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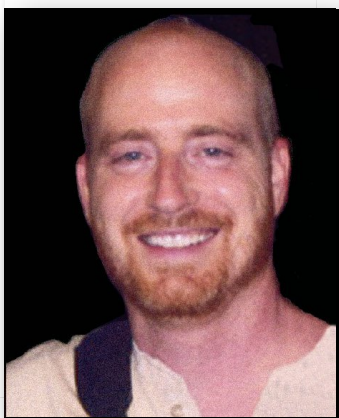
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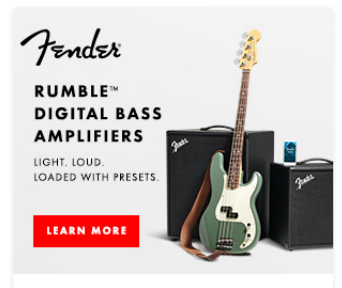
The Four Seasons: Aging Gracefully as a Bassist

Posted by Chris Fitzgerald | Sep 7, 2018 |
Columns, In The Doghouse | 0 | ★★★★★



In The Doghouse

by Chris Fitzgerald



Part II – Spring

The original “Four Seasons” article focused on bass setup during different stages of a bassist’s life and career, and how the setup might be adjusted to be optimal for the stages of life all bassists inevitably go through. In this installment of the series, entitled “Spring,” I’d like to focus on issues that affect young bassists, or bassists just starting out on their journey with the double bass.

When a young musician is first introduced to the double bass (hereafter referred to simply as a “bass”), it can be a very intimidating experience in many ways. The most obvious of these are how to manage the sheer size of the instrument and the amount of force that is required to play it, but there are many other variables in play, as well. Ultimately, the differences of the unique people and instruments involved make the number of variables almost effectively infinite, but for the sake of simplicity we’ll divide them into four basic categories: **Physicality** (including the size of the bass in relation to the player), **Experience** (including technique or lack of same, which makes all other variables all the more important to address), **Strings**, and **Setup**.



Physicality

A standard $\frac{3}{4}$ bass with the endpin retracted measures about 76” from floor to scroll tip, with a string length of



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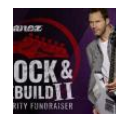
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about 41.5". While these measurements are general guidelines, they interact with the body of the player in somewhat predictable ways. The player will need to find a way to center their strength and leverage around the body of the bass while being able to reach both extremes of the string length. They will also need to decide whether to play standing or seated, how to balance the bass, and how high to raise the endpin in order to find the optimal position for the bass in relation to the body.

The basic decisions regarding where the bass sits in relation to the body vary from player to player and teacher to teacher, but one common pedagogical landmark I have encountered frequently is to make sure that the nut not be too far above forehead level; when the nut is much above this level, it becomes difficult to reach up with the left hand to stop the strings in the lower positions. This is balanced by the need for the right hand to be able to reach the other end of the string length, especially for players who use the bow and need to be able to play near the bridge.

For this reason, it is important to consider the wingspan of the beginning player, both when choosing a suitable bass and in choosing a posture with the bass. Lately, I have begun measuring the wingspan of my students who are smaller in stature to help me get a feel for how much or little leeway that student may have when deciding on their posture with a standard sized instrument. My own wingspan is 74", which means that I am fortunate that a lot of posture options are available to me. A recent student of smaller stature has a wingspan of only 60", which means that she



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must be very careful not to waste any of that reach, or risk injury if she does. People of small stature and children would do well to take these issues under consideration when choosing an instrument. If a standard $\frac{3}{4}$ bass feels too big to handle, there are excellent smaller basses with shorter scale lengths available. While these smaller basses of quality are not as readily available as the standard sizes, I would advise any student not to try to play a bass that is too big for them, as the likelihood of eventual injury is not worth the risk.

Experience/Technique

While it may seem strange to bring up experience in an article about beginning players, it is a variable that can't be ignored. Experience includes the notion of acquired technique, and a player with a decent amount of technique can overcome a lot of other obstacles that might obstruct an absolute beginner, especially in terms of physical relation to the bass, strings, and setup.

One of the most important aspects of bass technique is learning how to apply pressure to the strings in a relaxed way that uses the larger muscle groups rather than the smaller ones, as the smaller ones are more easily overtaxed and prone to injury. When we are in the first stages of our journey, we are often so anxious to pick up the bass and play that it is easy to overlook the physics of what we are doing as we stop, pluck, and bow the strings. I have played a number of instruments in my life (including piano, guitar, French horn, clarinet, and electric bass guitar), and while each of these

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instruments has its own set of technical challenges, none requires the sheer amount of physical force as the bass requires simply to produce a workable sound.

Players who are approaching the bass for the first time are well advised to find a teacher to help guide them along the first steps of their journey, especially one who can help them navigate the physical challenges of exerting force to the strings in a relaxed way that doesn't overburden the bones, joints, tendons, and muscles along the way. Often, people who decide to begin playing the bass may not have access to a dedicated teacher in their area. In these cases, they may resort to online resources on bass technique, picking up tips here and there from players traveling through their area to perform, or in some cases they may simply decide to teach themselves by trial and error.

In all of these latter cases, I would urge people in this situation to tread lightly and pay close attention to their bodies and not to ignore pain! Pain is a danger signal that something is wrong. If you should experience it, especially sharp pain, stop and examine what you are doing that caused it and try to find another way around whatever it was that caused the problem. If you can't find the technical source of the problem, I would advise consulting an experienced teacher in any way you can. Hopefully, this person – whomever you are able to find – will be able to help you find a technical solution that will enable you to move forward safely. In general, my experience has been that pain comes from inefficient use of the mechanism, and from putting too much strain on a

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small and fragile link in the chain, and a good teacher should be able to help you identify the weak point.

Strings

There are a lot of ways to approach this subject, but in general when in the early stages of learning the bass, when technique is only beginning to be developed, a “friendly” set of strings would be an extremely wise thing to consider. While it is an investment, finding a set of strings that has the basic sound the player is after, but that isn’t too high-tension and hard on the hands can make all the difference in the world in these early stages. Things to consider when choosing a string for the player’s intended use are dampened vs. undampened strings, and the tension rating of the strings. I’m a long-time user of Thomastik-Infeld strings, so I’ll make recommendations from their line, but most string manufacturers make strings designed for the same specific uses.

Dampened strings: strings that are intended to be played with a bow are often made with dampening material around the core to reduce scratchiness and limit the amount of high frequency information the string produces. While a seasoned player may be able to sound good on just about any string, a beginner who is intending to do most of their playing with the bow would be wise to consider an orchestral string like the Thomastik Bel Canto line. Strings of this kind are designed to start quickly under the bow and produce a dark, warm tone.

Undampened Strings: Many jazz players and players who play primarily *pizzicato* tend to gravitate toward strings that are brighter and cut through a dense mix without the use of a bow. Fingerstyle players using this type of string will hear more upper harmonic information with each note and also get more sustain, which helps make it easier to intonate quickly. Strings designed for this kind of use, like Thomastik Spirocores, often come in “light” and “regular” gauges, with the former having less tension and thickness than the latter. Many beginners prefer to start on the lighter versions of these strings as they build their technique to the point where they can handle any string.

Setup

The final piece of the puzzle is the setup of the bass. A properly set up bass that makes it easy to play is essential for all players, but especially important for beginners who have not yet developed a lot of technique. The two most important setup considerations I'll mention here are string height and fingerboard dressing.

String height: the height of the strings above the board is a large part of what makes a bass feel comfortable to play. If the strings are too high, it becomes difficult to press them down, which inhibits all aspects of left hand technique. If they are too low, it can cause buzzing against the fingerboard. The best way for the young player to find the sweet spot is to make sure their bass is

well set up, including a bridge that has adjuster wheels built in. Teachers would also be well advised to take a few moments to show their students to use the adjusters to find the correct height for their playing style.

Fingerboard Dressing: a well-dressed board makes a bass much easier to play, while a poorly dressed board can make playing a nightmare. The main variable in how a board is dressed relates to how much *camber* (scoop) is built into the board. A board that is too flat is prone to buzzing when the strings are played forcefully, and a board that has too much camber can cause the strings to be difficult to press down in the middle and upper registers. Every young student would do well to start early developing a relationship with a qualified luthier, and every teacher should foster and encourage this relationship.

All of these basic variables interact with each other every time any bassist picks up a bass, but they have been addressed individually here in the hope of fleshing out some of the particular details of each. Hopefully, both teachers and beginning students alike will be able to find some areas of thought to explore in this way. Coming to terms with these issues can go a long way toward making the beginning of the bass journey a pleasant and comfortable one. Good luck, and enjoy the scenery!