

All-State: Bass Pedagogy

presented by Mark Kausch — reported by Carlin Stiles

Mark took a very interesting approach to his bass pedagogy session by using the All-State Orchestra bass section to profile some of the currently available bass solo, duet and ensemble repertoire. The first selection the All-State bass section played was the opening to the 3rd movement of Mahler *Symphony No. 1*. This solo was the first solo that I played as I began working on the bass. Mark invited the harp player to join the section for this piece because harp players have a unique perspective on how to play beautifully across a wide range of pizzicato.

The bass section then played a series of duets from two compilations of duet books (*12 Duets for Double Bass* and *Duets*). One of these duets was a Bach *Minuet* which students can use to develop correct baroque articulation and phrasing. Another duet that Mark and a student played was from the collected solos of Oscar Pettiford. The interesting thing about these solos is they are entirely in the lower positions because Oscar's bass had a very high string height, which made it almost impossible to play above the octave G. Because of this, these solos are fairly accessible to younger bass players.

Double bass pedagogic method came late to the string pedagogy table in making a strong series of repertoire that makes sense for the instrument. George Vance developed a series of three books of *Progressive Repertoire for the Double Bass*. The Mahler trio that the bass section played is early in the first volume of the Vance books and one of the last selections is the Domenico Dragonetti (a.k.a. "Edouard Nanny") Concerto. This is a wonderful upper intermediate level concerto as it is essentially an elaboration on a G major scale and arpeggio including some passage work in upper position harmonics.

Three of the All-State bass players were working on the Koussevitzky Concerto, which has many technical skills that challenge young bass players. Mark said that in the bass world that this concerto needs to be approached with caution by young performers as it has the potential to become the Carpel Tunnel Concerto! The double stop section at the end of the concerto can cause repetitive stress injuries if practiced too intensely or too long without frequent

breaks away from the instrument.

Much of the solo bass repertoire is stolen from other instruments, particularly the cello and the viola da gamba and even the violin. There are many arrangements of the Johann Sebastian Bach solo cello sonatas intended for performance at cello pitch but there are also arrangements in which some of the suites are transposed to keys more manageable on double bass.

One of the major and relatively recent pedagogic evolutions in the bass world is the adoption of more sophisticated shifting technique. The old way relied more heavily on larger shifts on the upper two strings while the modern method includes more options for crossing strings in upper positions. Mark talks frequently about playing the bass with ease. Mark's former teacher Eugene Levinson wrote a scale book called *The School of Agility*, which has this idea at the core. The whole purpose of the book was to develop ease of playing on the bass by practicing every permutation of every double bass three-octave scale and arpeggio fingering in every key. In Levinson's method each scale fingering moves progressively across the entire fingerboard; the multiple fingerings for each scale (as many as 16 for each scale!) build upon each other. By the end of the book a young player can effectively play across the entire bass fingerboard with ease. Even though the bass fingerboard is a huge chunk of wood, it can be played without tension and fear. The bass, the bow, good rosin (Mark recommends "Pops") and gravity, will work for you to allow the bass to be easy to play.

One of the questions that someone asked regarded the height of the endpin and Mark responded that that height was largely dependent on the length of the arm and allowing the bow to land in the sweet spot between the bridge and the fingerboard. This may mean that the nut is higher than the traditional "eye level" rule, but it is more important that the sound is clear and that the player doesn't need to bend over to place the bow properly. This does cause challenges with keeping the left hand in tune in half and first positions, as younger hands and arms have a tendency to drift towards the bridge with gravity. Another left hand challenge is the hyper-extended, locked-knuckle

iron claw that sometimes, (almost always), develops as young bass hands try to push down the double bass strings a.k.a. "giant pieces of high tension wire." Mark helps prevent this from occurring by reassuring the students that the thumping sound that the F# (the first note played in the *Essential Elements* series) makes is okay and will improve as the hand gets stronger. He showed us several left hand strengthening exercises that reinforced good hand shape and were good finger warm-ups.

Then Mark was asked to answer the eternal conundrum of French versus German bow holds for beginning bass players and his answer was complex and two sided. On one hand, the French bow hold allows for more versatility and subtlety than the German bow but it often is played with a very pronated pointer finger and a collapsed pinky. The French bow hold also has gravity working against it. The German bow hold is a much more natural feel to it as it is similar to holding a tennis ball in shape and has an initial power that is very attractive to young players. But, it is easy for the middle fingers to fall into the middle of the bow or for the fingers to lock into place, which leads to tension in the hand and in the sound. Mark lets his young bass players feel both bow holds and decide for themselves which feels right in their hand. This is a long digression from my initial discussion on repertoire, but, if a student is playing with tension or with poor habits, then the repertoire that the All-State students performed is absolutely out of reach.

The last aspect of bass repertoire I would like to focus on is the growing field of bass ensemble repertoire. Many of the top bass players in this country are arranging orchestra standards, traditional chamber music and pop music for bass ensemble and the results are phenomenal! The All-State bass section performed the *Nocturne* by Mendelssohn with spectacular result! I personally have performed the Barber *Adagio*, *Bydlo* from *Pictures at the Exhibition*, *Happy* and a few others for bass quartet. All these pieces are accessible for a mixed group of bass players as the top parts are challenging while the lower bass parts are easier for younger players. This music is fun to play, gives a chamber music challenge to our bass players

and it is quite impressive when twelve bass players parade on stage to perform!

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