

Sound and phrase

The importance of developing a refined, balanced technique to communicate a nuanced musical line on the double bass

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BORN

Mainz, Germany

STUDIED WITH

Günter Klaus,
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TEACHES

University students
aged 18+

To play the double bass today is very different from what it was a few decades ago. While once we hid away in orchestras, now we also need to perform as soloists, using the same spectrum of tone colour, intensity and articulation as violinists, violists and cellists. To be able to coax our mile-long strings into vibrating in the truly focused way that is needed to produce a musical phrase, we need an incredibly sophisticated technique. To many double bassists, players who produce a beautiful sound while projecting in a soloistic way seem like magicians.

To create a nuanced phrase with a full, articulate sound that is rich in colour requires us to find a balance between body and instrument, combining power with a supple and refined technique by working on our bowing, vibrato, sound imagination and sense of musical direction. The body must be balanced and elastic, to enable good use of weight, pressure and momentum in the bow arm; the vibrato must be varied using arm weight and different pivot points; and our breath and sense of line must guide every phrase. We need to shape the music with the whole body, using all the technical possibilities at our disposal.

EXERCISES

I recommend standing up to play solo repertoire, so that you are free to move your body to create a full, broad sound filled with creative possibility. With the pelvis as your centre, keep your joints elastic and your knees relaxed, not locked, so that you are stable but flexible like a tree.

In these exercises, focus on making the string vibrate powerfully and freely using the resistance of the bow. With each bow change use the arm and wrist to make sure the string never stops vibrating. The soul of the sound lies in the bow and the bow

arm should lead every phrase, while the left hand articulates clearly, with all fingers pressing down equally whether they have to remain down, anticipate a note or play across the strings. Keep them close to the strings to avoid losing energy or control and to help you pull calmly with the bow.

BOW MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL

Warm up with scale studies to check your sound and intonation, and to work on good bow management and control (**exercises 1 and 2**):

EXERCISE 1 Warm up with scales, for example using Carl Flesch's scale system. Pay attention to your intonation, bow arm and sound-mood



EXERCISE 2 Continue to work on bow management and control using Kreutzer's 42 Etudes or Caprices, no.8

Allegro non troppo



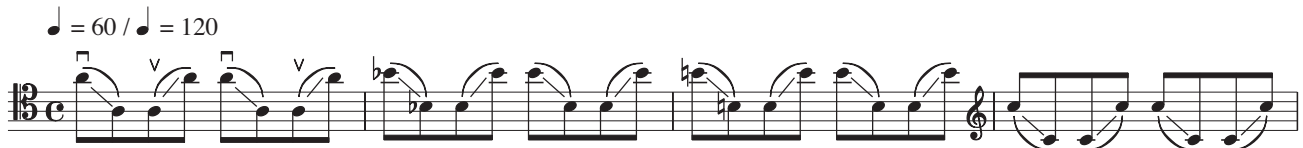
EXERCISE 3 Use Findeisen's xxxxx to practise producing a powerful sound in thumb position



EXERCISE 4 Practise double-stopping exercises (this one is written by me) to learn how to make a full sound and build up finger strength



EXERCISE 5 In exercise no.11 from Petracchi's book *Simplified Higher Technique*, play with slow, glissando shifts; fast, purposeful shifts; and then a mixture between the



- Use your sound to reflect your current mood
- Pay attention to your bow arm, contact point, arm weight and bow speed, and move your fingers, wrist, elbow and shoulder flexibly in sequence, with the armpit slightly open
- Check your movement in a mirror, to ensure you are drawing straight bows. This is a prerequisite for seamless bow changes
- Once you have practised the standard fingerings, find new paths across the strings. Integrate different rhythms, types of bow stroke and dynamic plans that add direction to each scale

Whichever bow hold you use, keep your upper arm flexible and use gravity to give the darker, fatter sound that comes from weight rather than purely pressure. A left hand that is intonation safe will give you more security and freedom with the bow.

THUMB POSITION AND DOUBLE-STOPPING

To practise making a powerful sound in thumb position, try **exercise 3**, then work on **exercise 4** to help you stabilise the

position of your left hand and strengthen your fingers. Using the bow on two strings can be an enormous help when you are working on creating a good-quality, full sound. I would also recommend working on the double-stopping in Simandl's *New Method for the Double Bass* and Nanny's *Ten Caprices for Double Bass*, with a focus on bringing out a clear melody voice as you play.

CONSECUTIVE SHIFTS

It is vital to master making consecutive shifts within a musical line, in order to achieve beautiful phrasing on the double bass and generate a vibrato that develops and unfolds with the musical line. To practise this, use **exercise 5**, which combines large shifts with legato bowing. First play it with slow, glissando shifts; then with fast, purposeful changes of register; and then with a mixture of the two. You can create your own exercises with shorter and longer shifts of different speeds, landing on different target fingers too. Make sure that the bow stays smooth and never jerks when you shift with the left hand, especially when you shift a long way.

REPERTOIRE

Pieces containing sustained melodies will help you to internalise the technical skills you need to produce a phrase: arm weight, contact point and bow speed with breathing and vibrato for a beautiful sound and sense of direction in **example 1**; calm, portamento-free shifts and legato bowing in **example 2**; and all of these in **example 3** or any Bottesini, which is so influenced by bel-canto singing. To work on chords and scales in a musical context, try Rota (**examples 4 and 5**). Teppo Hauta-aho (**example 6**) will help you to practise

creating a sense of phrase that runs throughout a movement. Other pieces that I would recommend include Dittersdorf's Second Double Bass Concerto, which is great exercise for elegant string changes; the second movement of Bach's Violin Concerto in E major BMV 1042, which is, very demanding for double bassists; and Bruch's *Kol Nidrei*, which requires great bow control. Finally, in Saint-Saëns's *The Swan*, you can use a calm legato to create a big, focused sound as you sail through the changes in register. >

EXAMPLE 1 Focus on breathing, vibrato and musical direction in Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise*

EXAMPLE 2 In the Allemande from Fryba's *A Suite in the Olden Style*, concentrate on calm, portamento-free shifts and legato bowing

EXAMPLE 3 Bring out the bel-canto singing style in the second movement of Bottesini's *Double Bass Concerto in B minor*

EXAMPLE 4 Rota's *Divertimento* second movement, 'Marcia', is excellent for working on scales in a musical context

EXAMPLE 5 Practise playing musically in Rota's *Divertimento* fourth movement 'Finale'

EXAMPLE 6 In Teppo Hauta-aho's *Kadenza*, try to create a sense of line that runs through the entire movement

IN YOUR PRACTICE

Record yourself to check whether or not the way you think you are playing actually corresponds to what you are playing. If not, reflect upon why not and what you can do to change it. Are you really using every last millimetre of the bow to bring out each climax? Are your crescendos and decrescendos moving from the middle of the bow, as they should be, or are you always being tempted towards the frog? Are you breathing? Take a step back to help you see what you need to exaggerate or correct. Familiarise yourself with the historical, social and artistic context of pieces as you decide how to interpret and structure each phrase; and notice how your favourite string soloists use their fingers and bows to develop their sound. You can also listen to the phrasing of great wind players for inspiration, or watch dancers to see how they use weight, momentum, bounce and elasticity to move through every phrase.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

As teachers we must show our students how to teach themselves, while giving them the space to be individual and authentic. Give them a clear technical programme and show them how to draw on their technique to create every phrase; and emphasise that they must practise all techniques with the repertoire that they are learning in mind, to ensure that they are able to achieve them while taking musical direction into account. Encourage them to mark their etudes with dynamics and phrasing, set varied etudes and technical studies to approach the goals they have in their pieces, and make sure they can articulate why they are practising them. It can be fun to film them playing fast techniques, and then to watch them back in slow motion, so that their movements are clearly visible. This is motivating and good for training self-control. ●

INTERVIEW BY PAULINE HARDING

FURTHER MATERIALS



Annibale Mengoli's 20 Concert Studies for Double Bass are virtuoso etudes that lend themselves to phrase practise because of their good musical content.



Italo Caimmi's Tecnica Superiore del Contrabbasso contains excellent exercises that cover low as well as high positions.

NEXT MONTH Violinist Misha Galaganov on how to stay in shape in only 30 minutes a day