

# Starting Young Bassists – Andrew Moon

## Hardware before you start

- Commitment to program
  - Budget. Small bass will cost upwards of \$2K.
  - Who is teaching the instrument?
  - How much time is required to add this?
  - How well resourced is violin program?
- Equipment needed
  - Bass(es), stools, bows, rosin, music books.
  - Additionally, many schools find it better to have one bass at home, one at school to keep instruments from damage.
- Space necessary
  - Teaching space for a double bass. It can be difficult to transport the instrument from storage to studio. Easier to leave in studio.
  - Further if more than one student where are the basses stored? Stools?
  - What happens at end of year when instruments come back?
- Progression of Instrument Sizes
  - As student grows, larger instruments are needed. This means more storage and more space.
  - What is the largest instrument you could need? Smallest? Again, one wouldn't consider giving a full-size violin to a 6-year old student. Why is it different for bass?
  - Smaller is better than bigger for students.
- Time Resource vs. Outsource
  - Is it worth your time to teach double bass?
  - Get in a bassist to teach may be more effective particularly for demonstration purposes.
  - If you play in other string lessons be prepared to play in a bass lesson.

## LEFT HAND SET UP

### It's ALL about the Left Thumb

- No Banana Thumbs
  - Thumbs must not be hyperextended on either hand
  
- Boomerang Thumbs
  - Thumbs should have a bend on both hands
  
- No Thumbs UP
  - This is same as using palm to hold up violin.
  - In order to have a well-supported left hand it is necessary to have thumb pointing at player, not at the ceiling.
  - Thumb pointing up is a safety for holding bass.
  - Bass should NOT be held up with thumb. This is not a strong position for stopping notes as well. Leads to problems almost immediately.
  
- Big Bad Wolf & Three Little Pigs
  - Hand position gives equal semitones.
  - Universal problem with bassists is having first and second fingers too close together. Out of tune. Leads to not hearing good intonation—we become accustomed to what we hear regularly.
  - Natural and normal is finger equidistant apart. Bass is not natural nor is it normal. This can be tough.
  
- Lego Hands
  - Both hands need rounded fingers. Takes time to build the strength.
  - Length of practice should be limited to what can be done with proper strength so that bad habits are not entrenched.
  - This goes for both hands.

## Left Hand Organisation

- One whole tone reach
  - No use of low first fingers or third fingers or high fourth fingers.
  - No stretching of hand. Bass requires more strength and stretched out (small) hands cannot stop notes well.
- Shifting is essential
  - Understand shifts.
  - Always measure the shift so that you know where you are going.
  - Always slide shifts.
  - Use sound at first to hear shifts. Have a target note and a goal note.
  - Shift on the finger and string you came from to target, then play goal.
- Know and use 4th position
  - Easiest position on the bass. Same for all string instruments.
  - Not always standard on bass so check student's instrument. Make sure home bass and school bass are congruent on for this spot.
  - Slide thumb to thumb rest- first finger across from thumb perpendicular to the fingerboard.
- Positions
  - Rabbath (followed by George Vance) came up with different positions to rest of strings. Simandl, Nanny, etc followed other strings.
  - Positions are not important to bassists, but a strong internal map of the fingerboard is essential.
  - Positions are useful for teachers so that we have a common vocabulary which is why I support traditional positions.
  - Static positions are bad on string instruments. Stable positions are not. If the thumb moves, then there is a shift. If the thumb stays still, fingers can move or be out a bit, but a proper position can be achieved.
  - While good hand position is important, rigid hand positions are exhausting and dangerous. Help your student to understand the difference.

# The BOW

## French and German

- French
  - Overhand. Like violin. Can be moved towards balance point to avoid 'tipping' towards the floor.
  - VERY important that thumb is opposite the middle fingers and NOT using a 'pinched' hold with first finger.
  - NOTHING in the rest of a student's life is like a proper bow hold. It won't feel familiar to the new student.
- German
  - Underhand. More like viol da gamba.
  - This hold makes it easier to get good weight in string for young players.
  - Trade-off for dexterity. If student cannot get good bow contact this can help.
  - Also can use a pencil-type hold for the stick. Keep bow perpendicular to arm to avoid 'tipping' towards the floor.
  - String crossing is more exaggerated movement at first.
  - Don't be afraid or prejudiced about German bow. It is a good choice for many bassists.
  - Easier to get contact with string for good tone.
- Bow Dynamics/Mechanics different to violin/cello
  - Bow is MUCH heavier and shorter. Use less bow
  - Difference in weight and speed of bow from lowest string to highest is much more pronounced.
  - Use of weight paramount. Impossible to do a perfect bow hold without the string holding up the arm to some extent.
- Bass Rosin
  - Different product. Applied differently. Recommendations.
- Bow Contact
  - Without well-applied good quality rosin and without a decent contact between bow and string, the bass cannot have good tone. Even on open strings. So important to work on tone and that relationship of contact/weight, slow bow speed and good rosin.

## Ensemble Playing

- First Position
  - Know this position. Only one-octave scales available are G-major and F#, A and B natural minors.
  - Limit need for half-position at first. Know that what is possible for violin and cello in first position just isn't for bass.
- Check that parts are appropriate
  - Does your bassist know how to play all the notes?
  - Modify parts at necessary.
  - It is important that your bassist feels proud of her/his contribution and participation. This is what gives the learning and the lessons relevance. It is not the joy of playing melodies two or three octaves below everyone else.
- Check that parts are fun
  - Simplified bass parts are like simplified viola parts. Boring to the point of meaningless. Make sure there is some fun.
  - It can be as simple as adding a bass spin but make sure there is something fun/meaningful in the parts.
- Always tune bass with a tuner
  - Sadly, this is non-negotiable. Humans can't hear the open strings of the bass (according to science).
  - If you want to help, use a tuner and tune often.
  - The temperature change from morning to evening is enough to totally untune a bass.
- Use tape or pencil markings
  - Pencil marks are great temporary way of hitting a shift. Be sure the underlying mechanics of the shift are sound.
  - Auto detailing tape makes good tape lines and come in a variety of fun colours.
  - Then be fussy about intonation. The better in tune your basses play the better your ensemble sounds. Insist the tuning is spot on or you will suffer.
- Spend time to rehearse your basses
  - Too violin-centric in some rehearsals.
  - Do not ask the cellos and basses to be ever-patient saints. They want some fun too.
  - Help them understand how their parts fit into the melody. Help them understand how their rhythms are the motor of the piece.