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The Double Bass Choirs of Spartanburg



BY BILL RUSSELL SCOTT

Where else but in Spartanburg, South Carolina would you find two performing double bass ensembles? In this city of 45,000 residents 850 students, representing 12 percent of the student population, study orchestral stringed instruments, making this the largest string program in the state. The musical population of the city is highly sophisticated and the school district offers administrative and financial support to the music programs throughout the year. Add to this the fact that the head of the pre-college music department of the local college is interested in new and innovative music programs and the idea of a bass ensemble is born.

As string coordinator of district schools, I had taught between 10 and 14 private bass students per year since 1980. When the head of Converse College's pre-college music department approached me with the idea of founding a double bass ensemble, I agreed to try it for a year, although with much hesitation. Some of my reluctance concerned the merits of such a pro-

gram for my bass students. What would they gain? How successful would the program be for them?

That summer I played in a double bass trio and discovered two good reasons for beginning a double bass ensemble. My students could play chamber music, an idiom that the bassist doesn't often encounter, and they would have the chance to play both the melody and harmony, a rare opportunity for bassists.

As my hesitation abated, I focused attention on locating appropriate literature for bass ensemble — a complicated task because few original compositions or arrangements have been written for bass choirs. The problem was solved, however, at the National String Orchestra Association Summer Conference. While speaking with

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a trombonist, I discovered he owned a large collection of trombone ensemble music. He allowed me to peruse his library; and I selected several compositions that would be appealing technically as well as musically to junior high and high school bass students.

I formed two ensembles: a junior bass ensemble consisting of 10 junior high school students, and a senior bass ensemble made up of nine high school students. All bassists auditioned for the ensembles and paid a tuition fee of \$25.00 per



semester. Students performed in quartets and trios, rotating the music within the ensemble so each bassist would have a chance to play the upper part and so familiarize himself with playing in the thumb position. Each ensemble met for six one-hour sessions per semester and performed twice during the year at the close of solo recital programs.

After the first year of working with the bass ensembles I saw and heard my students benefiting in several ways. They needed fewer sectional rehearsals for the high school symphony. In the smaller ensembles they performed music that was rhythmically independent of the bass players standing next to them, requiring them to



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count subdivisions of the beat in order to keep their places. Their new rhythmic facility, in turn, enhanced unison orchestral playing. The bowing articulation required in works like Morley's *Now is the Month of Maying* or Vivaldi's Concerto for Four Double Basses (Trombones) encouraged a greater awareness of bowing styles both in ensemble and solo playing. Overall they played major orchestral literature better as a section because of the bass ensemble practice. The bass choir catered to different levels of ability within the group. Reading parts in the thumb position challenged advanced students, while younger students observed and improved their playing by following the model set by the more experienced players. Seven ensemble members joined the local volunteer symphony orchestra, adding to and supporting its bass section. The school district enjoyed its largest double bass population ever. The ensemble created a greater sense of integrity for the double bass as an important musical instrument. Students purchased beautiful hand-carved basses and first-rate wooden bows. Most important, however, the ensemble created a positive musical experience: it was fun, and it cultivated an invaluable esprit de corps among the bass students.

Here is a list of some of the works we used in performances that year.

The Colors Churn Within the Thunderstorm, Schubert, transcr. Singleton.

March Fanfare, C.P.E. Bach, arr. Yates.

Now is the Month of Maying, Morley, transcr. Myers.

Christmas Carols, arr. Wagner.

Grave-diggers Song, Schubert, transcr. Singleton.

Let Me Drink!, Schumann, transcr. Singleton.

Sonata No. 2, Daniel Speer.

In Majesty Upon the Sublime Throne, Schubert, transcr. Singleton.

Rule Britannia, Arne, arr. Benoy.

My Bonnie Lass, Morley, transcr. Meyers.

Concerto for Four Double Basses, Telemann.