



BASS

Bass Gems—Looking Back

by Tom Pieper

It seems like the repertoire for bass is well-established and continues to emphasize the same few concertos, sonatas and etudes for auditions. As any living form of art, sometimes digging under the rocks or through the weeds can reveal some lost pieces, or pieces that have simply been left behind. As a teacher of aspiring players, I think it helps me to remember how these pieces are suited for teaching, to remind myself of their importance and to rediscover other works to play on the bass. Transcriptions have always been a great source for the bass, and why not see what one of the treasured teachers from an earlier period considered valuable. This article is a result of curiosity, and also simply of opening an old book and seeing what used to be available for an earlier generation. The staples of playing for a previous era.

Oscar Zimmermann was born in 1910 and died in 1987. He was a member of the first graduating class at the Curtis Institute of music. As a bassist, he performed in the Philadelphia Orchestra, St Louis Symphony, NBC Symphony Orchestra, and finally in the Rochester Philharmonic for 36 years. His son, Robert Zimmerman, was also principal of the Rochester Philharmonic. Oscar Zimmerman spent many years teaching at Interlochen Music Camp and the Eastman School of Music. His students filled many positions in major orchestras over a period of many years. With his self-published books of complete bass parts, many bassists went deeper beyond learning the excerpts to learning all the material helpful in preparing for a career in bass performance. Students at Eastman also became some of the most influential musicians in jazz and contemporary music over his long teaching tenure. His exceptional experience created a legacy that was transformative for the world of bass education.

Helping students find solo pieces to play for auditions, seating placement, and just for the fun of learning some new music lead me to search through some old sources. The *Complete Double Bass Parts: Selected Works of J.S. Bach* were edited and published by Oscar Zimmerman and were first published in paperback in 1980. The editions contain complete bass parts for the Brandenburg Concertos, Suites, and other often-performed repertoire. They also include some less familiar material. Oscar Zimmerman states, “These selections have been adapted from keyboard works. They are included here because they serve as excellent technical studies, and because the double bass player may encounter them in orchestral transcriptions.” I believe he is correct in his description and understanding of the needs of bass players as they become skilled musicians.

I became reacquainted with the repertoire; after looking over the *Violin Concerto in E minor* part, I flipped to the back of the book and found a few pieces I was curious about. I settled on learning the *Pedal Fugue in G minor*, *Fugue in D major*, and the *Praeludium*. And now I share these with my students. They are not too long, and are complete musical explorations, melodically and harmonically interesting, and helpful to build up technique, bowing and phrasing. Incidentally, they are also good for jazz bassists to develop thumb position. These three pieces also sound good

when played pizzicato.

The theme of the *Pedal Fugue* is satisfying to play and the bowings from the editor help the bassist to get comfortable starting beats with a down bow or an up bow. In measure 11, the down bow is on the second sixteenth note, which feels unsettling at first. Experience how this feels and as you land on the next down beat.

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the Pedal Fugue. The top staff is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb major). It contains measures 11 through 16. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 below notes. Bowings are indicated by 'v' (down bow) and 'u' (up bow) above notes. The bottom staff continues the piece, showing measures 17 through 20, also with fingerings and bowings. Measure 29 is also shown with alternate fingerings for the thumb (1) on notes A and F#.

After a few times through this will play better than using two up bows at the end of the bar. Measures 17-20 have a great episodic section cadencing in Bb major. The sequence and the bowing are super fun to play and I've found it helpful as it exposes the basses to more bowing options common in the orchestral repertoire. I include some alternate fingerings for my students in measure 29, using the thumb on A and F# to keep the hand balanced between the three notes on each beat. Measure 36 has a nice climb up the G string. In measure 48 the tenor clef is employed, and because it follows the scale seems to be appropriate and useful.

Today, I know a lot of editors choose bass and treble clef for solo music; however the tenor clef is still common in older editions and useful in certain situations. In the same way, using the bass clef in higher registers makes sense for reading music, and if you are analyzing music in big band setting where you may be doubling with trombones, may be more pragmatic. Overall, this piece has a lot to offer, and Oscar Zimmerman's insights are helpful to instruct and challenge an intermediate and advanced bassist.

The next piece is an *Allegro from a Fugue in D major*. The bowings again are balanced and by using the printed bowings, create better control over up bows and down bows following the phrasing of the music. The harmonies cycle through predictable patterns satisfying for the ear, and capable to propel the music forward. This piece goes all the way up to a G two octaves above the open string.

The image shows three staves of musical notation for the Allegro from a Fugue in D major. The top staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two sharps (D major). It contains measures 27 through 28. The middle staff continues the piece, showing measures 29 through 30, with fingerings (1-4) and bowings (v, u) indicated. The bottom staff shows measures 31 through 32, including a tenor clef in measure 31. The piece ends with a double bar line.

We arrive at this note through the elegant rising of the melodic content. With the key of D major as a familiar key, the player arrives safely at the penultimate pitch. This would be a great piece for an audition as it shows off the players' understanding of the fingerboard and ability to move throughout the range of the instrument. Even after many repetitions, the line moves easily between tonal centers and has strong cadences in clear and related keys. The

added fact of being short in length, makes it fit well in an audition dossier while making it easier to work up quickly.

Finally, the *Praeludium* is an Allegro section of continuous 16 notes. Except for the Adagio section at the end, no other bowings are indicated. This is a great piece for string crossing practice, harmonic awareness, and for practicing intonation. In general, a great etude for the bass or electric bass.

Allegro

The image shows three staves of musical notation for a piece titled "Allegro". The notation is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a common time signature (C). The first staff starts with a measure number '1' and contains a sequence of eighth notes. The second staff starts with a measure number '3' and continues the sequence. The third staff starts with a measure number '5' and includes a series of bowing and fingering markings below the notes: 4, 2, 1, 2, 2, 2, 1, 2, 4, 2, 2, 2, 1, 2, 4. The piece concludes with a final measure.

Measure 27 uses a 1-finger harmonic on the D string to produce an A (misprinted without accidental) but fitting the chord of D7^{b9}. As a jazz musician this whole piece shares harmonic information

that has infiltrated jazz harmony since Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Super cool to play and realize connections between all styles of music.

As the world of bassists continues to be filled with exceptionally talented and highly trained players, it is good to take a look back of some of the people who influenced bassists in the past. A study of these pieces, and the willingness to research adaptable works for the bass is an acceptable and needed component in continuing the development of bass and the performers on this instrument. With more familiarity of “keyboard bass” music, playing continues to rise and elevate the playing to the next level. Play these pieces for yourself, your friends, and so everyone has the opportunity to hear what is beautiful and possible on the bass.

Tom Pieper teaches orchestra at Central Middle School in the Wayzata School District. He is a bass instructor at MacPhail Center for Music and also teaches bass and ensembles in his private studio. You can hear his musical composition with the Illicit Sextet and SpiritJazz at CD Baby.com or on YouTube. †