

THE DOUBLE BASS: UNIQUE WITHIN THE STRING FAMILY

presented by Nancy Bjork
reported by Mark Kausch

On January 12 Minneapolis-St. Paul bassist and bass teacher Nancy Bjork gave an in-depth presentation entitled *The Double Bass: Unique Within the String Family* to an enthusiastic group of string educators. Nancy opened with the story of a telephone call last autumn from a former student, now a grad student at Rice University, who had been called upon to make a presentation to non-bass playing string teachers on how to teach the bass. Nancy suggested that he focus on the major differences between the bass and other strings. During a 90-minute presentation and dialog Nancy discussed the similarities and differences between double bass and other string instruments, and implications of those similarities and differences. Nancy showed how this awareness of similarities and difference needs to guide our double bass instruction and pedagogical concepts. What follows is an overview of that presentation.

The bass is no longer the ugly stepchild of the string family. It's all too easy for bassists to hang together and bond, rather than tough it out with all the other string players and risk getting no attention. For example: string bass conventions. Tons of bass players have attended Nancy's sessions (and sessions by other bassists) at International Society of Bassists conventions. By contrast, only a handful of string bass focused sessions have taken place over the years, mostly with fairly small attendance, at national American String Teacher Association conventions. From the middle of the 20th century onward, however, with notable bassists including Gary Karr, Francois Rabbath, and Edgar Meyer together with many dedicated and intelligent teachers and pedagogues, string bass performance level and pedagogy have begun to catch up to that of the other strings, just as the cello under Casals' direction caught up a century ago to the level of the violin. Bassists and bass teacher are now part of the violin family and need to behave like it!

Similarities

The primary similarities between the bass and the other orchestral string instruments include:

- All the qualities of a stringed instrument played with a bow—and all the ramifications of expression enabled by the bow.
- The role of the soloist, along with other roles.
- The possibility of many students reaching a very high level, if taught correctly.
- Left hand techniques for shifting and strength and accuracy are very similar—bassists can use many of the same exercises as those used by other orchestral string players.
- Right hand techniques—with equal amounts of time and attention and starting early enough, we can use exercises similar to upper string exercises to reach a very high performance level.
- Risk of injury from over-use or improper attention to physical matters—equal to that of the other strings.

Differences

- Size & Energy. The dimensions of the bass relative to the other strings is the most obvious difference but in actuality not the most important difference.
- Tuning. The bass is the only orchestral string instrument tuned in fourths.
- String Vibrations. While the lowest string on each instrument vibrates more widely than the highest on that instrument, all four bass strings vibrate more widely and therefore more slowly than any string on the other orchestral string instruments.
- The bass' role in ensemble settings with other instruments is seldom solo or melodic; it's rather and usually accompanimental, rhythmic, or harmonic.
- Two types of bows. Basses have both overhand or French style bow hold and underhand or German style bow hold available. Use of the underhand bow hold, in some cases, presents potential challenges in matching bow strokes with upper string instruments.

The key question for educators is this: how do we wisely and realistically address these differences? The answer lies in understanding the implications.

Size and Energy

For bassists the transportation issue is obvious: basses need more space. Narrow hallways present very real challenges when transporting a bass, especially in a crowded hallway. Bassists need more space to transport the instrument, to stand with and bow the instrument in both performance and practice.

Bass strings are far apart so string crossings present a bigger technical problem. Basses need to travel a greater distance to shift from one note to another. Basses also need to shift more often than the other strings.

All of the string problems are there for bassists too, but they're exaggerated. They require that bassists spend more time carefully drilling on each technique. Since bassists typically do not begin their instrument at as young an age as the other strings, they will not play at a level equivalent to a same-age violinist or cellist, and may not for many years. But that does not mean a bassist cannot reach an equivalent level; the process simply requires more time.

Negotiating a large instrument requires a greater output of physical energy. Before stamina and strength develop in a young bassist, they are likely to get more tired, need more breaks, and will manage shorter practice times.

Tuning in 4^{ths} rather than 5^{ths}

The main implication here is that bassists need to shift almost immediately and very frequently. Bassists have only one scale available to them in first position: G. From the lowest string to the top string, there is only an octave and a fifth—not a very wide range! So giving a bassist the cello part to play, assuming the bass clef implies similarities, instead can create overly frustrating challenges for a beginning bassist.

Moreover, since bassists have such large distances between notes on the fingerboard, the possibilities for playing out of tune are

huge. There are many chances for inaccuracies. This necessitates many years of careful shifting exercises. With a beginner, as soon as the left hand is well formed in first position, Nancy begins a series of shifting exercises, starting with a soundless “take a ride” up the G string motion, long before the student actually does any real playing in a higher position.

From that point on, Nancy introduces each new position with an exercise relating that position to one the student already knows. This is what directs the choice of repertoire: finding melodies that fit and reinforce the position being taught. Nancy considers the François Rabbath approach to be the best in addressing shifting issues; there’s an excellent discussion in the forward of his method, along with excellent exercises, and excellent planning of each move.

String Vibrations—Bow Speed

When starting a note or phrase, the larger vibrations of bass strings create a delay. Bassists need to learn to slightly anticipate the start of a note so as to not sound behind the rest of the ensemble. Bowing on the lower strings of the bass, and playing the lowest notes on all strings, requires a slower bow speed in order to keep the bow in synch with the string vibrations. By contrast, higher notes require a faster bow speed. Bassists use a wide range of bowing exercises to drill on this aspect of bow control and tone quality.

With these realities of bass mechanics in mind, the discipline and challenge of playing scale passages faster takes more

time to develop. For these reasons, young bassists do not play scales at as fast a speed as other strings. It’s arguably the case that there’s an inherent unfair quality to All-State and youth orchestra audition required scale tempos.

Implication: Since bow control takes more time to evolve for bassists, Nancy has her beginning level students develop left hand technique playing pizzicato while developing bow control separately. By focusing on the two different hand techniques separately the bow technique always sounds better. And the bowing skills, while a bit behind the left hand development at first, eventually do catch up. The other advantage to this method is that the student can see the vibrations—can actually see when they’re in tune—by watching sympathetic vibrations of the octaves with select notes.

The Role of the Bass

Orchestra leaders need to listen to their bassists, identify the role being played, help the student to achieve it, appreciate the bassists work publicly and help the whole ensemble to appreciate the bass players role. This kind of attention always results in better student bassists and better sound for the entire orchestra!

French or German Bow?

Although professional bassists tend to have strong opinions on which type of bow is “best,” everyone recognizes that there are fabulous performers on both types. Nancy said that she favors the French bow because

of its similarities to the bows of the other string instruments.

Summary

How do we wisely and realistically address the similarities between basses and other strings?

- Surround yourself and your students with opportunities to hear and perform with the other strings in concerts, master classes, and chamber music.
- Use the techniques that you know for other strings, adapting for size, tuning and speed of vibration when necessary. E.g. Suzuki’s “stopped bow” at earliest levels, as well as “finger before bow.”
- Set the expectations just as high for bassists as for other string players, allowing for probably more time to reach the same level.
- Use language that holds the string family together, rather than setting the bass apart from the other strings!

Mark Kausch teaches bass, viol and string pedagogy at Bethel University. He has performed locally with many ensembles including the Lyra Baroque Orchestra, Minnesota Opera and Vocal Essence. He currently performs with the Twin Cities newest historically informed ensemble, Consortium Carissimi, and is co-founder of Ensemble Sebastian, a Baroque sacred music ensemble in residence at Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. †