



BASS

Return of an Etude

by Tom Pieper

After many years, I have tried to widen my opinion on how I could use etudes for my own practice, and for helping my students develop new skills and confidence in their solo playing. One motivation for returning to etudes has been an awareness of etudes required for college music applications. In the '70s, life seemed less complicated for aspiring bassists; Oscar Zimmerman published a complete series of bass parts for orchestral works for major composers, and Fred Zimmermann published books of excerpts of difficult bass parts for major orchestral works. These works and knowledge from professional players sharing audition experiences coalesced into a list of the 40 most commonly requested orchestral excerpts. Besides this, a bassist kept busy mastering a few concertos, and several technique books. Playing experience and having a good private teacher shaped a student to move from amateur status into college and finally meet the requirement of a highly qualified applicant able to qualify for a level of playing necessary for professional auditions.

You can find this list at: <http://double-bassblog.org/2006/12/double-bass-orchestral-audition-lists-a-survey.html>. The list first published in the Winter Edition of the International Society of Bassists' Journal ranked how often certain pieces occurred on auditions. I received a similar list from bassist Mark Foley, who was a bass student of James Clute in '70s, and used this list extensively with Clute from 1988–1992. Many other students used it too, and many of them became experts at the list as they honed their playing to gain positions in orchestras across the country. Although more choices for bass etudes exist now, the selection is not as extensive as you would find for other string instruments. I believe studying etudes creates an opportunity for technical understanding and musical growth necessary to advance on the instrument and bridge a gap between secondary school and college level performance.

Etudes are ideal because they isolate a few specific techniques, allow for displays of

technical mastery, are limited in length, and can demonstrate musical expression in a specific and concise manner. After I ignored this Etude #17 by F. Simandl, from his *30 Etudes for the String Bass*, for many years I was surprised by how much it filled a need to help my students improve their playing in a short amount of time. The etude was a good marker of change over time and fun too. This timeline began with my working on the etude in February of 1981, using it to help prepare for a student's audition in 2008, and finally reworking it this past fall for another student's required audition piece.

Breaking down Etude #17

This etude is in an ABA form and starts out in the key of E minor. Two technical problems first arise with the double down bows in measure 1 and the hooked bowing in measure 2. The down-bow motive is used multiple times throughout the A section. To execute this bowing you must use very little bow and move the bow very quickly. The string-crossings also make the bowing more challenging, especially with the low note on the E string. In measure 8, the syncopation challenge is to resist rushing through the measure. To help resist rushing, remember to slightly emphasize beat one and enjoy how the offbeat notes carry you into the next downbeat. As you play the ritardando in measure 31 keep your right elbow close to your body to help minimize the time moving to the E string from the open A string.

Fingering is also a key to success for parts of this etude. Fingering is always personal, so I think a good strategy is to try out ideas from different editions, let them sit for a while and make changes if necessary. This strategy is better than ignoring fingerings while learning a piece because often times the people who edit the works have a great deal to share. In measure 3, move up the D string so you do not have to leap up for the last interval from C to E. Use the same ideas on measure 19, where you can shift all up the D string and play the last five notes in VII position. Fingerings of this nature work well when playing passages

across strings and when you are trying to accommodate larger interval leaps. For the descending scale passage in measure 31, start with a fourth finger E in IV position and immediately shift to a fourth finger D in III position. This shifting pattern groups the remaining notes in two notes per position.

When the etude changes from E minor to G major in measure 17, you may want to emphasize the downbeat and accelerate into tempo on measure 18. This could help to foreshadow the upcoming cantabile section. You will not lose the drive of the section and you will pique the interest of the audience. Having the low G sustain a bit longer is a convincing way to show and express your musicality.

The cantabile section begins in measure 33. In this section, some shifting choices are included to help play the section in a more lyrical fashion. This is done by playing most of the section on the G-string, and sometimes shifting more often even though you could play on two strings. The lyrical advantage of this is when you are sustaining the sound on one string you do not have to start another string. This will make your phrasing more connected and allow you to vibrate more continuously. Start the first seven measures on the G-string, and play the F# on the D string. You will have many shifts from 4 to 4, however when moving down in pitch this keeps your left hand in a good position. This will work best when you shift during the open G-string. Immediately return to the G-string for the D until the E on the D string. On the next G, play the note open and shift up to II½ position for the B and C, shift up to IV position for the next four notes before the end of the phrase. In measure 45, start up-bow and come down the G-string until you play the F. Slurring in groups of two can also make the crescendo more effective. Play the accelerando section on the G-string until the ritardando. Each new shift starts with first finger, which works great for your left hand when moving up in pitch.

The last theme repeats and when you play the down-bow on the high G, you

can even build to a bigger finish slurring in groups of two and by removing the slur between G and F. Stay in the upper half of the bow to diminuendo to complete the phrasing in the most elegant way.

The A section returns and is marked Tempo 1. Keep in mind all previous changes and remember to play a noticeable ritardando in the last measure. The effect of this section frames the etude and gives a sense of completeness.

Several other etudes in Simandl's *30 Etudes* are great for exploration and study. I feel that #17 uses a variety of styles and keys to develop a musical excerpt that will push your playing to another level. After learning the etude, see how what you learned transfers to other music you are playing. The more variety of playing you have to immerse yourself in, the greater your musicianship and influence will become. Show yourself off and be prepared for any audi-

tion in advance and your ability to support and accompany others in all musical situations will be obvious to all who hear you.

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