



BASS

A New Year — A New Start

by Tom Pieper

With the start of the school calendar, a new year, or even the arrival of your new issue of *String Notes*, you can use the energy of the moment to step back and make a plan for some musical improvements. Each new year gives us the chance to begin to focus on our strengths and shortcomings, with the idea of improving our playing and enjoyment of the bass. If we try to use this energy we will undoubtedly become better musicians and learn skills that can make us be better people in other areas of our lives. With this in mind, scales in general, and specifically on the bass, are where we can begin to rev-up and energize our playing.

Back to Basics

Basics present different challenges for every player. Some of you are particularly talented with technical abilities and may have no problems with fast passages, intonation, and beautiful tone. Some others may have an understanding of how your part fits into the rest of the ensemble and the ability to make smart choices to make any ensemble you play in sound better. Others may have an understanding of melodic line and phrasing. Whatever your strengths are, chances are you can improve some aspect of your playing.

Scales are one standard that all instrumentalists seem to be judged by. Pianists practice hour after hour to make their thumbs sound as even as all of their other fingers. As bassists we can show our skills and musicality with scales, solos, and ensemble playing. In the last 60 years our instrument has made exponential advancements in the level of skill that players now demonstrate. It seems that everyone is a virtuoso, and this level of great skill begins with the youngest players who now can start on well-made fractional size instruments. Whether playing classical or jazz we must be able to demonstrate certain competencies on the bass in order to participate and contribute to our musical expectations and demands.

If you ever have had to audition to join a group, or even to first try out which instrument is best suited for you, most

likely you have had to play a scale. This is true whether you are in the 4th grade, 8th grade, or auditioning for placement in a college program or orchestra. In high school violinists, violists, and cellists are usually asked to play 3-octave scales within certain tempo guidelines. Bassists typically have been required less stringent demands of 2-octave scales at slower tempos. Now it is more common that bassists are asked to do the same as other string players. This is good for bassists as a whole. This is the time that we can strive for some of the same skills that our other string players take for granted. With many bassists starting later we have had many excuses for our lack of perfection; the size of the bass, the amount of shifting we do, and the thickness of the strings have also has been used to explain why we have not had to play scales with the same results. Forget it! It is time to fix our scales so that we can do what others do with pride and confidence. Bassists, “This is Our Time.”

Tuning

First take the time to make sure your bass is really in tune. For younger players finding a source that can play each string is more helpful than the traditional “Here is an A” method. I have found starting on the A string, D, G, E works very well. If you are tuning with a piano, strike the note and hold the sustain pedal down. When tuning with an electric tuner adjust the volume so you can easily hear both “voices.” For older players, the matching of harmonics works better because it puts the note more in our human ear hearing range. Finally I also recommend playing the open string with the harmonic at the octave on the adjacent lower string, producing a perfect fifth.

The major scale

True the bass is big, we have to shift to play more than a whole step, and we have around 42 inches of fingerboard to play with. Since every scale has the same construction of 1/2 and 1 steps most of our work is figured out for us. The pattern of 1, 1, 1/2, 1, 1, 1, 1/2 is always with us. I think the first thing to do is limit our task. We must play

all major scales in all keys (12), and for 3 octaves at ♩=80 bpm. You cannot start there but should break down some of the steps.

- Start with one key
- Begin with the 2-octave scale
- Start with a manageable tempo
- Use different bowings and increase tempo
- You have succeeded.

Key of E major

4 sharps F# C# G# D#.

Start in 1st position—your first finger in one whole step above the nut on the E and A strings. On the D and G string you will play in half position to begin and then shift to 1st on the D and 2nd 1/2 position on the G.

Remember the pattern of half steps and whole steps. [1, 1, 1/2, 1, 1, 1, 1/2] For every scale we will start the second octave with the first finger and then group the notes together in pairs. With this pattern you never have to shift more than one whole or one 1/2 step. When going up the scale the 1-1 shifts keep the hand in a good position with the fingers parallel to the string.

First octave:

I pos.

0 1 4 0

1/2 pos. I pos.

1 4 - 1 - 1

Second octave:

I pos. 1/2 pos.

1 4 - 1 2 -

II 1/2 pos. IV pos.

1 4 - 2 4

Play the scales as half notes at 60 bpm. Then play two quarter notes on each pitch, followed by four eighth notes, and finally

eight sixteenth notes. Increase the tempo by 10% and you will reach your goal quickly. Next, play the scale in a pattern of ♩ ♩. The first time slur the eighth notes in groups of two; next slur over the half measure; and finally slur over the whole measure. The bowing variations only add to your shifting and fingering prowess. Do not change the fingerings to accommodate the slurs but try to slur through the shift; (the shifting example later will help with this).

It makes no difference what key you are playing, you always start the 2nd octave with the first finger, and pair two notes together and you will land on your fourth finger (third finger above the octave harmonic). Now please put this paper down and try playing this scale on your bass. What helps most for scales is consistency and by having a “one size fits all” approach you have eliminated many of the errors and questions that will come up. We now have the same

pattern for every scale so that you do not have to wonder what the fingering is, but can concentrate on moving the bow, placing the bow in the correct position, crossing strings, etc. But no worries for fingers or positions.

Third octave:

IV pos. V^{1/2} pos.

4 - 1 3 - 1

Thumbless Thumb position

3 - 1 2 3

Try these scales in a number of keys. We ask everyone to play everything in all 12 keys and that fingering makes this pos-

sible. Human nature shies away from this so picking a few keys for a while may be more productive. I like to spend a few days on a key and then try another. Pick a key of a song, solo, or orchestral part that you are working on and you will improve both your keys and the music that you are performing. And a side note, the shifting exercise really should be played everyday.

Shifting Exercise

The Shifting Exercise will help with one of our most important jobs as bass players—shifting. We have to shift more than any other string instrument and good shifting is very helpful in improving our scales. The exercise starts with I and III positions. Essentially every finger-combination is used in each position to maximize the shift. When you shift do not leave your thumb or arm behind. The shift is started with the arm leading the hand and not the hand with the arm following. Also the thumb should retain the position of being opposite the 2nd finger to complete the shift and have the hand maintain the proper position: 1 apart from 2; 2,3,4 grouped together; and all fingers perpendicular to the string. This exercise can be used between any positions. I recommend trying I-IV next and then 1/2- II 1/2. Find a section in an excerpt that you are having trouble getting in tune and in time and this will allow you to make a rapid assessment of the problem, followed by improvement.

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Shifting Exercise
Do This Everyday

Contrabass