

Preface

This book sets out to complement the traditional bass methods by approaching the double bass from musical as well as technical standpoints. Based on years of teaching and orchestral experience, it is written for the student, teacher, and professional player. It considers the musical and technical aspects of performance, using the body and the right and left hands in playing, then takes up the double bass as an ensemble instrument in lessons, classes, orchestras, and auditions. Musical examples provide illustrations of how, through artistic means, the double bass can be seen for the musical instrument that it is.

We wish to thank those bass players and others who have been instrumental in making this book what it is. For what the book is not and for its imperfections, we are, of course, solely responsible. The photographs were taken by James Benfield. Encouragement and suggestions have come from many, especially Bertram Turetzky (the University of Southern California), David Walter (The Manhattan School of Music and the Juilliard School of Music), Henry Portnoy (principal bass, the Boston Symphony Orchestra), Roger Scott (principal bass, the Philadelphia Orchestra), and Joseph Guastefeste (principal bass, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra).

This book also owes much to the encouragement from our families, to the example of those colleagues and teachers from whom we have learned, and to the inspiration of those bassists, like Anton Torello and David Babcock, who have gone before us.

WAB and JSD

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I.

The Double Bass: A Musical Instrument

When we read in Leopold Mozart's *Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing* (1756) that this musician had heard double basses performing "concertos, trios, solos . . . with great beauty," and when we hear of the achievements of Domenico Dragonetti and Giovanni Bottesini, and listen to the recorded performance of Serge Koussevitsky and the live concerts and recordings of Gary Karr and Bertram Turetzky, we know that the double bass can be a musical instrument if it is in the hands of a musical double bassist. Of course, the limitations of the instrument for solo playing should be recognized, both for the physical difficulty of playing soloistic passages musically, and for the economic difficulty of making a living as a double bass soloist in the meager repertoire. Lately, though, that repertoire has been increased, thanks to commissions from prominent players. Nevertheless, this instrument plays an important role in the present symphony orchestra. It provides the musical depth, the harmonic foundation, and the rhythmic power that give the orchestra its vitality.

The satisfaction of playing the double bass must

lie, for the most part, in recognizing these factors and seeing the essential value of the bass as an ensemble instrument. To be a double bassist (excluding the jazz player for the moment) means playing in an orchestra. Orchestral playing, like solo playing, requires a high degree of musicianship and technique. The orchestral bassist must be able to sight-read well and to have a highly developed sense of ensemble playing. Accompanying artistically is difficult, for it requires an understanding not only of the individual part, but also of the entire score. Besides watching the conductor, the player must listen in order to fit with the ensemble. Chamber music playing, in developing this sensitivity, is excellent preparation for orchestral playing. For the double bass player this is particularly true, since the bassist gets satisfaction from conceiving his role in relation to the rest of the score. Only in this way can he understand just how his part fits in with the rest of the symphony. For example, the triplet motif at the beginning of Strauss' *Don Juan*, if begun with an accent will point up this passage so that it obviously belongs with similar passages in the other parts:

Allegro molto con brio

The musical score consists of two staves of music in bass clef, with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The tempo is marked "Allegro molto con brio". The first staff begins with a forte (*ff*) dynamic and a triplet motif. The second staff continues the music with multiple triplet motifs and a forte (*ff*) dynamic. The score is marked "1" at the end.

II.

Playing the Double Bass

THE BODY

Body balance is vital to playing the bass effectively. If all the body's weight is on the right foot, there will be no weight to press the string down. But if the player stands or sits squarely with his weight evenly distributed, he can shift that weight as needed to the left or right hand. He should lean the side of the bass squarely against the abdomen so that the instrument can balance itself without the aid of the left hand. To play on the E string he needs to be able to shift the lower side of the bass forward, at the same time turning his body slightly to the right (figs. 1, 2, 3, 5). Body English is not just for pool halls but for concert halls too. And as in golf, if the stance is balanced, the power can focus on a central point. On the bass that focal point is where bow and string meet. Here is the point where all the energy and mass are brought to bear upon the note. Because the conjunction of bow and string is so important, the setting of the bow must be natural to the player, or, to put it another way, the height of the bass should be adjusted so that the bow can cross the strings naturally at an angle of ninety degrees, without an inefficient arcing as it moves from frog to tip (fig. 4).

If the body is balanced, there is sufficient weight for the left hand to press the string firmly to the fingerboard, thus allowing for a better

tone. If the weight is all on the bow side, then the left hand has no power, and vice versa. The principle is true whether standing or sitting, whether playing the bass, cello, piano, oboe, or violin. By standing or sitting squarely, body weight can be shifted to where it is needed.

Not only can body weight be used to advantage in playing the double bass, but the weight of the bass itself can also be used. The bass is a huge instrument, and any help that gets the string under control should be used. The weight of the bass leaning into the fingers can allow the fingers to relax while pressing down the string. You cannot pitch a ball if you are tense and off balance. François Rabat, the French jazz player, was not far off when he called a record he once made "Bass Ball"—the analogy with the sport was not misplaced. The bassist must be like the boxer or tennis player, who stands prepared, on the balls of his feet, ready to shift his weight one way or the other. The body must be in a state of balance.

The bass player needs a highly developed sense of rhythm. Rhythm is not simply a matter of mechanically reproducing through the bass what is on the printed page. A classic example of the necessity for going beyond the notes occurs in the second movement of Tchaikowsky's Sixth Symphony:

Allegro con grazia

The musical score is written for double bass in 2/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked "Allegro con grazia". The first staff begins with a double bar line and a repeat sign, followed by a *pizz.* instruction and a *mf* dynamic. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes. The second staff continues the piece, featuring a *div.* instruction, a *f* dynamic, and a *mf* dynamic. It includes various playing techniques: *pizz.*, *arco*, and *1. pizz.*. The piece concludes with a *sempre mf* dynamic and a final *pizz.* instruction. The page number "5" is located at the bottom right.