

# Beginning Doublebass Techniques

## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the wonderful world of low tones and the double bass. As the largest member of the string section, the bass may seem a rather imposing figure at first. Large and yet quite fragile, the bass presents a fascinating contradiction. Most students are quite tentative when initially approaching the bass. However, with a little patience, dedication and familiarity with the basic rules for handling the instrument, you will soon be able to create beautiful sounds with this most resonant of instruments.

As with all string instruments, the fingerboard of the bass is like a grid of pitches. As you finger closer and closer toward the bridge, the pitch will get increasingly higher. Keep in mind that unlike all the other string instruments the bass is tuned in fourths, not fifths. Starting with the lowest string, the pitches are E A D G. You will also need to become familiar with the names of the various parts of the instrument, the performance terms and symbols, the two types of bass bows, and the names of the bass in the most common languages; English, French, German, and Italian.

## General Rules:

Picking up the bass:

Pick up the bass by placing one hand in the C-bout and one hand on the neck. Gently pick up the bass while being careful of the edges. Do not roll the bass up on the floor.

**DO NOT** pick up the bass by the f holes or the bridge. This can cause damage to the instrument.

Carrying the bass:

Always carry the bass in front of you with your left hand firmly holding the neck and your right hand grasping the upper portion of the C-bout closest to your body.

Carry the bass in a case whenever possible.

Protect the bass with your body when going through doorways. Be extra careful of the scroll and bridge when walking with the bass.

**NEVER** drag the bass on the floor.

**ALWAYS** take your time when carrying the instrument.

Be sure that the end pin is pushed into the instrument before walking with it.

#### Carrying the bass with the bow

**NEVER** place the bow inside the f-hole when carrying the instrument.

As an alternative, gently place the tip of the bow on the bridge on the E string side being careful not to place the tip in one of the carved holes in the bridge. Then lift the E string and place the stick of the bow under the string so that the tension of the string keeps the bow in place against the fingerboard. Be careful not to let the metal frog to scratch the fingerboard.

#### Placing the instrument into an instrument rack

Be sure the end pin is in.

Be careful not to let any of the basses rub up against each another or the frame of the rack .

Be sure the bass is resting firmly in place. Check that both lower bouts and the neck are flush against the rack and that the bass is stable.

#### Playing the instrument

You must avoid allowing jewelry, such as watches, belt buckles, etc from scratching the instrument.

You must have short fingernails in order to play the instrument.

Be sure to wash your hands before playing the instrument.

## Health and Safety

The bass is obviously a large and cumbersome instrument and will present health and safety issues, especially to students with smaller or weaker hands and arms. The physical nature of playing the bass cannot be over emphasized. You will be required to use undeveloped muscles that will become fatigued quickly. Therefore, it is **IMPERATIVE** that you take time to practice a little **EVERY DAY**. If you try to cram for the performance exam you will very likely do permanent damage to your hands and arms. In order to help avoid injury it is very important to do the following:

1. Warm up properly. Most injuries occur because the muscles are still cold and are not at the correct temperature. Be sure to work every hand and arm muscle in repetitive full motion exercises before beginning to play. Several will be demonstrated for you.
2. If you begin to feel any sharp pain stop immediately and shake out your hand or gently massage it. **DO NOT** try to "play through the pain". You will injure yourself seriously.
3. Practice a little every day to keep your hands in shape.
4. Stretch out your hands, arms, neck and back after you have played for several minutes. This will help to keep your muscles from getting tight too quickly and will help prevent cramping.
5. Take the time to cool down after playing. Play a couple of slow scales to allow the hands to cool down gently. Try running your hands and forearms under cold water after playing to help the muscles return to a more normal condition.

## Stance:

### If standing:

- 1) Stand at a 45 degree angle to the back of the bass while holding the instrument extended arms length and straight up and down
- 2) Feet should be shoulder width apart.
- 3) Take a half step towards the instrument and lean the instrument into you body. The corner of the upper bout should rest to the left of your navel.
- 4) Balance the bass against your body. The bass **should not** be held upright by your left hand  
\*see height for adjustment

### If sitting:

- 1) The stool should be at a height so that your legs are slightly bent and your feet touch the floor when you sit towards the front of the stool.
- 2) Place your left leg up on one rung of the stool and your right leg outward with the foot flat on the floor.
- 3) Lean the bass into the left leg resting the back of the bass on the leg. Occasionally you may need to extend the right leg to play on the lower strings.  
\*see height for adjustment

## Height Adjustment:

Many methods suggest that you adjust the instrument's height so that the nut on the bass is level with the bassists eyebrows. However, your eyebrows have nothing to do with playing the bass and everyone's arms are different lengths, so ignore this advice.

In order to find the correct height for the bass first assume the proper stance. Then hold the bow at the frog in the right hand and place the bow on one of the middle two strings so that the stick of the bow is perpendicular to the string. When the bass is at the correct height, the bow should rest naturally half-way between the bridge and the fingerboard, (with the right arm slightly bent). If the bow rests too close to the fingerboard, then the bass needs to be raised. If the bow rests too close to the bridge, then the bass needs lowered. In other words, you are to adjust the height of the bass so that the bow will rest in a good playing position.

-Ignore the advice that you should adjust the instrument's height so that the nut on the bass is level with the eyebrows. Your eyebrows have nothing to do with playing the bass!

-When the bass is at the correct height, the bow should fall naturally half-way between the bridge and the fingerboard, (with the arm slightly bent).

-If the bow lies too close to the fingerboard, then the bass needs raised.  
If it lies too close to the bridge, then the bass needs lowered.

## Using the bow with beginners:

With beginners, it is important to have them producing a tone right away. Therefore it is O.K. to let them just grab the bow at the frog in a fist as long as they **do not** touch the hair. You must discourage "sword fighting" immediately. Remember that the bow hair must first be tightened by turning the button at the frog end of the stick. Turn the button until the hair is tight enough that when you place the bow on the string at the mid point of the bow and press the bow into the string that the hair is just tight enough to prevent the stick from coming into contact with the hair and the string. The concave curve of the bow is called the "camber". Do not tighten the bow so much that you straighten the camber. It is extremely important to remember to loosen the hair when you are done playing. Loosen the hair so that the hair is still together in a relatively straight bunch, but not so loose that the hair is flopping around. Have the students play down bows on the open D string. Work with them to keep the bow straight and to pull the bow until the bass starts to ring. Continue using down bows striving to produce a big sound.

-With beginners, it is important to have them producing a tone right away. Therefore it is O.K. to let them just grab the bow at first as long as they don't touch the hair.

-On the D string, have the students use down bows to pull it until the bass starts to ring.

-Continue using down bows striving to produce a big sound.

## Holding the bow:

French bow:

- 1) Grasp the stick of the bow at the mid point in your left hand.
- 2) Then place your right hand down by the frog.
- 3) Place the tip of the thumb at the end of the frog on the stick. (*Kiss the frog with the tip of your thumb.*)
- 4) Make sure the thumb is bent.
- 5) Tap at the first knuckle up from the fingernail of the index finger on the top of the stick. (*Tap first finger.*)
- 6) The tip of the pinkie should rest on the mother of pearl dot on the frog. (*Spot the dot.*)
- 7) The middle two fingers should just fold over the stick.
- 8) Check to see that your fingers are evenly spaced on the stick and that there is little tension in your hand.

### German bow:

- 1) Grasp the stick of the bow at the mid point in your left hand.
- 2) As if you were shaking hands, slide the frog into your right hand.  
(*Shake hands.*)
- 3) Do not allow the edge of the frog closest to your hand to come into direct contact with your hand. Maintain some space between the frog and palm in order to facilitate unrestricted movement of the frog. **Do not** make a fist around the frog or grip it rigidly.
- 4) Place the thumb and index finger on top of the stick as if making an O.K. sign. (*O.K.*)
- 5) The pinkie should be curved and the tip of the pinkie should rest underneath the frog. (*Proper tea cup.*)

### **Bowing:**

\*There are three basic parameters of sound production with the bow.

- 1) **location** - (MOST IMPORTANT) the placement of the bow between the fingerboard and the bridge. note: consistency of tone requires a consistent location for the point of contact on the string. This means the bow must be pulled in a straight line perpendicular to the strings as much as possible
- 2) **weight** - weight must be transferred from the back, through the arms to the instrument. Players should always avoid "pressing" the bow into the string, (do not raise the elbow so that one can produce a torquing motion into the string with the bow).
  - The transfer of weight into the string should not be produced by a torquing motion but instead a sensation of pulling the bow towards the bass.

demonstration: "Wrist Flex"  
(requires two people)

- Student should hold the bow on the D string in playing position.
- With the right hand, the teacher should hold the student's bow hand in position making sure the student's little finger remains in contact with the bow.
- With the left hand the teacher should gently 'flex' the student's wrist alternately towards the tip and then back towards the frog.
- The teachers left arm should help support the student's bow arm from underneath so the student doesn't tire quickly.
- The teacher needs to explain that it is the student's forearm that controls the direction of the bow and the wrist flexes towards the new direction of the bow AFTER the forearm has already begun to move in the new direction.
- Once the student understands the wrist flex sensation with the help of the teacher, then the student may practice the sensation alone by holding the bow in place on the string with the left hand while flexing the right wrist .

exercise: "Ice Cream Scoop"  
(can be done alone)

\*This exercise is to be practiced at both the frog and the tip using both down bow and up bow.

- The student is to place the bow on the string.
- After applying weight into the string from the arm, the student is then asked to release the bow in down or up bow direction using only finger/wrist motion, (as if scooping ice cream).
- This exercise is to be practiced at all dynamic levels from pp-ff using no arm motion.
- The purpose of this exercise is for the student to develop a clear attack at any dynamic level.

3) **speed:** refers to how quickly the bow is drawn across the string. All scales and other exercises should be practiced with both slow bow speed and fast bow speed.

\*In regards to these three elements, (location, weight, and speed), the student should practice using all different parameters of these variables.

examples:

<u>location</u>	<u>weight</u>	<u>speed</u>
close to bridge	light	fast bow
close to bridge	heavy	slow bow

in between  
close to fingerboard

light  
medium

medium bow  
fast bow

## **Pizzicato:**

**classical**-The thumb of the right hand is placed on the edge of the finger board.

-Pizz. with the first finger using a circular motion.

**jazz**-there are two styles.

1) Use the same position as classical only pull more string, (using the finger all the way up to the first knuckle). Use a more parallel angle of the finger to the strings. You should only use one finger for this style.

2) Use a more perpendicular angle to the string. You will use two fingers for this style only you will use less of a contact point, (less meat).

\*In both cases of the jazz style the player uses a strong horizontal pull, (across the fingerboard), into the adjacent string.

Pizzicato should take place at the end of the fingerboard 1.5-2 inches away from the end of the fingerboard. Do not pizz. in the area Between the fingerboard and the bridge. Experiment with the location of the right hand on the strings. For example: closer to the bridge=brighter sound and further from the bridge=duller sound.

## **Left Hand Technique:**

-The hand should be rounded as if holding a can with the thumb across from the second finger.

-The thumb should be placed toward the center of the back of the neck.

-The hand must be flexible, not rigid.

-Work towards playing on the "flabby" parts of the tips of the fingers while not allowing the fingers to collapse at the first knuckle.

-As the fingers depress the strings, they should move more like hammers and less like levers, (although there is a slight attack when the finger hits the string). Enough energy should be used to fully depress the string with out "smacking" it to the fingerboard.

\*The hand must retain a curved and arched shape while not allowing the fingers to collapse.

-The bass is tuned in fourths. Starting with the lowest string, the pitches are E A D G.

-Think of the fingerboard as a "grid" of pitch possibilities for you to explore.

-Half steps, (in the lower positions), occur between the first and second fingers and between the second and fourth fingers. The third finger is generally not used in lower positions.



## **Trilling Exercises:**

- 1) Begin by placing the second finger on the pitch D on the G string. Practice a slow rhythmical trilling motion between the open string, (G), and the pitch D at about eighth note=80. Check the open D string for correctness of pitch. Do the same process with your first finger on C# and your fourth finger on Eb.
- 2) Holding your first finger down on C#, trill to your second finger on D. Next, holding first finger down on C#, trill to your fourth finger on Eb. Then, holding your second finger down on D, trill to your fourth finger on Eb.
- 3) Practice the trilling exercises on all four strings.
- 4) Try using different repetitious finger patterns, such as 1242, 1424, 4212, etc to help solidify the left hand position. Remember to keep the hand flexible and avoid too much tension.

It is a good idea to practice these exercises pizzicato at first to avoid becoming too absorbed with the bow and allowing you to really focus on the left hand. Once a basic bow stroke has been introduced then the exercises should be practiced arco. Throughout these exercises, check for proper intonation of pitches. Concentrate on maintaining the proper curvature of the hand and watch that your thumb remains behind your second finger at all times. Practice these exercises for only brief periods. (Once you begin to experience muscular pain and/or you notice the hand beginning to collapse from fatigue, stop playing.)