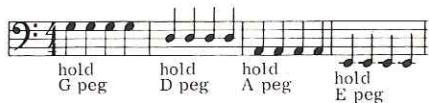


A Different Approach for String Bass Beginners

Bill Scott

A beginning string bass student need not be started in the usual way, with his first finger in the first position. Techniques such as harmonics and double-stops, usually taught only to advanced players, can also be used by the imaginative teacher to instruct the beginner. I often start off such lessons by using this tuning routine. Have the student play each open string with whole bows while holding the corresponding tuning peg. They should make needed intonation adjustments as they bow (example 1).

Example 1



Next, have the student find the octave harmonic by lightly touching the string halfway between the nut and the bridge. Example 2 is played by alternating the left hand between the harmonic and the tuning peg. The point of the exercise is not just to find the harmonic, but to get from the tuning peg to the harmonic and back again. Open notation (P) indicates a harmonic, as opposed to a stopped pitch.

Example 2



The next step is to find third position. Have the student wrap his fist around the neck of the bass so that the base of the hand just touches

the base of the instrument's neck. This is the approximate location of third position; the fourth finger should sound one octave above the next lower string. The third and fourth harmonics, commonly used for tuning, are played with the first and fourth finger in third position. Again, the student should just touch the string and not press it down. The exercise in example 3 uses the third and fourth harmonics on each of the strings. The notes in the treble clef indicate the pitches of the harmonics (one octave higher than their actual sound); finger positions are shown in the bass clef.

Example 3



Bill Scott taught string bass techniques as a teaching assistant at the University of Wisconsin. He is currently Music Director and Conductor of the Huntsville Youth Orchestras and Director of String Development for the Huntsville, Alabama Schools.

Isaac Ostrow is the contributing editor for the String Clinic. He is on the faculty of the School of Music at Utah State University in Logan. He received his DMA from the Eastman School of Music, has played in several professional orchestras, conducted college and youth groups, and formerly taught at Clarion State College in Pennsylvania.



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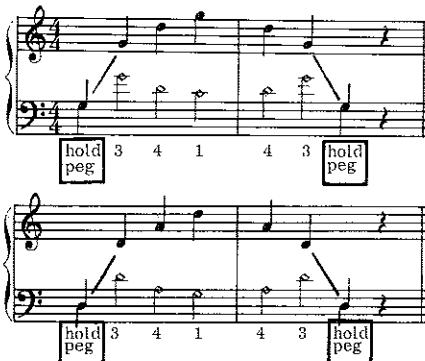
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String Clinic

The final tuning routine combines all three harmonics and the open string. The pattern is given in example 4 and is repeated on all four strings.

Example 4



This tuning routine encourages the student to develop several basic skills on the bass. To shift to harmonics, the player must have good body and instrument balance and must relax the left hand. Many beginners try to hold the bass with the left hand alone. The firm hand grip needed to support the instrument makes shifting and fast playing almost impossible. It is much easier to learn good balance from the start than to try and correct a bad habit later. The exercises help to develop bowing skills, because proper bow speed and angle are necessary to make the harmonics speak. The student also learns which peg tunes each string. (When tuning, many beginning bass players concentrate more on finding out which peg to turn than on the tuning itself.)

Positions

Twelve left hand positions cover the first octave on each string of the bass. With the beginning bass student, I emphasize four of these positions: first, third, fourth, and sixth. These four landmark positions are physically easy to find and can be used as points of reference to locate the remaining positions.

Have the student place his left index finger on the nut of the bass and spread his fingers apart. This represents one handwidth, the unit of measurement along the bass fingerboard. By replacing the fourth finger with the first finger, the student can approximate the first position. Use the terms "north" and "south" to explain direction. This avoids confusion over whether "higher" means a higher pitch or a higher elevation of the hand. With

this terminology, first position is one handwidth south of the nut of the instrument. Other positions can be described in a similar manner.

Fourth position is probably the easiest position to find on the bass. It is located at the point where the thumb stops at the base of the instrument's neck. The index finger will be slightly higher than the thumb on most basses. The first finger should sound an octave above the next lower string.

The remaining two landmark positions, third and sixth, are easy to find if the student has worked with the tuning routine. The third and fourth tuning harmonics are in the third position. This is also one handwidth north of fourth position. Sixth position is where the third finger touches the octave harmonic.

To reinforce these landmark positions, use the shifting exercise shown in example 5. When the student returns to the open string, call out another position and have him repeat the pattern in that position.

Example 5



After a short time playing this drill, the student is ready to fill in the remaining eight positions. These positions should be introduced in terms of their distance in handwidths, north or south, from the landmark positions. Gradually include these new positions in the shifting exercise. As the shifting itself gets easier, different bowings and rhythms can be added.

Double-stops

Double-stop playing on the string bass is usually left to more advanced students, but the beginning player can also improve certain skills by practicing them. Double-stops require a straight bow and the right combination of weight and speed to make both strings speak equally. A good hand position and curved fingers are necessary to make both notes clear and in tune. Finally, by playing double-notes the student can easily see that spatial adjustments must be made to stay in tune in the higher positions.

Teaching the Double-note Scale

To introduce the double-stop scale, have the student play a one-finger scale on a single string. (example 6)

Example 6

Then have the student play a scale of broken perfect fifths followed by the double-stop, as in example 7. (The third finger may be substituted for the fourth in the higher positions).

Example 7

After the student becomes familiar with this exercise, the broken fifth can be eliminated. The result is shown in example 8.

Example 8

Another double-stop scale which can be introduced to the beginner at this point is the major scale in thirds. Since this scale contains both major and minor thirds, the fingers cannot assume a single grouping, as they did in the previous scale of perfect fifths. To avoid fingering confusion, have the student think of the two finger groupings, and play the scale by ear: first and fourth finger (distant grouping) for minor thirds, and first and second finger (close grouping) for major thirds. The pattern is shown in example 9.

Example 9

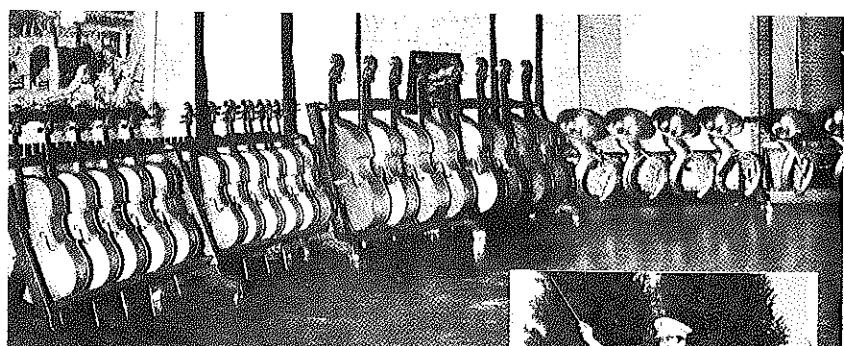
Start by having the student play the broken third, followed by the double-note; just as with the perfect fifth scale. (example 10).

Example 10.

Then move on to the double-note scale without the broken intervals, as shown in example 9. Using this method, even beginners can learn to play the double-note scale. ■

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