



# BASS

## Throwback Thursday (looking back)

by Tom Pieper

I always believe looking back is a good strategy for moving ahead: grasping the big picture. Over the years, different music and musicians inspire and lead us to many facets of exploration. Diverse styles and influences combine to create your unique voice on your instrument. With the bass as an essential instrument across many genres of music, this TBT article highlights different paths to the same end—becoming a complete and contributing musical collaborator motivated to pursue as many experiences as possible.

On many occasions, I have had conversations with musicians about using specific music as a methodology for learning how to play the bass. Early on, I recognized that if you wanted to play the bass, you needed to be familiar with traditional methods. Techniques and skills can only develop when working on authentic music with musicians who have reached a level of competence, and with guidance of mentors who understand how to reach your goals. If you are playing in a big band, you need to know how to play with horns and produce a pocket of sound to support them; in a trio you need to take on more of soloist role; and in an orchestra, you have to be able to play the repertoire at a professional level. In college a well-known cellist performed Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations* and told the conductor he could play it any tempo that the orchestra was able to reach. Strive to play with musicians motivated and drawn to the type of music you love and you will certainly become a better musician.

Many bassists/educators/performers have helped create a space for the bass to take center stage. Two of them are Rufus Reid and Christian McBride. Rufus Reid in his critical method book, *The Evolving Bassist*, articulated concepts shaping bass playing since the early 1970s. Christian McBride promotes the bass, education, and is an example of a complete double bassist performing today. He spoke about all the influences in his life, and on a recent radio interview referred to himself as a funk musician. *Papa was a Rolling Stone* was one of the hooks for him as a young musician. The riff

ELECTRIC BASS      PAPA WAS A ROLLING STONE

goes on for about nine minutes and is relentless in its simplicity and insistence. After mastering this funk style at 9 years old, he discovered jazz through an uncle who was a player who also took the time to share the legacy of this music. For his uncle, the talk was about the history of jazz. The uncle was also very cool, and Christian wanted to be like him. You can learn a lot and hear a lot more information about Christian McBride at [www.christianmcbride.com](http://www.christianmcbride.com).

Bassist James Clute was a master teacher who prided himself on recognizing talent, and guiding students into the world of orchestral bass playing. He would talk about students that were “really wet” with potential. He spoke often of the number of the people he helped get into a professional, living-wage orchestra, and of students he helped get accepted into the Curtis Institute of Music

where they became students of Roger Scott. Closer to home, he spent 47 seasons in the Minneapolis Symphony and Minnesota Orchestra. His expertise as a teacher placed him at the University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire, and the Eastman School of Music.

Clute organized his studio teaching around the list of music bass players needed to be able to play (<http://doublebassblog.org/2006/12/double-bass-orchestral-audition-lists-a-survey.html>). This list ranked the frequency of requested pieces, and how often they appeared at auditions for professional orchestra positions. The list here was from 1990, and Clute used a very similar list available in the late 1980s. When you studied with Clute, you started at the top and progressed to the bottom. It soon became apparent that you needed to know everything from Beethoven to Stravinsky. Seeing all of the music on this list was a little intimidating, but it set you on a path to understand all the required technical and musical skills needed to play in an orchestra. These skills also continue to be useful in any area of music that you settled in.

I have included Clute's notes on the piece on the top of the list. Beethoven's *9th Symphony* has the bass/cello section soli from the IV movement. Clute noted how Beethoven had one of his most familiar themes introduced by the basses and cellos. Every school age kid on the planet knows this melody. When I began teaching at Ramsey in Minneapolis, I had a conversation with Ken Freed, a violist from the Minnesota Orchestra, about repertoire. I said I might try part of a Beethoven Symphony with a group of advanced eighth graders, and he said, “Of course, everything you need to know can be found there.” I still believe using authentic repertoire from a master is the best methodology.

Beethoven 9 starts out with a furious theme interrupted by the bass and cello sections checking the momentum and pulling the ensemble back from the brink. This orchestration interplay continues and moves the ensemble from  $\text{≡≡≡}$  through  $\text{≡}$  and down to  $\text{♩}$ . Two down bows articulate the phrase, followed by slurred notes that help move the bow back to the lower half. In measure 3, the eighth notes pull back on the tempo and then accelerate to the B $\flat$  quarter note. A diminuendo follows a slight break before the B $\flat$  octave into the next ensemble episode. The next soli entrance pushes against the  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter by varying the starting beat of each entrance. Clute warned that often the space in measure ten and eleven were miscounted in auditions. The result was the audition was over. Tempo 1 has more tugging and pulling while adding harmonic interest using G $^7$ . Every new entrance is a tour de force for the ensemble followed by imaginative modulations and melodic fragments. This juxtaposition of colors and themes played by ensemble are interrupted and elaborated on by the lowest strings. When first hearing this and seeing it on the page, I wondered, how everyone could stay and phrase together. As often is the case, great players make it appear easy.

Measure 36 and after challenge the player with key and shifts in dynamics. Clute always edited the crescendo and following diminuendo to reflect what he had learned in years of playing and

## Beethoven's 9th Symphony — bass soli from movement IV

*f* 1 4 2 1 1 4 0 1 2 2 1 1 4 2 1 4 4 0 1 4 *dim.*  
*p* *f* *ff* *rit.*  
*f* *ff* *mp* *f* *dim.*  
*f* *mf* *dim.* *pp*  
*p* *cresc.* *fff*  
*ff* *f* *f*  
*sf* *pp*  
*cresc.* *p*

auditioning. Note the explosion of sound in measure 43 leading to the end of the phrase. Finally, Beethoven arrives in D major to lead into the main theme. In measure 72, you have the specific crescendo on beat four at forte tied to a piano on beat one and then continuing. This whole excerpt demonstrates the continuous genius of Beethoven's orchestration and imagination as he follows up with the unexpected vocal entrance (Choral Symphony!). I was lucky to have heard seven bassists demonstrate the power of this subtle and exquisite excerpt as they performed an arrangement of this excerpt at Clute's funeral.

So there, you have your method. Follow all musical styles you enjoy and seek out the masters of many diverse styles. Practice what you love, and play with others who share the goal of creating the best and most authentic musical experience. Remember, that not everything will reach the ultimate level, but everything will help shape your musical and life experiences as a bassist and musician.

I like also to remember this quote from the exceptional jazz bassist Charlie Haden, "...don't think of yourself as a jazz musician. Think of yourself as a human being who plays music."

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