Bass



Back to Learning from a Few Masters!

by Tom Pieper

- Yes, fall is here again so I recommend getting a few sessions of practice in before the year and your schedule fills up. Avoid the heat and spend a little time indoors for practice. After you're done, go for a bike ride, dog walk, or hang out with friends. Some general observations and preview to get you ready and productive:
- Take breaks and have a plan
- Dedicate a specific time for each activity
- If practicing is not working today, refresh and start again tomorrow
- (Coffee may help)

Here are four pieces to bring you back to



The Elephant by Camille Saint-Saëns— Alex Hanna

music and your bass.

Bassist Alex Hanna's version of *The Elephant* (in the Room)

https://youtu.be/KCcf7GeBq-M This is an amazing time to be a musician/human. Many artists are producing work of the highest artistic standards and making it available for free. This allows us to develop and improve our own musical conception at our own pace and view as many times as we would like. With this video Alex Hanna gives us his insight on a classic solo from the repertoire. More importantly we hear how a solo sounds when performed by someone at the pinnacle of their field. Carnival of the Animals is a familiar piece introducing sounds of the instruments and The Elephant is an excellent solo for a double bassist to have ready for an audition performance.

Alex Hanna's version on the recording is played in the key of F, using a standard solo tuning: A/E/B/F#. Solo tuning has the solo double bass part written in the standard key, and the accompaniment written a full step higher. The transposition is realized by the alternate tuning above. If you have never played with solo strings, you will notice how a whole step higher impacts your articulations, clarity, and creates an increased vibrancy of sound. In this first video you can see and hear how evident this is with his off-the-string repeated up bows. This tone and the quicker response of the bass is something to revel in and marvel at. Certainly his exceptional musicianship, instrument, and even his "accompanist" contributes to this performance.

On the second note he expertly resets and uses the space to bring out the staccatos. Each time he does a retrieve you can see the space and his precision in handling the bow. And in bar 6 beat 2, he uses two up bows leading to a down bow in bar 7 helping the gliss up to the F on the A string. This control of stopping the bow and returning to the frog and his off-string playing will continue through the piece. Also already in bar 7, Alex shifts up for the first printed F on the A string, returns to F on the D string, and then goes to half position for the A^b on the G string. Understanding positions at this level is not about finding the notes, but as a means of projecting the wanted sound, dynamic, and tonal color of the musical line desired. The pitch is in his head! When he wants to, he contrasts tenuto 8th notes with staccato as in bars 11 and 12.

From the start Alex Hanna expresses an ideal for the solo and produces a rendition that is agile and light for an elephant. His understanding of a theatrical element is evident throughout his execution of this brief vignette. In bars 17 and 18 he adds slurs and finishes his phrase with two down bows while taking advantage of the open string to land on the first finger G. The second theme also shows his choice of separate bowings in bar 24 (key of E_{\flat}) and in bar 28 (key of E), rather than slurred in the original version. Finally, a nice sequence from bar 45 of hooked bows on the B^{\flat} to D^{\flat} with a retrieve to a down bow followed by two up-bows. And in bar 47 another double down bow with retrieve takes full advantage of the open D to climb to the high E^b. And again bar 51 starts the last three notes all with down bows. The fingerings are presented here and again they serve the musical phrasing-note that sometimes a 3rd finger will appear in the lower positions! All technique serves his vision of the musical scene he presents.

The Godfather Theme by Nino Rota performed by Anne-Gabrièle Douce

https://youtube.com/shorts/00z4QsKyKJQ?featu re=share No endorsement about the movie or streaming but this music is always recognized. In my current position, a school principal asked me to play this during my interview. This is a good start into thumb position with the harmonic D and only a few other notes. Anne-Gabrièle is a French musician and current content provider who puts out worthwhile videos on both bass and piano. Got to go with an old country European virtuoso for this tune and a reminder to be open to music from all corners and genres when wondering what to play next. Whimsy always has a place in your practice routine, and when your choice combines a beautiful melody that is immediately recognized, you have an added bonus.

Anne-Gabrièle has chosen A minor which really lays well on the bass and gives you a chance to work on your sustained tone and all the sympathetic open string resonance. She uses a common technique of placing the 2^{nd} and 3^{rd} finger parallel for

the E and A on the D and A strings to help connect these two notes for the string crossings. She also has a great command of finger substitutions using a different finger for the same pitch on repeated notes to help with shifting. I like how she plays sections on the darker D string and demonstrates a disciplined expanding/opening of her hand as she goes up to the G harmonic. This is a short but fun piece to play at concerts and parties. In the world of bass solos, lately we see many editors writing in the treble clef, so I have too. It is good to become more familiar with this clef especially with unpublished pieces because you are more likely to find them written for other instruments and you will have to transpose them to the bass-it makes you a better reader too! I recommend playing this down an octave as well as it sounds

particularly good low and fits my image of Marlon Brando's portrayal in the film.

(Another option to listen to is: *The Godfather* by Nino Rota performed by bass quartet the Olso Fat String Quartet. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coCnd_WOuiU)

Bassist Alex Hanna's version of Beethoven's Ninth Recitativo

https://youtu.be/rYEVD1kBD3U I returned to Alexander Hanna for his take on the recitativo from the 4th movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. After his performance he speaks about the frequency of this music on audition lists and the importance for the conversational style to be realized by the performer. In the '70s and '80s there used to be a list of the 40 top excerpts for bass asked to be played at section auditions, and this



The Godfather Theme by Nino Rota — Anne-Gabrièle Douce

was #I on the list. Not only does he provide an instructive video playing the excerpt, he also includes some insightful comments after the playing so be sure to watch it all. Thank you Alex Hanna and the Chicago Symphony for this production!

I had some questions about his fingerings and was so immersed in his sound that it took me a few times watching to see his tuning. I realized he was tuning the bass like a cello an octave lower and had to inquire if he had used this when performing with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. I sent him an email to confirm and he responded how he was experimenting with options during the pandemic but had not performed with this with the CSO. His reason, and others before him, was how it is harder to blend with the section. I also like Alex Hanna's advice on putting your time in on the bass and remembering each day will be different with growth and setbacks.

The nuts and bolts of this are again a marvel to hear and see. Alex Hanna starts off with an up bow pick-up and this makes total sense although traditionally the excerpt starts with two down bows. The feature of the two down bows returns throughout but as the first phrase is lyrical and connected, the up bow pick-up helps carry the A to the E. In bar 4 and often later the bow retrieves help with articulations especially with string crossings. Bar 5 starts with a slur; however it is played across two strings with a slight space and is more of a hooked bowing.

In Section 2 there is always a temptation to not hold the rests for the full value, so make sure to keep steady. Minnesota bassist and teacher James Clute would have you count, "I, 2, 3" on beats 3, I, and



2 to make sure that the F^{\natural} did not come in until the second half of the beat. This was a wise understanding of emphasizing how important the spaces are in music. While watching, notice how often Alex Hanna often shifts up to a second finger and down as well, to facilitate a great vibrato.

In Section 3, bar 4, he almost changes the first two notes to quarter notes to emphasize the ritardando that ends this section. The give and take of tempo is prominent in the excerpts and a player must understand where the next measure is leading to or suggesting what follows. In bar 6 those hooked bows provide unity from before and tie the whole piece together.

In Section 4, the double down bow quarter notes with retrieval are prominent and acknowledge the traditional bowing and complement the ending two notes of Sections 5 and 6. In Section 4, bar 5, he again shifts up to the 4^{th} position B_{\flat} on the D string as he did in Section 1, bar 6. I included his fingerings below, but remember he has his bass tuned in fifths so the open A string does not work in standard tuning. Again Alex likes to go farther than he needs to for shifting to facilitate the vibrato with his second finger. Section 5 is traditionally played on the D string to help bring out the piano and again some liberties are taken with fingerings due to tuning but the bowings he plays are captured here. He again starts Section 6 with an up bow and regroups some of notes in bars 7 and 8 as many have done in the last few years. I know players who like to play the third option in bar 7 and 8 of coming down to 1st position on the G string until the G in bar 9. This works really well with the regrouping of 8th notes. Since this excerpt is played with another tuning, remember some fingerings obviously cannot work, but observe how he moves from note to note on one string or how he stops and resets the bow and places the bow right in position for the best result. Also notice the determination in this excerpt and the confidence that is conveyed. Digital recording has removed any barrier of producing a good sound so determine what to use and take everything from what you are seeing!

In his comments he speaks about how this piece is often asked for in auditions because it reveals the depth of understanding the player brings to the excerpt. This is very akin to jazz musicians who perform songs from the *Great American Songbook* and know the words for the music they are playing showing a deeper context beyond melody and harmony. Both styles of music

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Beethoven's Ninth Recitativo, sections 5–6 — Alex Hanna



are culminations of their respective artforms and require deeper understanding beyond the basic elements of music.

Bassist and Composer Steve Swallow tune *Falling Grace*

https://youtu.be/RdB12HxYvTY Steve Swallow is one of the jazz world's most impressive bassists since the 1960s and grew up in the standard jazz tradition. His compositions and musical sensibilities helped create a world beyond the standard jazz ensemble. Following the paths of other jazz composers like Wayne Shorter, Gary Burton, Charles Mingus to get their own music published, Steve stretched stylistic boundaries and helped promote the electric bass. Here he plays the double bass, but later the electric bass became his instrument of choice and this helped and opened the door for electric bassists like Jaco Pastorius, Marcus Miller, Victor Wooten, John Patitucci and others to impact jazz and all contemporary music.

Falling Grace is one of his most familiar tunes and it was inspiring to come across this original recording from the album *The Time Machine* (1966). Other later versions from Chick Corea and Bill Evans have slightly altered the melody. This is common with Miles Davis versions of Thelonious Monk tunes where the original version is different from the most popular version. Always check out the primary source! I have heard that in some versions of the early *Real Book*, Gary Burton gave his charts to students to aid in the accuracy of his and others' music, but even so sometimes changes occur. If you want to learn a tune it is essential to find a recording from the composer and learn the notes from transcribing. Usually when you do this faithfully your results will stick with you longer and you will know more about the music you are playing. Gary Burton does some typical rhythmic interpretations that are more common with vibes than when the lead is played on other instruments. Since the vibe is struck with mallets he uses multiple quarter note triplets throughout and even half note triplets in bar 17. In bars 20-23 the lowest note is an A instead of dropping to a G like many fakebook versions. This is the great thing about listening again to music you have played as you always hear more details on return visits. Rarely do you get things wrong once you take the time to be absolutely certain.

Some final thoughts are: watch these videos and notice what draws you in or leaves you cold. I see so many nuances with repeated viewings and I continue to learn by writing down and then playing what I notice. So much is revealed here and all of your efforts will add another dimension to discovering your musical identity. Always go see live music, listen to recordings, and watch videos to figure out and satisfy your curiosity to find where music leads you.

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