

Double Bass 101:

Foundations for Building Strong Players

The Midwest Clinic
Chicago, Illinois

James Mick, Ph.D.

Ithaca College

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Session Outline

1. History, Evolution, & Stereotypes
2. Double Bass-ics
3. Beginner & Intermediate Expectations
4. Miscellaneous





HISTORY, EVOLUTION, & STEREOTYPES

THE BASSIST

by Dr. Basso Profuncto

EXCEPTIONAL EYESIGHT
(for locating cute wind players)

SMALL LUNG CAPACITY
(string players don't need to breathe)

THICKER BONE MATTER HERE
(bassists tend to bump into immovable objects at this point)



SIDE
(bassists rarely take sides)

ENLARGED CRANIAL CAVITY
(reason unknown)

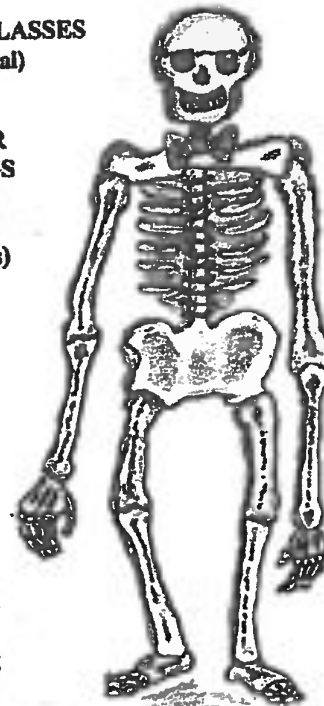
NOTE ABSENCE OF TAIL
(evolved away months ago)

LEFT LEG LONGER THAN THE RIGHT
(helps support the bass while standing and reduces fatigue when standing at airport snack bars for long periods of time)

EXTREMELY THICK SKULL

SUNGLASSES
(optional)

TINY EAR OPENINGS
(for tuning out pesky conductors)



FRONT
(opposite of back)

INTELLIGENT LOOK
(honestly!!!)

ELONGATED ARMS
(for playing in upper positions and picking up peanies without having to bend over)

EXTRA FINGER BETWEEN 1ST AND 2ND FINGER
(aids in correct hand position & counting to twelve)

Why are Double Basses “Different”?

“As a member of the violin family, the double bass shares fully in its history, development and technique. Its uniqueness, however, stems from its evolving musical function in the orchestra which has brought about a number of significant changes. Each successive stage in the history of the double bass has required the instrument to adapt to new musical and technical demands; playing techniques and even quality of sound have varied accordingly.”

- Brun, P. (1989). *A history of the double bass* (Trans. by Lynn Moreel & Paul Brun). Chemin de la Flanerie, France: Author.

Historical Mentions

Leopold Mozart: “The Great-Bass (il Contra Basso)...is also made in various sizes.... Usually it has four strings (at times only three), but the larger ones may have five.”

Hector Berlioz and **Richard Strauss** preferred their double bass sections to consist of instruments containing varying numbers of strings because of the mixed timbre they provided.

- Mozart, L. (1948). *A treatise on the fundamental principles of violin playing*. (E. Knocker, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1756 & 1787).
- Brun, P. (1989). *A history of the double bass* (Trans. by Lynn Moreel & Paul Brun). Chemin de la Flanerie, France: Author.

Differences Today

Today, relatively standardized tunings and number of strings; however, instrument sizes can still vary greatly:

- **Larger** – typically contain a deeper tone generally preferred by orchestral players
- **Smaller** – typically easier to maneuver in higher positions and are generally preferred by soloists



Pedagogical Lagging

Double bass performance standards have traditionally lagged behind the other string instruments: “The double bass long remained the *‘lame duck’* of the music schools” (Brun, 1989, p. 42).

1. Lack of quality **student-sized instruments**
 - Delays age of beginning instruction
2. Lack of quality **literature** and method books
3. Overall program number **ratio** and subsequent teacher-time investment

Recent Developments

Over the past 40 years, more student-sized instruments have become readily available, more quality literature has been written, and higher performance standards have become the norm.

François Rabbath: “I am proud because the bass has become respectable. We are not just bass players. We are like violins.”

- Fanelli, M. (2009). A life of self discovery and passion for the double bass and teaching: Part II. *American String Teacher*, 59(1), 30-33.

Who picks & Doesn't Pick the Double Bass?

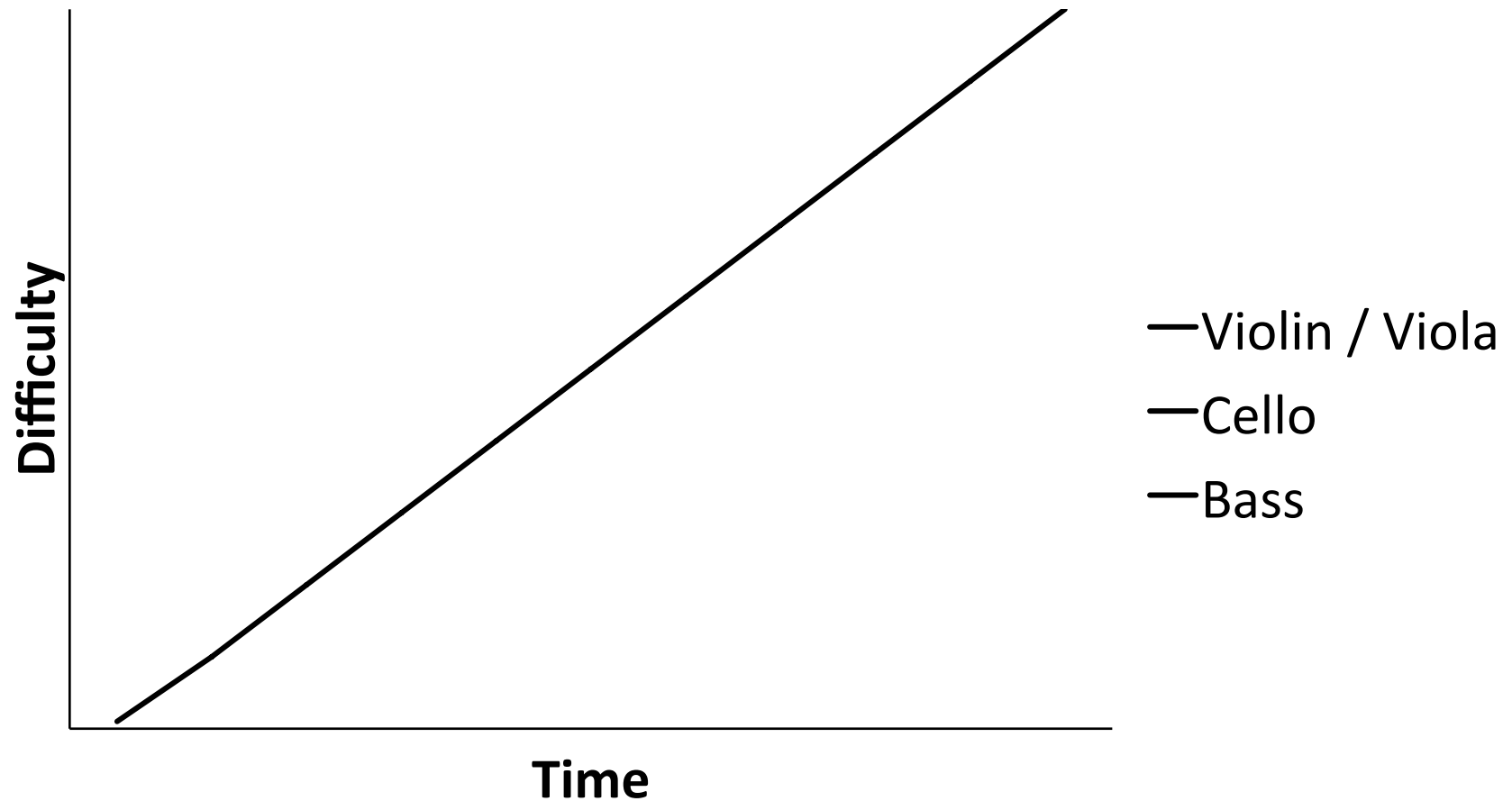


- Use of school instrument
- Don't have to transport to and from school daily
- Get to play other genres
- Looks cool!

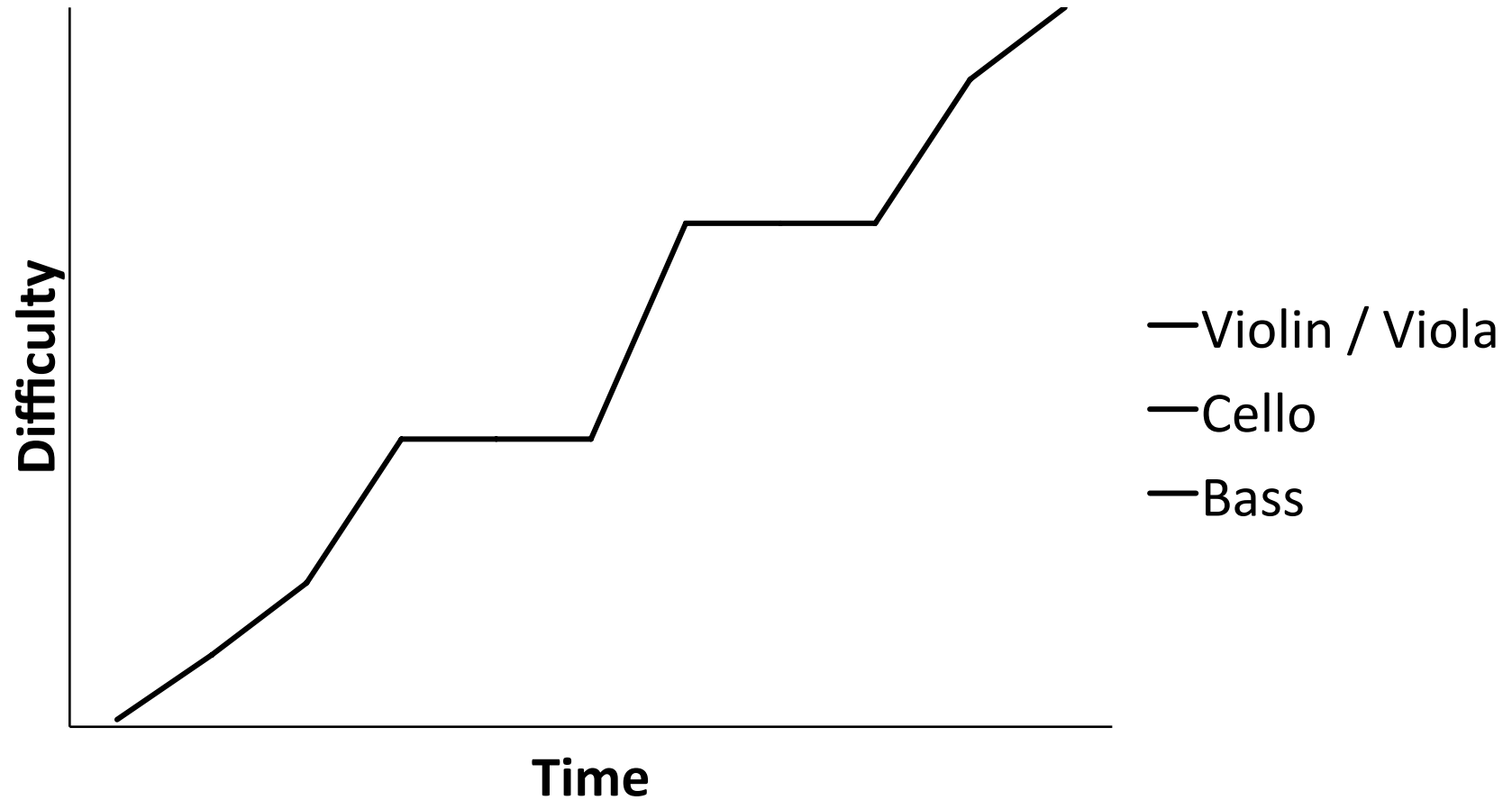


- Too expensive to rent
- No place to store at home
- Transportation
- Don't get the "fun" line to play (=melody)

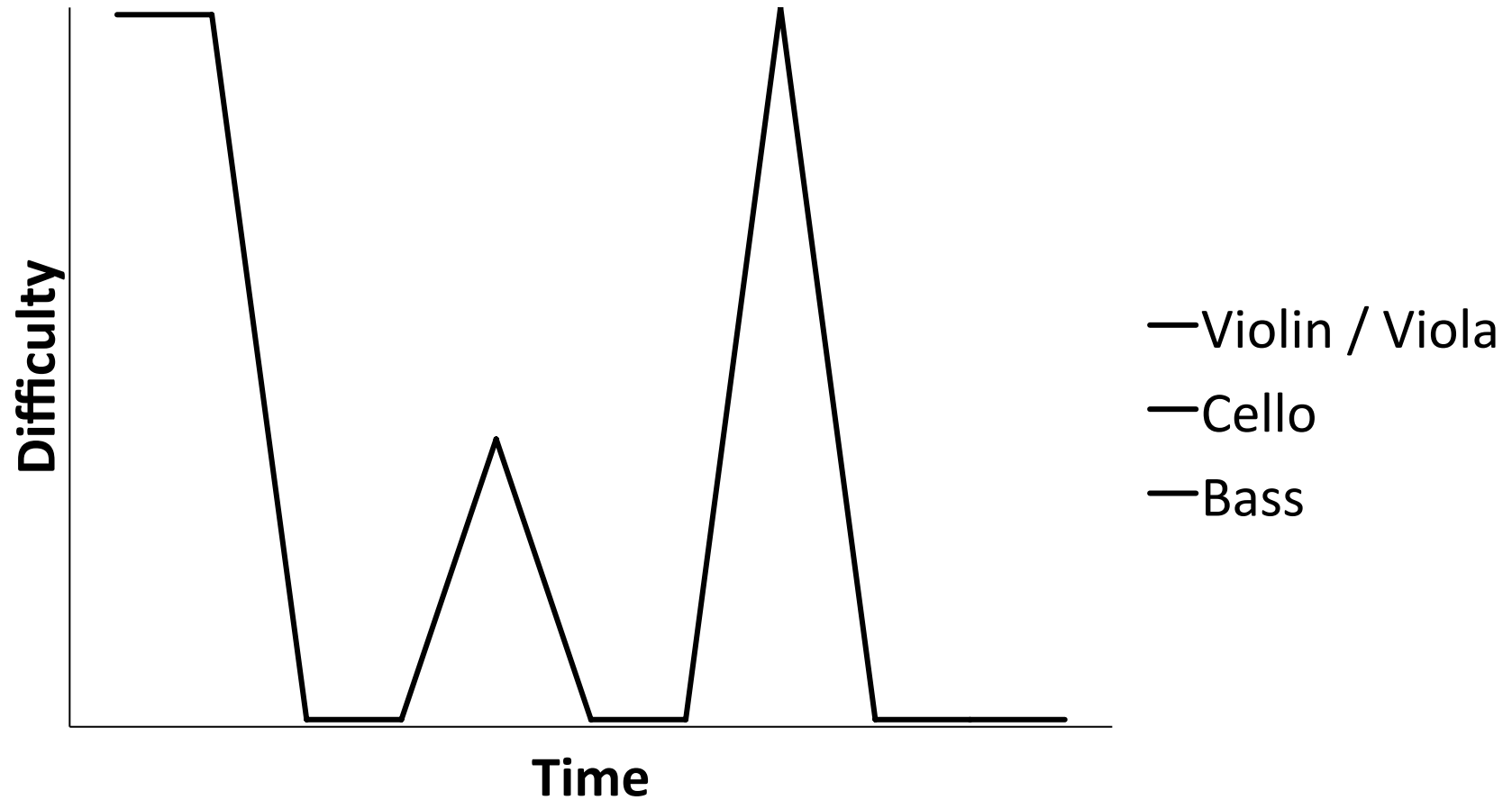
Traditional Method Book Concepts



Traditional Learning Curves



Traditional Learning Curves





DOUBLE BASS-ICS

Double Bass-ics

- Instrument Setup
- Teaching for Technique
- Sizing
- Posture
- Left Hand
- Right Hand
- Traditional/Simandl vs. Rabbath/Vance



Setup

“If the teacher cannot make an acceptable sound on a student’s instrument, what reasonable person would expect the beginning student to have any success with it?”

-George Vance



Poor instrument setup is a **MAJOR CHALLENGE** to the beginning bassist! Playing the bass should not be a wrestling match for the student!

String Action – lowest possible action in all positions.

- Bridge should have same contour as the fingerboard
- At the nut, business card height
- No more than 25-26mm spacing between center of strings

End of Fingerboard String Height

- G = 6mm
- D = 7mm
- A = 8mm
- E = 10mm
- You should not be able to slide a finger underneath the string

Setup cont...

“The trouble with bass strings is that they don’t break when they are worn out.”

-George Vance

Strings “should be” replaced once per year for a student practicing 1 hour/day. So, maybe don’t wait longer than 3-4 years (?).

- D’Addario **Helicore** Light Gauge (= \$120)
- Savarez **Corelli** 370m Tungsten (= \$120)
- Thomastik **Bel Canto** (= \$270)
- Pirastro **Flexocore** Original (= \$290)

Leaning Bridge of Pisa?

Periodically fill the bridge string notches with pencil graphite to help prevent bridge warp

More Setup...

Stools

- www.ki.com 800 Series Industrial
- Remind students to avoid slouching
- Adjustable stools allow for student growth over time

Bows

- French vs. German
- Full amount of hair
- Rosin = Pops, Kolstein *All-Weather*, Carlsson

Provide local instrument dealer/renter a “must” list of requirements for all instrument rented to your students

- Method book, rosin, strings, string height, bow type, etc.

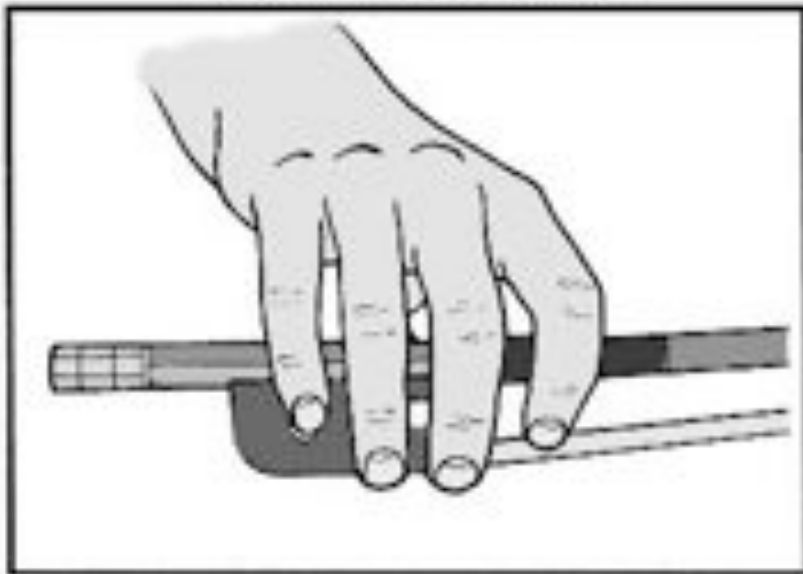
Mid- and End-of-Year Instrument

Maintenance Check-up

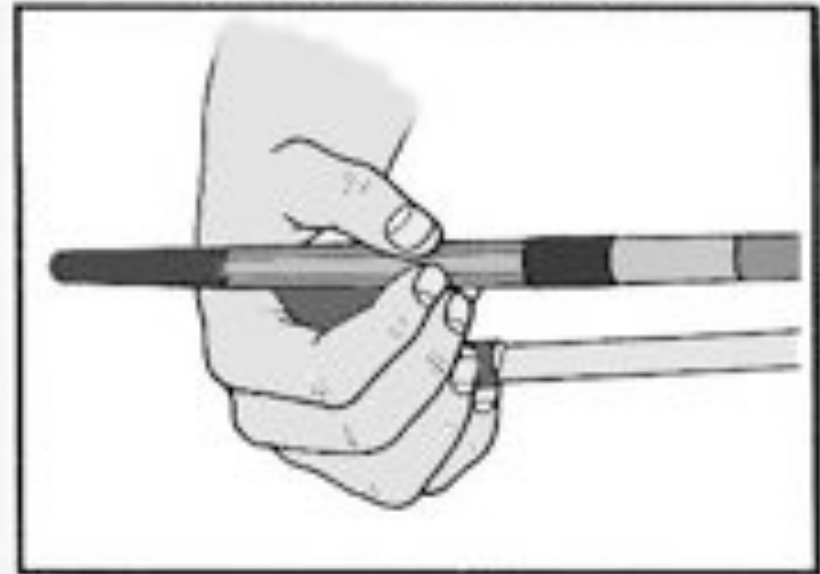
- Must Bring “Home” Instrument



Example of French Grip



Example of German Grip



**FRANKFORD ORCHESTRA
SUPPLY LIST**

Name: _____
Instrument: _____
Size: _____

~ IMPORTANT~

Instrument and supplies are reserved at the music store and will remain there until the store delivers the items to school. Your child will receive the items on the first day of class. Please do not take the items home.

I. Instrument

Your instrument rental outfit should include the following:

- A good WOOD bow with horsehair and ebony frog (bass = French bow)
- "Dominant" strings (bass = Helicore strings)
- Four fine tuners! (One for each string on violin, viola and cello)
- Rosin
- Case
- Shoulder Rest for Violin and Viola (KUN brand preferred) →
- Rockstop for cello and bass
- Adjustable height stools for bass (walmart, target, etc.)



II. Folding Music Stand

Needed for home practice to help with proper posture

**III. Method Book - Essential Elements 2000 -
Book 1 - Hal Leonard Publishing Co. →**



IV. Black 3-ring binder (1/2 - 1") with 5 dividers

To organize music and orchestra papers

V. Metronome/Tuner

Students are given specific tempos to practice their music so that the orchestra can stay together during class and concerts. The tuner will come in handy when your student begins learning how to tune the instrument.

VI. Essential Elements Play Along Discs 2 and 3 (recommended)

Disc 1 is included with purchase of the book.

Name: _____ Period: _____

Instrument: _____

Size: _____

Size Change Recommended:

Mid-Year Instrument Check-Up

Your son or daughter's instrument has been inspected for wear and tear. The following are recommendations for repair or maintenance. Please try to have the instrument in "tip-top" shape for the beginning of 2nd semester. Most rental policies cover common maintenance procedures.

Bow:

_____ Repair

_____ Other Repair:

Strings: replace the following (most rental plans cover this)

E A D G C

General Brand Recommendations

Violin, Viola, Cello = Dominant

Double Bass = Helicore

Other Violin Recommended Brands

E: Gold Brkat, Hill, Westminster, Chromcor
A, D, G: D'Addario Helicore, Chromcor

Other Cello Recommended Brands

A: Jargur, Larson
D, G, C: D'Addario Helicore

Other Viola Recommended Brands

A, D, G, C: D'Addario Helicore

Other Double Bass Recommended Brands

G, D, A, E: Bel Canto

Body of the Instrument:

_____ General cleaning needed

_____ Fingerboard is loose

_____ Pegs need to be adjusted:

_____ Fine tuners are required on all strings for violins, violas, and cellos. Please replace or add fine tuners for the following strings (E A D G C)

_____ Seams may be open (instrument buzzes):

_____ Cracks/scratches:

Supplies: _____ Shoulder Rest (Kun) _____ Cleaning Rag _____ Metronome/Tuner combo

_____ Rock Stop _____ Rosin _____ Orchestra Book (Essential Elements 1 2 3 4)

How do you teach tone, Intonation, rhythm, etc?

1. Technique
2. Technique
3. Technique

How?

- Echoing Technique
- Modeling with Instrument
- Modeling with instrument during Student Performance
- Co-Verbal
- Pedagogical Touch
 - Rebecca MacLeod, UNCG

Posture

4 Checks

1. Forehead Height
2. Neck-to-Neck (bass lean)
3. Pizza Pie Slice
4. Balance



Left Hand

4 Checks

1. Thumb in middle of neck
2. Bass “K” (or 3-Toed Sloth)
3. Rounded Fingers (all knuckles engaged)
4. Straight wrist X2 (elbow floating off instrument)



Right Hand

4 Checks

1. Thumb Bump
2. Middle Two Fingers (split ferrule, almost 2 knuckles deep)
3. Squared Hand (slight lean into 1)
4. Relaxed, flat-ish wrist



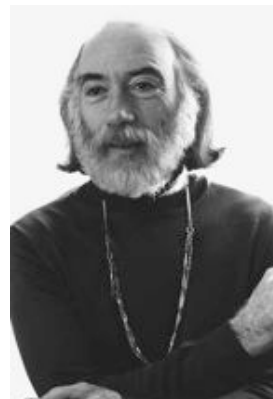
Simandl & Rabbath

Simandl / Traditional Method outlined in the late 1800s / early 1900s

- System built on vertical advancement on the fingerboard moving from lower registers to higher registers

Rabbath / Vance Method outlined in the 1980s

- System built on “natural” acquisition of skill & advancement



Francios Rabbath

1. 6 positions for entire fingerboard (= different numbering system)
2. Emphasis on pivoting versus shifting
3. Le Son Premier (= “the first sound”) – building off of the natural resonance of the bass
4. Emphasis of weight in both hands
5. Start students in higher positions
6. New repertoire built on familiar melodies/songs
7. Use of a Bent Endpin



A color copy of this chart can be downloaded from:
http://faculty.ithaca.edu/nwalker/docs/NYSSMA/Bass_Positions.jpg

Positioning Systems

Two Position Systems at a Glance © Nicholas Walker 2008

Generic Names (G string pitches indicated just below respective line) Open G string

Generic Names	Simandl	Rabbath	String Pitches	Other
First Position	Half Pos.	1st Pos.	Open G	
			G#/Ab	
			A	
			A#/Bb	
			B	
			C	
			C#/Db	
			D	
			D#/Eb	
			E	
			F	
			F#/Gb	
			G 8va	G harmonic (15ma)
			G#/Ab	
			A	
			A#/Bb	
			B	
			C	
			C#/Db	
			D	D harmonic (8va above fingered pitch)
			D#/Eb	
			E	
			F	
			F#/Gb	
			G 8va	G harmonic (8va above open string)
			G#/Ab	
			A	
			A#/Bb	
			B	
			C	
			C#/Db	
			D	D harmonic
			D#/Eb	
			E	
			F	
			F#/Gb	
			G 15va	G harmonic (8va above open string)
			G#/Ab	
			A	
			A#/Bb	
			B	B harmonic
			C	
			C#/Db	
			D	D harmonic

Simandl
 (Zimmermann/Drew International ed., Applebaum, Essential Elements, String Explorer)

Rabbath
 (Vance/Green/Ellison/Robinson/Proto)

"Thumb Pos."

Block Position

Class Method Books

- New Directions for Strings (= “D Position” book)
- Artistry in Strings (= “middle position”)
- Orchestra Expressions



Many method books today include materials built on Rabbath principals

Block Position Solo Method Books

Progressive Repertoire for the
Double Bass, books 1-3 (George
Vance)



The Popular Bass Method, books
1-3 (Barry Green & Jeff
Neighbor)



New Technique for Double Bass,
vol. 1-4 (Francois Rabbath)



Bent Endpins



Bent Endpins





BEGINNER & INTERMEDIATE EXPECTATIONS

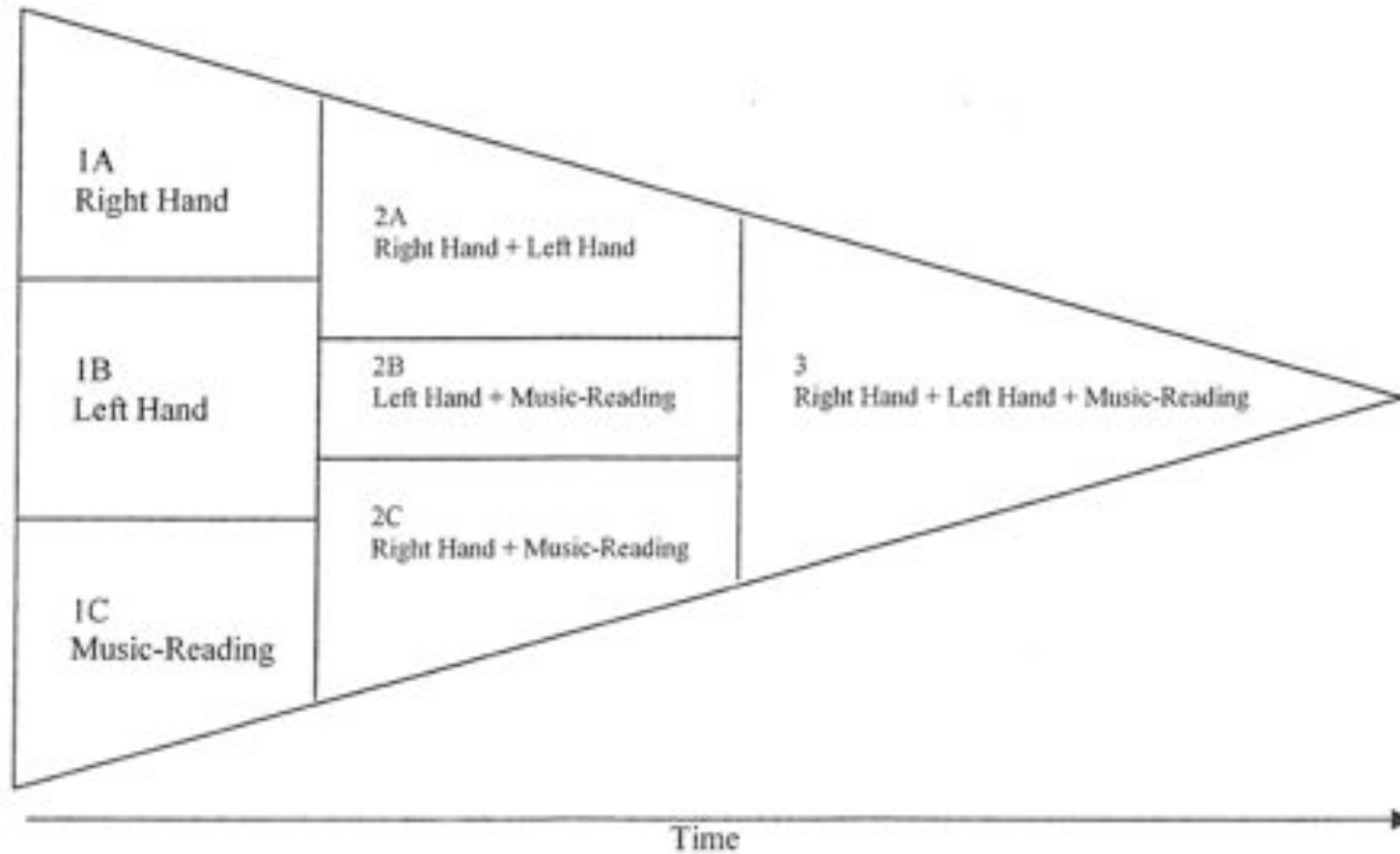
Beginner & Intermediate Expectations

- No one should be able to tell the conductor's primary instrument by looking at the orchestra
- Allen Model
- Beginner (Years 1-2, Grades 5-6) Expectations & Common Issues
- Intermediate (Years 3-4, Grades 7-8) Expectations & Common Issues
- Sending them to HS = should be able to



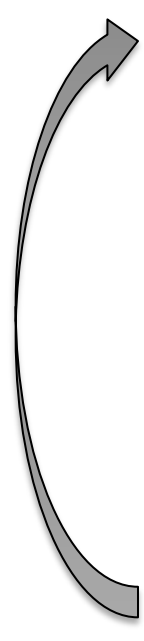
Michael Allen's full article explaining this model can be found in "Teaching Music through Performance in Orchestra, Vol. 2" (GIA Publications).

Allen Model



Beginning String Routine (Michael Allen)

(Micro-Steps) ←  (Macro-Steps)

- 
1. *Say, Sing, Count* (MR)
 2. *Pizzicato* (MR + LH)
 3. *Shadow Bow* (MR + RH)
 4. *Ghost* (MR + LH + RH)
 5. *Perform* (MR + LH + RH)
 6. *Vamp/Loop* (Monitor & Adjust)

Initial Classes/Lessons

- Sing!
- Technique rules!
 - Dichotomize “correct” and “incorrect” to the extreme
- Focus on general posture and LH
- Disguised Repetition
- D Major warm-up
- Learn note names and placements on the fingerboard (=never moves)
- Play songs by ear
 - Twinkle, Three Blind Mice, etc.
- Spell words
 - Introduce various notes in various places on the instrument
 - Encourage alternate note octaves/locations and fingerings
- Make-up new fingerings to method book exercises
 - Experiential and differential learning
- Build the idea that we play all over the instrument!
- Put that violin down! Model on a bass.

More Initial Classes/Lessons

Right Hand Activities (= Weight, Placement, Speed)

- **Pre-bowing skills** – pencil, motion games, etc.
- Start with **short notes** and add length
- **Successful First Day** – (1) Down bow, (2) BP., (3) 2" vs 6", (4) lane 4, (5) tilt, (6) perpendicular
- **Learn Rote Rhythms** – PBPB, PBSW, Coconut, Pineapple, Fruit, DctCct, DtCh (= 2" vs 6", placement, speed, string crossings)
- **String Crossings** – using rote rhythms
- **MR rhythms on open strings (MR + RH)** – students pick strings to play rhythms on (again, move towards string crossings)

Common Beginner Issues

- **Poor instrument** = high action, horrid tone, thick neck, badly cut bridge
- **Posture issues** = endpin height, bass angle,
- Collapsed RH
- Raised RH wrist
- RH pain
- **Locked RH fingers and wrist**
 - Wiggle string before pulling
 - “gummy” arm
- Flat LH fingers
- Sharp 1st finger
- **Bad shifts** (= intonation, thumb, squeezing)



Beginner Expectations (Years 1-2)

- **1-octave scales** with superb LH shape (= delay $\frac{1}{2}$ position or flat keys)
 - Major = D, C, G / A, Bb, F
 - Natural Minor = d, a, e, b, g, c
- Perform on A, D, and G strings with **clear tone**
 - $\frac{1}{8}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, half, whole notes
 - Slurred string crossings
 - Harmonics
- Recognize and shift fluidly between $\frac{1}{2}$, **I, II, III positions**
- Demonstrate **resonant tones**
 - As precise as a violinist and harder to hear (range and being on top of the instrument = press ear to neck)
 - Our advantage = resonance and sympathetic vibrations
- **Tune** using harmonics
- Sense of double bass **community**
 - Jaws, So Fresh & So Clean, Crazy Train

Intermediate Teaching Concepts

- Vibrato
- Bigger Shifts
- Ability to create several fingering options (=playing “across” the instrument)
- Ability to play with good tone in $\frac{1}{2}$ position and thumb position



Common Intermediate Issues

- Shifting Thumb
- A^b
- $\frac{1}{2}$ position on E- and A-strings
- Apathy
- Right arm tension
- Lost Rosin



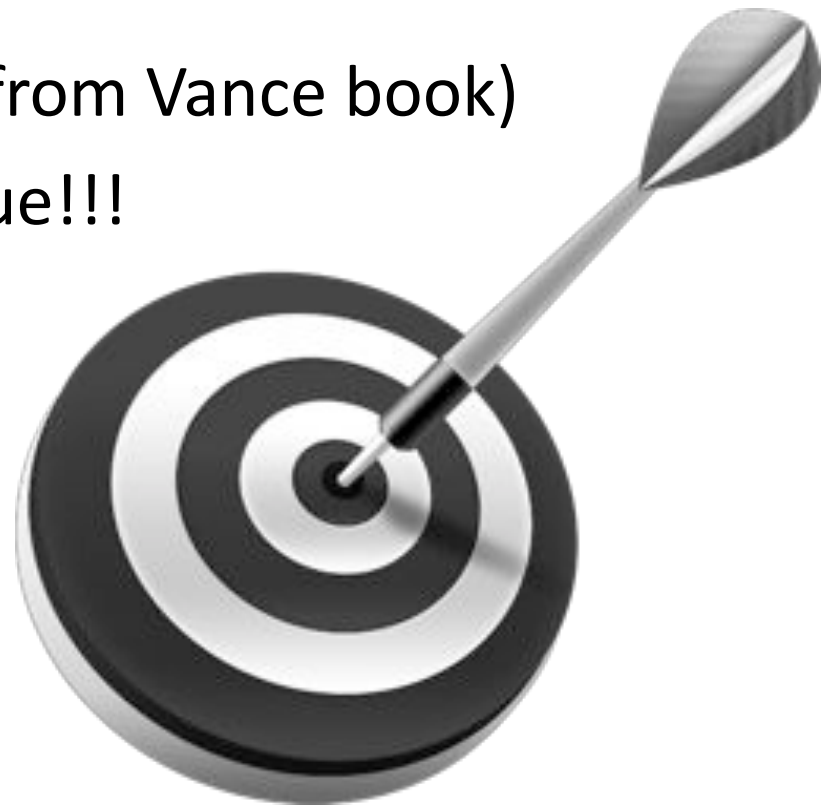
Intermediate Expectations (Years 3-4)

- **1- and 2-octave scales** with superb LH shape (= focus on $\frac{1}{2}$ position, flat keys, and 3-notes per string)
 - 2-Octave Major = G, F / E (=3 fingered notes on D-string)
 - 1-Octave Major = C, D, A, Bb, Eb / Ab (= 3 fingered notes on certain strings)
 - 2-Octave natural minor = e, g
 - 1-Octave natural minor = a, d, c, b / f (= 3 fingered notes on certain strings)
- Perform in $\frac{1}{2}$ **position on all strings** with good intonation and clear tone
- Recognize and shift fluidly between $\frac{1}{2}$ - **VI positions**
- Introductory rote understanding of **thumb position** and upper harmonics
- Ability to **vibrate** with a relaxed arm in a slow and wide motion
- **Chamber music** playing (=beautiful music for 2 stringed instruments)
- Performances in **other mediums** (=band, jazz, marching band, electric bass)

By the time they leave for HS...

If I had to boil it down to two goals:

1. Tune quickly and accurately
2. Perform Gossec's *Gavotte* (from Vance book)
 - It's all about the technique!!!



Miscellaneous

- Quick Repairs & Fixes
- Switching Instruments to the Double Bass
- Walking a 12-bar blues
- Young Double Bass camp
- Recommended Books



Double Bass 101:

Foundations for Building Strong Players

The Midwest Clinic
Chicago, Illinois

James Mick, Ph.D.

jmick@ithaca.edu

