

# The Sound of Bass

By Christine Hoock

Translated by Alison Shamrock

When Rabih Abouh-Khalil saw me, he had to take a deep breath and compose himself ... Like me, he lived near Munich. I had called him up to ask him to write something for *worldwidebass*, my world music concert programme. We had arranged a date and now I was standing outside his door. What I had not mentioned on the phone was that I was nine months pregnant. Therefore he was somewhat taken aback by my appearance ...

Somewhat surprised, he ushered me into his house, rushed to the kitchen to make some Lebanese tea, brought some Lebanese biscuits and lit some incense. I sank into a very comfortable sofa which, I was convinced, I was never going to get out of again due to my sizeable bump. Rabih Abouh-Khalil's study looked exactly as one would imagine the study of a world famous oud soloist and composer to be, full of instruments, music, photographs and Lebanese "stuff". The jazz awards and other trophies adorned the loo. While I relaxed on the sofa Rabih told me about his life as a "travelling composer", the laptop permanently installed on his lap, be it at the airport or backstage shortly before a performance. He painted a vivid picture of how, as a teenager, he fled the Lebanese civil war and came to Germany, of his studies in Beirut and Munich, his musical roots and his love for the Lebanon, which grew stronger the longer he was away from his country. I was now able to establish a link between him and his compositions, the lightness and the rather unique rhythms of his compositions suddenly appeared in a completely new light for me. Our further collaboration mostly took place on the phone and via the Internet. Big, fundamental changes lay ahead for both of us. My son was born and the same month Rabih emigrated from Germany to France. He had lived in Germany for more than 30 years and yet, somehow, it had never become his home.

For me, making music is a very personal and passionate affair. It is the love of music, the desire for artistic expression,



Christine Hoock, Barbara Nussbaum, and Jagdish Mistry perform in concert. Photo by Christian Schneider.

and the fascination of rhythm which draw me to the stage. I am keen to embark on all kinds of musical adventures, be it jazz, tango, world music, *Harmoniemusik*, rock, or contemporary Trio Basso compositions. For me, the creative exchange with other instrumentalists always implies exploring a new world and a sound production of my own. Unique moments, exploring harmonies and the contrast of sounds with others, be it when making music with people playing the djembe, the marimba or the harp, feed my curiosity.

There are three different ways of producing sound on a classical double bass. The way one plays and generates a sound in the orchestra is very different from the sound one has to make when performing chamber music, or as a soloist. With my students I also work on the fourth variety on the double bass – the sounds one needs for auditions. As a soloist I play with a focused sound in order to produce a sound which really carries. On the basis of this I can produce a wide range of colours with the help of bow distribution alone. Bow speed and resistance, arm weight, point of contact and the way the bow is angled are technical means, but also direct means of "conjuring up" sound. Using these colours together with a flexible vibrato I can create intensity and build long phrases. Ranging from archaic power to fragility of sound—our instrument has a lot to offer.

I had been playing the double bass for about two years and was still at school when I happened upon a recording by a certain Ludwig Steicher in a record store. The Dittersdorf concerto and even Mozart's *Per questa bella mano*. I could not believe it – there were solo works for this instrument! And I happened to have the 10 German Marks they wanted for this record!

Oh yes! This is how it was in the old days without Internet, without an environment seriously interested in music and only armed with a battered old record player... Until then I had never considered whether one could do anything with the double bass as a solo instrument. I was mostly interested in its position as the foundation in the orchestra and its sound there and, of course, in the orchestra itself as a big community. Shortly after this aha experience I enthusiastically participated in a young musicians' competition and took up my studies with Günther Klaus in Frankfurt. The course of studies was founded on a solid technical framework and the repertoire needed for auditions—lucky me! During my first year of studies I founded the *Frankfurter Kontrabass Quartett* with three fellow female students. The university facilitated our first public performance and we set to work excitedly. Luckily there existed works like *Logs* by Paul Chihara, *Varium et mutabile* by Jacques Vanherenthals, *Un petit recueil* by Angel

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Pena, or the Quartet No.1 by Jan Alm. We also wrote our own arrangements and got in touch with composers. Soon the press response was effusive, and we were invited to perform on the radio and on TV and recorded our CD *Quattro Contra Bassi*. We were highly motivated at that time and we performed together for a total of 12 years until our respective orchestral jobs and family commitments separated us.

Shortly before my final exam I had to terminate my studies as I had won a position on the solo desk of the WDR Symphony Orchestra in Cologne. Enthusiastically I tackled orchestral life and felt "free" to explore the solo repertoire

alongside my hobby: bass quartet. I met pianist Barbara Nussbaum with whom, to this day, I perform in concert as *DUO PIASSO*. We focused on international competitions as goals for broadening our repertoire. The preparations as well as the trips to these "meetings" brought us closer both on an artistic and a personal level.

I value my accompanist's [Klavierpartner in German; literally: piano partner] input. For me the piano is never a mere accompanying instrument, rather it lays the foundations for my performance on stage, it backs me up and enters into a dialogue with me. There was a day when Barbara, in the middle of a piece, suddenly stopped

playing and said quietly, but insistently: "... please, spare me this rigmarole...". We were in the middle of rehearsing a virtuoso piece, and she had seriously had enough. Discussions ensued where, of course, I vigorously defended the double bass repertoire and the transcriptions of virtuoso works originally written for other instruments!

Deep down, however, I agreed with my partner at the piano more than I cared to admit. For me virtuosity always has to serve music, not vice versa. I reckon that at some point every performer gets to the stage where they have to face up to this context and their own taste. Of course



Christine Hoock and Barbara Nussbaum hold up their CD *worldwidebass*. Photo by Ilona Klimek.

there were works that had always appealed to me. Among them were Bottesini's *Alla Mendelssohn* as much as Proto's *Sonata 1963*, the Vanhal concerto or the sonatas for viola da gamba by Bach. For me most transcriptions seemed unbalanced. Many important repertoire pieces for other instruments are written so phenomenally well that, when transcribed, they lose a certain naturalness and serenity and the balance between the instruments is disturbed. As much as I am, for example, enthralled and moved by the beginning of the Brahms sonata in e-minor for piano and cello, the more frustrated I get in the course of this fantastic piece. It is the very passages which are so simple and lie so easily for the cello where I, as a double bass player, have to work hard or make compromises. To this day this has kept me from making this piece part of my concert repertoire.

Just as we looked for pieces for our quartet which would reflect us and our taste, I treated myself to the same luxury when, after years of "building up a solo repertoire", it came to choosing concert programmes which, several years later, cumulated in my first CD, *Bassa Nova*.

After 7 years of working in the orchestra in Cologne, my 30th birthday gingerly

appeared on the horizon. I had had an eventful time with the orchestra and felt I was growing with my instrument. We changed the way we performed with *DUO PIASSO* by moderating our concerts, using video and also through collaborations with other artists such as photographers, actors and painters. First works were commissioned for us.

I was happy with my playing technique even if, in parts, it was intuitive. A lot of things had worked by themselves at some point. Now the time had come for me to do certain things more consciously and to gain a fundamental insight into my own technique. I met Franco Petracchi, was taken by his musicality, his ability to create the overall arc of a piece, his clear sound production and spontaneously enrolled in his class in Geneva for a two-year virtuoso course. For the final year I took a sabbatical from the orchestra. Other than being inspired artistically by Franco during this time, I also took apart my entire technique by observing myself while practicing, by taking time to listen and watch closely and by taking notes. It was a time of contemplation and intense reflection. Parallel to this I completed my original degree in Frankfurt as an external student. It seemed to make sense that my "maturing" was embedded in a framework

by the official examination. After completing my studies in Geneva and my return to the orchestra nothing much had changed on the surface, but inside I felt invigorated and more aware, not just when it came to music. I accepted a teaching position at Dusseldorf University and, after seven more years with the orchestra, switched to become a professor at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg.

I made use of the time during my long train journeys between Cologne and Geneva to explore the music and life of Astor Piazzolla and to transcribe some of his works for myself. Thus I, more or less, prepared my concert repertoire and the *Contrabajisimo* CD while travelling. I was fascinated by projecting some of Piazzolla's immense expressivity onto my instrument and to this day I enjoy every single note of his music when I play it. His personal and passionate relationship with music and his home country Argentina move me deeply. The emotional depth of Piazzolla's *Tango Nuevo* contains both sultry heat and bitter cold and, when it comes to sound—supported by the insistent power of the rhythm—poses a challenge for every musician.

Having immersed myself in Piazzolla's world, my curiosity was aroused and I wanted to explore the music of other countries. I met Erdal Tugcular from Turkey. His son studied in my Salzburg class and told me a lot about traditional Turkish music and about his father's compositions. Erdal sent me some recordings of very old, popular love songs from his home country. I was instantly touched by the melodic and rhythmic idiosyncrasy, the depth of these songs and the fervent sound production of the singers. Following a very busy exchange of emails, Erdal dedicated his piece *Colours of Anatolia* to me, where he integrated these songs and reworked them with the help of the piano part.

Arni Egilsson was travelling in Europe. After getting to know each other through humorous emails and phone calls, he was now to come and visit me. Without a navigation device, and without a mobile phone in his hire car, he asked his way through the region surrounding Munich and tried his hand at understanding the Bavarian dialect in order to finally arrive at my doorstep after countless hours, cursing heartily. I was familiar with many of his works owing to our Internet and CD

exchange. What I was interested in finding out now was whether he was willing to integrate his Icelandic roots in a piece. Inspired by the Nordic *Edda* saga, *Völukvaedi* for double bass and piano was created, a very personal work in which Arni brings together the light and the dark side of the double bass in a fascinating manner. Every time I hear the piano introduction I can still see him standing at my door, cursing.

The *worldwidebass* programme began to take shape. I had to stay in motion both internally and externally and was lucky to meet people who were happy to join me for part of my way. Like, for example, Glen Moore, who joined Barbara and me in the recording studio for a day in order to record a beautiful version of the Japanese song *Nara Yama* and the oriental evergreen *Miserlou* as an improvisation. I particularly enjoyed the time in the recording studio when I was joined by my German friends from Quadro Nuevo, who inspired me a lot with their accordion, jazz bass and udu drum, with their unpretentious approach to music and their professional equanimity, and who were open to spontaneous ideas during the recording session.

Every programme has a dynamic of its own. *worldwidebass* is lively, full of exuberant rhythms and colours. The technical and artistic difficulty of the pieces varies greatly. It gives me great pleasure to take my audience with me on this journey. My new programme, *le Phénix*, in which I combine old and new music, has an entirely different feel and is full of contrast. Here power meets fragility, excentricity meets simplicity—the demands on me and also on the audience are completely different.

After each journey into the most varied musical styles, I return to my classical roots and am inspired afresh by chamber music works. The Prokofiev Quintet, Zelenka's Sonatas, the Schubert Quintet or Octet nourish me. I can also approach the standard classical solo repertoire for our instrument with new inspiration and, just for the pleasure of it, attempt a transcription or two. I shall always treasure the sound potential of the orchestral bassist and the great artistic experiences I made in the orchestra. I feel that this basis permeates every note I play.

Maybe it is the need for artistic expression which allows me to retain the necessary amount of farsightedness and perse-

verance to tackle the various challenges of musical everyday life. There are moments when, while putting together the programmes and in conversation with organisers, I have to work hard to keep things moving. After all I hardly serve the mainstream – neither with my instrument nor with my programmes.

The power and energy of music intrigues and moves me and, for me, is at the same time journey, communication and personal development. Working with composers and the musical exchange on stage are encounters of a precious kind for me, and a gift. Music is part of us humans just as we ourselves are part of our blue planet. Expressing our life and existence through music is a matter close to my heart. I do not think it is a coincidence that I have chosen the double bass as my "mouth-piece" as its sound moves me yet, as an artist, I actually feel independent of it.

After I had received Rabbih Abou-Khalil's first drafts I did not hear from him for a long time. Of course, I thought – the move. Finally – shortly before the date set for the recording of my CD *worldwidebass* – I got hold of him on the phone and he



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Christine Hoock. Photo by Oskar Henn.

told me of his personal nightmare of the past months. His daughter, who had enjoyed a sheltered upbringing in Europe, had, while she was travelling in Lebanon, been caught in the middle of the

civil war raging once again. She suddenly found herself in a scenario of violence, also endangered by bombs dropped by the West. Eventually he managed to get her out of Beirut but he had lost all contact with his remaining relatives in the Lebanon. The fear for his family and friends and the uncertainty, the worries about his traumatised daughter and also the anger about the political situation were clearly audible in his choking voice.

When the parts for *You take my slippers, I'll take your socks* came through on the fax machine of the studio on the first day of recording for *worldwidebass* the piece had gained an importance for me which, at the beginning of this road, I could not have imagined.

*CHRISTINE HOOCK* works internationally as a soloist, in chamber music ensembles, and in orchestras. She has performed, among others, at Schleswig-Holstein Musikfestival, Lucerne Festival, San Sebastian Festival, Klangbogen Wien, Festival de Música de Canarias, Feldkirch Festival, Rheingau Musikfestival, Musik Triennale Köln and at the Festivals in Berlin and Salzburg. Concert tours have taken her to Japan, China, the US, South America, Europe, and Russia. During her studies with Günther Klaus in Frankfurt and Franco Petracchi in Geneva, Christine Hoock founded the "Frankfurter Kontrabass Quartett" (Frankfurt Double Bass Quartet), which gained international recognition with its concerts, radio and television recordings, and the CD "Quattro Contra Bassi". A prize-winner of international competitions, she was appointed principal bass of the WDR Symphony Orchestra Cologne when still a young artist. Christine Hoock is professor for double bass at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg and, besides her busy concert schedule, holds master classes at international summer academies. She is a jury member at competitions and, in collaboration with Jeunesses Musicales and the EUYO, supports up-and-coming double bass players. Christine Hoock plays an English instrument by William Tarr from 1848.



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