



ORCHESTRA

Recruiting Young Bass Players: A Cautionary Tale

by Sarah Duffy

This year, I had something happen in my 5th grade orchestra that might be a career-first for me. I have what might be considered too many basses! Impossible, you say? How did I get into this situation? Let me explain.

In my district, Mounds View Public Schools, we start orchestra in 4th grade. Students can choose from the violin, viola, or cello during their first year. We do not start students on the bass, but we include it in our instrument demonstration for 3rd grade students. If a student knows they want to play the bass, we encourage them to start on the cello.

The bass is an option for students starting in 5th grade, after they've had a year to develop some basic technique and note reading skills. It is also helpful for the students to have an extra year to grow a little bit taller and stronger. Their increased dedication to the program, an existing relationship with the students and their families, and one additional year of growth (both musically and physically) all help prepare students for success as they make this transition.

2018-2019 marks my third year in my current position at Turtle Lake Elementary. During my first year, there was one bass player in our 5th grade orchestra. During my second year, I had two. Now, in 2018-2019, I have 11 bass players in an orchestra with 70 students. The standard "ideal" ratio is one bass player for every 10 students in the ensemble, so my bass section would be better matched with an orchestra of 110 students. Is the orchestra a little bottom heavy? Yes. Is it a logistical challenge at times? Yes. But has it been a fun problem to have? YES!

My purpose in this article is to explain how I recruited all of these fantastic bass players this year. I will explain my process, what worked and what didn't, how I've handled some of the logistical hurdles, and my thoughts for future years.

"All About That Bass!" Day 2018

In February 2018, I presented the bass to all of my 4th grade students during their weekly lessons. First, I played them a few short clips from an eclectic mix of YouTube videos - Esperanza Spalding's NPR *Tiny*

it's a bigger instrument, but it will be the perfect size for you. I demonstrated how you can lean it up in a corner so it won't take up as much space at their house. I also showed them a quick video about how to get it in and out of a small car. That helped dispel some of the common misconceptions about the bass that scare students away—it's too big, it won't fit in our house, and it won't fit in our car. It made the bass seem possible for some students who had initially thought it wouldn't work for them or their family.



9 of the 11 bass players

Desk Concert, a Time for Three performance, a young student performing Suzuki's *Allegro* at a recital (they had just recently learned the same song, so it was relatable), a recording of *Flight of the Bumblebee*, a clip of an orchestra playing the 3rd movement of Mahler 1, and the "Double Bass Jam" from Berklee College of Music in 2013 (links below).

Next, I explained the logistics and did a little bass "myth busting." I showed them that basses come in a variety of sizes, so yes,

Once that was out of the way, I explained how they can get started. We have a large 4-week summer orchestra program in Mounds View Schools, and we offered two dedicated classes for students who are switching to the bass in summer 2018. One was in the morning and one was in the evening. In order for students to switch, they needed to participate in one of these classes or they needed to contact me for a private teacher recommendation. All 11 of my bass switch students this year participated in our summer program. Some also chose to take private lessons in addition to this experience. The students learned the bass and they also learned the same songs as the rest of the 5th grade summer orchestra, so they were able to participate in the final concert.

The final part of the presentation was for each student to try playing the bass. As you can imagine, this was very fun for most of the students. A few of them, usually violinists, said, "no way!!!" and promptly handed the bass back to me. A few were cautious yet curious, and then a few students really lit up

when they tried the bass. I took notes during each class about who seemed especially interested and also confident about playing the new instrument. I didn't direct them on what to play. I just showed them the basics about how to hold the bow and hold the instrument, and I let them explore. It was a lot of fun to see the variety of reactions and hear their explorations. The students had a blast, too.

The next step was for students to take home a form for their parents to sign. This explained some of the basics about the bass, reiterated the myth-busting I went over with the students, and discussed the summer orchestra schedule. Also, before the presentations, I emailed the parents and let them know that this would be happening so they weren't surprised when their child came home and said, "Guess what! I want to play the bass!"

I also shared details about renting an instrument. Not knowing how many bass players I would have, I said we would have a bass for them to use at school and then they could rent a second bass for home. This put me into a predicament when so many students decided to switch, but I'll discuss that a bit later in this article. I encouraged families to contact one of our preferred vendors to set up a bass rental, and I said that a limited supply of school basses was also available in case renting from the music store wasn't a possibility. Most families rented from the store.

To complete the process, an interested student needed to return a signed form to me before Spring Break (mid-March). This document asked for family contact information, summer orchestra plans, and rental plans—school or shop. Earlier in the document, I stated that students switching understood they were making a commitment for the full school year.

Once I had all of the names, I contacted each family to talk about the switch. This important step helped solidify parent support and clear up any remaining questions. Most families had known for a while that their child wanted to switch to bass, but a few families were completely surprised yet supportive. It was very helpful to have a chance to talk with them. I shared any notes I made during the demonstration day and reassured them that their child showed a lot of interest and aptitude. This was the case with each child, fortunately, so the conversations were always positive.

Scavenging for Instruments

Now, I was tasked with finding enough instruments for all of these students. I really wanted to have a school bass available for them so they didn't need to carry an instrument back and forth once a week. I told them during the demonstration that this would be the case, so I did not want to change the terms.

I had the good fortune of buying four new $\frac{1}{4}$ basses and one new $\frac{1}{8}$ bass in 2017. I also had two other basses from past years that were workable, so I had a decent supply of basses already. I then checked around with all of my colleagues to see who might have some extra basses available for 2018-2019. After looking all around the district and collecting a few extra instruments from other schools, I went to my administration with my request for one additional bass rack and two new basses. My building purchased the bass rack and the basses were then rented using money from a district allocation.

Here is how the bass rental works: my district paid the standard rental rate from July 2018-May 2019, upfront. All of the rental fees from the first year will go towards the eventual purchase of the instrument. The rental fees from the first year work out to approximately half the cost of the instrument.

The advantage of renting is that there is some flexibility. In case

I have fewer bass students next year, which is of course a real possibility, I can transfer those rental fees to a different instrument. If I continue to have high numbers of bass players but perhaps they need a different size, I can easily swap sizes. The current plan is to complete the purchase of the basses in 2019, or transfer those funds to different instruments we need in the district. If your district will allow this process, I highly recommend it.

Through some logistical gymnastics, I was finally able to secure 11 basses and three racks. The downside of having "school only" instruments is that I couldn't keep an eye on their home basses. I taught them how to tune at their first lesson, but not every student was able to do this independently at home if the instrument went desperately out of tune.

Speaking of tuning, I highly recommend the Korg TM-60 tuner with the clip-on mic for your bass students. It picks them up in a noisy room and it generally can hear the lowest pitches. The price for the tuner and mic combo is currently \$36.99 on Amazon.



Instrument size is another very important consideration. Start students on the smallest bass possible for their body size, and keep a close eye on bridge height. A bass that is too large or strings that are too high can be very discouraging for a young player. All of my new basses are Eastmans and I've been very happy with them. Our district Shen basses are also very nice. Most of my students are playing on a $\frac{1}{8}$ and it's been wonderful for them. If you don't have any smaller basses for your 4th or 5th grade beginners, I highly recommend making the investment when you can. They are easier to carry around, store in the house, get in and out of the car, and play.

Life with a Large Bass Section

For our first concert in December, I made sure to highlight the bass section. They played *Jingle Basses* by Bob Philips, which was a lot of fun. It gave the students a chance to learn a familiar melody on their new instrument.

One of the biggest challenges has been getting so many bass players to play together with a clear sound. We've worked very hard on our short bow strokes and staccato playing. We have also worked a lot on intonation and developing their ears. Good articulation is the key to getting the bass section to project and not make the orchestra sound like a muddy mess. I have also needed to ask the cellos to play with shorter bow strokes than I usually would on any parts where they double with the bass, which is most of the time in grade 1-1.5 literature. In addition to my 11 bass players, I have 18 cellists...so, we are well-covered on the low end of our orchestra!

We use color-coded tapes in Mounds View, and they are a lifesaver. They have really helped my bass students navigate their fingerboard. I say note names and I also say the tape color: "Basses, high D—blue tape." This association can be so helpful. Eventually they won't need the tapes, but they are a wonderful tool in the

beginning orchestra class. On the G string, white tape is A, red tape is B, yellow tape is C, and blue tape is D. I added additional tapes up to the middle harmonic on E, F# and G. The middle harmonic is green tape and a smiley sticker. We use Scotch plastic tape, which you can find in stores or order on Amazon.

The basses are kept in their cases on our racks and I am vigilant about instrument maintenance. I check regularly if the students are adequately rosinning their bows and we wipe the instruments down really well at their lessons each week. We talk a lot about how to safely lean their bass on a chair, to only have their end pin out when they are playing, and to never leave their instrument on the floor unattended. The bass section gets very crowded at our large group rehearsals, so instrument safety has been a constant topic. The students have done a great job with this and our instruments are still in great shape.

A note about end pins: I highly recommend having threaded end pins on your basses, which are a bit thicker and have a screw-on tip that is more durable. The students don't need rock stops, which is wonderful. It is one less thing for them to keep track of, and it's also one less source of frustration. I spent \$150 per bass to get these end pins put on some basses I received from other buildings. If you have available repair money, I recommend investing it in these fabulous end pins.



Thoughts for the Future

It has been really fun working with so many bass players this year. Here are some considerations for the future:

- Too many consecutive years of overly-strong bass numbers can cause a problem once they all get up to the high school. So, it's important to balance things out each year as we plan our recruitment as a district staff.

- I need to change the wording in my presentation to say, “depending on enrollment, you may have a school bass available to use at school only.” I never expected so many students to switch, so I didn't expect this to be such a problem. It eventually worked out thanks to support from my school, district funding, and the ability of most families to rent from a store. However, it's important to not over-promise in the future.
- I will require all of my bass players to buy the tuner mentioned above for home practice next year. Most students have access to a tuner on a parent's iPad or phone, but I discovered that some students are never tuning their basses at home. Yikes!
- I am going to present the bass to only the 4th grade cellists this year. I will still let violinists and violists switch if they really want to, but I'm not going to promote it. I had four violists switch to bass this year, which ended up not being ideal. They struggled more with the transition because they didn't know the clef and the technique was so different, and it was an unfortunate loss to the viola section.
- If a student isn't taking private lessons, I will ask the student to bring their home bass to school occasionally so I can check it over for any needed repairs and to make sure it is tuned.
- I am going to include a short “why do you want to switch to the bass” section on the form for the students to fill out.

In conclusion, I titled this article a “cautionary tale” for a few reasons. One, I was reminded again and again of how impactful we as teachers are in the instrument selection process. It is important to present instrument opportunities in a way that is supportive and never manipulative. I did not want parents to feel like I was pressuring their child to make this switch, as that would have put all of us in a difficult position of possibly disappointing a student.

Two, I was fortunate to have families who could rent basses from a store. I also received funding support from my district and building. Without those stars aligning as they did, I would not have been able

to meet the needs of my students as I had promised. I need to make sure my literature to families includes more caveats such as “depending on enrollment...” I won't know for a few years if a large bass section is a trend or a fluke, but I need to prepare for either possibility.

It's important for every teacher to consider their own situation and recruit accordingly. How much funding do you have to maintain your bass inventory? How much space do you have to store instruments? Do you have students who can be driven to school by a parent and bring a bass each week, or do kids need to ride the bus? It's important to keep an eye on equity and make sure every student has access to the opportunity.

My advice for anyone hoping to recruit more basses at the beginning level is simply to help clear up any misconceptions they may have about the instrument, and then let them give it a try. You might be pleasantly surprised by who falls in love with the bass.

YouTube Bass Videos:

- Esperanza Spalding *Tiny Desk Concert*—<https://youtu.be/sBZa7-2bG2I>
- Time for Three bass feature—<https://youtu.be/2l-z0aaBagw>
- *Flight of the Bumble Bee* for two basses, split screen—<https://youtu.be/kLvCI046t7w>
- Mahler 1, 3rd movement—<https://youtu.be/JEP2pA6srnk>
- Suzuki *Allegro*—<https://youtu.be/TMqSQtg62w>
- Double Bass Jam—<https://youtu.be/dNXS7Zyda6Q>

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