



BASS

The Rite of Strings

On the Transition from Middle School to High School and Beyond

by Tom Pieper

Spring is the time of to remind yourself that the time you practice and play your instrument will eventually lead to big pay-offs. If this is your first year of playing you have already gone past the initial stages and excitement of playing a new instrument and are looking for some more signs that what you started months earlier was a wise choice. Making a decision about an instrument is difficult because even if you planned well and anticipated all the challenges ahead, you really cannot predict how playing an instrument will make you feel. You have to be open to letting the process unfold as you mature over a long period of time.

Choosing the Bass

Currently in the business world there is a school of thought that says it takes about 10,000 hours of practice to achieve mastery. Music however is different; music always changes and you will never achieve complete mastery. You can take some of the strategies from business and apply them to your bass playing. One thing you can do is remind yourself to concentrate on short-term gains and achievements. Do not neglect to celebrate and reward yourself for what you have already accomplished in this short amount of time as you continue to make longer-term gains. Over your lifetime you will constantly have to adapt so you will not be left behind or lose your hard earned gains. Although you may feel that you have put in a lot of time practicing, you have not yet reached anywhere near the 10,000 hours. Reaching that goal of 10,000 hours would take over thirteen years if you practiced at a rate of two hours per day.

Why does bass seem to lag behind some of the other string instruments and be left out of the, “Am I going to be a soloist or a section player?” debate? Time is the main factor with most bassist starting at an older age. Another significant factor is balance of the orchestra and the lower range of the instrument. When you last went to a concert were there 40 bassists and 8 violins? The final piece is bassists have more opportunities as section players because of the role

they play in an ensemble. Usually this is the path for bassists and even Edgar Meyer was a section player in the Nashville Symphony while he was recording and beginning his solo career.

One great feature of the Suzuki method is that with fractional basses we no longer have to wait till we are big enough to play the bass. This adds lots of years of experience for bassists and has certainly brought up the level of playing closer to that of other string players. Suzuki can present some practical problems for bass players to communicate with other players or non-Suzuki teachers because the positions are not numbered in the standard way. Bassists sometimes miss out on the critical element of a group class since usually they will not have a large enough group of bassists that start and continue to develop together over a period of years. As long as you have a dedicated private teacher these students can make great progress in their solo playing, and one thing certain is they will always be in demand to be included in larger ensembles. I think in Minnesota there are still only a very few certified Suzuki bass teachers!

If you had played another string instrument before the bass, the skills you learned with the bow will transfer very well to your new instrument. This is because the bow speaks easier for instruments in the higher ranges, and the melodies that you have already played help you to understand tonality and intervals and will help your ear hear the melodies in the lower range. Most people don't walk around and sing the root progression of a song—this is learned after we learn about melodies. Because of this I think the transition for those moving from another string instrument to bass makes sense and works well. When you take your bow technique and musical awareness to the bass you will be a step ahead of someone who started on bass because the sound of a bowed instrument is already in your head. The advantage of starting first on the bass is the compounding of skills over time and developing good habits from the start. If you did start first on the bass ask a friend to

let you try the bow on their instrument to feel how easily the sound can be drawn out with the natural weight of the arm. When you return to the bass try to control your bow as easily.

Not sure about your choice then? More than likely you started out with a Suzuki program, started in orchestra with the *Essential Elements 2000* books, or were given another well-researched method book that your elementary or secondary teacher recommended to you. You plugged along with the bass and tried to learn as much as you could. With the ensemble often working a long time with the upper strings, you either started to get bored in orchestra, or began to enjoy the down time. In the first year you learned to have a good set up for your left hand and how to use your arm to keep the bow straight, worked to get a focused tone, played with a rock solid beat, read notes, and played as a member of a group. You may also have come to bass after trying another instrument that did not seem to fit your personality. This is great because something about the bass drew you in, or it may simply be that you found the instrument that let you bring out your own true voice. You may or not even be conscious of this but you can remember this as you continue—the bass may have chosen you.

Transition to High School

As many of you know, the bass is an instrument that requires a player to come to several realizations. The instrument can be unwieldy both to play and to travel around with. At first this is an easy problem to work around because you are excited to try something new and understand that you will eventually become successful at playing the bass. In a short time, the charm can wear off and you will need to find additional ways to capture the excitement and keep your momentum moving. As you make the transition from your first few years of playing and begin thinking about playing in high school, the pace of your improvement needs to increase rapidly. This seems even more evident for bass due to the changes in

repertoire from middle school to high school. At first you can play a lot of the music that can be played without too much technical proficiency. If you look at the bass parts of the 5th *Brandenburg Concerto* and compare it to a Mozart or Beethoven symphony you will understand what I am saying. Now is the time to develop the mindset that you must meet the dual requirements of becoming a really strong ensemble player as well as a polished and accomplished soloist. While these can seem to be opposite requirements, they really do feed off of each other and this is why orchestra audition committees focus on both when selecting musicians. The realization of these two aspects of your playing is what will help you to become a well-rounded musician.

The parts for bass are supportive; not often are we featured or play the melody. When we do move into Sonatas and orchestral excerpts, the parts we have played in orchestra do not quite prepare us to be fantastic soloists or even have the skill to play difficult ensemble parts. We need to work on both the meat and potatoes for the bass and the cream cheese frosting. Unless you are Flee (bass player for the Red Hot Chili Peppers), you will not get a lot of recognition for your efforts even though when the bass is missing or performed at a lesser level everyone is aware of some problem.

Schools and parents can take care of the traveling problems of the bass by having good instruments for use at school, and by renting good instruments from a string shop for home use. The bass is even more critical in set-up than some of the other string instruments. A bad violin tone is something you can work around; however a bass with 5 or 25 year old strings, a flat fingerboard, and a bridge that is poorly cut can make the difference for someone becoming successful as a full time member of the bass club, or a one year player. Our climate has a radical effect on the bass and level of string height. Almost every day I will try to play a bass where the strings press to deeply into the fingerboard and choke the sound of the string. If you have bridge adjusters you can raise this, if not you may need to have a better bridge made. I suggest the adjusters in every situation, but make sure your teacher or the shop are the only ones allowed to turn them until you get trained to do it yourself. This will also help in summer when the strings get to be way too high for the left hand to press down.

After the bass is set up and you have been playing you will need to supplement what you play in your orchestra. From the start it is important to also play melodies on the bass. The Suzuki method is very good for this because it allows bassist to start in more comfortable positions and even explore thumb position early on. Suzuki also offers a lot of good solo material that is sequential for the bass.

Some good places to start for resources if you do not have a private teacher and are interested in developing further as you continue to develop are available. The biggest trick is to start where you are at and not overestimate your skill level. George Vance, who has worked a long time with young bass players, has a progressive repertoire series for the double bass. This comes in three volumes, is clearly printed, well edited, and accessible for a young performer. Many great songs and melodies arranged by George for the double bass are included here.

Another book, recommended by bassist and teacher Sara Thompson, is the *Double Bass Solo, Book 1*, selected by Keith Hartley. This book makes a great transition from the Suzuki melodies and method books to some well know melodies that move between positions. These are solos found in the standard repertoire, but not necessarily from the standard bass repertoire. In addition these are fun to play and in a good range and of a good length for the

Suggested Solo Music

- Hartley, K. (1980, 1997). *Double Bass Solo, Book 1*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press
- Marcello, B., ed. Zimmerman, F. (1957). *Sonata in F Major*. New York: International Music Company.
- Rabbath, F. *New Technique of Double Bass, Vol. 1* Paris: Alphonse Leduc. Available from Lemur Music
- Scarlatti, ed. Drew, L. (1969): *Three Sonatas for Double Bass and Piano*. New York/ London: G. Schirmer
- Scarmolin, A. L. (1960). *Introduction & Dance*. Boca Raton Florida: Ludwig Masters Publications.
- Simandl, F. *New Method Book 1* (orange cover) New York: Carl Fischer, LLC. Available from Lemur Music
- Vance, G. (2000). *Progressive Repertoire for the Double Bass Vol. 1, 2, 3*. New York: Carl Fischer, LLC
- Vivaldi, A., ed. Drew, L. (1959). *Six Sonatas for Double Bass and Piano*. New York/London: G. Schirmer
- Zimmerman, F. *Bach for the Young Bass Player*. New York: International Music Company.
- Zimmerman, F. (1950). *Duets for Two String Basses*. New York: International Music Company
- Zimmerman, O. (1966). *Solos for the Double Bass Player*. New York: G. Schirmer

younger performer. The series includes 2 volumes, piano accompaniments, and some bass duets.

Fred Zimmerman has a book entitled, *Bach for the Young Bass Player*. This is another good source with some lesser-known and well-known works included. Phrasing, articulation, fingerings, and bowings are included. These pieces are longer and would be demanding for most bassists as they are moving on to high school; however the quality of the selections are worth the extra effort for a student looking to advance and play more challenging material.

Oscar Zimmerman's book, *Solos for the Double Bass Player*, also can give extra musical choices to newer and continually advancing bassists. I have found the Beethoven *Sonatina*, to be particularly good for bassists who have played in orchestra for a few years, but have not had the benefit of any private lessons. The opening theme in G minor fits especially well on the bass, and when you contrast this with the *poco animato* theme in G major you have a song that also teaches the young student about form, and thematic variations. Several other sonatas for this period of development are: Marcello *Sonata in F major*, Scarlatti *Three Sonatas*, and Vivaldi *Six Sonatas*. The former edited by F. Zimmerman, and the other two by L. Drew. All of these include piano accompaniment and are great for developing string technique as well as being good for recital and auditions.

Bassists who have edited these pieces give you valuable insights on fingerings, and have included selections that are well suited for the instrument. There is such a great level of experience behind these books, which should prepare you for auditions for high school or a youth orchestra. Often as bassists we play music that is written for cello and because of the uniqueness of tuning in fourths certain bowings are very difficult and not well suited. Obviously anything can be adapted for the bass but I think it is better to let the editors share what they have found for the students. This is especially important at this early age so that the time searching for music is reduced and the time playing music that is possible and helpful is increased. We can all try to play Bach cello suites at pitch but for

most bassists this would be a considerable waste of time that could be better spent on these materials.

So remember to try to play music that is appropriate for your level of technique. Record yourself and play with as many different ensembles as you can. Bass is still the most important instrument in the any

ensemble, and the most universally needed regardless of what type of music you play. Listen, practice, and perform and enjoy the changes of spring and how far you have already come.

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