

# All-State: 10 Steps to Better Bass Playing—for the Non-Bassist

presented by Paul Ousley — reported by Carlin Stiles, Brenda Radloff, Alison Swiggum

## Rock Stops

Everyone needs a rock stop. This is a non-negotiable for bass players because unless the bass is steady, nothing else will work well. When the bass is solid, it allows for better tone, better intonation and easier shifting.

One of the major problems with rock stops is longevity because the bass endpin drills through the metal in very little time. If you superglue a penny into the bottom of the rock stop, suddenly the rock stop will last three or four times as long.

## Rosin

Rosin is a problem for all string players, but especially for bass players. The process of getting rosin on a bass bow presents challenges because the bow is so big and the rosin is so soft. When applying rosin to the bow, if you cannot see the indentations of the hair in the rosin, you need to press harder. You should listen for a squeaking sound when pressing the rosin into the bow hair. Bass students should not do the quick back and forth motions that upper string students use when rosining their bows. In the winter, rosin needs to be applied more often, but when it is hot that two swipes across the entire bow is all that a player needs. As a rule of thumb, rosin should be applied before the start of every rehearsal.

The three brands of rosin that Paul suggested were Pops, Kolstein and Weidof. Bass rosin is expensive, so instead of asking each bassist to purchase their own cake of rosin, he suggests having one cake of rosin for the section (and a back-up in your desk!) Make sure students always keep the cap on tight so that the rosin doesn't dry out.

## Strings

In the best of all situations, bass strings need to be changed about every 4 years to maintain the best tone on a bass. A bad bass can be greatly improved with a good set of strings. For larger basses, Obligato brand are recommended; a set runs about \$230.00 and sound good for both pizzicato and arco. Do not use Red Label brand because they are cheap and the sound quality is poor. For smaller basses, one of the teacher attendees recommended ChromeCor brand.

When purchasing bass strings, always buy regular strings and never solo strings. Solo strings are actually tuned higher than

regular strings and are only used in particular repertoire. If solo strings are purchased, in effect, they turn the bass into a transposing instrument.

Paul told us that he has a drill bit attachment that fits on bass tuners so that he can change a set of bass strings in under a half hour—compared to maybe 20 minutes for one string. Paul says that if you bring your basses to him, he will use his drill bit attachment to change your strings for you!

## Handling the Instrument

When kids put the bass up and down, you should not be able to hear it. This will prevent the instrument from getting cracks and scratches. If your basses are kept upright next to each other, put a cloth over the bridge to prevent it from scratching up the bass next to it.

## End Pin and Proper Posture

Another focus was proper bass posture, and Paul emphasized the importance of a good end pin for basses so that the bass can be adjusted to the proper height for each student. The height of the end pin should place the hand directly in front of the face in 1<sup>st</sup> position. If the bass endpins develop “scoliosis” and does not return to the inside cavity of the bass with ease, unfortunately the only “cure” is replacement.

The placement of the bass as it connects to the body is one of the continual challenges that bass players face. A great revelation that Paul exposed was the fact that male and female bodies are different. On a male body the shoulders, hips and knees are aligned whereas a female body the knees are set back and are unaligned with the shoulders and hips. Paul said that he usually puts his knee on the back of the bass to help support it, but because of how the female body is built, the knee doesn't connect with the back of the bass as easily. Regular “balance checks” are required of the bassists to ensure that the bass is able to be self-supported against the body. (This is an easy challenge to give the bass players while working with another section. It is productive and it keeps the bassists occupied and out of trouble.)

## Bow Holds

Unlike everyone else in the orchestra, the

bass has two types of bow hold: French and German. The question of French vs. German—which one do you use? The answer—whatever you have available.

When teaching the French bow hold, the first finger should be perpendicular to the stick (much less pronated than the violin hold) and the middle finger should touch the ferrule (which can feel much higher on the bow than feels correct.) The thumb should have a rounded curvature (when the thumb is straight, the 18 muscles are more tight and less flexible which can lead to repetitive stress injuries.) Do not let pinky rest on the stick of the bow (French).

When teaching the German bow hold, the pinky should be slightly behind the ferrule and the thumb is directly above the pinky on the top of the bow. The other the fingers do not directly touch the stick but wrap gently around the frog. The middle finger goes at the end of the frog. There should be an egg-shaped space in the hand. If that space is being crushed, it effects the sound quality that the student is able to create. Place a marshmallow, or if you are sadistic, a push pin, to allow the student to feel the space needed in their hand.

## \$20 Tone Game

Paul's teacher used to play the \$20 Tone Game. If the student was able to play 4 half notes on an open string with the same dynamic and same tone quality, the teacher would give them \$20. In the span of his career, no one earned the \$20.

Sound quality, particularly on the bass is incredibly important because the bass is the core of the orchestra and particularly challenging because the bass itself is so huge! It all starts with a good bow hold. The next step is figuring out the rest of the arm. Analogously, the arm imitates that of a gorilla or a pendulum. The main muscle involved is the back.

If a student is struggling to pull a straight bow, a great exercise is to have the student play open string double stops. The student will be unable to play the double stop until the bow is parallel to the bridge. Keep bow perpendicular to the bass, not the floor.

The bow hold effects the bow angle which effects the sound quality. It is all connected.

**Shifting**

Encourage kids to shift to second position, not just first and third.

**Pizzicato**

There are different ways to do pizzicato. For jazz, the hand is closer to the bridge. Use the side of the finger, rather than the tip. The thumb goes against the finger board.

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