



BASS

How To Stay Busy and Active as a Bass Player in the 21st Century What You Can Expect to See and How to Make the Best of It.

by Tom Pieper

The music making business continues to change and grow in every conceivable way. On any given day a bass player may get a call to play in a variety of musical situations. I suggest you become familiar with the many styles of music and the instrumental techniques required to play for anyone who has a need for a bass player. One of the greatest joys of the bass playing world is that we have an endless variety of musical situations to participate in. If you play the viola or violin you learn all the standard solo and ensemble repertoire to cover your part in an orchestra. This is extremely valuable pursuit and difficult to say the least, however you generally will not be asked to play something that you cannot find a part, score, or recording of. In the bass world you often have to make up (improvise? compose?) a part in the moment and if you want to be called again you must do that on a high level of performance and consistency. With this in mind you also must prepare as diligently as the violist or violinist, but you have to prepare for all the possibilities that you might run into. Today I will talk about some ways to set you up for success when those strange calls come in.

Situation Number 1: Printed Music

So you get a call from a church and the music director/ choir director wants a bass player for Handel's *Messiah* or Mozart's *Requiem* or a variety of music for special festivals. This in some ways is the easiest place to begin because you have the luxury of time and the potential to practice the music you will be performing. The first thing is to ask the director when you can get a copy of the music that you will perform. If you want to pursue more performing situations with these types of groups, start networking and auditioning for groups that rehearse and perform regularly. If you are a youth, find situations at school, a youth or civic orchestra, church or synagogue—any situations that have people playing music live. Many community orchestras play some of the greatest music around and to play with a large group is some of the greatest fun a bassist can have. Chamber orchestras are also fun if you have another partner or just yourself. It is challenging to play with a partner in the bass section and also rewarding. If you are the only bassist you have more freedom but a greater responsibility to support the whole ensemble.

Allegro assai

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Situation Number 2: Piano Score or Choir Anthem page

Sometimes you make a connection with a group and you are given music that is not written specifically for bass and does not even

take into account what would be normal for a bass player to read. It could be a music director who thinks giving you a tuba part is a good option without thinking about the fact that the bass sounds an octave lower than written and the tuba part has notes that you have never seen before. A choir director may give you a vocal anthem page from a choral arrangement and you typically will have about nine measures on each page. This presents you with the problem of playing continuously and trying to turn the pages very often. On piano you can sometimes do this while playing one part and leaving another out. On the bass it is not possible to play with one hand so unless you have lots of open strings you must turn in the most strategic ways. Two solutions are to quickly request an actual bass part (unlikely to have one if not given originally) or writing out a copy for you. (This takes more time but is much easier in the long run.)

Situation Number 3: Playing for a Show (pit)

Even in a professional show the music is bound to be a rough suggestion of what is really going on. If you are lucky you might be called to sub for a show when the regular bass player cannot make a performance. This is usually a good sign because if the show is up and running the book is together and working and you will usually have a great time with little frustration. If you are playing the show from the start you will often come in and rehearse with the band without the actors and then the actors will join you for

the technical rehearsals. Keep your pencil ready and be prepared to make cuts and have intros changed and arranged as you go. If you are doing a less professional show—you, a piano and a couple of horns for a musical revue—it may be best to read over the pianist’s shoulder instead of having the full piano scores on your stand. As mentioned above the piano score will not have your bass part in the correct octave and will have many more page turns than you want to deal with; so by having the pianist do the work you may be more successful. If the show pays well and has multiple performances writing out your own book could save you frustration and be a good plan in the long run.

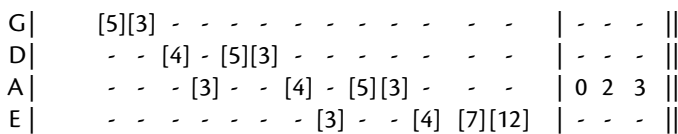
Situation Number 4: Music on a chart

You have hit pay dirt! You have been called to play a big band gig and although the book has 350 songs in the folder you just have to read the notes and watch the leader for the count-offs. If you remember to quickly put your charts back in the book as soon as you finish a song you will save yourself 45 minutes at the end of the night.



Situation Number 5: Tablature

This is most often how music is written by people unfamiliar with traditional notation, or by singer-songwriters. (Someone listens to a song on-line and decides that as long as they have heard it they can remember how to play it with some guidelines.) You must not expect these notations to be readable or reliable on the spot—they are tools you can use to learn a song from a recording or to help prepare an untrained musician for a live show. After a little practice they are not too difficult to decipher. The numbers refer to frets and you place your fingers on the string that the number is written on. In the past musicians could buy books of excerpts to learn difficult passages for orchestral auditions, and tablature is really no different. The tablature tells you one way that you can get the correct notes on your instrument and this similar to an editor telling you what they think is the best place to play a passage. The unfortunate downside is most often rhythm is not included as part of the information given you so you must listen to help put all those little numbers in the correct place. In this example, all the notes are harmonics until the open A; the actual pitches are shown on the staff. This is the famous *Portrait of Tracy* by Jaco Pastorius; check out YouTube to hear and see it.



Situation Number 6: Nashville Number Charts

Someone decided that Roman numeral explanations of chord

progression were easier to see in Arabic numbers. We often refer in music to the I chord or the V chord so in Nashville studios they decided to go all the way with numbers. Some variations include chord symbols and groupings of chords so if you are not in Nashville you may not come across this method. As always it may seem easier to write the music out in a more traditional way instead of learning a new language that is limited except for the expert.

One number is used for a measure; if you have two chords in a measure it can be notated with a slash, or you can underline the two chords, or even enclose the two chords in a box:

1	1	1/4	1
1	1	<u>1 4</u>	1
1	1	<u>1 4</u>	1

Minor chords can be notated with a dash (-) or a (m) and dominate chords have a (7).

Situation Number 7: No Charts - playing tunes you know or have not ever played.

You will probably not be called to play in this situation by seasoned players unless you are already able to play yourself. If you are substituting the best strategy here is to think of a number of tunes that you play well and offer them up for suggestion. I read a story in the International Society of Bassists journal about a bass player who sat in with Marion McPartland. After playing *Have you met Miss Jones* with the trio Marion said, “I see that you have not met Miss Jones. Is there a song that you know that you would like to play?” People who play at this level only want to make the best music possible and will try to help you out if you are humble and polite. Generally if you play at this high level of ensemble playing you already will be able to hear what the harmony is while it is being played and can make the correct choices when a chord surprises you. I went to a masterclass with Gary Peacock and Keith Jarrett in the mid 1980s at Eastman School of Music. When asked about rehearsal and how they selected material they laughed and Gary said Keith would say do you know this song and sing a bit of it and then Gary would sing the bridge and they were ready to go. As a bassist it is easier to follow the harmonic lead of the chord player who follows the melody than the pianist who may have to come up with the chords and melody.

Situation Number 8: Free improvisation

To play in a free improvisation group setting you have to be able to play what the other players are playing and make your part complement or contrast the sound around you. You have to be fearless, bold, and keep your ears open. As well you must have a very highly developed understanding of musical form and the ability to play your instrument at a very high level of performance. The best training for this is to experiment thoughtfully with peers and honestly assess what you have played by recording yourself and listening to what came out. The parts that work are the ones that you try again and the parts that don’t work leave at the side of the road.

All of these situations will come up as you play for more time and in more varied situations. The best thing is to be prepared to expect the unexpected. The first time I played a Nashville Chart was in 1997 when a singer brought in a chart from a friend. Some very talented musicians in the band put their heads together and we were able to get through the extra slashes and dashes but it was not easy at first. If you continue to have an open mind and ear you will manage to make the best bass lines and play the best music that you can in the 21st century.

Tom Pieper teaches orchestra at Wayzata East Middle School and Wayzata Central Middle School, and bass at MacPhail Center for Music and in his private studio in Minneapolis. Tom continues to gig

with SpiritJazz, Salem's Discover Band, and the illicit sextet. If you have questions or ideas to share contact him at spiritjazz.com. ↗