 2. Bach, *Minuet*, arr. Zimmerman

and play all the notes it is time to move out to New York and hit the pavement and start playing with everyone. If you hit most of the notes people think, “Wow she played all of it.” This changes when two people play; the potential to be slightly out of rhythm, out of tune, and not swinging increases exponentially. I emphasize rhythm first because if you are not together in time you have no chance with intonation. Swinging can sometimes trump intonation, (think Jackie McLean) in that some expressive intonation and even bad intonation sometimes can be overcome by the intensity of the groove and feeling of swing.

Intonation on the bass in once again a place to highlight some difficulties because the vibrations per second are so few compared to our higher friends. If you separate the instruments by a few octaves it sounds great. You can demonstrate this by noticing how good a bass sounds when added to any ensemble or single player in a much higher register. Bass and violin or soprano saxophone sound great together. The range saves you because like distant cousins they do not often interfere. When you play a cello and a bass together the timbre is still unique and range of an octave apart gives us some liberty and a little help. This all changes when you have two basses in the same range. They have to be exactly together to not rub against each other the wrong way. Two flutes in a much higher range will play better in tune more often than two basses in the lower register and this is because of the range and how the human ear hears. Also when two violins play a duet they most likely can play more of it without having to shift. With basses unless you are playing *Hot Cross Buns* in third position or most simple beginning songs you will be required to shift a great amount of the time. For shifting on bass we have to be perfect marksmen or at the very least perfect at adjusting to the correct pitch. Finally our limited chances and experiences of playing the melody makes us not as solid

as other instrumentalists in performing this important task of music. Duets allow us to switch roles from background support to the front lines.

As background support, first of all we must choose a note that best helps suggest the harmony of the song, and offers the best support to our partner. When you encounter a chord progression that moves quickly (e.g. two changes per measure) it is relatively simple to express the sound of the chord with one or two pitches. This becomes more difficult when the chords are the same for several or sometimes even up to 16 measures. (Example 3.) C minor can be realized with the root on beat one. Thirds, sevenths, and fifths also work when you have a stagnant harmonic progression, as long as you strive to create a good counter melody. I mean to stress this both for writing a set part, and for improvising a bass line: both require trial and error and are skills that improve the more that you experience and experiment. Allowing the phrase of the melody or the improvisation to flow over the bass line and not bore the listener or the players is always the primary goal.

Secondly since our range prevents us from playing all the tones of a chord in root position, we may try to capture the sound with fewer notes. While we need to carefully choose the notes to play, we should also not be afraid to not abandon sounds that we gravitate toward. As long as the notes are in a good sounding range for the bass we can be successful with many choices. Even though we choose while improvising, or as some people mistake, at the spur of the moment, we still must use all our experiences to make the best and most helpful sounds. John Coltrane spoke about his approach to improvising as, “I know some things that will work harmonically, and I’m trying to find a line that flows between what I know.” Bass is very much like this. Sometimes we leave out the root and the context lets us know what other note will work out to find a line that moves us from point A to

B in the harmonic progression.

Thirdly to give us more options we can play double stops to create interesting textures for improvisation, and to help us understand the structure of the music that we are playing. (Example 4.) This helps us to examine improvising from another end of the bass-playing spectrum. For example you can think of the solo and duo playing of Dave Holland and Barre Phillips, (e.g. *Music From Two Bases*, ECM 1011), and the duo and trio playing of Christian McBride, John Clayton, and Ray Brown (e.g. *Super-Bass 2* Telearc 8483). Ron Wasserman and Ron Carter have also pushed the envelope of bass playing through their many duo performances with instrumentalists, as has Harvie Swartz with vocalist Sheila Jordan (e.g. *Old Time Feeling*, Muse 5366).

It is my hope that you start to include playing more duets as part of your practice and social routine. Take every opportunity to play the bass with other bassists and with all types of instrumentalists and vocalists. We are in the most unique position of all instrumentalists to be needed by almost every ensemble. Everything you do will train you to hear more of what is going on with the rest of your orchestra or ensemble. With duets in your hip pocket you quickly will increase your enjoyment of music and bass playing. To be successful in a jazz context take every gig, go to every rehearsal, and play with anyone who will help you to reach your musical goals.

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