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What's the Big Deal About the Double Bass in String Class?

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Logan City School District • Logan, Utah

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In the ongoing attempt to improve string class teaching methods, new approaches for the bass seem to be drawing a lot of attention. There is a movement in the bass world to begin students with a pedagogical approach that is geared more to a solo performance style. Because this technique lends itself so well to starting players at a young age, this is now being tapped into by today's school string educators. Great progress is being made to apply cutting edge bass pedagogy in the heterogeneous string class.

The objective of this session is to provide a plan for teaching bass which can be implemented in the string class while encompassing the newest trend in bass pedagogy. Hopefully, those somewhat insecure will gain some confidence with their bass teaching skills. Suggestions will be given to correlate technical training within the string class situation. The ideas offered will broaden the knowledge of the teacher who can then transfer this knowledge to students. The desired result will give motivation (instead of frustration) to the young bass players so they continue in a pursuit of musical expertise with the same zeal as their fellow string players.

I. The Traditional Approach

Students begin in 1st or Half Position

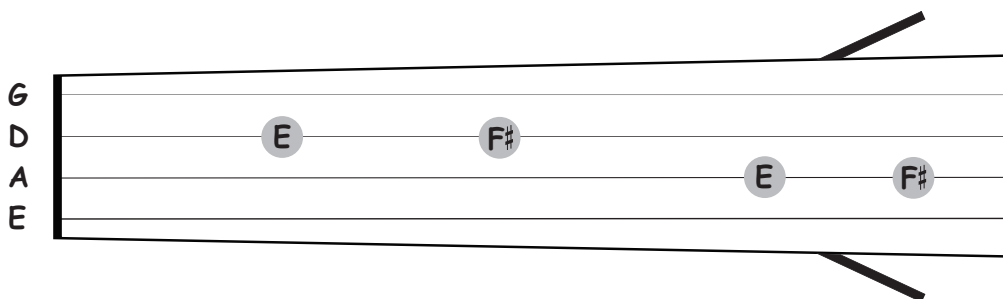
- A. Individual Bass Methods (Geared toward private instruction, i.e., Simandl: New Method for String Bass)
 - 1. Left Hand (shifting approach) - Students begin in half position: all 12 positions (ascending) progressively are integrated into Part 1. All major key signatures are represented.
 - 2. Right Hand - separate bowings of simple rhythms without articulation until Part 2; then etudes which include more complex rhythms, articulations, and bowings.
- B. Class Methods
 - 1. Left Hand (shifting approach) - Students begin in 1st position; shifts are required as pitches are added to the curriculum.
 - 2. Right Hand - broad approach to rhythm, articulations, and bowings at a gradual progression of difficulty.

II. The New Approach

Students begin in “Middle Position”

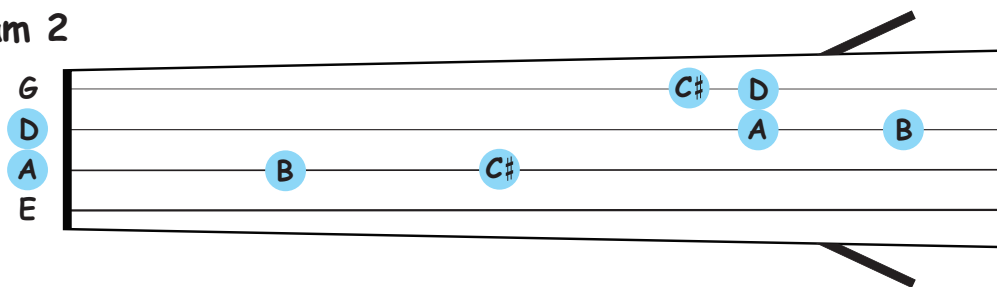
- A. What is it?
1. Left Hand (pivot approach*. See **Part III**) - hand stays in “Middle Position”
 - a. Middle position on the bass is the area at which the left hand (thumb) rests in the crook of the neck (traditionally, “4th position”)
 - b. Middle position can also be described where the 12va harmonic (440 A-tuning note) lies under the 1st finger on D; string class teachers will be familiar with the location of “high D”, 4th finger on the G string (which is notated the same as the cello 4th finger on the A string).
 2. Right Hand follows Traditional Approach, Class Method (**Part I, B**)
- B. Where did it originate?
1. François Rabbath, bass virtuoso, who astounded the string-playing world with his technical facility, produced a teaching method, which has been widely accepted in the bass performance field.
 2. The “Suzuki” philosophy of starting younger students on smaller instruments lent itself conveniently to the new approach.
 3. George Vance, a Rabbath student, produced an entire string class method and repertoire series supporting the approach where students begin in middle position.
- C. Why begin there?
1. Physical reasons are the dominant factor.
 - a. Size - The finger spacing is significantly smaller than the finger spacing of low position.
 - b. Strength - The thumb can help support the instrument.
 - c. Convenience - The position of the left hand, lower arm and elbow are in a more natural and level position to the body.
 2. Pitch parallels and expansion of range are crucial factors as well.
 - a. Fingerings transfer exactly from low position to middle position. See the relationship of E and F# in Diagram 1.
 - b. More pitches can be played by using a left hand pivot.

Diagram 1



- c. Middle position focuses on the upper tetrachord A, B, C#, D rather than the lower one starting on open A (Diagram 2). It is more satisfying for the bass part to follow the melodic line with other instruments in unison exercises.

Diagram 2



Open A tetrachord (Low Position)



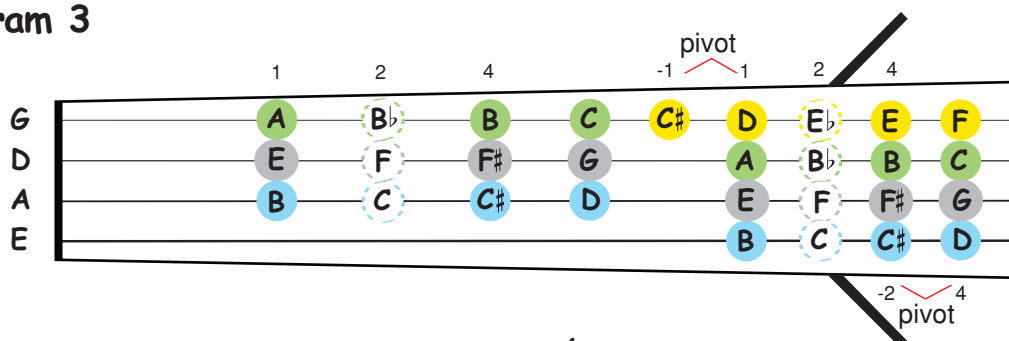
Middle Position tetrachord



D. How to Make It Work

1. Have instruments set up properly. (Dealers should be willing to get advice from a quality bass shop)
 - a. String height above fingerboard must meet industry specifications: ranging from 6mm (G) to 11mm (E).
 - b. String gauge should be in proportion to instrument size. Check brands for smaller gauge strings.
2. Fit students with correct instrument size.
 - a. The most important factor is the right arm length; the bow must lie comfortably between the end of fingerboard and bridge without the student reaching, with an arm practically straight but relaxed at the elbow. This element can be controlled with endpin length and also by the height of a stool for the sitting student.
 - b. The left hand placement should be no higher than eye level in low position. For smaller students, middle position is the only place to start.
3. Learn the bass fingering system and fingerboard.
 - a. As with other instruments Roman numerals are used to represent the strings: I(G), II(D), III(A), IV(E). However, some method books, and solo literature for young players may use Roman numerals to refer to a specific position (1st, 2nd, etc.). Be aware of this and help students to interpret any fingerings which are printed.
 - b. The fingerboard is not complex and as seen in the following diagram, the fingering system parallels easily from low to middle position.

Diagram 3



4. String crossing exercises are critical to success. Do not skip these exercises. They are crucial to all string players, especially the bassists. Make the most of them! One idea for continually reinforcing string crossing technique and “setting the bow” before moving it in any given situation is the “insert a rest” method. See how it works below:

Ex. 1 a. Open string cycle: 4 quarter notes

**C-C-C-C- (rest,2,3,4) G-G-G-G- (rest,2,3,4) D-D-D-D- (rest,2,3,4)
A-A-A-A- (rest,2,3,4) E-E-E-E- (rest,2,3,4) etc.**

b. Same but with 3 quarters on each to cross with an up bow

Ex. 2 Strings and Fingers: *Twinkle, Twinkle* (Theme or Variation A)

D-D- (rest-rest) A-A- (rest-rest) B-B- (rest -rest) A__(lift)

Ex. 3 See attached exercises for *String Skipping* with musical examples (page 9)

III. The Art of the Pivot

A. Definition: A rocking of the left hand forward or backward (one half step in either direction) while keeping the thumb in place.

B. Application: The pivot is an essential technique of executing notes without “shifting” the hand (specifically, the thumb)

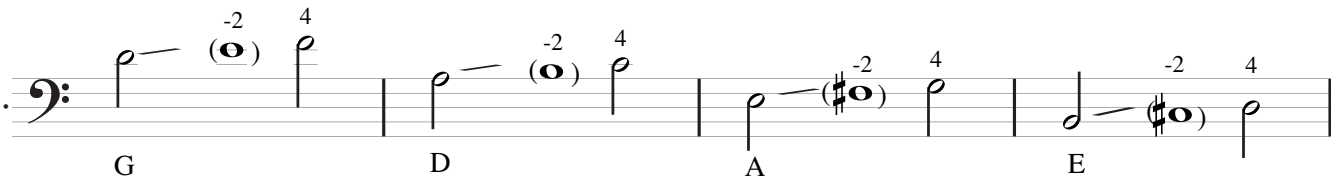
The pitches playable in middle position on each string are as follows:

1.

The pivot backward one half step (towards the nut) allows the following notes to become available:

2.

By pivoting the hand forward (toward the bridge) the following notes are available:

3. 

Faster ascending motion is achieved by pivoting to the 2nd finger as shown.

IV. Working with the Pivot in String Class

A. The backward pivot with first finger

1. This pivot on the G string should be introduced when other instruments study the A string notes. (See musical example 2.)
2. Combined with Middle Position fingerings on the D and A strings, any D scale exercises and related pieces can be played with the same melodic contour as other instruments.

B. The forward pivot with 2 and 4

1. This same pivot on the D string fits into the study of the G string notes for the other instruments. The cello/bass fingering will be similar (cello on G: 0,1,3,4 while bass is Open G, then 1,-2,4 on D). (See musical example 3.)
2. This pivot on the A string eliminates the need for crossing to the open G string. (See musical example 4.)
3. Executing the pivot while crossing to a lower string could require some focused training. It could be introduced with a similar challenge for the other instruments in class in a D Major Scale exercise: violin/viola – use 4th finger (instead of open A) when descending; cello – incorporate shifting. (See musical example 5.)

C. All pivots combined.

1. Musical example 6 provides a Middle Position fingering for a commonly used tune in string methods. Musical example 7 shows the perfect example of how well Middle Position fingering works for D scale melodic material.
2. Musical example 8 employs the “pivot” fingering in *Twinkle, Twinkle*. Compare the logic and convenience.

V. Conclusion

Teaching bass within the string class setting presents challenges. The good news is that subject has been thoroughly researched by leading string educators. The result is a systematic teaching approach that is ready and waiting to be used for all of us. It only takes a conscientious effort to bring our level of teaching the bass up to the standards which we are trying to bring our performing groups. Take advantage of the materials that are available to you and get a jumpstart with your bass students. The rewards will be exponentially worth the efforts.

Musical Examples:

1. Twinkle

0 (1) (4) 0 (4) (1) 0
D G A D

(1) 0 (4) (1) (1) (1) 0 (4) (1)
D G A D G A

0 (1) (4) 0 (4) (1) 0
D G A D

2. Boil 'em Cabbage - Pivot 1

(-1) (-1) (-1) (4)
G D

(-1) (-1) (-1) (4) (1)
G D

3. Jolly Fellows - Pivot 2-4 on D

(-4) (2) 0 (-4) (2) 0 (-1) (-2) (4)
D G D G D

4. Rigadoon - Pivot 2-4 on A

(-4) (2) (-1) 0 (1) (4)
A D A D

(-4) (2) (-1) (1) (4)
A D A

5. D Scale (see IV in outline)

Violin

Viola

Cello

Bass

6. Ode to Joy - Pivot across string

7. French Folk Song

8. Twinkle, Twinkle with pivots (playable on 2 adjacent strings)

String Skipping Drill

(piano)

A musical score for a string skipping drill in 4/4 time, marked piano. It consists of four staves. The first staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The second and third staves are bass clefs with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The fourth staff is a bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Each staff begins with a measure containing a '4' above the staff, indicating a four-measure rest. The subsequent measures contain rhythmic patterns of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some measures featuring slurs and accents.

Add some fun during the learning process by incorporating these rhythmic variations. Have different sections use one pattern while another keeps the beat. This string skipping drill can work as a precision drill as well.

A.

A rhythmic variation labeled 'A.' consisting of a sequence of four eighth notes.

B.

A rhythmic variation labeled 'B.' consisting of a sequence of four groups of sixteenth notes, each group containing four notes.

String Skipping Drill - Accompaniment

A musical score for an accompaniment piece in 4/4 time, marked piano. It consists of three systems of two staves each. The first system has a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The second and third systems have a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The score features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth notes, quarter notes, and chords, with some measures containing slurs and accents.