

OMEA Conference: OPUS100  
**Teaching the Lower Strings: Cello & Double Bass**  
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## **DOUBLE BASS**

### **Set-up**

There are different types of bases as well as different styles. Bases come in full size, 7/8, 3/4, 1/2, and on the rare occasion 1/4. The most commonly used bass is a 7/8 or 3/4 size bass. The size is actually determined by string length so if you are ever in the position to be buying a bass for your class it is important that you go and look at the bass yourself. Just because it is a 3/4 size bass does not make it the right one for your students. A big factor of a bass being the right size is the size of the instrument's shoulders. A bass with large shoulders will probably sound louder but it will be harder for the player to reach around. I would suggest going with a bass with more sloped shoulders so that it will be more accessible to a larger percentage of your students and future students.

When setting a student up on their bass, the first thing to adjust is the endpin. The way that you determine the right height of a bass is by making sure the player's hand is about eye level when they are in first position. The bass leans slightly and the top corner of the C bout rests on the inside left hip of the player while the back of the bass below the C bout rests on the inside left knee. It is a very finicky standing position and every player may have the bass positioned slightly different. The bass should *never* be directly in front of the player and the player should *never* be completely perpendicular to the bass (stomach directly on the side of the bass).

### **Tuning**

Basses are typically tuned in 4ths. The strings from lowest to highest are: E, A, D, G. This is the opposite of the Violin strings. The reason that the bass is tuned in 4ths is to help reduce the amount of shifting.

### **Position in the room**

I've been there. In the back of the room. The BEST place to goof around. Do not neglect your bass players. You've been warned.

But in all seriousness, even if the students in the back of your classroom are not intentionally messing around, it is much easier for them to lose focus and to get distracted. Do not underestimate how much this influences student's ability to focus. Even in university and professional orchestras, the basses get ignored simply because they are behind another section. Percussionists have this similar problem.

### **To stool or not to stool?**

To make a student stand for 75 minutes is maybe a little bit cruel... but at the same time, letting them sit on a stool incorrectly or at the wrong height is equally as wrong. If you have stools and want to allow your bass players to sit on them, it is important to go over proper seating positioning with them. It is like re-learning how to hold the instrument. Another option is to have chairs for them to sit on when they are not required to play.

### **The Third Finger**

We DO NOT use it ... in low positions.

Up until we reach thumb position (and some high school bass players may never get to this point) we do not use the third finger. It is very common for students to think that they can. This is because the other string player do and also because if they play electric bass, they think that they can use the same fingerings. The reason that electric bass allows for the use of the third finger is because the string length is much shorter and is therefore possible to reach the notes (3 semitones). For these electric bass players it will be a difficult adjustment that will require you to constantly remind them.

### **The Left Hand**

Key points for the left hand:

- ✓ Big space between the 1st and 2nd finger. Since we do not use the 3rd finger, the distance between 1 and 2 must be the same distance between 2 and 4 (each distance is a semi tone).
- ✓ Left hand should be relaxed as if you're holding a can of pop.
- ✓ Fingers should always be perpendicular to the fingerboard, with thumb behind second finger

## Shifting

Bassists have to learn how to shift much sooner than the other string instruments because the notes on the bass are much further apart which requires shifting to reach more notes. This becomes clear when you do scale exercises with all of the strings together because while the other instruments can play many scales without shifting, the poor bass players will be scrambling around trying to find the last few notes of their scale. Some ways to help postpone shifting is by changing octaves. For example, on D major scale, the bass players could start on their open D string and then drop down to their open E string and proceed up the scale from there. D major seems to always be one of the first scales taught on string instruments so this is why I use this example. It will be quite overwhelming for a completely beginner bass player to think about shifting on top of all of the different aspects involved in creating a sound. I would suggest teaching shifting very early on because they will not be able to play much without it but at least give them some time to get used to holding the instrument first. One of the most important and often forgotten aspects of shifting is making sure that the player is sliding their finger and keeping contact with the string. It is common for beginner players to lift their hand off of the fingerboard and move their hand while praying that they will land on the right note. By keeping contact with the string, it gives your muscles context so that the movement can be remembered and then replicated.

## The Right Hand (French bow hold)

- ✓ Similar to left hand, also with a space between the 1st and 2nd fingers
- ✓ Thumb curved and sitting on the spot where the frog meets the stick
- ✓ 2nd and 3rd fingers resting on the ferule
- ✓ Pinky is sitting in the middle of the frog - if the bow has it, it should be sitting right on the eyelet. NOT on top of the stick.
- ✓ All fingers pronated so that the fingertips are pointed towards the tension screw.
- ✓ Ideally the bow should always be parallel to the bridge with the stick rotated slightly away from the bridge.
- ✓ To make a good and consistent sound, you must remind your students to put weight into the string with the natural weight of their arm and not to push the bow down into the string with force.

## Rosin

Bass rosin is essential to a bass bow. Rosin made for other instruments is not a good substitute.

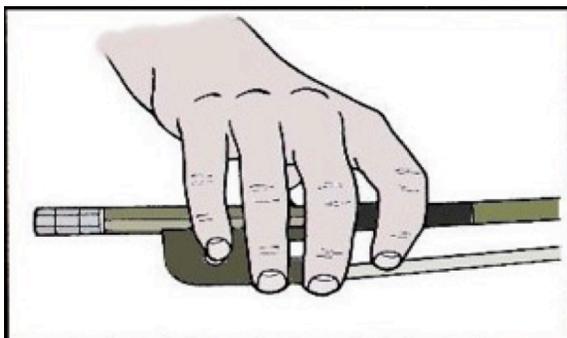
## Taking an instrument home

A great way to encourage an enthusiastic young bass player to practice is by giving them an instrument to leave at home. If you can spare the extra instrument it is a great way to accommodate the student to practice without having to lug the big instrument home. Also, having a student carry a bass to and from school greatly increases the chances of a repair that might be more expensive than the instrument itself. This way if they choose to take it more seriously they can have lessons on their at home instrument as well!

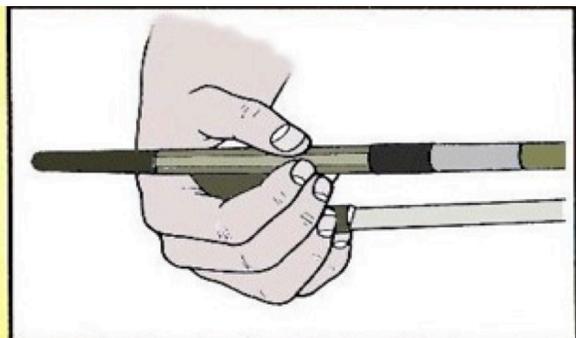
## German vs. French bow hold

- Both are commonly used around the world
- French seems to be more common in Canada, so you will probably have more French bows in your school than German bows

French Bow



German Bow



## **Cello**

### **Introduce the Instrument**

- Demonstration – play simple tunes and popular recognizable tunes; if you feel uncomfortable playing the cello, you can either get your senior/experienced students to demonstrate for the beginner class or play YouTube videos – there are great resources out there!
- What is it made of? – Explain the anatomy of the instrument and bow
- Its role in orchestra – similar to a tenor in a choir, will be playing bass line and sometimes melody
- When selecting the instrument, student must be able to take the instrument home to practice or make arrangements with the teacher in order to get practice time
- Accessories – rosin, endpin rest/stopper, cleaning cloth, binder, pencil

### **Unpacking the Cello**

- Explain the routine – where to unpack the cello, how the cello will be stored in the classroom
- Remove bow first, then instrument; reverse order when packing up – instrument, then bow
- Show what goes where and how – pockets for their music and accessories

### **Instrument Set-Up**

- Name parts of the instrument + instrument care
- Posture – feet flat and back straight, sitting on the edge of the chair; legs are shoulder width apart
- Endpin adjustment – depends on students height; C peg by the left ear, cello resting on base of sternum or where the ribcage meets
- Rest position – Cello is always on your left side and hands on your legs
- Playing position

Things to watch out for – placement of cello on body, knees by its side, twisted torso, neck, cello doesn't move around, and everything feels comfortable

### **Right Hand – Pizzicato**

- Letter C
- Fleshy part of the index finger
- Anchor your hand, thumb on the side of the fingerboard

### **Right Hand – Bow/Arco**

- Parts of the bow + care; tightening + loosening bow hair
- Rosining
- Bow hold – rabbit, smile/bumpy thumb, hide treasure, waterfall/jellyfish, cup tilt, toilet paper roll  
\*\*Pinky different than violin/viola
- Exercises/games – develop flexibility/control: windshield wiper, stir the soup, spider crawl, unicorn, alien, subway ride, finger taps/push-ups

### **Left Hand**

- Straight wrist, elbow/arm up, shoulders relaxed
- Round hand shape – water bottle hold, hamburger hold

### **Packing Instrument**

- Endpin in before standing up
- Cello first – kangaroo pouch on the back; Bow last - loosen bow hair, tip goes in first
- Where/how to keep cello at home – away from AC/heating vents, somewhere safe where younger family members or pets won't get to, leave the cello on its side with endpin in

### **Always remember to:**

- Take a break and stretch, especially in the beginning stage and with younger students
- Emphasize on instrument care and posture – always review and remind!
- Adjust the cello to the body, not body to the cello
- During break: cello on its side on the ground, beside the chair; endpin inside; never on its back/front or leaning on a chair

**Please feel free to contact us!**

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