

# DOUBLE Number 28

# Bassist

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SHAKING UP SALZBURG  
CHRISTINE HOOCK



BUENA VISTA LEGEND  
CACHAITO LOPEZ

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# A Modern Bassist in the City of Mozart



**B**ASSIST CHRISTINE HOOCK creates a grand energy every time she picks up her instrument. 'The best moments come when I can simply let loose,' she enthuses. 'The notes flow, and the real contact – the give-and-take with the other musicians and the audience happens. That live feeling, when something new is created, is incredible. Music is for me a special type of communication, where things that words cannot express are said and felt. I'm satisfied when I can put across the feelings that come to me: beautiful colours that are dark, bright, wide, scratchy, sad, friendly, funny, everyday, deep, glowing. I like fresh sounds.'

According to Hoock, the modern bassist plays three distinct roles: orchestral musician, chamber musician, and soloist. She began her professional career as an orchestral musician in 1988 at the age of 23 by winning her very first audition, as assistant solo bassist with the prestigious Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra. 'The feeling of playing in an orchestra can't be beaten. The cornerstone of my bass playing was always my desire to play in an orchestra. The power of a bass section is something special, even breathtaking. Rhythmic presence, humming sounds, rustling, threatening noises, roaring, crashing, storm clouds, showing off, the humorous remarks – these are all part of the fundamental nature of a bass section.'

Hoock does not see her gender as a barrier, either financially or creatively. However, like many musicians both male and female, she has had to overcome her fair share of difficult situations. 'In my



first year with the Cologne Radio Symphony, I experienced some strange, arbitrary types of prejudice. I think it had to do with me being new as well as being a woman. A lot of young players have these kinds of problems when they join an orchestra, and it doesn't necessarily have to do with being a female, rather that they are a new entity in a long-established group.' She quickly overcame these early hurdles as the youngest member of the bass section, proving herself countless times over as a solid player making valuable contributions to the group sound and spirit. 'My first concert with the orchestra was Shostakovich Fourteen – a great beginning. After that we went on tour to Japan playing Mahler symphonies with Bertini.'

During her many years as a major protagonist in the Cologne orchestra scene, Hooek also pursued a solo and chamber music career on the side. The successful all-woman ensemble, the Frankfurt Bass Quartet, has been among Hooek's countless music projects over the years. She comments, 'We had the high standards of a string quartet and we all learned a lot about interactive playing in a chamber music group.' The ensemble enjoyed a 12-year run and produced a great recording in 1995, *Quattro Contra Bassi* [Dabringhaus and Grimm, MDG 603 0634-2].

In terms of solo composition, Hooek has clear ideas about her favourite styles. 'I prefer solo pieces that use the deep, round tones of the bass – not just virtuosic fingerplay. For example, I like the Concerto from Ernst Ludwig Leitner, which I played recently with the Bläserphilharmonie Salzburg – as well as Prota's *Sonata 1963*, Shostakovich's *Adagio*, Teppo Hauta-aho's *Cadenza*, Piazzolla's *Kicho*, and naturally Bottesini's works like *Allegro di Concerto alla Mendelssohn*. I love the freedom of movement when I play solo, musically as well as physically. I am free to be creative.'

Hooek and pianist Barbara Nussbaum joined forces in 1989 to form Duo Piasso. Dedicated to the goal of performing modern and newly-commissioned works for double bass and piano, the duo has championed new music from all corners of the globe. Their newest CD, *Contrabajissimo* (available from [www.christinehooek.de](http://www.christinehooek.de)),



Christine Hooek delivers her vibrant feeling for life through her music, whether onstage with an orchestra, teaching at the University Mozarteum in Salzburg, or playing new commissioned works. **John Goldsby** meets her



is a programme of works by Astor Piazzolla. In addition to the title work, other pieces on the recording include *Kicho*, *Grand Tango*, *Tanti Anni*, and *Milonga*. Hooek comments, 'The natural momentum and the magic of the tension and release in Piazzolla's music touches me. It's an honour for me to be able to record his music.' Duo Piasso's first CD, *Bassa Nova* (also available from

**Opposite** : Hooek has been playing professionally since the age of 23  
**Above top** : The entrance to the University Mozarteum Salzburg, Austria  
**Above left** : Duo Piasso's first CD release  
**Above right** : *Quattro Contra Bassi* by the Frankfurt Bass Quartet



www.christinehoock.de) features a broader repertoire, including *alla Mendelssohn* and *Tutti il Mondo Serra* by Bottesini. A highlight of the recording is the thrilling virtuosic solo rendition of *Motivy* by Emil Tabakov.

Nussbaum is the perfect foil for Hoock, possessing the magic balance of brilliant solo pianist and sensitive accompanist. When the two make music together, the result is impressive – a masterful collaboration of like-minded players who share the same vision. Hoock reflects on her longtime relationship with Nussbaum, saying, 'Barbara always brings something new into the framework of our "old" team. We play and push each other – we make progress even when we are not together. We've experienced so many strange and wonderful things.'

In 2003, Hoock accepted a position as Professor of Kontrabass at the University Mozarteum Salzburg, Austria. She gave up her choice solo position in the pre-eminent Cologne orchestra, along with her part-time teaching position at the Robert-Schumann Hochschule in Düsseldorf, to accept the full-time responsibility of the professorship. The winter holiday season 2003 was filled with the monumental task of moving to a new house in Munich, in order to be closer to her new musical home. 'Salzburg is a special place!' Hoock exclaims. 'The natural surroundings are pristine and intact. It is populated by all kinds of people: traditional and modern, local and internationally prominent. And everything here revolves around music.'

Salzburg is a top tourist attraction in Austria, and the importance of the traditional classical scene is driven by the tourists. They want to hear Mozart, eat the famous Mozartkugeln (chocolate balls), visit Mozart's house and maybe take home a beer mug decorated with the face of the great composer. When asked how she balances her lust for modern musical expression with the traditional music scene that defines Salzburg, Hoock answers, 'I have the feeling that Salzburg is waiting for something new. In my short time at the University I've seen a lot of changes – there are a lot of very competent people at work improving the situation. Anyone who brings something new is



*Above: Hoock is always prepared to seek out new musical challenges*

**I prefer solo pieces that use the deep, round tones of the bass – not just virtuosic fingerplay**

welcomed with open arms by the professors and teaching staff. It's a solid breeding ground for ideas. I think that contemporary music is finding its place in Salzburg as well as in the big festivals everywhere.'

In preparing her students for a career playing the bass, Hoock carefully plans a course of study and method of learning tailored to each individual. 'It's always

exciting to find the right approach for each student. Not everyone understands the same explanations – some of them need other starting points, other metaphors.' She also sees being female as an advantage when teaching other women. 'The great thing about teaching female students is that I can give them a special type of self-confidence. I know that women can win top positions, and



Above: The University Mozarteum Salzburg, Austria

**It's always exciting to find the right approach for each student. Not everyone understands the same explanations**

they can survive. This knowledge comes from my personal experience and it has become a part of my personality. I pass that on to all of my students.'

An important part of her lessons is playing for and with the students. The acts of imitation, exaggeration and repetition become vital for the exchange of ideas. Hooek uses all possible types of instruction: verbal, demonstrative, physical, singing, along with video-taping of lessons. Once Hooek has determined the best strategy for a student, the lessons become a complete approach to unlocking creativity – not only the technical and musical aspects, but the physical and spiritual. She often gives students advice for body and mind enrichment: yoga, Feldenkrais, Pilates, and N.L.P. (Neuro Linguistic Programming).

'I start by determining the level of a student,' explains Hooek. 'Even advanced students who have played the solo repertoire in and out can sometimes overestimate themselves and are not in touch with reality. They might have bad posture, or a technical blockage. Then I might prescribe a specific overhaul programme: finger etudes, bow etudes,

maybe an easier solo piece. Instead of Koussevitzky, I might assign a Gordon Jacob concertino, a Marcello sonata, or Andante and Rondo from Dragonetti.'

For every serious student of the double bass, there is a treasure trove of etudes that Hooek uses: Kreutzer, Findeisen, Montag, Möchel, Czerny, Trumpf, Nanny, Mengoli, Simandl and the list goes on. Hooek says, 'I have a huge collection of diverse etudes and finger exercises that addresses every problem. From this material, we assemble an individual warm-up programme.' Hooek also recently completed a play-along CD to help students prepare one of the most requested orchestra audition pieces, the Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf Concerto. The CD, *der Begleiter* (available from [www.berndholz.de](http://www.berndholz.de)), features piano accompaniment in various tempos both in solo and orchestral tuning. 'I wanted to produce a real work CD, so the students can have fun but also work intensively at their own pace,' Hooek says.

Always looking ahead to her next projects, in 2004 Hooek plans a youth bass camp in Markneukirchen, as well as

teaching at the yearly International Summer Academy in Salzburg. Her earlier life as orchestra musician has been replaced by her new life as professor, chamber musician, and soloist. 'During my 14 years of orchestra work in Cologne, I viewed chamber music and solo playing as my hobby. Now the situation is reversed,' she says.

She is constantly looking for new works and composers who are willing to write for solo bass or bass and piano. 'A lot of composers are interested in understanding the bass and all of its colours and possibilities,' she says. 'They just have to be curious enough to look in its direction.' Claudio Putin is writing a piece for Duo Piasso entitled *Hexenohren* (Witches' Ears). 'I should ask once more what he means by that!' Hooek quips. Her colleague at the Mozarteum Salzburg, Ernst Ludwig Leitner, is working with the bassist on a new composition, and the 94 year-old composer Kurt Schwaen is underway with a concertino for bass and woodwind ensemble. These works will be performed on Hooek's English bass made by William Tarr in 1848, equipped with Pirastro Original strings for orchestra work, and Tomastik solo strings or D'Addario hybrid strings for solo and chamber playing. Hooek says, 'it's the earthiness and the versatility of the bass that move me, so the choice of instrument was very important. I wanted an instrument that is very versatile, that sounds very deep in the low register.'

Hooek exemplifies the modern bassist. Prepared and willing to seek out all musical challenges just for the love and the thrill of it, she is a multi-faceted musician who embraces every style of music-making with joy and passion. She sums up her inclusive approach to music, saying 'In each ensemble, the live feeling is different but still an expression of humanity. Whether I'm in an orchestra, quartet, or chamber orchestra, music creates a flow. When I'm really in the moment, music is almost like meditation. After a point, the musical ideas come effortlessly by themselves. It's like you come through a door and suddenly see new possibilities – and then you see the next door, or another perspective on the whole thing just waiting to be discovered.' **DB**