



BASS

Practicing Smarter

by Tom Pieper

Welcome back as you return to practicing the bass in this new school year. Do you ever wonder why it is hard to get motivated to practice and why it sometimes seems difficult to be consistently productive? Does it mystify you that some people who practice little make great progress, while you remain stuck in the same place? Different people learn at different rates, and some just have a knack for catching on quickly. The truth is it does not matter if you are a quick learner or a slower learner as long as you learn. Believe in what you are doing and allow time to have material integrate into your whole fiber. First, you must develop a vision of where you want to go, then try different practice strategies, and stick to your own path.

I have been teaching and practicing one such strategy of organizing material for the past four months or so. I am not certain how long I will continue this, but it is helping to create a better sense of intonation, to produce a bigger sound, and has made an impact on clarity of ideas and musical memory. Today, I am calling it Tonal Center Practicing. In jazz, music moves freely through a tonal center, borrowing on different forms of scales in parallel keys to offer many different temporary shifts (e.g. John Coltrane's *Moments Notice*). In classical music, the development section moves through many closely and far-reaching tonal areas (e.g. Beethoven's *5th Symphony*). In all music, we shift between keys and need to be nimble to react to the key of the moment.

For my practice of the last few months, I begin with taking one tonal center for a whole day or segment of practice. This has changed over the years because in the past I would have had four or five hours available and now my time is much more limited. I begin with a three-octave scale in different rhythmic combinations, half notes, 2 quarter notes, 4 eighth notes, slurred, hooked, détaché. I then will play the scale in thirds, fourths, or other intervals on two strings and on one string to help with shifting, timing and tone. Next, I will continue playing a whole tone or diminished scale on the same tonic pitch to stretch out my ear and broaden my tonal pallet. Finally, I may try to play four or five different modes with the same root to compare and contrast different sounds and different intervals.

After scales, I will play a tune that is usually in the key I am exploring. Therefore, if I am exploring the tonal center of D, I might play *Yesterdays*, *Summertime*, or *A Night in Tunisia*. This means playing the melody of the tune, playing the chord changes with a walking bass line, and soloing on the tune. After this I may play the melody in another meter or uncommon tempo to see what else could be possible and to aid my understanding of all the elements of the song. Now if the melody of the tune, like *Yesterdays*, starts on the fifth of the key, which is the note A, I will transpose the tune to G minor so my tonal center note of D is the starting pitch of the melody. This helps me not just to memorize where the notes are on the bass, but trains me to audiate the sound, and pull that out of the bass in a different key. I do this phrase by phrase and if I have a difficult time, I play the phrase in the original key

again before I transpose. The same process works with the chord changes as I try to place the melody within the context of the standard harmony. It is important at first to practice a tune that you know so you are not just guessing but reinforcing the melody in your ear and fingers. After I get comfortable with the tune, I modulate between the two keys to see if I can connect them in a useful and interesting way.

If I have a solo in the same key or an orchestral excerpt in the same key, I will play that and begin to memorize part of the song as well. If I am playing the solo *Prayer* by Bloch, which starts on the tonic, I will pick another note of the key to begin the song on. The next critical step is to play another solo that is in a different key in this new key. Therefore, I may take one movement of the Bach *Cello Suites* and start it on the tonic of the key I am working in.

It is easier to transpose a small segment, maybe one phrase, and continue by adding phrases to play the whole piece in the new key. Just as in the jazz piece, I may start in one key, and play the repeat in another key to see if I can create an interesting sound and grouping of the two keys. In future days, I will play the same tune and solo piece in the different tonal centers. After three or four keys, the process really becomes easier. When and if you stumble, going back to the original key helps reinforce the tune. When you play something in a new key all the idiomatic advantages are lost, meaning some things will be easier and some things will be harder. For bass, the change of positions also hits at the core of playing with awareness—not just memorizing where the notes are, but having an understanding of the sound and musical structure as you draw the music you hear from your instrument. Having this preconceived sound to shoot for makes for a deeper understanding of the music and of the technique needed to create that sound.

External visions and listening to the masters are how we build on our vision of how we want to sound. I find the following examples of two bassists playing duets to be enlightening, instructive and inspirational.

Christian McBride — SuperBass

In a past article, I referenced the playing of Christian McBride, and after seeing him play at the Dakota on July 5 with Chick Corea, I realized I need to explore his playing further. Christian McBride was first presented to a wider audience through his association with bassist Ray Brown. The first video here features him with Ray and John Clayton. Ray Brown was the foremost bassist of his generation who played with everyone from Charlie Parker to Ella Fitzgerald. John Clayton was one of Ray's most prominent students and a bassist/composer in both the classical and jazz genres.

- Ray Brown, John Clayton, Christian McBride - SuperBass - *Taco With A Pork Chop*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FY5ymONXlg>
- Christian McBride performing *Blue Monk* with SuperBass
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzBjOX7hlgw>

Lynn Seaton and Christian McBride

Lynn Seaton has an extensive bibliography and is a notable teacher at North Texas State. This informal video is from a master class at the school.

- Lynn Seaton and Christian McBride
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZO15LLshzP0>

David Friesen and Glen Moore

Two of the earliest jazz duos on bass that I have on recordings present bassist Glen Moore, who was highly innovative in the group Oregon. David Friesen also has lived in Portland for many years and their recordings have a joyfulness that is hard to miss.

- David Friesen - Glen Moore CD *Bactrian* promo video
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQuBd82E6wY>

Dave Holland and Barre Phillips

Miles Davis first discovered Dave Holland at Ronnie Scott's club in London England. He is comfortable playing in any ensemble and explores a different type of tonal spectrum. I had heard a story of Phillips not naming his children but calling them number 1 and number 2. He brings a very interesting mind and intelligence that he brings out in his improvised music that transcends categories.

- Dave Holland / Barre Phillips *Improvised Piece 1 & Beans*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RN-g0bjk79Q>

Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen and Christian McBride

Niels-Henning was also a virtuoso who recorded with Dexter Gordon on *One Flight Up* when he was only seventeen. He eventually took over the bass chair that Ray Brown occupied with Oscar Peterson and recorded in many duos for many years. His words of introduction for Christian McBride speak eloquently as to the history and admiration he had for Christian. "Now it is my privilege,

honor and actually also duty to introduce a fabulous bass player, Chris McBride." The technique and command of the jazz language that Niels had in the 70s was impressive to see live and is a joy to hear these two bassists of different generations play together.

- Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen & Christian McBride - *Bye-bye Blackbird*. Composed by Ray Henderson.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ne51BFpF9M>

Christian McBride and Edgar Meyer

Finally, I have included two selections of Christian and Edgar Meyer. These two have created a duo built on mutual virtuosity and respect. Christian brings out a jazz phrasing sensibility that is unequaled by any player on any instrument. Edgar's walking is supportive and his bowed solos provide a potent contrast to the previous pizzicato solos. Listen to each master to note how Christian swings and Edgar explores a very different awareness of musical tradition.

- Christian McBride & Edgar Meyer *Solar*, live at Band on the Wall https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xS_eYJa18rQ
- Christian McBride & Edgar Meyer *Stella*, live at Band on the Wall <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRg5P418nCI>

As always, I hope you have time to listen and watch these videos and experiment with Tonal Center Practicing over the next few months. Let me know if you have any questions and insights from your experiments and experiences.

Tom Pieper teaches bass in his private studio and at MacPhail Center for Music. He is the middle school orchestra director for Central Middle School in the Wayzata School District. He has a new recording coming out with the Illicit Sextet, which can be found, on iTunes and at cdbaby.com. 🎸