Demystifying the Double Bass!

Emma Sullivan

Sitting Position:

- No one-size-fits-all approach – needs to be tailored to each student
- Right foot must remain on the ground, left foot also on ground or slightly elevated on stool or foot stand
- Bass turned slightly inward to enable access to all four strings
- Endpin needs to be at a height that allows the left hand to comfortably reach 1st position and the right arm to comfortably draw the bow straight (often this is achieved when the nut is around the eye-line)

Standing Position:

- Both feet stable on the ground and spread apart, approximately in line with shoulders
- Again, bass turned slightly inward and endpin at height that allows comfortable reach for both left and right arms
- Work on achieving position where instrument is stable but player has the flexibility to move from the lowest to highest position with ease – this often requires the instrument to slightly lean back toward the player
Tuning with Harmonics:

- Tune A harmonic on the D string (3rd position, 4th finger) to tuner, piano or other reference
- Match A harmonic on A string (3rd position, 1st finger) to A harmonic on the D string (3rd position, 4th finger)
- Match E harmonic on the E string (3rd position, 1st finger) to E harmonic on A string (3rd position, 4th finger)
- Match D harmonic on G string (3rd position, 4th finger) to D harmonic on D string (3rd position, 1st finger)

**N.B. Always play the correct harmonic first and tune slowly**

Left Hand Position:

- Left arm hanging down, so natural weight can be harnessed
- Fingers curved and spaced apart
- Thumb relaxed and curved behind the fingerboard, in the centre of the hand

Exercise for left hand position:
First Position:

- G string: 1 – A, 2 – A#/Bb, 4 – B
- D string: 1 – E, 2 – F, 4 – F#/Gb
- A string: 1 – B, 2 – C, 4 – C#/Db
- E string: 1 – F#/Gb, 2 – G, 4 – G#/Ab

G Major Scale – entirely in 1st position:

![G Major Scale Diagram](image1)

Half Position:

- G string: 1 – G#/Ab, 2 – A, 4 – A#/Bb
- D string: 1 – D#/Eb, 2 – E, 4 – F
- A string: 1 – A#/Bb, 2 – B, 4 – C
- E string: 1 – F, 2 – F#/Gb, 4 – G

F Major Scale – entirely in half position:

![F Major Scale Diagram](image2)

3rd Position:

- G String: 1 – C, 2 – C#/Db, 4 – D
- D String: 1 – G, 2 – G#/Ab, 4 – A
- A String: 1 – D, 2 – D#/Eb, 4 – E
- E String: 1 – A, 2 – A#/Bb, 4 – B

D Major Scale – starting in 1st position and moving to 3rd position:

![D Major Scale Diagram](image3)
2nd Position:

- G String: 1 – A#/Bb, 2 – B, 4 – C
- D String: 1 – F, 2 – F#/Gb, 4 – G
- A String: 1 – C, 2 – C#/Db, 4 – D
- E String: 1 – G, 2 – G#/Ab, 4 - A

C Major Scale – starting in 1st position and moving to 2nd position:

Thumb Position:

- G String: + - G harmonic, 1 – A, 2 – A#/Bb, 3 – B
- D String: + - D harmonic, 1 – E, 2 – F, 3 – F#/Gb
- A String: + - A harmonic, 1 – B, 2 – C, 3 – C#
- E String: + - E harmonic, 1 – F#/Gb, 2 – G, 3 – G#/Ab

N.B. Please note there are many different variations of thumb position notes and fingerings – this is simply the first version I teach

Thumb Position Exercise:

This exercise can be used to develop strength and improve intonation in thumb position. It can be performed in any key, on any string, and with a variety of fingerings.
Standard French Bow Hold:

- Thumb curved and placed in the corner of the frog
- Fingers flat over the frog, with second finger on the corner of the frog and the hair
- Tips of the second and third fingers placed under the frog
- Joint between the ends of the fingers and the start of the palm against the stick
- Wrist low so the full weight of the arm can sink into the string

Exercises for flexibility with bow hold:

- Windscreen wipers
- Crawling up and down the bow, striving to maintain bow hold

Open String Exercise:

With this exercise, the student should aim to play with a straight bow and to evenly distribute the bow. Sometimes it helps to start with a portato stroke so they can plan the best way to distribute the bow in bars 1, 2, 4 and 5.

String Crossing:

- Play two strings together and then slowly move toward one string to explore the distance between strings
• Discuss the analogy of the motion of a ramp or stairs – although sometimes a string crossing needs to be marked out, usually we should strive for the motion to be more smooth and gradual, like a ramp.

String Crossing Exercise:

![String Crossing Exercise](image)

Working on Spiccato:

1. Throw bow on the string to establish the feeling of a whole arm motion and using the natural weight of the arm
2. Gradually refine this motion until you are hitting the same spot on the string each time
3. Add an accent on the first of each 4 notes, then 3 notes, then 2 (this allows the student to work on creating an even stroke, regardless of the bow direction)
4. Finish by playing an even, clear spiccato stroke

Vibrato on Double Bass:

• Whole arm motion – not from wrist
• More difficult to achieve an open and flexible motion with 4\textsuperscript{th} finger – releasing the first finger can help the motion

Vibrato Exercises:

1. Working in oscillations starting with 1 per beat, then 2, 3 and 4 – by the time you reach 4 you are almost at a standard vibrato speed. This exercises works well with the metronome on crotchet = 60
2. Start with the vibrato motion as slow as possible and then gradually accelerate until it is as fast as possible and then move gradually back to the slow motion
3. Pick any note and finger and work on the vibrato for that specific note – often these notes can be selected from repertoire the student is working on
4. In the below exercise, the student can work not only on vibrato on each individual note but also maintaining the vibrato while changing notes. It can be played starting on any note and in any position, and can also be adapted for thumb position:

![Vibrato Exercises](image)
Recommended Technical & Repertoire Books for Beginning Students:

- **I Bags the Bass** – Chris Belshaw: Separate books providing pieces for open strings, first position and half position.
- **The Really Easy Bass Book** – Tony Osborne: Solos for the beginning bass player, including some pieces on open strings.
- **Right From the Start** – Sheila M. Nelson: Solos for the beginning bass player, including some pieces on open strings.
- **Microjazz for Double Bass** – Christopher Norton: Jazz influenced solos for the beginning bass player.
- **Amazing Solos for Double Bass and Keyboard** – Angela Schofield: repertoire covering a range of positions and standards.
- **Double Bass Solo 1** – Keith Hartley: repertoire covering a range of positions and standards.
- **Progressive Repertoire for the Double Bass** – George Vance: 3 Volumes of well-known pieces, using the lower positions as well as thumb position (includes a play-along CD).
- **AMEB Double Bass Series 1 & Technical Work Books**: Grade books for Preliminary to Grade 4 and a book of scales and technical exercises for Preliminary to Grade 8.