

ALL-STATE — BASS IN THE CLASSROOM

by Michael Watson

Tips for string teachers on improving the teaching of bass in large groups. Based on a session presented on Saturday, August 6, 2022, at the MNSOTA All-State Teachers Workshop.

As string teachers, we work with all the instruments in our orchestra class, and I frequently get asked about teaching bass, because it is very different from the other string instruments. It is tuned in fourths, has two different types of bows, involves more shifting because of the distance between notes, and two different fingering systems. In the session, I presented some tools for teaching and a couple of fun activities you can do with students to help form better bass technique.

First, I talked about my procedure for tuning in orchestra class. As a bassist, I usually start with the bass section when tuning during class. Many of us have learned about the sound pyramid with the bass as the foundation, yet many still teach tuning lead from the violins. Bases need to tune carefully before leading the tuning, but starting with the lowest string can help to train students to listen toward the bass at the start of each rehearsal.

Next, I reviewed a few tips about purchasing and sizing basses. Typically I check the width of the hand in 1st position. Students should be able to comfortably reach the first and fourth finger to be properly sized. Height of the student is less important than hand width, and it is better to select too small a bass over too large a bass. In fact, we all shared that we knew adults who still play on $\frac{3}{8}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ size basses. While the larger the bass, the fuller than tone potential, there are some excellent smaller instruments with excellent tone, too.

When sizing the end-pin, bow placement is more important than height as well. Some method books use the placement of the nut to the eyebrow, but the eyebrow has nothing to do with bass playing! You want the bow to naturally fall halfway between bridge and fingerboard with the right arm naturally extended. This way students don't need to bend over to have a bow in good placement for playing. Anyway, basses shift so much, so using the left arm is less important in deciding endpin placement than bow placement.

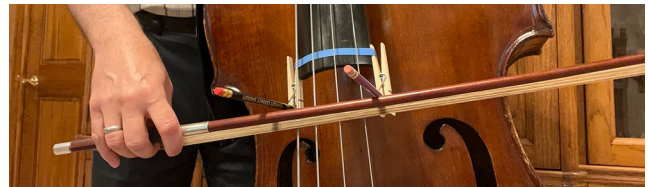
Many of the teachers at the workshop have access to both German and French at their school programs, and some only have German bows for bass. Since French bow hold is nearly identical to cello, I spent more time demonstrating how to successfully set up a German bow hold. I usually have students start with holding the bow tip down, and using only their thumb and pinkie.



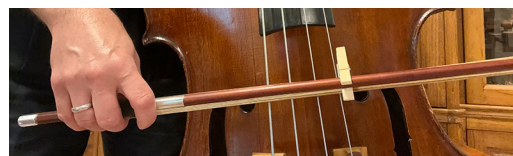
The other fingers should be rounded like holding a ball, relaxed, and not actually gripping the bow at all. I also use a ball in the hand (the smaller the better) to help with forming the round shape



I like to use some tools to help beginner and advanced students with establishing good bow placement. I showed the use of clothespins, rubber bands and pencils to help guide the bow. This photo shows how to use the clothespin for bow lane guidance. You can adjust these up or down depending on the goal.



The next photo shows how to adjust this for using less bow, which is important for bass players. Many students use more bow than is optimal, especially in the low positions and lower strings. This helps them to focus the sound with more efficient bow usage.



A fun game that I play with cello and bass students at school is “don't drop the Beanie Baby.” It involves balancing a stuffed animal on their left elbow. This must be done in 1st position, and actually involves holding the elbow a little higher than the ideal, but most students usually hold it lower than they should so it helps to

emphasize better elbow placement. The picture is of me doing this activity with my favorite “Beanie Baby.”



I usually have students pair up with a partner to help them set the item on their elbow once they are in playing position. It is difficult for most students to position themselves. Once it is in position, we will play a first position song or scale to see if they can play while keeping their elbow shelf in position.

For those who teach their students solos, it is important to know about books with two different fingering systems. The most common is the Simandl system which is used in school method books and published music for orchestra. It is the same system used for violin, viola and cello. It uses the diatonic scale for each position, for instance on the D string, 1st position has 1st finger on E, 2nd position has 1st finger on F, 3rd position has 1st finger on G, etc. The other one is the Rabbath system, which is used in some solo books, and the most commonly used books are in the *Progressive Repertoire* series by George Vance. It is based on the most common harmonics on the bass. For instance on the D string, 1st position has 1st finger on E, 2nd position has 1st finger on G, 3rd position has 1st finger on A, 4th position has first finger on D (octave harmonic), etc. In my PowerPoint for the session, I shared diagram from Nicholas Walker’s bass blog: <https://doublebassblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/walkerbasspositions.jpg>

Finally, in addition to sharing games, technique guidelines and equipment pointers I shared some resources for advanced students and teachers to learn more about the bass. There are several outstanding websites and videos. Here are few of my favorites:

- Discover Double Bass (discoverdoublebass.com)—online lessons with top teachers
- Contrabass Conversations (contrabassconversations.com)—hosted by Jason Heath, a series of podcasts devoted to exploring music and ideas associated with the double bass
- International Society of Bassists (www.isbworldoffice.com)—Bass Workshops, Magazine, Online Masterclasses and more
- Joseph Conyers (josephconyers.com)—Philadelphia Orchestra member & Juilliard Faculty. He has helpful information and links on his website
- Lauren Pierce (www.youtube.com/c/LaurenPierceBass)—amazing videos on YouTube!
- Xavier Foley (xavierfoley.com)—composer & performer, web-store for music, equipment, videos and more

For those who would like to see my full PowerPoint and other files from the session at the MNSOTA All-State Workshop, use this QR code to link to the folder.



Michael Watson currently teaches orchestra at Coon Rapids High School and maintains a double bass studio at his home in Shoreview, MN. As a freelance bassist he has performed with The Minnesota Opera, Minnesota Orchestra, Minneapolis Pops Orchestra and Minnesota Sinfonia. He was formerly the President of the Minnesota Strings and Orchestra Teachers Association and Vice-President-Orchestra for the Minnesota Music Educators Association. †