

Rodney Slatford & Stephen Pettitt

# *THE BOTTOM LINE*



*New prospects for teaching and learning the double bass*

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98 Portland Place  
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## Foreword

Usually we whittle our way down to the bottom line: musicians start there. For harmonics are set ringing *upwards*. Raise the dampers on a piano by means of the 'loud' pedal, strike a note, and you can hear the strings in a harmonic progression sounding in sympathy - those *above* the note that is. When the thirty-two or sixty-four foot pipe of a cathedral organ is the bass note of a chord, like a blind Samson making even the stones tremble, it is not actually the volume of the note that stuns us but the resonances, enriching the sound miraculously. Provided, of course, the notes on the bottom line are exactly in tune. For by the same propensity, a deep note that's not spot on, though it may be the least distinctly audible of mistakes and seem therefore the least serious, sets up harmonics which blur and frazzle the neat and necessary exactnesses of all the other parts. When one hears an orchestra with a notably brilliant sound, the sparkle largely comes from basses being played precisely in tune.

That shock of brightness is now heard, alas, more often in orchestras abroad than here at home. For among us the double bass, that ungainly member of the glamorous violin family, no longer attracts its fair share of talented musicians. Few young people take to an instrument that's scarcely ever centre stage, or plays a tune. It's physically awkward to hump about, and physically hard to play - whether in the finger pressure needed on the strings to register a note, or in the near-dislocations and splits required in spanning the hand between notes, or in stretching to bow way below and to finger way on high. A firm hand is needed.

Desperate teachers running orchestras, their double bass desk as usual without an incumbent, will recruit some hearty tough overcome by immortal longings late in his school career, or a Betjemanesque girl prepared, amid the dogs and horses, to put down a stubborn instrument. Moreover, training on the instrument from a professional bassist is hard to come by. A single teacher travels far and wide within a county authority to cosset his scattered flock; and when financial cuts come, what more democratic and just than that this least popular of instruments should be least provided for? "From him that hath not shall be taken away, even that which he hath."

So it is, that when the time comes for violinists and cellists to compete for entry to the music schools, they do so as fledgling soloists with Bach and Beethoven at their fingertips; the few double bass players will be welcome if they can tunefully play the equivalent of a few nursery rhymes. Few instruments sufficiently scaled down for children, late starting with it, few players, few professional teachers, low expectations at entry to music college and low expectations at the end of it - the bass is for most who play their second or third instrument...no wonder some players accepted by orchestras have a command more limited than would be tolerated on any other instrument. By extension jazz suffers too. The bass, once so exciting an underpinning, threatens to become a piece of percussion, all slap and no tickle. Worse, its place is often grossly filled by the wow and flutter of the amplified guitar.

Such, in paraphrase, was the case put to the Foundation by Rodney Slatford, professor of double bass at the Royal Northern College of Music. He had

already set up the charitable Yorke Trust at his own expense to support those who teach and learn and play the double bass. We agreed on a report that should set out the present situation, describe some steps already being taken to improve it, and propose further advances. Stephen Pettitt, a music critic of *The Times*, joined Rodney Slatford to arrive at a text; and Adrian Whitefoord and Jane Mitchell, (two post-graduate students in Professor Quentin Blake's department at the Royal College of Art) have designed and illustrated it.

This report is aimed principally at those who dispose resources for music training - chief education officers, music advisers, headteachers, music staff in schools; at those who run youth orchestras or music centres or music courses, or administer and teach in our music colleges. But, by such intermediaries, we think the report will find its way to parents, and finally serve to stimulate rather more young people and students to embrace this Cinderella among the instruments. More generally, those who care about the future of music in this country should read the report with concern, for this is the bottom line about that vital bottom line.

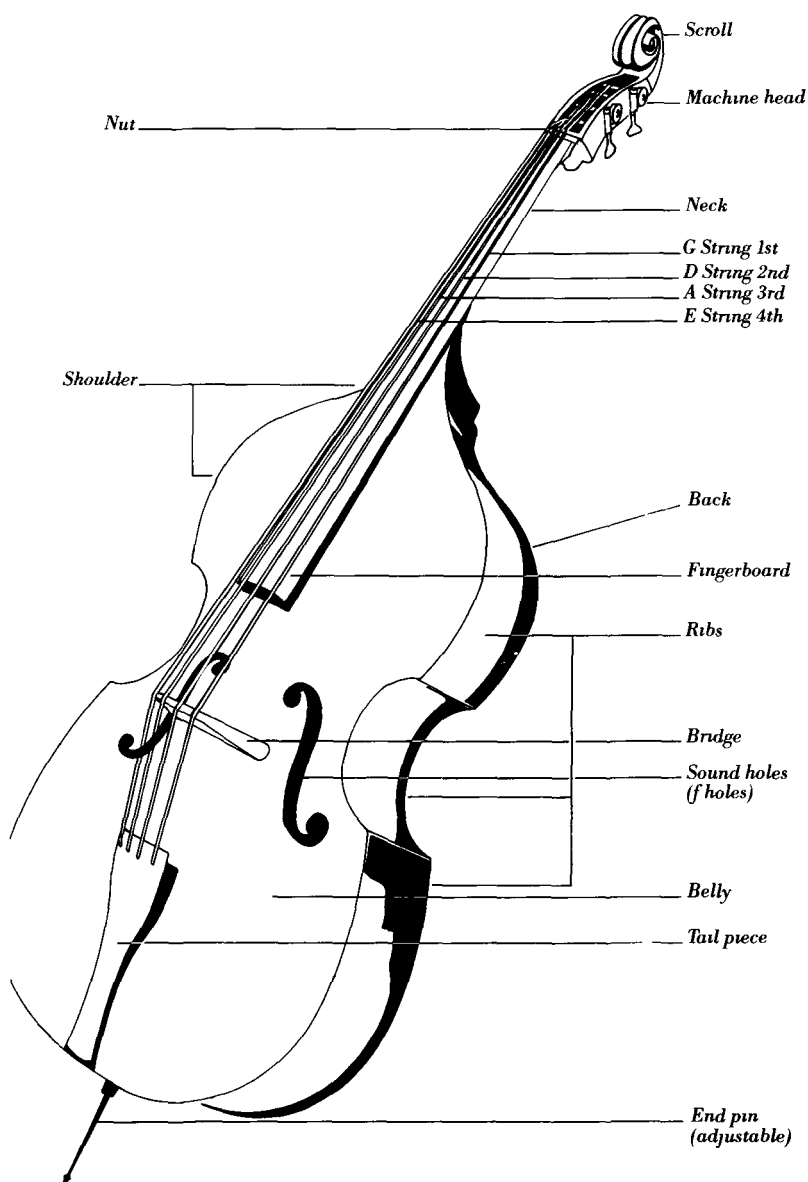
L C Taylor,  
Director, United Kingdom Branch,  
Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.



# *1 The double bass - an introduction*

The simplest definition one could offer of the double bass is that it is the largest and lowest-pitched bowed stringed instrument in common use. Its purpose in the orchestra is to supply a solid foundation to the string section and to the orchestra as a whole. This it achieves through sheer weight of sound as well as through its ability to define rhythmic patterns crisply. In chamber music it fulfils similar functions, though in addition, and particularly in more recent music, it is often used for its unique tonal colours, which are fundamentally different from those of a cello. It also functions as a solo instrument; over 200 double bass concertos exist, most from the 18th and 19th centuries, while there is also a whole repertoire of more intimate solo music, such as sonatas. In jazz, the double bass has always enjoyed a vital role in even the smallest combination. Today, jazz improvisatory techniques have become so highly sophisticated that far more is expected of players than finger-slapping virtuosity alone.

The history of the double bass is confusing, to say the least, but it is among the viol family that the first double bass type of instrument is to be found. The earliest known illustration of such an instrument dates from 1518, but according to Panyavsky, the double bass player and scholar, Prospero as early as 1493 wrote of 'viols as big as myself', a reference which could hardly point to the conventional bass viol. Later, another theorist, Agricola (1486-1556) wrote of the *contrabasso di viola*, an instrument presumably comparable to the one made by Hanns Vogel kept in the Germanic National Museum in Nuremberg. This bass is fretted

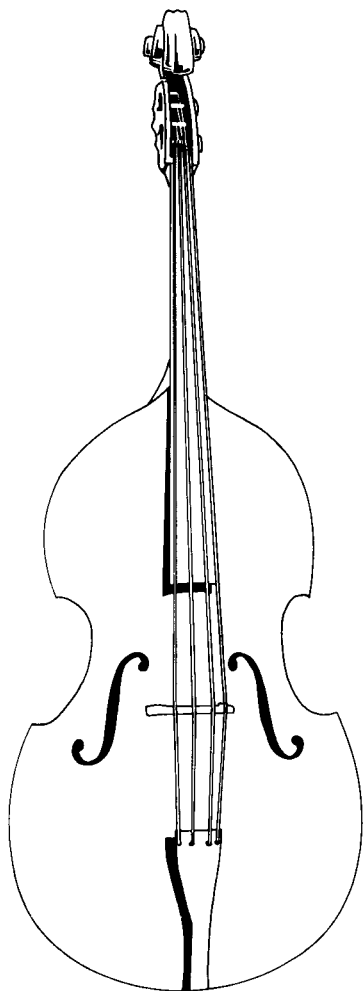


like a guitar, and its six strings are tuned G'-C-F-A-d-g, a tuning also given by Praetorius in his *Syntagma Musicum* for an instrument he called the violone.

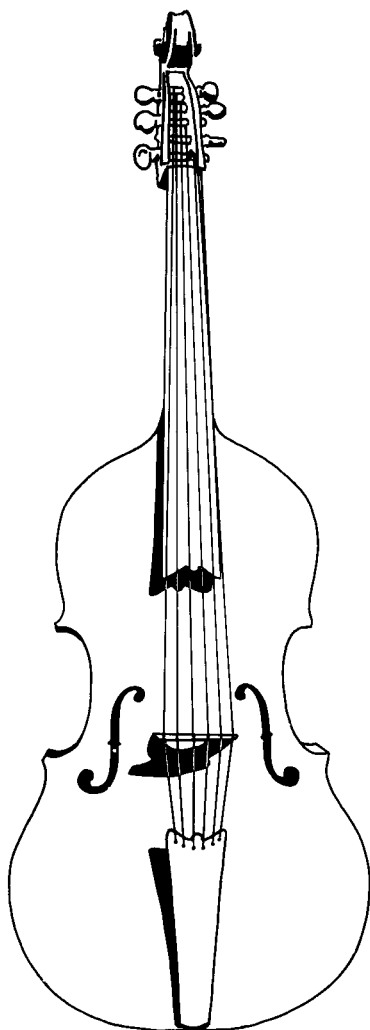
It should be mentioned here that the instrument's impractical size and its comparative rarity, led to a plethora of different tunings. Some of these evolved from viols, whose players turned their skills to lower notes, whilst others were devised by players who were searching for a tuning that gave the instrument a natural sonority yet also permitted the maximum number of notes to lie comfortably under the hand in a variety of keys. A modern instrument tuned, in fourths, E'-A'-D-G, for example, allows comfortable access to most keys, whereas a tuning in fifths would demand more frequent changes of left hand positions.

Praetorius, however, cites other tunings besides, some of them high, some low, some for six-stringed instruments, others for five-stringed examples. The most significant of these different tunings is the low D'-E'-A'-D-G; only the presence of the extra D' string makes this particular configuration different from the conventional four-string tuning of today.

A number of late 16th and 17th century basses, some still existing, had their original six strings later reduced to three or four, although a three-stringed bass owned by the virtuoso Dragonetti and made by Gasparo da Salo (1540-1604), now housed in the Museum of St Mark's, Venice, was in all likelihood built that way. Another early six-stringed instrument to survive, an early 17th century example by da Salo's pupil Giovanni Paolo Maggini (c1581-c1632), can be seen in the Dolmetsch Collection at Haslemere, Sussex. This instrument, though flat-backed, is violin-shaped in contrast to the



*Left Viol shaped bass*



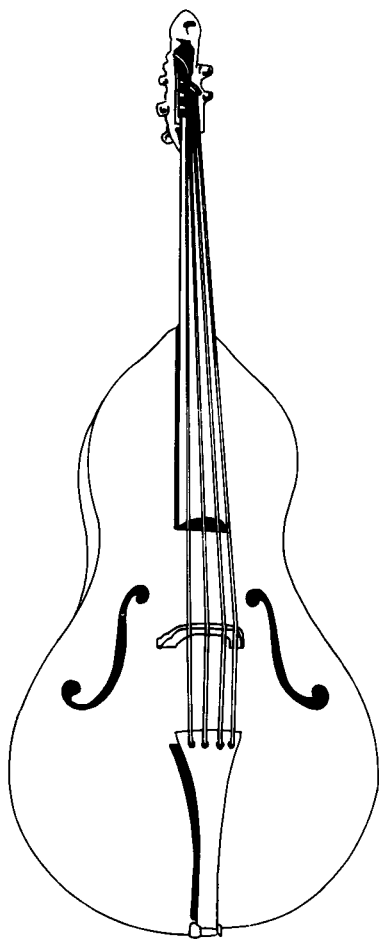
*Right Violone*

viol-shaped violone by Ventura Linarol made in Padua in 1585 and now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

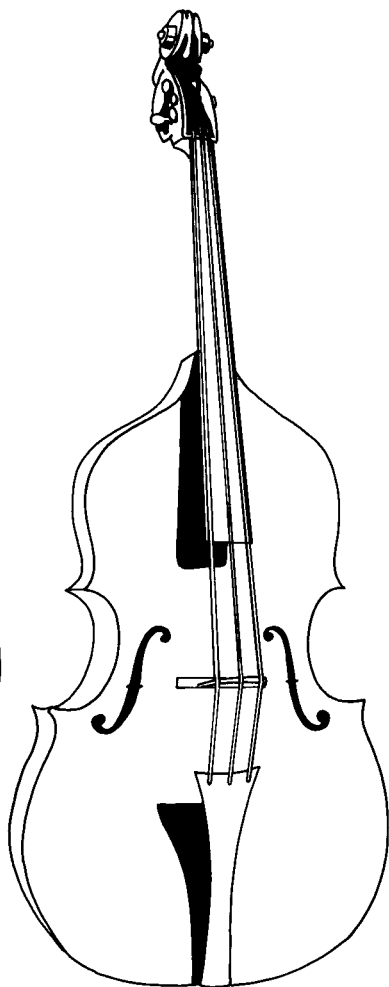
During the early 17th century the five-stringed bass was most commonly used in Austria and Germany, and the earliest known instruction manual, Johann Jacob Prinner's *Musicalischer Schliessl* of 1677, is written with a tuning F'-A'-D-Fsharp-B in mind. Much later, in 1790, Albrechtsberger cited a tuning of F'-A-D-Fsharp-A, but still the instrument was a violone or contrabass with thick strings, and frets tied at every semitone along the fingerboard. Michel Corrette's *Méthode* of 1733 illuminates the techniques and tunings in use at a time when the bass was beginning to enjoy unprecedented popularity as a solo instrument. Much of the repertoire from that time demands formidable virtuosity, and many of the double-stopped passages (a method of playing in which two strings are sounded simultaneously) are impossible using modern tuning, leading some writers earlier this century into believing that some of these works were not intended for the instrument at all.

During the later 17th and early 18th centuries, a fashion developed that favoured three-stringed basses tuned either A'-D-G or G'-D-G. These instruments, which were fretless, produced greater power and their popularity coincided with a marked growth in the size and versatility of the orchestra. It was not, in fact, until the 1920s that the additional E' string could be found on the basses of all respectable professionals; before that time, any line that ventured below A' was liable to be transposed up an octave or perhaps even omitted altogether.

Such a wayward development has unsurprisingly given rise to the two basic patterns of double bass in



*Left Guitar shaped bass*

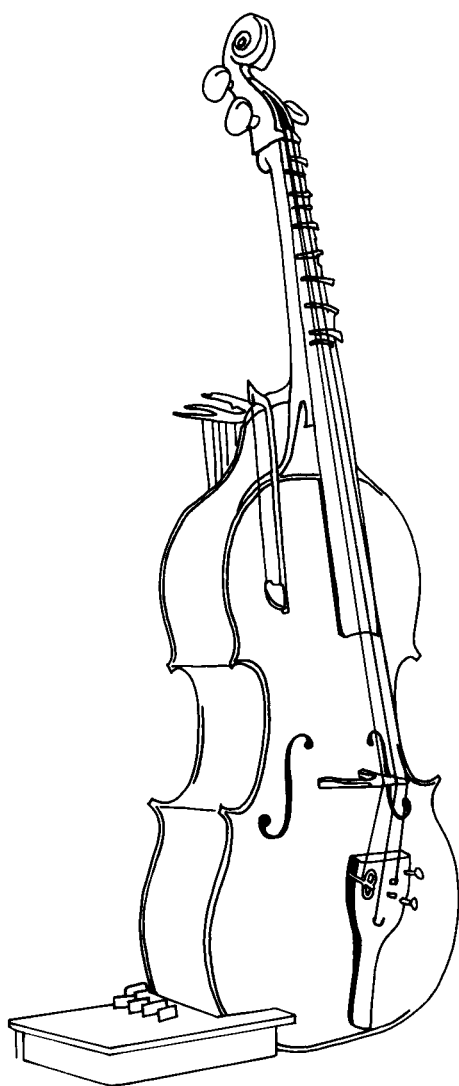


*Right Violin shaped bass*

most common use today. One related to the shape of the violin, the other to that of the viola da gamba, though there are other designs, such as that which resembles the outline of a guitar. Viol-shaped basses usually have a flat back, the top part slopes towards the neck, the two holes in the belly are C-shaped, and occasionally there is a third, central rose-shaped aperture. For convenience of playing, violin-shaped basses are also sometimes flat-backed, although otherwise the design, with its high shoulders and S-shaped holes in the belly, looks quite different.

More than any other instrument, the size of the double bass varies considerably. Some smaller examples (bassetti and chamber basses) are scarcely larger than a cello; by contrast the largest basses may have a body as much as 140 cm long. Normally, however, the three-quarter size instrument used by most professionals is around 115 cm long, these measurements, of course, discount the fingerboard. Connoisseurs of extremes may note here that the largest double bass is 480 cm long and was built by Paul de Wit for the 1889 Cincinnati Music Festival. J B Vuillaume's enormous three-stringed octobass of 1851, which was admired by Berlioz, is another monster and can be seen in the Museum of the Paris Conservatoire, while in England one imposing giant once owned (and presumably played) by Dragonetti resides in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Although the four-stringed bass is today normally tuned E'-A'-D-G, there are occasions for which a different tuning is required, the most common being *Fsharp*-B'-E-A. Some instruments are fitted with a fifth string, tuned B' or more rarely C', while others are fitted with a lever device enabling the player to lengthen the bottom

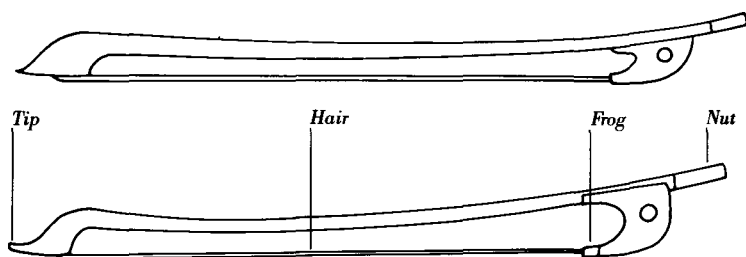


*The three stringed octobass*



string to C', useful for orchestral work but impractical in rapid passage work or for the special effect of glissando (literally, sliding). The strings themselves are made of aluminium-covered steel or nylon, except where the demands of a period-style orchestra require gut.

There are two types of double bass bow in common use, the French and the German. The French (used most commonly in England, France, Italy and Scandinavia) is rather like a modern violin bow but shorter and heavier than a cello bow. The German bow, preferred in Austro-German countries, the USSR and most of the USA, has a deeper frog and is held underhand. Its historical antecedent is obviously the viol bow. The Dragonetti bow, which was also held underhand but had the stick arching away from the hair, was used widely in England until the early 20th century, but for all practical purposes it has now become extinct.



*Top: A French bow*

*Above: A German bow*

In many 17th century orchestras a 16' string sound (an octave lower than the cello and below the range of most human voices) was not required at all. There was no bass in the orchestra of the Paris Opera, for example, until the early 18th century, at which time the lower-pitched region of the orchestra was dominated by the bassoon. Court orchestras of the middle 18th century did include basses; indeed the bass section would often be larger than the cello section. Nowadays a symphony orchestra will usually include at least eight double basses.

The earliest known works specifically composed for the solo double bass are the sonatas composed by or perhaps for Giovannino del Violone, written around 1690 and now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. No solo music survives from the 18th century until the solo passages that occur in Haydn's symphonies of the early 1760s. But suddenly, the four years from 1765 saw a torrent of new works, including 28 concertos by such composers as Vanhal, Zimmerman, Haydn, Franz Hoffmeister, Johannes Sperger and Dittersdorf. Clearly there were players and audiences ready for such repertoire and it is no surprise that Sperger, in fact, wrote his 18 concertos for himself. Sporadically thereafter the musical world would produce a masterpiece which involved solo double bass. In 1791 Mozart composed the aria *Per questa bella mano* for bass (singer) and double bass; this piece was intended for the bassist Friedrich Pischelsberger, an outstanding Austrian virtuoso. Joseph Kampfer (1735-1788) toured Hungary towards the end of the 18th century and duly impressed Haydn, while the doyen of bassists of this period Domenico Dragonetti (1763-1846) spread the

cause of the instrument far and wide, numbering among his friends and admirers Haydn, Beethoven, Spohr, Hummel, Liszt and Rossini (who wrote a duet for him to play with the London banker and amateur cellist Sir David Salomons). Dragonetti, and later Giovanni Bottesini (1821-1889), inspired many composers to write for their instrument. Bottesini himself composed: he studied the art with Verdi, no less, while his bass playing was renowned for a delicacy of sound that by all accounts Dragonetti's lacked.

The legacy left by these and other figures is still valuable, although it has to be said that little music from the 19th century goes much beyond the superficially virtuosic. Bottesini's double bass method continues to be used, and the work of later pedagogues such as Simandl, Hrabě and Nanny frequently forms the mainstay of young players' techniques even today. The conductor and bassist Sergey Koussevitsky (1874-1951) advanced the standing of the instrument through his own illustrious reputation, as well as by his valuable contributions, didactic and otherwise, to the bass's literature.

All these players had one thing in common: the understanding that playing the double bass requires as much concentrated study and sophisticated training as playing any other instrument, and that virtuosity is no less valuable to a double bassist than it is to a violinist or pianist. Since the war, thanks to the enterprise of players like Bertram Turetzky and Gary Karr and of player-composers like Barry Guy, the solo repertoire has expanded immensely, while many young composers have recognized the instrument's individual voice in their chamber music writing. In the field of jazz, the

techniques of the early 20th century black pioneers in the USA have spread throughout the world.

Whilst the comparatively few stars shine brilliantly, the general standard of double bass playing has remained remarkably low. The advent of advanced recording and broadcasting technology has meant that double bass pitches can now be heard clearly on even the least sophisticated domestic equipment, exposing inadequacies that had largely gone unnoticed before. A radical reappraisal of modern double bass technique and its teaching has therefore become inevitable.

## *2 Opportunities for the player*

Not all those who learn to play an instrument, whether the double bass or any other, are going to become professionals, even if training is pursued to an advanced level. Vacancies are limited and competition may be fierce. Many students, then, will not even want to contemplate a life in which the next crust or mortgage payment is dependent on their playing an instrument. For these people, however, music may remain an important part of their being, whether for recreational, social or artistic reasons.



Many amateurs take up the bass late in life. When a local orchestra might be forced to turn away flautists and clarinetists because they already have too many, often a double bassist will be welcomed with open arms, whatever his or her standard may be. The chances are, indeed, that the player concerned will be the only bassist in the orchestra. Increasingly people have a greater number of leisure hours. Unemployment,



whether by choice, as in the case of those who accept the now commonplace offer of early retirement, or whether inflicted by a society with fewer jobs to offer than in the sixties and seventies, is undeniably rife. We can thus reasonably expect that voluntary recreational activity is increasing. That must include music-making, for school and youth orchestras as well as local music centres have begun to encourage an increasing interest in many that will last. Standards inevitably vary, and will continue to do so.

Most professional musicians—and this is true of double bass players among them—earn their living by playing in orchestras of one kind or another. These may be attached to opera houses or to radio stations or may function as independent symphony, chamber or light orchestras. The demands made upon a **professional orchestral player** are immense. He or she must be familiar with a wide repertoire of music and must be able to read fluently music that can be technically complex or, on occasion, aesthetically baffling, at least on first acquaintance. Sometimes, too, a principal player will be required to play solos (such as the one which occurs in the slow movement of Mahler's First Symphony).

The training at conservatories is directed by and large towards the orchestral profession. It is true to say, however, that the accent on practical orchestral work varies tremendously from country to country and from establishment to establishment. In the United Kingdom, for example, orchestral rehearsals and concerts may occupy the student for between six and twenty hours each week, whereas in Italy and the smaller Scandinavian institutions quite often no time

will be spent playing in an orchestra at all. In the United Kingdom many players entering a music college will already have had some experience of orchestral work through having played with their county youth or school orchestras. Although this may sound encouraging, sadly in many cases the young bassist will not have been taught by a specialist, so that he or she arrives at college possessing a hybrid technique which can only harm prospects of further progress. Such an inadequacy in the early training of young bassists has over the decades been both the cause and effect of the bass's image as a rather comical, even superfluous instrument. These shortcomings have adversely influenced orchestral playing in Britain. Whereas increasingly in America, Germany and the Scandinavian countries, orchestral technique is taken very seriously, in Britain (at least until comparatively recently) an orchestral post could be had without real mastery of the double bass: without it in America, it has been impossible to get a job.

In many countries, a corps of **freelance professional musicians** exists (and this is so for double bass players among the others) which supplies players (and arrangers and composers) on demand. (In some countries, notably those of Eastern Europe, the freelance profession, in keeping with the political dogma of those places, does not exist.) The work these players do is extremely varied. They may be required to deputize for indisposed regular orchestral players or to augment a section for a particular piece of music (this is called 'extra' work). They may be of sufficiently high calibre to be required for occasional ensemble playing. Or they may be called upon to work in recording studios to provide the background music for film soundtracks or



television commercials or to contribute to the making of a chart-topping single. Some orchestras (such as the English Chamber Orchestra) are comprised entirely of regular freelance personnel.







The demands of such a varied working life are extremely rigorous. The more perfect the player's sight-reading, the quicker his or her reputation will spread. Stamina is the first essential, together with versatility and an ability to organize one's diary and to run a small business. For the bassist, like the harpist, on top of the problems all musicians face, there are transportation problems. He has to be prepared to drive an estate car, sometimes through the night.



The opportunities for a professional bassist to exist purely and simply as a **chamber musician** are limited, although with younger composers ever more willing to experiment with new instrumental combinations, the situation is very slowly changing. Of the so-called standard repertoire, only a very few masterpieces, Schubert's Octet and Beethoven's Septet among them, include the double bass as part of a mixed wind and string ensemble. In any case, the number of successful



chamber groups world-wide is itself low, and not many of those can afford to employ a bassist full-time for the sake of those relatively rare occasions on which one will be required. Some groups, however, are looking beyond the favourite classical masterpieces. In the United Kingdom two ensembles, the Melos Ensemble and the Nash Ensemble, have been particularly active and successful: the latter partly through their adventurous approach to programming, enabling composers like Hummel and Spohr, both of whom wrote chamber music requiring the double bass, to be given their due alongside their more frequently played contemporary, Beethoven. In the end, though, chamber groups have to be viable concerns, and halls, sadly, are seldom filled by the performance of anything unfamiliar, which means that the bassist will generally be called upon relatively infrequently.

In the field of new music prospects are a little brighter, although ensembles normally function on a freelance principle. The activities of the London Sinfonietta, for example, are hugely varied, and at different times they may require a large chamber orchestra or a trio of almost any combination. Similarly groups like the Ensemble Intercontemporain, in Paris, or Circle, in London, will often require a bassist. From a career point of view then, as well as an ideological one, the aspiring chamber player will be well advised to champion the cause of new music. As is usually the case, there is a different attitude in Eastern Europe where subsidy is unlimited; if you are fortunate enough, as well as good enough, to become a member of a group like the Czech Nonet, you will have no need of other work.



Jazz music continues to thrive and develop more or less on lines independent from what might be called art (ie classical) music. Most groups are quite small, which means that **the jazz bassist** is liable to find himself playing on his own within a particular group. Perhaps it is not very surprising that such an art form, which relies on spontaneity and improvisation, is not as yet taught very widely, though with jazz's ever-increasing sophistication and the evolution of its own history, the potential resources for those institutions who do encourage its study are vast. In the United Kingdom



only the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London provides a formal jazz course that runs side-by-side with a classical one, though in America, the cradle of the tradition, and in Scandinavia, the phenomenon is more widespread. As far as Britain is concerned, part of the reason that jazz courses are hard to come by is the generally entrenched attitudes at the major conservatories, where tradition still largely prevails.

In practice it is difficult for a player to handle the very different demands of both jazz and classical worlds on any instrument, though exceptions such as the American trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and the bass players Christopher Lawrence and John Clayton have proved that there need be no bar to a dual career. The field of jazz is open to any number of semi-professionals. Pubs and clubs around the country are often keen to entice customers by offering jazz music of widely varying styles and while in many places fees may be low,





the performers play above all for their own pleasure, and nobody cares too much if one or two things go awry.

Whatever the instrument, there are relatively few soloists, though there are, of course, many pianists who make their livings giving solo recitals and playing concertos throughout the country and abroad. There are few solo violinists, fewer cellists and very few solo viola players. Because of the lack of a large and creditable repertory, and of enough bassists able to play it with the panache it demands, the solo bassist can only be international; frankly, what little jam there is has to be spread very thinly. There are less than half a dozen virtuoso bassists in the world who are able to make their living without recourse to orchestral work of any kind. Their principal problem is choosing what to play; there is not, for them, the embarrassment of riches that a violinist or pianist can explore, nor indeed the escape of learning a handful of masterpieces that can be repeated as often as one wishes from Cincinnati to (these days) China. Instead the double bass soloist has the choice of a mere handful of interesting concertos, though the work of living composers has had something of a positive effect, as witnessed by, for example, Hans Werner Henze's idiomatic and charming Concerto. In recital, the selection is usually of 19th century showpieces and transcriptions. Once again, the solo bassist has to look to new music for his more substantial material. Klaus Stoll and the cellist Jörg Baumann (both members of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra) have created between them a whole new repertoire through commissions; while figures like Joëlle Leandre, Bertram Turetzky, Fernando Grillo and Barry Guy have attempted to solve the problem by



*Klaus Stoll*

*cover design for Bote & Bock's Philharmonic Duo Series*

writing their own experimental music.

Many players in all spheres supplement their income and submit themselves to the challenge of young minds through teaching. In the United Kingdom, there is a need for competent bass teachers, whether they be professional players or not. Generally speaking it is only at the music colleges that one can be reasonably sure of finding properly qualified teachers at work. With recent cuts in education budgets, local authorities are inevitably hard put to supplement their lists of full- and part-time peripatetic teachers with bass teachers, but some are more enlightened and more tenacious in putting their case than others. Certainly the professionally trained player who finds himself unable or unwilling to perform for a living ought not to think that teaching is somehow a second-best career.

### *3 Learning the double bass*

Current opinion is that the earlier a child begins to learn a string instrument the more he or she is likely to attain a high degree of technical accomplishment. The theory can be likened to that which applies to the skill of swimming: those introduced to the water when very young, grow up without fear of it. Only rarely does a child who has taken up the violin at, say, the age of 13 succeed in catching up with one who has been playing since the age of 8 or 9. The variety of opinion as to what age is best to begin playing a string instrument is wide; Suzuki's method encourages children to start playing the violin at 3, while cellists have begun at 5 or 6 with excellent results. But as far as the double bass is concerned, encounters early in life are extremely rare, and usually limited to those children whose families are in some way involved with the instrument. Naturally the sheer size of the instrument engenders the reaction that it is suited to grown-ups only, but half- and quarter-size violins and cellos are commonly used in the training of the very young, and there seems to be no particular reason why a similarly shrunken version of the double bass could not be adopted for the same purposes.

A few teachers are working in the highly specialized field of teaching young children the double bass. As yet, however, no systematic comparison of results has been attempted, nor until now has there been any co-ordination among leaders to encourage double bass tuition of the young on a wide scale. Because training in early childhood is so rare, many secondary school orchestras find themselves without bass players of comparable



aptitude with the rest of their string section. Thus a large majority of double bass players take up the instrument only because there is a need for them in the school orchestra. Some, of course, are attracted instinctively towards the low sound and the size of the instrument—it is hard not to be noticed when the number of players is small and the instrument so physically prominent—but some genuinely possess an aptitude for providing a harmonic foundation to the whole orchestra, while others may even gain some sort of psychological security from being, as it were, at the root of things in a group. By extension, generally speaking, there are limited opportunities for the jazz bass player in schools, and tuition is haphazard. Many good jazz combinations in schools, and outside them, use a bass guitar or an electric keyboard in lieu of a bassist.

Sometimes the reasons for encouraging a particular child to take up the double bass can be dubious. By no means rare is the assumption that the instrument is for some reason peculiarly well-suited to children who are large, less intelligent, or who have already failed to master anything else. The double bass is often seen as a simple instrument to play compared with the violin or cello: for a musical child with little or no practical skills it is regarded as an easy option. While such a selection process has at least the advantage of providing an opportunity for 14–16 year-olds to begin learning an instrument that can yield quick and more or less effective results, it can nevertheless be seen that a lower level of accomplishment and promise is assumed.

The standard of tuition in schools varies widely. There are those education authorities who do employ

## Education authorities, 1985

Education authorities	number of basses	bass teachers	bass pupils in schools	bass pupils in music centres	schools population
Barnsley	37	1	40	0	200,000
Blackpool	60	1	40-50	See Note A	235,000
Devon	24	0	10	8	132,000
East Sussex	40	5	63	0	82,500
North Yorkshire	35	2	40	11	100,000
Sheffield	22	1	47	0	90,000
Wolverhampton	17	2	9	12	286,000

Note

A Figure for Blackpool pupils in music centres is counted in with those in schools

specialist teachers, as do several private schools. Hertfordshire, for example, has several full-time peripatetic teachers of the double bass. Other authorities, though, have no specialist teachers of the bass at all, and rely on cellists to teach the instrument.

For lack of specialist double bass teachers, the practice has developed of treating the double bass as a large cello (even of tuning a cello as a double bass) in the teaching of the instrument in schools. This is utterly wrong. Whilst the violin and viola share virtually the same technique, there are fundamental differences between the double bass and the cello. The strings of a double bass require a greater force to make them speak than do those of a cello and bowing technique is therefore dissimilar; fingering a heavy string also requires more strength in the fingers for good tone production than is necessary for a lighter, thinner string. Moreover, the system of fingering for the cello, which requires the use of extensions from a comparatively early stage, is not generally applicable to the double bass. The few similarities that do exist

between double bass and cello technique are those fundamental principles shared by all string instruments. Bassists taught by cellists invariably inherit bad habits that are difficult to eradicate later on. It is inconceivable that an aspiring cellist should be taught by a double bass player; the reverse is equally nonsensical though it is widely tolerated and even encouraged.

Teachers in those areas such as Somerset where there is no provision for any instrumental tuition within the timetable in state schools, often experience the additional problem of gaining access to pupils. Instrumental tuition, privately funded, has to take place outside school hours. But in other areas, such as Northamptonshire and Berkshire, county peripatetic teachers (who may have to travel several hundred miles each week) are treated sympathetically by school staff who will frequently tolerate a measure of disruption to the regular timetable in order that instrumental lessons may be accommodated. Attitudes from authority to authority vary depending upon interpretation of current legislation.

Two other matters give cause for concern. First, there is the question of continuity of tuition. Where a pupil may have made good progress in his or her junior school with a particular teacher, there is frequently no chance of continuing with the same teacher at secondary level, even though, bass teachers being so scarce, that teacher may be more experienced and accomplished at obtaining results than the one later assigned to the pupil, or even if that teacher is the only qualified specialist bass teacher in the area. Second, there is the matter of the availability of instruments. Often there may be only one double bass in a school, or perhaps none at all, and

### **Specialist music schools, 1985**

Schools	bass pupils	bass teachers	violinists	violin teachers
St. Marys	1	1	12	2
Wells	11	2	79	7
Menuhin	0	0	27	4
Purcell	2	1	76	39
Chethams	6	3	60	6

instruments are often in poor condition, so that little incentive exists to encourage new players. Many school orchestras function without a bass player, or with a member of staff who fills in as best he can. This is not the kind of attitude which is likely to spawn enthusiasm, though one must appreciate that the resources necessary to change things are, in the current economic climate, hard to come by.

While the few specialist music schools in the United Kingdom have justly gained for themselves formidable reputations in providing musical tuition for gifted children, curiously they have done little as yet to stimulate high quality playing from young double bassists. There are, for one thing, comparatively few bass students in the schools, and the tuition they are offered is often only of a moderate standard. Modest achievement on the double bass is regarded, fallaciously, to be something remarkable.

At the Menuhin School where all cellists are required to play the double bass, they tune it like a cello. While this may give cellists some experience of handling a double bass, this exercise does not in itself produce bass players. There is no provision for specialist bass teaching in this particular institution at all.

Aside from the specialist schools, several music



**centres** exist where tuition is provided for children while they are still at school, some within the state system, some outside. At the top of the tree, at least in theory, are the junior departments of the music colleges which normally provide individual and group tuition, as well as theory and history classes, on Saturdays. Even in these schools there is an acute shortage of double bass students. At present, for example, the Junior School at the Royal Northern College of Music has no double bass students at all.

In London there is a bass tutor at ILEA's music-orientated Pimlico School, which young players have the chance of attending if they live near enough. But there is no teaching or playing of the bass at the Youth Music Centre in Hampstead (pioneered by Kay Hurwitz) though here the principal reason is said to be one of space. Similarly, at ILEA's Tower Hamlets Project, where many young people are given an opportunity to play string instruments from an early age, there is no provision for double bass players at present, although it is likely that some equipment and a teacher will be made available in the near future. Opportunities for jazz bassists at all these Junior Schools are minimal.

During the past decade, weekend or half-term **courses** have begun to proliferate which cater for young bass players by providing intensive specialist tuition. Jazz occasionally forms an informal part of these courses. Centres where such activities have taken place include Hertfordshire, Berkshire, Birmingham, Staffordshire and York, though there are still many areas without any such provision. The function of these courses, given their brevity, is primarily to reinforce the tuition of local teachers and to act as a stimulus for

those intending to take the graded examinations of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. But they also provide another invaluable service by enabling young players who might otherwise feel themselves to be rather isolated to mix with others of like inclinations, even though of different ages and abilities. And often the group lessons and masterclasses in which they participate will be given by an accomplished teacher for what in the end will be relatively little cost per capita. A weekend course at the Rural Music Schools Association in Hitchin, for example, is normally about £40 inclusive of bed and breakfast.

Standards, of course, do vary. In Hertfordshire there have been annual courses during the summer attended by around 30 players with 2 or 3 teachers available for 2 days. Staffordshire staged a course in 1983 which attracted over 100 players and not a little attention from the media; it ended with a mass concert outside Lichfield Cathedral which was televised – an undoubted morale-booster for all who took part. But things can go awry when the organization is imperfect. A course in the Midlands with over 50 players attending, was loosely planned with insufficient staff on hand and in premises that were simply too small. Insufficient equipment and poor tuition may well have rendered this well-meaning exercise more damaging than constructive.

Several private organizations also promote occasional weekend courses. There are, for example, as well as those run annually by the Rural Music Schools Association at Hitchin, occasional courses at Highnam Court in Gloucestershire, and regional demonstrations organized from time to time by the European String

Teachers Association (ESTA). In 1984, the advanced course at Prussia Cove in Cornwall (International Musicians Seminar) included special provision for double bassists for the first time, though the comparatively high cost of the event meant that only a handful of musicians were able to attend. There were some dozen enrolments for a repeat course in 1985. Also in 1985, Manchester Bass Week was held at the Royal Northern College of Music with over 100 enrolments, while in 1986 there is to be a large international course in Wales called Bass 86. In the field of adult summer schools, a brief survey suggests that only a few cater for the bass player, though for keen amateurs there is good provision for other instrumentalists.

While such events are slowly beginning to lend a sense of cohesion to the double bassist's formerly disparate world, it is the youth orchestras that continue to provide, in most cases, the best training ground for young players at pre-college level. Of these, the National Youth Orchestra (NYO) of Great Britain has achieved the highest levels of performance and has produced consistently good players since it was founded. Many of these eventually find their way into the profession. The NYO revolves around residential courses held during school vacations, since commitments during term-time would for obvious reasons be impractical. There is always a good bass coach on hand. Likewise many county youth orchestras engage professional coaches, though there are still those that make do with a cellist, a student, or an amateur. The IAPS (Incorporated Association of Preparatory Schools) Orchestra also engages a qualified bass coach, but often, because of the variability of bass tuition in prep

schools, recruitment is difficult and there are those years when the orchestra suffers from having to accept players who, quite literally, have just begun to learn. At the time of writing, there have been no bass players in the IAPS Junior Orchestra and a shortage of good young players has always been evident in the National Children's Orchestra for the under 14's.

Traditionally most colleges of music in the United Kingdom and elsewhere are slow to accept change, and so it is perhaps not very surprising that the standard of tuition in such establishments still varies more widely than it should. Only the larger colleges are able to offer a choice of teachers. Whereas many of the violin or cello teaching staff will have studied abroad, few of the bass tutors will have had this opportunity. This encourages a resistance to change and a reluctance to explore new developments. Often, too, these teachers have to contend with a low level of attainment from their students. Really competent applicants for college courses are few and far between; in years when there are few applicants, standards for entry are often lowered in order to keep sufficient numbers to feed the various orchestras. The role of the teacher is then reduced to that of a remedial adviser. Whilst violinists and cellists will as a matter of course play unaccompanied Bach, Mozart concertos and Beethoven sonatas from memory at auditions, bass players often display only rudimentary technique as they struggle through an elementary piece, and they may lack even the most fundamental qualities of musicianship, such as the ability to recognize key signatures. Some, as has already been suggested, will never have had a lesson from a bass player at all.

## *4 Some teaching methods - their application to the double bass player*

Given the fact that string playing is best started at as early an age as possible, it is necessary to examine the major teaching methods employed for beginners and to explore their relevance, or otherwise, to the learning of a sound double bass technique.

It should perhaps be noted, as a preliminary, that although not specifically an instrumental teaching method, the Alexander Technique is widely used by practising musicians to achieve a relaxed but positive posture and an equivalent mental outlook. Its physical application is directed towards maximizing efficiency of movement and reducing muscular tension. For the supple child the technique should be easy to master and provides a firm foundation for a correct and natural posture which, if encouraged to develop as unconscious habit, ought to stand the intending player in good stead in later years. Its effectiveness for older students, who may have been taught badly or who may have developed physical and mental tensions that were absent in earlier years, is also widely recognized.

### **The Suzuki method**

Two aspects of child development form the basis of the Suzuki method. First, virtually all children, regardless of their intelligence, speak their own language quite freely by the age of five, retaining a memory and instant recall of 4,000 words. Second, character is shaped, abilities acquired and voluntary desires developed through immediate and impulsive reaction to



certain, repeated stimuli. Shinichi Suzuki, in 1933, decided to apply this philosophy of education to his own violin teaching. His method is based on absorbing

through constant repetition. Its success depends on parental involvement, the parents playing a vital role in tuition, and sometimes even attending other children's lessons before their own child is born.

Suzuki believes all children to be capable of acquiring a degree of musical fluency, and his technique has been extended to instruments other than the violin. There are at the time of writing ten books available of Suzuki repertoire for violin, viola and cello, and Suzuki instruction has recently been extended with programmes for piano, flute and trombone. The Suzuki method begins with the children listening to recordings (usually in cassette format) and committing to memory what will shortly be played; the process is intended to motivate too. The technical instruction that follows is minutely defined and standardized. Instrument size is tailored to the size of the pupil; the smallest violins being no more than nine inches long, and discipline is encouraged from the very beginning—each lesson begins with a formal bow to the teacher. Posture is developed based on the principles of the Alexander Technique.

Suzuki-trained children, as young as 3 or 4, are often capable of remarkable technical feats, and can perform difficult music from memory with complete confidence. Undoubtedly the importance Suzuki attaches to teacher training and selection is a major contributory factor to the method's success. It is the only school of playing that runs comprehensive and demanding training courses for teachers: this sets an example from which every educationalist can learn. Many critics of the method, however, have pointed to an apparent lack of initiative shown by the pupils. Blame for this has

been attributed to the repetition of recordings at the beginning of training, for this process offers models for absolute imitation rather than encouraging anything approaching interpretative creativity. Another drawback to the system is that it does not universally incorporate reading techniques, so that a sixteen-year-old Suzuki pupil may well have no ability to translate written notation into sounds. Some Suzuki children experience tremendous difficulty in learning to read music, although they can often copy a teacher's demonstration, albeit fingered poorly. In addition, the involvement of parents can be outweighed at adolescence by the child's natural tendency to move away from the close family circle; in many cases music is also left behind. However, recently some Suzuki pupils have progressed to British specialist music schools. In spite of these criticisms, it is an undeniable fact that the Suzuki method has introduced millions of families to music at an amateur level, and has given countless children an opportunity to experience the magic of creating their own musical sounds.

As far as its application to the teaching of the double bass is concerned, however, there can be little doubt that the method is only of limited value. An attempt was made to introduce Suzuki-styled double bass teaching in the United States of America, but the first tape, intended to introduce Book 1, was of poor quality and the repertoire was an unsatisfactory adaptation from that for cello: the scheme was abandoned before any literature was published. Another, more recent initiative uses cellos tuned in fourths (an octave higher than the double bass) and short cello bows. In any case, it would seem counterproductive simply to teach



children to play melodies from memory on the double bass when for the vast majority of double bassists it is more important to be able to provide a bass line for which the skills of balancing with the upper parts, phrasing intuitively, and sensing the logic of harmonic movement are the most vital requirements. Add to this that the Suzuki method pre-supposes a relatively modest financial outlay on an instrument (say £30 on a small violin outfit) when a reasonable bass kit would cost at least £350, together with the additional problems that less wealthy parents might experience in transporting the double bass - the conclusion that pure Suzuki-style teaching of the instrument to very young children is impractical becomes unavoidable.

### **Rolland principles**

Paul Rolland's teaching programme, developed by him at the University of Indiana, USA, in the 1960s, is founded on observations obtained from studies of some of the most eminent teachers and players in Europe. At the heart of Rolland's principles is the theory that good technique is in the first place dependent on balance and posture. In order that the bow can be used freely and controlled with skill, it is essential for the arm holding it (and hence the entire body) to be relaxed. Similarly if the fingers of the left hand are to operate efficiently there should be no unnecessary muscular activity within the body: a tight back, for example, or incorrect stance, may lend difficulty to the way in which the instrument or bow is held and if such a basic function is not perfectly natural, the complex reflex reactions required for playing can never be properly developed.

There are some excellent films of Rolland in action, but although some contain references to the double bass, they are primarily directed towards violinists. What Rolland bass literature there is does not seem particularly inspiring, but it does at least allow bassists to play along with cellists and violinists in a class situation. But as far as the double bass is concerned, the Rolland method progresses too fast and leaves many problems unsolved. There is a need for much more material to develop the student's familiarity with the lower hand positions: tunes that are comparatively simple on the violin and cello can pose quite advanced problems for the double bass. In the United Kingdom, courses in Rolland's *method* are held from time to time under the auspices of the European String Teachers Association, some of whose British branch members worked with Rolland himself. In harness with other specialists, these teachers are thus able to offer expert guidance at such courses.

One example of how Rolland principles are applied in practice can be found at the Tower Hamlets Project. Here Sheila Nelson has developed a string teaching programme for all the children at schools in the borough who show relevant aptitude. Not only do such children receive instrumental tuition as part of the normal school timetable, but they are also encouraged to develop the skills of reading music and ensemble playing through the use of ingenious board games recently invented by Wendy Max and Steve Woods. The instruments on which the children learn are of reduced size and before attempting to play anything the pupil is first taught to develop a feel for the instrument.



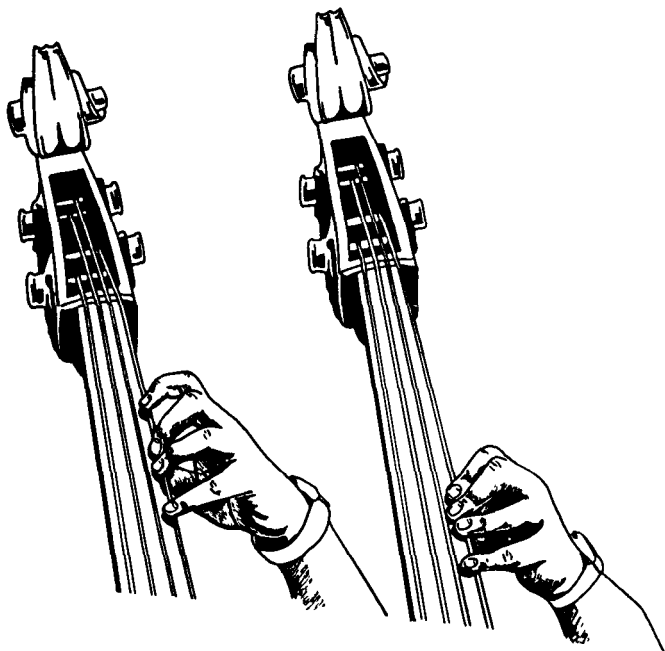
*Bingo, Space Invaders and Jumping Jim make the learning of notation lots of fun*



## *5 Advice about instruments, literature and music*

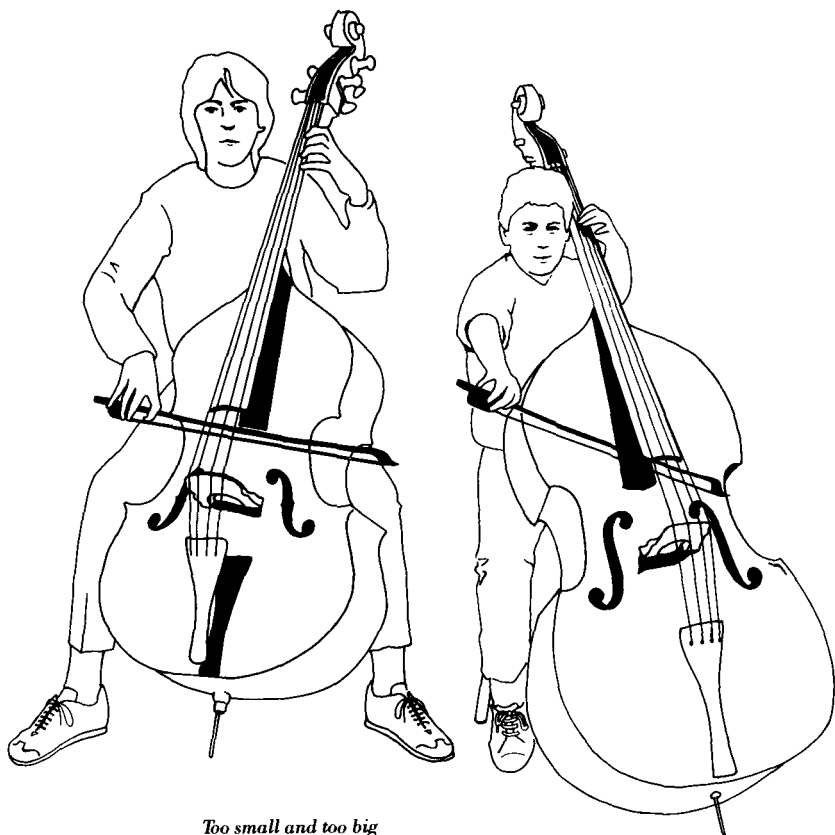
### **Instruments**

It is true to say, as was made clear in the introductory chapter, that of all instruments the double bass is the least standardized in terms of its shape and size. Nevertheless, there are certain criteria which must be satisfied when choosing an instrument for a student. These criteria are dealt with under the six sections which follow.



*Left. Good hand position*

*Right Collapsed fingers give rise to poor tone and bad intonation*



*Too small and too big*

**Size** Perhaps the most frequently encountered mistake when observing the teaching of the double bass is that the instruments used are simply too large for the players. This miscalculation when choosing a double bass can give rise to bad posture and inaccurate string-stopping from the very first stages of learning. The ideally proportioned instrument for a pupil will enable the interval of a tone (positions 1-4) to be covered comfortably by the span of the left hand. In

addition, the height of the instrument should be adjustable by means of the end-pin, which should be sharp, robust and secure.

**Strings** Despite the predilection of some players for five-string basses, it is wisest to begin learning on the four-string instrument. The strings should be made of metal, or spun nylon with metal covering and must be easily adjustable by metal cogs. Gut strings are now chiefly used only for period-style playing, for example, in a baroque orchestra. All-nylon strings should be avoided; these strings are only used professionally by some jazz players. The height of the strings should be adjusted at the bridge and at the nut so that they can be pushed firmly down to the fingerboard without too much strain on the left hand; they must be set high enough to avoid buzzing against the fingerboard; and should be sufficiently apart from one another and at adequate angles to each other on the bridge to allow them to be played cleanly one at a time, but not so far apart that string crossing becomes difficult.

**Bows** A bass bow, like all other bows, must balance correctly. A point about four inches from the frog is ideal, and if so balanced the weight of the stick is less important and can vary enormously. The hair of the bow should be of as fine a quality as possible. Nylon should not be used as its durability is only marginally greater than horse hair and the tone it produces is rarely adequate. Frogs should fit snugly and should have a lightly greased screw to facilitate adjustment of the tension of the hair.

The size and material of the bow stick is of

paramount importance. The best quality sticks are made individually from Purnambuco, although these are rare. Factory-made Purnambuco bows can be found and bought for around £150 upwards. A cheaper alternative is Brazil wood, a near relative of Purnambuco, and if the bow is well made the option is worth considering. However the quality of finishing is not as high, and manufacturers, who pay about the same for both woods, cannot often produce really good sticks from this material. Almost all alternatives to these two woods will warp or straighten, thus making the bow a hindrance to any student's progress.

Fibreglass bows can be bought for around £30, but in the long-term they are a poor investment. After about a year the head-joint is liable to become weak and will begin to swivel, or the bow, if it is dropped, may well break irreparably at the frog. During a recent one-day course, 10 out of 30 fibreglass bows became useless for these or other reasons. A Purnambuco bow, on the other hand, can last a lifetime.

**Rosin** All too often little attention is paid to the quality of rosin used. Many advocate a powder rosin which was designed for gut strings. Judicious choice of a good and sticky rosin can be an invaluable asset to playing. The choice in the end must be a matter of personal experimentation. Among the most widely available suitable brands are Petz, Pops and Nyman's.

**Stools** In choosing a stool for those players who prefer to sit, it is important not to opt for one that is too high. A stool should be low enough for both the player's feet to be placed flat on the floor. Many prefer to use a rung

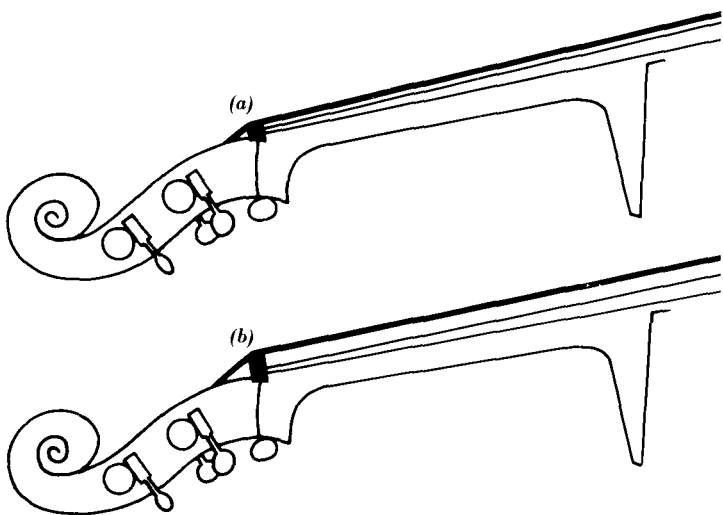


on the stool for raising the height of the left foot: some find this a more comfortable way of supporting the bass. Care should be taken when a rung is used, as the twisting caused to the lower vertebrae and the tension in the left leg can lead to permanent physical damage.

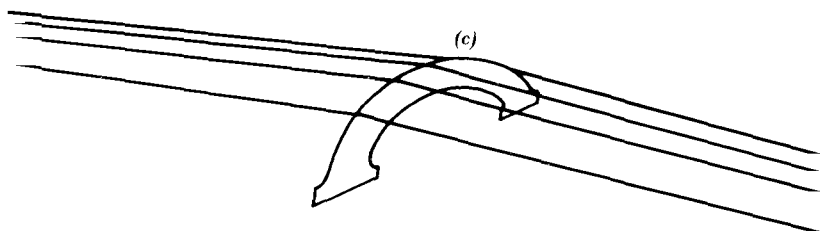
***Other accessories*** It almost goes without saying that a good, soft, padded case offers important protection for an instrument and can extend its life. Boxes for bows are equally important and should always be used if the bass and the bow are being transported separately. Because commercially made bow boxes can cost upwards of £30, players in straitened circumstances or in emergency situations can easily improvise with cardboard tubes (such as those used for packing posters) or snooker cue boxes for less than £10. Some experimentation with rock stoppers to help prevent the double bass from slipping on a polished floor or concert platform has met with moderate success. These are seldom strong enough to support the weight of such a large instrument. Further research will undoubtedly produce more successful gadgets.

The next two sections comment on purchasing instruments and, linked with this, the role of parents and schools.

***Buying a double bass*** As in most things, the higher the price paid for a bass the better its quality is likely to be. Many factory-made examples are widely available. At the bottom end of the market, Czech, Romanian and East German instruments come in both half- and three-quarter sizes (the latter used by most pro-



*A low nut (a) makes the strings easier to press down than a high one (b)*



*It is impossible to play on one string at a time when the arc of the bridge is too shallow (c)*

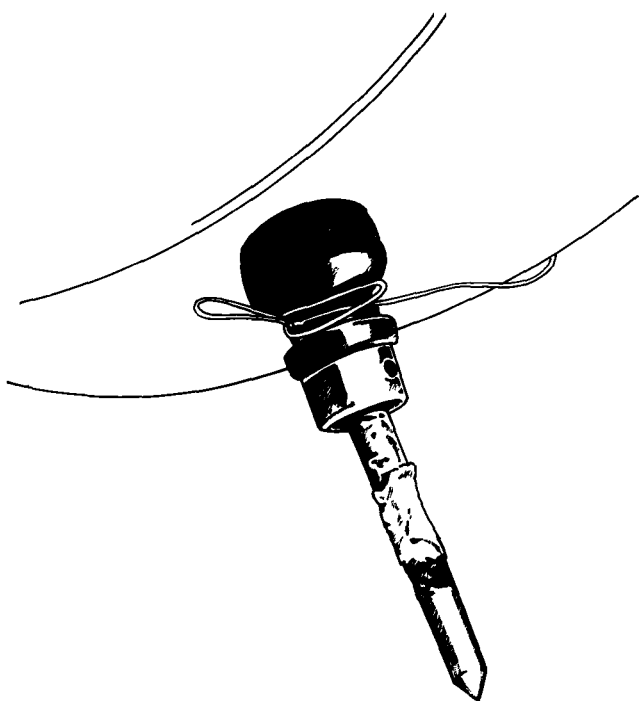
fessionals) at prices which begin around £320, often including bow and case. Some of these instruments are perfectly adequate for their purpose if they are properly adjusted. At the upper end of the market there are West German and Italian factory-made basses. They may cost anything from about £750 to £2,500, although for school purposes it should not be necessary to spend more than the lower figure.

Another option is to search for second-hand instruments from dealers and professionals. However, few violin dealers sell or understand double basses. Often it is the experienced teacher who is best able to keep an ear to the ground for a good second-hand deal.

Few new instruments are sold with good strings fitted; most of the cheaper East European examples are indeed incapable of producing anything like an acceptable tone with the strings provided in the kit, particularly in the case of half-size basses. It is generally accepted that the best strings are made by Pirastro, but they are very expensive.

***Instruments, parents and schools*** Good half-size basses are expensive and difficult to find and few parents are prepared to provide the necessary capital outlay, while the great majority of parents of aspiring instrumentalists do not, of course, have any option at all. The alternative is to hire an instrument. While there are hire schemes for most other instruments, however, few firms have basses available. Small-sized double bass bows are not commercially manufactured.

Predictably, the picture in schools is varied. There are those local education authorities who own and maintain over 100 basses which are either lent to pupils



*This 'temporary' end-pin repair prevented adjustment and effectively rendered the bass useless*

or kept at music centres or in the schools themselves. Even in these relatively few cases, much of the equipment is unplayable because of broken or missing end-pins, frayed strings (which are likely to damage small and tender hands), necks of instruments which are misaligned or broken, ridged fingerboards, warped or ill-fitting bridges, and bows warped sometimes through  $45^{\circ}$ . In one case a broken bow tip was found repaired with two inches of lead piping. Rarely are good bows found in schools, and few local education authorities or schools are able to afford regular maintenance of their music equipment. Another problem is that a school may possess only one or two double basses which have to be shared between several

children. Although individual lessons may not be too difficult to arrange, this situation makes group tuition impossible, and there are inevitably difficulties in sharing practice times between pupils, as well as the impossibility of each student being able to practise regularly at home or during school holidays.

### **Literature**

Candidates for Music O level are required to have passed Associated Board Grade 5 (or equivalent) on their instrument and to be acquainted with its history, but as far as the double bass is concerned, the amount of useful and relevant literature at present available is negligible. No book in print in the English language gives the type of information required by those sitting O or A level examinations, and the only readily accessible background information is in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* or in the journals of the International Society of Bassists. There are a few slightly off-beat American booklets, and from time to time articles appear in *The Strad* and other periodicals, but the average school library does not usually subscribe to such publications. On the other hand, most school children have ready access to county or local libraries whose larger branches may well include these publications among their stock.

### **Music**

When compared with the amount of study and repertoire material available for players of other stringed instruments, that for the double bass is far less. Yorke Edition (the publishing company begun by Rodney Slatford in 1969) has produced cheap and

reliable editions of both study and repertoire material. Otherwise, despite the availability of some quantity of double bass studies, their quality is often second-rate. *A-Tune-A-Day* is inadequate for serious study, while the Simandl, Lotter and Nanny methods were written almost a century ago and are on the whole quite dull, though the odd good study can be found in each of them. The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music has shown imagination in its selection of bass pieces over the years, even if its scale manual has been criticized for being both unsystematic and unnecessarily complex in its fingerings. The general lack of suitable pieces and exercises has been one motivating factor in starting the Yorke Studies series, the second volume of which is now published.

There are few publications widely available that are well suited to group tuition; at present most teachers have to write their own exercises and ensemble pieces.

## *6 Recent progress - a Project for change*

A charity has been established, The Yorke Trust, one of whose functions is to administer a scheme known as The Yorke Mini-Bass Project. The Project is designed to make good double bass teaching on small double basses widely available to children from the age of 7 or 8. A paper outlining the Project (see Appendix A) was published in October 1983 and distributed to some 2,000 players, teachers and heads of instrumental teaching, directors of music in schools and colleges, members of the Music Advisers National Association, European String Teachers Association and others.

The Mini-Bass Project is divided into two phases. **Phase One**, itself divided into two complementary parts, is now complete. The first part was concerned with research into double bass teaching methods. The second part consisting of Manchester Bass Week at the Royal Northern College of Music in April 1985, introduced the public and the profession to the research work already carried out, and demonstrated the possibilities of teaching the bass to the young. The Yorke Trust imported and set up a number of prototype instruments, commissioned the making of bows and stools, and made them available to a seminal group of teachers. **Phase Two** of the Mini-Bass Project will see the same group of teachers acting as ambassadors, taking the scheme to other countries, training more teachers and acting as advisers on the implementation of the teaching programme throughout Europe and further afield.

The remainder of the chapter will describe in more detail the research findings of Phase One and the plans for Phase Two.

### **Phase One**

Investigations started in Summer 1983 with a view to *creating a scheme to implement the changes implicit in the previous chapters of this report*. Much of the information contained in this report is the result of research carried out between September 1983 and April 1984.

The main research resource was a working party, comprising eight double bass teachers and a secretary who attended the Fifth European Suzuki conference at Lyon in France (see Appendix B), from 15-20 April, 1984. Some delegates were sponsored by their education authorities, others attended as individual private teachers. During this week spent meeting Dr Suzuki and talking to violin and cello teachers about the many challenging aspects of teaching the very young, as well as observing Suzuki-trained children in class and concert, the working party spent many hours in discussion.

The working party examined in broad terms the state of double bass teaching throughout the world, focusing particularly upon the needs of beginners and on work in Britain. Specific recommendations were made on equipment, techniques and literature, and the talks concluded with drawing up guidelines for the remainder of the Project's Phase One, and with some resolutions put forward for Phase Two. It was decided not to expand the size of the first group of teachers until after the Manchester Bass Week in April 1985,




since it would be impractical to initiate new teachers while the techniques were still being developed and consolidated.

***The instrument*** The working party preferred plywood-fronted, not solid-fronted, basses on account of their durability, and manufacturers were asked to produce tough end-pins, ebony fingerboards and sloping shoulders. It was thought sensible to supply equipment only in kit form, initially priced about £350; the bow would account for about £100 of this. The automatic inclusion of the bow in the kit was felt to be a significant advantage, eliminating any temptation to opt for a cheaper but less satisfactory alternative bought separately. The working party recommended certain heights and designs of stools and rock-stop devices, and small blocks of rosin.

A number of solid-fronted Romanian basses have been imported into this country as an interim measure while an East German manufacturer tools up to bring a laminated instrument into production in 1986. There may be the possibility of instigating an instrumental hire scheme in the future. The Yorke Trust now owns three endowed basses: The Britten-Pears Bass, the ESTA Bass and the Harlech Television Bass. Two more have been donated by The Granada Foundation.

***Teaching techniques*** As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the Suzuki technique, while being of some value, has its limitations when applied to the teaching of the double bass. The most fundamental objection to its direct application is that, as Suzuki's teaching methods involve primarily the learning of melodies, this is of

little value to the double bass player who is not in normal circumstances a soloist. Few Suzuki-trained children heard in concert exhibited an adequately intuitive sense of rhythm or phrasing, two qualities of crucial importance to bass players.

The working party noted that the quality of reproduction from small cassette recorders of double bass sounds is far from good, as was proved by playing the one tape produced by the American Suzuki bass experiment. Also, the Twinkle rhythm -  - which is at the core of all Suzuki teaching, is neither a fundamental component of the average double bass line (as it is in a violin melody), nor an easy rhythm to articulate in the early stages of playing the double bass. It was therefore agreed to circulate a trial tape illustrating a few idiomatic melodies to show what can be achieved, and to include on the tape some piano accompaniments, for which solo lines can then be provided by the pupil in the classroom and the home.

All members of the working party expressed a preference for teaching children to play in a sitting position, at least to begin with. Here the assistance of Alexander Technique might be very useful, as the cellists at the conference suggested. No objections should, however, be raised against those teachers who would prefer to teach children to play in a standing position. First lessons ought to be confined to short bow strokes near the balance of the point of the stick, using the upper two strings only. Changes of position would be introduced and developed at the equivalent stage when cellists begin learning their first extensions. More attention should be paid to the development of bow skills, and they should be formulated *before* the bow is

applied to the instrument. Initial instruction exercises for finger independence and control of both hands must play an important part. The working party agreed to examine thoroughly the films of Rolland at work to discover what might be learnt from his techniques and applied to teaching at this stage.

The working party felt that reading skills should be developed by using notation similar to that devised by Sheila Nelson in her Tetra Tune books and games. Singing should be included in this learning process wherever possible. (Caroline Emery, one of the Project's leading teachers, has since the first draft of this report, used Curwen hand signs to great effect. This system of physical movements and hand shapes enables a teacher to elicit an accurate vocal pitch response from pupils.)

Involvement of parents was discussed at some length. Although such involvement is vital to the success of the basic Suzuki method (as already outlined in chapter 4), in practice there are a myriad of difficulties in adopting the same familial approach in schools (an area which at present remains outside the domain of Suzuki). Not all parents have the time to attend lessons in school hours, many schools do not have the necessary facilities to accommodate parents at instrument lessons, and the ever-increasing problems of instrumental tuition within classroom hours dictated by the policies of some education authorities, all militate against parental involvement in school tuition programmes. It was therefore agreed that for the purposes of the intended teaching programme for the double bass, wherever possible parental involvement is to be recommended as beneficial, though it should not be seen as an essential component of the approach. The

following example illustrates how parents can become involved. The example is taken from pilot schemes which are being run in a private music school in Epsom. Here, parents have assisted in the design and manufacture of practice bows and foot blocks for pupils who are too small to reach the floor even when seated on a low stool; and have helped with transportation and fundraising. The parents have also attended some lessons and liaise closely with the teacher.

It cannot be over-stressed that the whole point of starting the double bass at an early age is to cultivate physical responses and musical sensitivities at a time when they are most easily assimilated: the later this is left the more difficult the learning process becomes.

***An instruction book*** All members of the working party submitted suggestions for inclusion in a projected preliminary instruction book for the double bass, and they felt that such a book ought to be restricted to a few simple reminders for parents and pupils. Lengthy instructions are open to misinterpretation and if an international market is envisaged (as is commercially essential) there would be added complications of language difficulties. In any case most teaching instructions are more effective when communicated by a teacher than through an essay, however well written. The instruction book has been collated, copied and distributed by a small sub-committee of working party members and used by all members of the working party so that it will have been assembled, tested and corrected, ready for publication by April 1985. Yorke Edition has assumed responsibility for publication and is also supplying tapes as required.

A series of video demonstration tapes should be planned to illustrate specific points in the teaching method. These tapes could be used both as publicity directed towards a non-specialist public and as a means to help convince education authorities and teachers of the merits of the scheme. Such films might show posture, bow games, early bow training, spiccato, left hand techniques, etc.

### **Phase Two**

It is hoped that the fruits of Manchester Bass Week, coincidentally held immediately after an International Suzuki gathering in Cork, will go a long way towards encouraging the implementation of the Project in other parts of the world. Looking to home, more British teachers are required. Training courses over successions of weekends or of concentrated week's duration are needed, and financial assistance is required if these sessions are to be organized professionally. Further afield, negotiations have been conducted with a French instrument manufacturer who has been awarded a French government grant to enable him to mass-produce high quality education instruments. These could form the basis of a French Kit with the ultimate objective of extending the teaching project to France. Financial assistance will be necessary if British teachers are to be enabled to teach their French counterparts at home or abroad. Scandinavian and Italian teachers have already shown an interest, and with sufficient funds to implement teacher training schemes, a nucleus of teachers in other countries could be formed, perhaps with the assistance of ESTA and the American String Teachers Association.

It is hoped that with the co-operation of the Welsh education authorities a second major initiative in the Yorke Mini-Bass Project can be incorporated as part of Bass 86, planned for July 1986 in Wales. As this event is to replace the International Competition and Workshop held previously on the Isle of Man, it is almost guaranteed international attention.

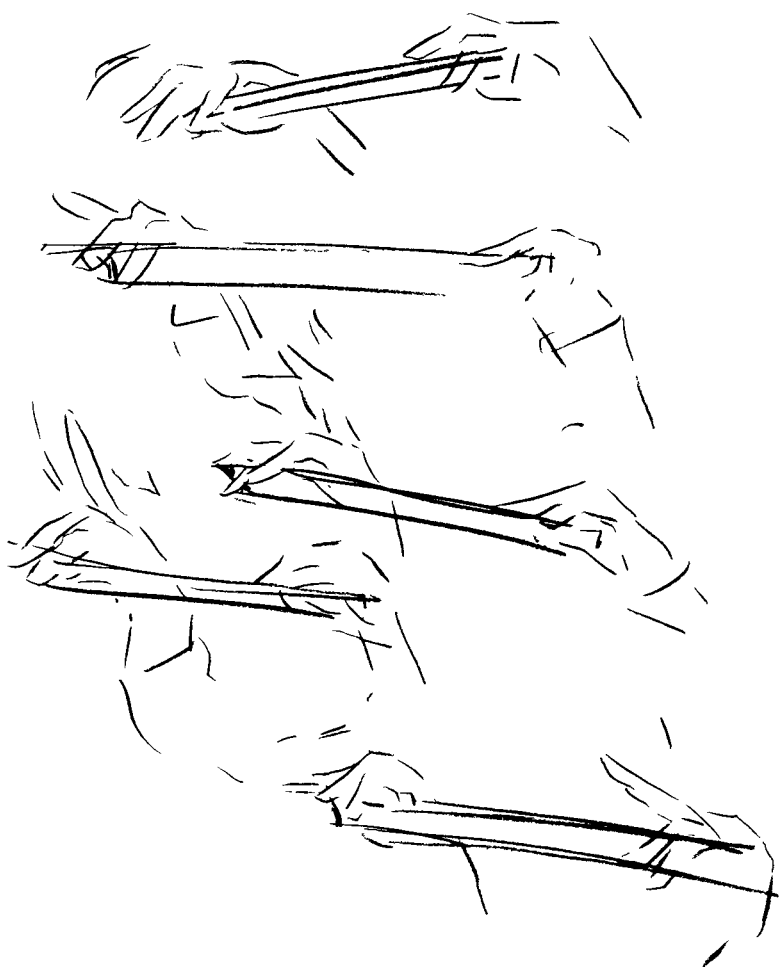
## *7 Realizing ideals*

It has been shown that, despite a number of pockets where good teaching occurs backed by adequate finances and a positive approach to the instrument, by and large the emergence of competent professional and amateur double bassists in all fields is more the result of personal determination and later corrective teaching than the product of well organized and co-ordinated teaching programmes. The double bass still suffers from a less than ideal status in the profession. Its sheer size presents problems; its capabilities have rarely been exploited exhaustively; and as good players and teachers are rare animals, few people take the instrument seriously.

Good bass players are needed at all levels of music-making, from the school or county youth orchestras, jazz groups and folk groups, to the international symphony and opera orchestras. To improve the situation, then, a major change in attitude is necessary, and such a change cannot be brought about merely by the production of such propaganda as this report. Investment, in cash terms, is needed: local authorities and others must be encouraged to channel more of their music funds towards implementing a seriously intended change in teaching policy. This policy change can be defined under four main headings: teachers, equipment, starting age and teaching material.

### **Teachers**

There is limited point in providing capital resources for the purchase of suitable equipment unless teachers have been properly trained in the techniques suitable



*Finger co-ordination games: children copy teacher*



for the requirements of young bass players. Many years have passed since the Department of Education and Science insisted that local authorities must employ *qualified* teachers for instrumental teaching. At present there is no proper provision within the state education system for training teachers in the techniques of teaching small children string instruments (see the ESTA report *The Training and Employment of String Teachers*). Double bass tuition is a highly specialized skill, as specialized as tuition for any other instrument, especially where the very young are concerned. It is essential to provide correctly trained teachers before any long-term schemes or plans can be implemented. This cannot be stressed too heavily.

### Equipment

The ability of teachers to teach properly, however well-trained they may be, is limited without adequate

*Bow games: Monkey-up-the-stick*





*Physical freedom is the key to bow control*

equipment. We have already seen that high quality instruments, properly fitted and chosen carefully, are of the greatest benefit. If children are to begin learning the double bass at an early age, they must have small instruments and bows to enable them to do so. At

present there are no good small-sized bows on the market and quarter-size basses are a rarity, largely because with present teaching policies they are commercially unviable. Manufacturers and education authorities need, therefore, to co-ordinate; the former must be persuaded to market the equipment through the demand of the latter for sufficient quantities. The possibilities of obtaining subsidies to instigate such a programme from, for example, the manufacturing industry itself or from publishers, public bodies or private foundations, must be investigated.

### **Starting age**

Local education authorities must be made aware that an early starting age is as important for players of the double bass as it is for other string players. Despite the fact that there are successful well-tried teaching programmes which cater for the very young, none of them caters for the double bassist. Bassists need to develop both technically and musically at the same rate in order to attain their optimum level of accomplishment. Our recommendation is that young children ought to begin learning the double bass at eight years, though perhaps once teaching programmes have been established it may be feasible to reduce the starting age to six. This change already implies, however, an increase in local authority expenditure for paying teachers and equipping schools and music centres.

### **Teaching material**

New material has to be assembled and thoroughly tested in the absence of published co-ordinated learning programmes. Cassette and video recordings of

any teaching programme would be a valuable supplement, though such a programme must be economically viable both for the consumer and the producer. Compatibility with repertoire used in other string programmes is desirable, but while providing for group experiences (for example in string orchestras), the programme should also cater for independent double bass study.

### **Conclusion**

The proposals and recommendations outlined above are, of course, only a beginning. To change attitudes on a wide scale is necessarily a slow exercise, and even slower where the teaching of musical instruments is concerned. Of the children now at the age of eight who are *beginning to learn the double bass in a logically disciplined and specialized way*, if just one is going to reach the pinnacle of the profession, it will be several years yet before this can be achieved. The proposed system, because it has been carefully prepared by those who are concerned at the present ramshackle standards in early teaching, *stands every chance of changing things for the better* if it can be implemented on a large scale. In fifteen years, who knows, the double bass will no longer be regarded as an oddity that only the eccentric or less capable take up, instead it will take its rightful place as the dignified musical instrument it is.

# *Appendix A*

## *The Yorke Mini-Bass Project*

**October 1983**

### **Aims**

To launch Rolland-style and/or Suzuki-style teaching on the double bass both nationally and internationally through the training of teachers, the provision of instruments and the publishing of learning material.

### **Introduction**

Whilst it is now widely acknowledged that small children require  $\frac{1}{4}$ -size and  $\frac{1}{2}$ -size violins, violas and cellos in order to learn the rudiments of good string playing from an early age, basic training on the double bass has been neglected.

A Suzuki scheme of sorts was started in USA but has, since the death of its pioneer, petered out; the double bass has never become fully integrated into Rolland programmes. As a result, children seldom begin to study the instrument until it is too late; often it is the less talented ones who graduate downwards as failures from higher-pitched instruments, or it is the large (and often slower) child who is allocated to the only double bass available.

With the exception of a few very talented and over-worked peripatetic bass teachers employed by enlightened education authorities and schools, early tuition on the bass is of a standard so pitifully elementary that has not been tolerated on other instruments for many years.

The dearth of good young players is evident from school and youth orchestras upwards: until teaching is improved and both instruments and repertoire are more widely available, the situation will not change.

Even in areas where specialist teachers are active, they are often required to 'make do' with equipment that is either unsuitable or in poor condition, or both. Manufacturers and importers have hitherto shown little interest, largely because of the commercial unattractiveness of small double basses as a profit-making line.

## Outline of Scheme

### Phase 1

A charitable company is being set up, one of whose functions will be to promote the Mini-Bass Project.

$\frac{1}{4}$ -size Mini-Basses have been commissioned and are being fitted with specially made high-quality strings for optimum results.  $\frac{1}{2}$ -size basses, already commercially available, will also be specially set up. Prototypes of small bows have been made, of suitable size and weight, which have already been tried successfully. A 'kit' consisting of instrument, bow, case, stool, rosin, strings and an instruction book will be marketed as part of the Project.

Selected bass teachers from all over the UK will attend a Suzuki teacher-training course in Lyon, France, in April 1984. During the week they will observe Suzuki training and will discuss with Mr Anders Grøn, the leading cello teacher from Denmark, a suitable approach to the double bass. Suzuki himself will be at Lyon.

Most teachers involved will already be familiar with Rolland methods, largely through the work of Euro-

pean String Teachers Association. All are experienced in starting young players.

It is hoped that by the end of the week, some positive steps will have been made towards formulating teaching techniques and methods appropriate to double bass tuition of children from the age of 8. The approach evolved is likely to embody aspects of many different methods and will no doubt assume an identity of its own. It will be necessary, as with the Suzuki method, to train other teachers in the new techniques if standards are to remain high and if the scheme is to have a lasting impact.

A pupil's instruction book will be compiled and published through Yorke Edition, the specialists in double bass music.

When the first Mini-Basses are ready (hopefully early in 1984) the teachers participating in the Project will begin experimental classes using the methods and techniques evolved at Lyon. Some will be working with  $\frac{1}{4}$ -size and others with  $\frac{1}{2}$ -size basses.

The first phase of the Project will culminate in a double bass course at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, to be held from Monday 15 April to Friday 19 April 1985, during which the new instruments and teaching methods will be launched. The Manchester Bass Week will essentially be a double bass show-case. It will comprise recitals, master-classes and workshop sessions for students, professionals and amateurs, and will also aim to inform cellists and other non-specialists who find themselves in the position of having to teach the instrument. Demonstrations, exhibitions and discussions about the Mini-Bass Project and about many aspects of bass tuition should attract

not only teachers, but also heads of instrumental teaching, county and regional music advisers and those ultimately responsible for implementing the Project throughout the country. Groups of children will work during the week under the guidance of the first Mini-Bass teachers. An 'open-day' for local schools is planned. The course will be semi-residential.

Artists so far engaged for Manchester Bass Week include *Berlin Philharmonic Duo* (cello-bass), *Lucas Drew* (Rolland specialist, Miami, USA), *Duncan McTier* (Winner of 1982 International Double Bass Competition), *Vivien Mackie* (Alexander Technique specialist), makers and restorers. Brochure available September 1984. Cost is likely to be £75 for participants, with accommodation about £100.

## Phase 2

With sufficient publicity and a large enough launch it is anticipated that world-wide interest will result in a change of attitude to the status of the double bass teacher.

It will be essential to ensure, as with the Suzuki method, that teachers of the right calibre are attracted to the Project and that the standards and ideals of the initial group of teachers are maintained, whether those teachers are bass players or not. Grant and sponsorship funding is being actively sought to set up teacher-training courses and to assist with the purchase of instruments throughout the country in order that objectives of the Project can be realised.

It is hoped, among other schemes, to implement a Mini-Bass hire scheme. There has already been some interest in the Project from other countries and with



demonstration classes it should be possible, perhaps with the assistance of ESTA and ASTA, to extend the Project throughout the world. It is hoped that with continued growth, the Project will be beneficial not only to the state of teaching, but also to the playing of the double bass in general.

## *Appendix B*

### *The Yorke Mini-Bass Project*

*May 1984*

#### **A Good Start**

The announcement of proposals to introduce teaching on  $\frac{1}{4}$ -size double basses for young children has met with enthusiastic response throughout the musical world, with considerable interest already coming from France, Germany and Scandinavia.

Ten teachers are now involved in the project, five different prototype Mini-Basses are in hand and plans are well advanced for launching the Project at Manchester Bass Week next spring.

European String Teachers Association have expressed their support and Yehudi Menuhin has written a personal letter of encouragement. The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation have commissioned a report, which, if published, will add considerable impetus to the Project.

A generous donation from The Britten-Pears Foundation has enabled the first Mini-Bass to be endowed. It will be known as The Britten-Pears Bass and is to be made available to children who would otherwise be unable to learn. It is hoped to build up a 'library' of instruments for loan.

A paper is to be presented to the International Society for Music Education at ISME XVI in Eugene, Oregon this July: the theme of the conference is 'Music for a Small Planet' and the Mini-Bass Project was considered an appropriate topic for a British contri-

bution. Next year it is anticipated that the Project will make a considerable mark on the achievements of music education in *European Music Year*.

### **Dr Suzuki Has a Bass Lesson**

Ten bass teachers and a secretary attended the fifth annual Suzuki world congress at Lyon, France, this Easter. Suzuki techniques were examined in detail and Dr Suzuki had a bass lesson! Many invaluable ideas were gleaned but some were thought inappropriate for the double bass and there are no immediate plans to begin Suzuki bass teaching *per se* (although it is possible that some Yorke Mini-Bass teachers might eventually become Suzuki teachers in their own right).

During the week, intensive discussions took place and the structure of a double bass teaching programme was agreed, together with recommendations for instrument specifications and repertoire.

### **June 1984 – April 1985**

During the next six months, the Lyon bass teachers will examine in detail instrumental programmes for young children (including the Tower Hamlets Project in London) and the Rolland films. Emphasis is being placed on developing a natural, relaxed playing posture, together with the encouragement of reading, aural and ensemble skills from the early stages; knowledge of Alexander technique is considered valuable.

The Lyon teachers, acting as a seminal group and testing techniques, equipment and repertoire, are forming pilot groups in various areas of the country. A retreat weekend in the autumn will consolidate ideas and focus on assembling the tested teaching material

for wider distribution. No more teachers are being invited to train until 1985.

### **Instruments**

A survey of equipment has shown that it will be costly to provide quality instruments and bows without subsidy. The base price of a good kit is currently around £500 wholesale, but negotiations are in hand with a manufacturer and it is hoped to bring this down to about £350, inclusive of bow, stool, rosin, case and repertoire book. There is little point in commissioning sub-standard equipment.

An excellent small British-made bow has been designed and five are now being tried.

### **The Yorke Trust**

A limited company with charitable status is in the final stages of being formed. One of its objects will be to attract sponsorship, grants and subsidies, for the provision of instruments, the training of teachers and for Manchester Bass Week itself; the Project cannot operate on limited private funding indefinitely. The involvement of so many children at Manchester will rely upon the cooperation of many of the Education Authorities whose teachers are involved with pilot groups. Forsyths of Manchester and The Goethe Institute have already promised assistance in one way or another but further sponsorship is necessary.

### **Manchester Bass Week**

#### **Monday 15 April – Friday 19 April 1985**

During this week, the seminal group of teachers will

coach their own and other children from all over the country. Observers will be invited and those wishing to train as Yorke Mini-Bass teachers will have the opportunity to see the techniques in operation.

The week itself is designed for players of all abilities and will comprise not only teaching demonstrations, but also recitals, master classes and workshop sessions of more general interest. Further information will become available in September.

**Yorke Mini-Bass Teachers Running Pilot Groups**

David Bagshaw (Oldham) c/o RNCM, Junior Department, 124 Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9RD

Hilary Braime (Leicestershire), 304 Thornborough Road, Colehill, Leicestershire

Hugh Bushell (Somerset), 2 Queen Square, North Curry, Taunton, Somerset TA3 6LT

Caroline Emery (London), 54 Conyngham Road, London W12

Penelope Kanner (London), 35 Airedale Avenue, London W4

Anthony Morgan (SE Derbyshire), Chevin House, 33 Avenue Road, Duffield, Derbyshire

Tony Osborne (Berkshire), 42 Parkland Avenue, Slough, Bucks. SL3 7LQ

Stephen Parrott (Northampton), 31 High Street, Roade, Northampton

Jonathan Thackeray (Manchester), 6 Victoria Grove, Manchester M14 6AP

31 Thornhill Square, London N1 1BQ 01-607 0849

*"The Bottom Line* is required reading for all who take an interest in the teaching of stringed instruments."  
*Classical Music Fortnightly*

"Apart from being informative, it is entertaining and very well written . . . it deserves to be regarded as a definitive statement about what can and should be done to improve standards and opportunities in the double bass realm."  
*UK Council for Music Education and Training Autumn Newsletter*

"A wide ground is covered, pithily and pointedly . . . well illustrated and excellently produced; one trusts educational authorities will act on its suggestions, although it should be emphasized that the appeal of this book is much wider than such a comment might infer."  
*Music and Musicians*

". . . with illustrations that are clear and often humorous . . . All in all this slim volume presents an exciting picture of what could be . . . could initiate a global revolution in the standard of playing of this neglected instrument."  
*The Strad*

"The double bass is at long last losing its music-hall image . . . this report will provide teachers, education authorities, parents and pupils, with a professional insight into the instrument, its teaching and its instrumental value."  
*The Educationalist*

