



# In The Doghouse

by Chris Fitzgerald

## The Four Seasons: Aging Gracefully as a Bassist Part 1 – Setup

Any double bassist who has been playing for a number of years will be familiar with the basic axiom that as the seasons change, the bass changes with it. In the winter, when the humidity in the air is very low, the wood of the bass contracts, causing the strings to draw closer to the fingerboard. In the summer, when it is very humid, the wood expands, causing the strings to move higher away from the fingerboard. The effect that these changes have on us as players is inescapable; regardless of whether the string tension of the bass actually changes or not, the amount of perceived tension that we experience as players raises and lowers with the strings.

When the strings are higher, it not only makes it more difficult to stop notes with the left hand, but also affects the perceived tension we experience in our right hand both with the bow and pizzicato. When the strings are lower, it is easier to stop, pluck, and bow the strings, but this easing of perceived tension also affects the power and tone of the sound produced. Most players find a basic string height and setup for their bass that works with their musical conception and then adjust the string height accordingly as the seasons change. In the US, this is most commonly done with adjuster wheels on the bridge, but can also be accomplished by having spare bridges and sound posts of different heights/lengths that can be changed out as the seasons change; occasionally you will hear phrases like “summer sound post” or “winter bridge” bandied about to describe this approach to mitigating seasonal changes.

To take this basic paradigm into the human realm, it could be argued that in some ways, we are very much like our basses,

in that we are affected by the seasons of life in the same way that our instruments are affected by the seasons of the year. In spring, when we are first learning to play, we have not yet developed a formidable enough technique to cope with a “full-blooded” setup, so we start with very little tension, and then gradually increase it in the interest of pursuing a bigger sound. In summer – in our early musical and physical primes – we are young and strong and bulletproof, and can play with a setup that maximizes acoustic tone and volume. In the fall, we are still in our prime, but our bodies are not as resilient as they once were, so if we don’t stay in shape, we can overdo things and risk injury playing a setup that gave us no trouble when we were younger. Finally, in winter, we have to make concessions to the weakening of our bodies and eventually go with a setup that is less strenuous as we endeavor to extend our playing careers.

As a teacher and observer of all things double bass for many years now, I have seen this cycle play out again and again. In watching students, I get to observe their spring and summer seasons, and watch them gradually raise their strings to maximize acoustic sound as their technique allows. In my own experience and by watching my peers, I get to observe the gradual autumn period, where the diminution of physical powers causes us experience minor pains and injuries from playing the music as we were always accustomed to. By watching older players, I most often observe them playing beautifully, but with setups that are very low, and when I sit in on their basses, I find myself struggling to produce the sound that my conception is used to. This naturally makes me consider how I will handle this same natural cycle of life as my early autumn eventually turns to winter. There are many facets to this paradigm – choice of instrument, variations of technique, refinements in recording/amplification, evolutions and changes in musical sensibility, etc. – but the remainder of this article will focus on aspects related to setup of the strings on the bass.

Along these lines, there are two main aspects of setup that yield the most dramatic changes: choice of strings, and height of the strings on the bass. While there are other

important aspects that can be considered (sound post size and placement, raised saddles, tailpiece choice and setup, fingerboard dressing, etc.), for most of us do-it-yourselfers, these are the two parameters that most bassists regularly regulate on our own.

Choosing strings for the bass is a very personal choice that is driven by feel and sound, and there are many factors that come into play. But in the most general sense, players who want a bright, punchy sound often choose a high-tension string with little or no damping, built in to maximize the impact of every bit of force applied to the strings in both hands. Players who want a darker sound that blends, often choose a string with less tension and/or a string that has a construction that dampens the upper harmonics of the note (such as gut strings or steel strings that are dampened to be less scratchy under the bow). There are too many options out there to even begin to discuss them all at length, here (or even mention them), but it is worth noting it is common for most of these types of strings to come in “regular” and “light” varieties that allow the basic character of the sound to come through, while still being able to choose the type of string tension the player prefers. Some companies, like Thomastik, sometimes even have three categories: “Stark” (strong/heavy), “Mittel” (medium), and “Weich” (weak/light).

String height choices are similarly personal, with most players finding their own “optimal” height that allows them to get a good strong sound that they like, without being too hard on the physical mechanism that produces it. Most players that I have talked to who experiment with raising and lowering string heights speak of a “point of diminishing returns” in either direction. Those who are raising the strings in search of a more powerful, full-blooded sound discover a point at which the height of the string impedes their ability to play in a fluid and relaxed way, at which point further adjustment in that direction is becomes counterproductive. Similarly, players seeking a setup that is easier to get around on talk of a contrasting point where the ease facility in terms of getting around the instrument is sabotaged by the lack of carrying power and weight to the sound once the strings get too low. As in all things, compromise is essential to finding the sweet spot for each player.

If we are lucky enough to continue living and continue playing the bass, there will come an inevitable point where we have to make some decisions about what kinds of compromises we’ll need to make in order to keep playing. Given that the basic concept is that most players tend to desire less tension as they reach the “winter” portion of

their bass playing careers, and acknowledging that we are limiting our discussion to string choice and setup here, I’ll list a few possible setup adjustments and comment briefly on them. I’ll restrict my comments to the right hand standpoint of pizzicato playing since that is what I have the most experience with:

1. Keep the same string height, but change to a lighter/softer string: A string with less tension and stiffness is more flexible and forgiving on the right hand. Keeping the height the same allows for the same basic motion of the right arm and the same depth of reach for “digging” into the string as the finger comes through. I imagine this will be my number one option when my time comes, as I am very sensitive to how deep under the string I can get my plucking fingers. The lighter strings won’t pack quite the same punch and will crap-out faster when pulling hard, but of all the possible adjustments, I have found this the easiest one to make, so far.

2. Keep the same strings, but lower them little by little to maintain a balanced comfort level: Keeping the same strings means keeping the same basic sound, but lowering them enables the player to decrease the amount of force needed to press the strings and pull a sound. This is something that most bassists do seasonally on a micro level at some point, and up to a point, it is the easiest possible solution. At some point, the lack of ability to dig in with the right hand makes this untenable for me, but if my hands become arthritic and painful, I could easily change my mind about this. The crux of this strategy is it’s important to remember that even small adjustments of the wheel can produce fairly dramatic results, so it’s a good idea to start small and give your body time to acclimate.

3. Use both a lighter string and a lower height: For me, this would be saved for an endgame scenario, since the sound would be the first thing to suffer from two directions ... and sound is the reason I play the bass, in the first place.

No matter which strategy you employ, it’s good to keep in mind that the overall goal is to keep making a joyful noise on the bass. Later, we’ll discuss some other possible strategies to approach this inevitable place we’ll all reach, if we’re lucky enough to be able to keep playing into our later years. But in the meantime, keep playing, and take care of your body! **BGM**