



BASS

Ever heard of the ISB? – What Is It?

A disease? The newest model of sports car? A joint in the body?

by Nancy Bjork

No, just an international organization of musicians with deep roots and high inclusivity: The International Society of Bassists.

Founded over 50 years ago by Gary Karr, world-renowned double-bass soloist who ushered in the stunning bass renaissance of the second half of the 20th century, the ISB enjoys a current membership in the thousands representing dozens of countries. This organization, according to its mission statement, “is dedicated to raising worldwide awareness of the double bass by providing forums to connect people, music and ideas through fellowship, performance, digital media and the printed word.” It holds an international convention every two years for both professionals and students, and publishes a quarterly magazine *Bass World* (masterfully edited by Minnesota’s own Connie Martin!), a handsome and classy publication which provides a vast amount of information, both in print and electronically. In addition the ISB offers a teachers directory; a luthiers directory; a members directory; access to videos as well as to the *George Vance Online Library* and the *Online Journal of Bass Research* (OJBR); group discounts for instrument and bow insurance; online postings of instruments for sale and performances—and much more!

The conventions provide bassists their chance to shine, no longer forgotten at the bottom of the orchestra or hidden in the rhythm section. For professionals and teachers, the lectures, informative sessions, panels, recitals and ensemble performances provide an opportunity to share pedagogy and craft, connect with each other, learn about new materials, products, books, techniques; and witness performances from bassists worldwide. The “Young Bassist” division offers a week-long student bass camp full of warm-up sessions, master classes, private lessons, bass ensembles and recitals, concluding with their own magnificent performance all within the embrace of the giants of the bass performance and pedagogy world. (Significantly, the jazz and classical worlds are not only given equal balance, but give brilliant evidence to the ways in which these worlds

intersect and enhance each other. No labels of “regular” and “alternative” to separate them! Further, the electric bass has recently been included with its own division.) Moreover, the ISB-sponsored International Competition boasts Symphonic, Solo, Jazz, and Junior (student) divisions, with performances guaranteed to the winners. (Note: Former MNSOTA Mary West Solo Competition winner Kevin Brown won first place in the 2009 Symphony Division; his prize included a week-long stint performing with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Currently he holds the Principal Double Bass position with the Detroit Symphony.)

Bassists, of course, recognize that they provide the heart and soul of most large ensembles regardless of genre—the harmonic foundation as well as the pulse. But how, you might ask, does this affect you, the string or orchestra teacher? Because without your bassists, you have a weaker group! With bassists strengthened by their education and connection to the world of bass and encouraged by those who do what they do and stimulated by the world of bass and the awareness of their vast possibilities; your whole orchestra will be stronger!

What about my “cool” bassist, you might demur, who only wants to play pop-rock and stick with the electric bass? The answer is that, in the bass world, all are accepted; since the foundation for excellence in all styles is a good grounding in the classical, then the better one’s classical foundation, the better equipped one is to adapt to all styles. Here is a quote from an interview with the original bassist for the huge Broadway hit musical *Jersey Boys* (from the January 2020 issue of *International Musician* p. 20). Ken Dow, who performed this show on Broadway for 10 years, states: “I also joined the San Diego Youth Symphony when I was in junior high, where I played upright bass. In my opinion, you can’t get a better overall musical education than by playing classical music. The way

harmony functions, the way our part fits into the whole, sight reading, technique, stamina, working with others...It’s the best! I found out later, once I started taking more advanced theory classes in college (UCSD) that I already knew most of what they were talking about, just without the terminology....”

Fortunately, the next ISB convention takes place close to Minnesota, a day’s drive away in Lincoln, Nebraska, and falls just a few months from now, time enough to get yourself educated and to join, time to interest your bass students in attending the “Young Bassist” division—they will never be the same! Add it to your calendar, whether you can attend for just 1 day or the full week: June 7-12, 2021 ISB Convention at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Glenn Korff School of Music. For more info: www.isbworldoffice.com/convention.asp. Note: As of this writing (March 2021) the ISB Convention has been shifted to an all-virtual event—making attendance even easier.

In the words of ISB president John Schimek, the ISB “remains the organization for all things bass. I invite anyone who wants to be inspired, educated, connected with others who share their love of bass, to join.”

I will be there – join me?

Bassist Nancy Bjork has enjoyed nurturing a vibrant studio of pre-college bassists for 45+ years, both in her home studio and at MacPhail; many of these students have joined the ranks of professional orchestra members, teachers, and enthusiastic amateurs around the world. She has organized 14 master classes with internationally-renowned bassists, and served as both presenter and panelist for ISB, ASTA, and MNSOTA events. She holds the 1999 MNSOTA Master Teacher: Studio Award. As a classical free-lancer, Nancy has performed widely around the Twin Cities, and currently performs with the Minneapolis Pops Orchestra as Principal Bass. ♪