

All-State: Bass for the Non-Bassist

presented by Nancy Bjork — reported by Stephanie Dotzel

Nancy Bjork began the session by emphasizing how similar the bass is to the violin. The difficulties are much the same as the violinist and violist in that it is an awkward instrument to play. The teacher should check to make sure that the bass is in good repair with good strings and an endpin that is in good condition.

Nancy prefers to teach the young bassist to stand while playing. This allows the student to avoid carrying the bass, music *and* the chair or stool. Nancy stresses the following points when beginning a young bass player:

- Pizzicato first! This allows the student's attention to be directed toward the setup of the left hand.
- The weight should be centered between both feet. The bass player should feel as if both feet are one unit, with weight not on one foot or the other.
- The back should be as straight as possible.
- Shoulders should be low and relaxed. This of course is the same as the other string instruments.
- The bass should rest on the left side, not on the tummy but not "side saddle" either.
- Both bass and bassist face forward.

The height of the bass varies according to the build of the bassist's body. Nancy advises that the first finger of the left hand should be at eye level and the bow arm should reach midway between the fingerboard and bridge.

To form a good left hand position the following steps should be followed. With the right hand on the upper bout of the bass let the left hand dangle along the side and then bring the hand up to the fingerboard making sure to curve the fingers. Keep tapes to a minimum. Nancy applies only the first finger tape and the high D tape.

If the teacher is a violinist or violist, the French bow is easiest to teach. Relaxation is key to developing a good bow hold and bow stroke. The arm should be straight but not locked and should move as one unit from the shoulder. Fingers should be relaxed on

the stick and slightly curved. Bow speed is critical to developing a good sound. It is best to use much *less* bow to make a good sound. Learning to stop the bow is just as important as starting the bow. Higher positions require a faster bow. I think developing a really musical tone is very difficult for young players. I've had trouble guiding students to place the bow at the correct place on the string to make the best sound possible. I now have some good guidelines to go by in my teaching.

Nancy suggests staying on the G-string to learn to shift. The hand should keep the same shape while "taking a ride up and down the G-string" without pressing down on the string. The left arm should move as one unit, elbow, forearm, wrist and fingers. Have students practice the D arpeggio (D, F#, A, high D—matching pitch with low D) then move on to the scale. The procedure should be repeated on the A and the E strings. All of the following scales use the same fingering: D, A and E. Other positions may be added one at a time. In half position practice the shifting motion, first matching the A pitches and then add scales. My bass players are recruited right away for jazz band and need to know half position along with the B flat and F scales. They need to be able to shift easily between half and first position. In second position the bass player should practice shifting from first position to second position using B flat to match pitches.

On the E-string it's important to move the elbow forward for correct position. Again Nancy suggests learning the E arpeggio first and then following with the scale. To keep from hitting the right leg while bowing turn the bass out and place the right leg back a bit. This should be standard position for all the strings and not just for the E-string. Shorter bow strokes on the E-string help a great deal.

Nancy suggests tuning the bass by harmonics. The fourth finger should sound the first pitch and be matched by the first finger

on the next string over. In tuning harmonics use a fast bow to make the harmonics resonate. The process is repeated until all strings are in tune. Bases should tune first to provide aural stability to the rest of the orchestra to tune to.

Nancy provided some good tips for teaching thumb position. Have the student practice placing the thumb behind the neck in sixth position and moving the thumb on top at the harmonic. This should be done with a quick motion. Then repeat. This

exercise can be done when the student is stable in early positions and should be done before the student is required to actually perform in thumb position. Next the student should play D with the 1st finger, open out with the 3rd finger to harmonic G, place the thumb on top of the string and play G harmonic with the thumb and then reverse. This should be practiced for

several weeks.

I was fortunate enough to have been able to try thumb position on the bass the day of the workshop. The left armpit should be placed over the top of the bass with the thumb on top of where the G harmonic is. Thumb position requires a faster bow in order to make the notes speak clearly. We went around the room performing *Hot Cross Buns* in thumb position. Nancy commented on my "strong fingers"! When students are able to play *Hot Cross Buns* the teacher should be able to assign other tunes to further develop thumb position.

I was so excited to see this topic addressed at the workshop. It is obvious that Nancy has been teaching and performing for many years to provide us with such comprehensive notes and laid out in such an easy to follow format. As a violinist I have felt completely inadequate to teach bass. Nancy had some wonderful tips that I can pass along to my bass players.

Stephanie Dotzel teaches at Northwest Junior High in Iowa City, IA. †



Nancy Bjork