

CLASSICAL DOUBLE BASS PEDAGOGY FOR INTERMEDIATE JAZZ BASS STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Numerous renowned jazz bassists, such as Ron Carter, Eddie Gomez, Christian McBride, and John Patitucci, underwent classical music training. However, other jazz musicians can be skeptical about whether classical training would enhance the quality of jazz performances. To examine the benefits of a classical bass method to jazz bassists, the researcher demonstrates a study of four hours of classical bass training to bass students who had received jazz training at the intermediate level. These four classical bass lessons include the study of appropriate postures for the bassist, the use of the double bass bow, left-hand techniques covering positions I–VII, and the study of thumb position. Consequently, four criteria from the class observations indicate that classical bass training may improve the quality of jazz bass performances.

Keywords: Jazz Bass/ Jazz Pedagogy/ Intermediate Jazz Bass Student

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Introduction

Does a jazz bassist benefit from classical training? What sort of classical bass teaching is useful for jazz bassists? The researcher studied the outcomes of four hours of classical bass instruction given to jazz bass students in order to answer these two key research objectives.

Although jazz musicians disagree as to the value of classical training in jazz¹, in reality, most professional jazz bassists have studied classical bass. For instance, one of the most prominent classically-trained jazz bassists is Eddie Gomez. At the age of 14, Gomez started taking private lessons from great classical bassist Frederick Zimmerman.² Ron Carter, too, before starting his career in jazz, was a classical music student at the Eastman School of Music, where he graduated in 1959 as an accomplished cellist and classical bass player.³ However, he made the decision to give up his career in classical music because of the racism in the American classical music industry in the mid-twentieth century and the dearth of opportunities for African Americans.⁴

In classical bass pedagogies, many techniques are taught to assist the players to perform the music more efficiently. Intonation, for example, is the principal concentration for a classical bassist. For this reason, the researcher assumes that in order for the jazz bassist to execute correctly with accurate hand placements, posture, and equilibrium, they should adopt a classical approach for the left-hand technique. In addition, a jazz bassist may benefit from becoming familiar with classical techniques, which enable them to play with greater flexibility and precision.

The researcher intensively studied classical bass performance as a graduate student in the jazz studies program at the University of New Orleans from 2013 to 2014. As a result, the researcher was able to pick up all of the essential classical bass techniques, including the appropriate posture, techniques for both right and left hands, and bowing techniques. The researcher later joined the New Orleans Civic Symphony Orchestra's bass department, playing frequently with the orchestra in 2014 and 2015. Consequently, all of the bass lessons and exercises of the study were developed through his classical training and experience of classical bass performances.

¹ Brent Vaartstra, "LJS 56: 8 Reasons Why Jazz Musicians Should Shed Classical," accessed April 3, 2017, <https://www.learnjazzstandards.com/ljs-podcast/jazz-tips-and-advice/ljs-56-8-reasons-jazz-musicians-shed-classical>.

² John Goldsby, *The Jazz Bass Book: Technique and Tradition* (San Francisco, California: Backbeat Books, 2002), 131.

³ John Goldsby, *The Jazz Bass Book: Technique and Tradition* (San Francisco, California: Backbeat Books, 2002), 125.

⁴ Tom Vitale, "85-year-old bassist Ron Carter has no plans on slowing down," accessed May 4, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/04/1096293712/85-year-old-bassist-ron-carter-has-no-plans-on-slowing-dow>.

Literature review

The string bass is believed to have been used first in classical music in the sixteenth century.⁵ The instrument was designed to be used as the low voice of an orchestral string section, and has presented physical challenges to the player since its creation. A modern approach to this instrument was introduced in the late 17th century by the Italian bass virtuoso Domenico Dragonetti.⁶ He inspired numerous composers to create challenging works for the bass. Later, classical bass pedagogues such as Franz Simandl, the principal bassist for the Vienna Court Opera Orchestra, and Francois Rabbath, a contemporary French bassist, would develop a fundamental classical curriculum for string bass.

For example, Franz Simandl's *New Method for the Double Bass* is a course to facilitate the classical bass player's understanding of hand position and bowing techniques.⁷ This method was developed in 1881 with the intention of preparing a bassist for playing in classical orchestras and solo performances. Additionally, the author provided a variety of etudes that may be used to refine both left- and right-hand skills in accordance with classical bass training.

Inspired by Simandl's work, Francois Rabbath published his own classical bass method in 1977. His *Nouvelle Technique de la Contrabasse* was revolutionary in its individuality and freedom of expression.⁸ In his method, Rabbath encourages the student to discover methods that work well and to explore the entire range of the instrument as well as its tonal and timbral possibilities. He also provides the pupil with some autonomy in defining the method's fingerings.

Jazz bass pedagogy also shows the influence of Simandl's approach. Ron Carter, who had a significant classical background, published *Comprehensive Bass Technique* in 2021.⁹ In this book, Carter provides various musical etudes that can help jazz bassists grasp the concept of fingerings and positions typical of a classical bass education. In addition, he explicitly demonstrates the appropriate fingering for playing scales and arpeggios, as well as how to use this technique in performance.

⁵ Patrick Lavergne, "The Origin and the Evolution of the Double Bass" (DMA diss., University of Miami, 2021), 2-4.

⁶ Geoffrey Saunders, "The Art of The Bow: Towards Developing a Pedagogy for Arco Jazz Bass" (DMA diss., University of Miami, 2017), 4.

⁷ Franz Simandl, *New Method for the Double Bass* (New York: C. Fischer, 1964), 7-11.

⁸ Francois Rabbath, *Nouvelle Technique de la Contrabasse*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1977), 6-7.

⁹ Ron Carter, *Ron Carter's Comprehensive Bass Method* (New York: Retrac Productions, 2021), 2-6.

John Goldsby, a bassist for the WDR Big Band in Cologne, Germany, published his own textbook, *Jazz Bowing Techniques for the Improvising Bassist* in 1990.¹⁰ His work addresses the bowing techniques of jazz musicians including Jimmie Blanton, Slam Stewart, and Paul Chambers. The book begins with a few open-string exercises incorporating different articulations before moving on to string-crossing exercises designed for the jazz bassist.

Rufus Reid's 2004 *The Evolving Bassist* is a popular book for jazz bass. In an effort to create a comprehensive bass overview, Reid covers both electric and acoustic basses as well as arco and pizzicato techniques.¹¹ The book begins with a discussion of how to produce a sound and hold the bow before moving on to walking bass lines and solo concepts in jazz performance. The bowing exercises in his book are also suitable for beginning bass students and can be beneficial for intonation practice.

In 2009, Jeff Bradetich, a professor of double bass of classical performance at the University of North Texas, published *Double Bass: the Ultimate Challenge*, a textbook that can be useful for both classical and jazz bassists.¹² The book is appropriate for a beginner since it covers the fundamentals of body postures, finger concepts, bow strokes, and the usage of pizzicato techniques in great detail and in a way that is comprehensible for students with varying levels of music training. It also provides pictures demonstrating various bassist postures and appropriate bow holding. They can also be later applied in classroom settings.

These are the most frequently used jazz and classical bass pedagogies written by renowned bass pedagogues and professional bassists. They were chosen as the primary resource for this study and suggested to the jazz bass pupils during the 4 hours of classical bass training.

Objectives

The purpose of this research is to:

1. Observe the benefits of jazz bassists in learning classical music;
2. Demonstrate fundamental classical bass techniques that the jazz bassist may use;
3. Offer an example of classical bass methods to improve intermediate jazz bass students

¹⁰ John Goldsby, *Jazz Bowing Techniques for the Improvising Bassist* (Los Angeles, California: Alfred Music, 1990), 49-52.

¹¹ Rufus Reid, *The Evolving Bassist: A Comprehensive Method in Developing a Total Musical Concept for the Aspiring Jazz Bass Player* (Teaneck, N.J.: Myriad, 2004), 18-20.

¹² Jeff Bradetich, *Double Bass: The Ultimate Challenge* (Denton, Texas: Music For All To Hear, 2016), 6-11.

Methods

As Ann Clements has stated, a case study in music education “can serve as a how-to guide, helping the reader consider the different approaches and tools they can use to experiment with these approaches in their own teaching and learning situations.”¹³ With that in mind, this study employed the case study method, using class observations and the musical experience of the pupils to answer the research question. This research design is also suitable for this investigation as it involves the study of real-life settings.¹⁴ Four one-hour classical bass lessons were given to the two bass students who had received jazz training at the intermediate level¹⁵ and were already able to play a couple of jazz standards.

Several musical exercises designed by the researcher were also used in the lesson to help the students apply their knowledge practically. These were provided alongside jazz bass lessons in which the pupils learned to improvise over the jazz standards assigned in combo lessons. The lessons were given at the 2021 New Zealand Jazz Workshops (December 7-11), Wellington, New Zealand, where the researcher served as a bass and ensemble instructor in the jazz workshop.

Discussions

Lesson One

Posture

Posture is the foundation of all techniques for the study of double bass. Improper posture can negatively affect a bassist in many ways, including threatening their physical health. To determine an appropriate height for a bass, Jeff Bradetich explains that “when the body and bow are played in the most natural way possible and the bow placement meets the optimum sounding point on the string, then the correct height of the instrument has been found.”¹⁶

In order to put this into practice in the first lesson, the researcher let two pupils hold the bow without playing to determine whether the height of their instrument was appropriate.

¹³ Ann Callistro Clements, *Alternative Approaches in Music Education: Case Studies from the Field* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2010), 6.

¹⁴ For more details of a case study in music education, see Tim Cain, and Joanna Cursley, *Teaching Music Differently: Case Studies of Inspiring Pedagogies* (Milton Park, Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2017).

¹⁵ Students who understand the fundamentals of Major, Minor, Dominant, and Blues scales and able to play Major, Minor, and Dominant 7th Arpeggios on their instruments are considered to be at the intermediate level of this study. As well, they can play a few jazz standards, like “All of Me,” “Autumn Leaves,” and a 12-bar blues song.

¹⁶ Jeff Bradetich, *Double Bass: The Ultimate Challenge* (Denton, Texas: Music For All To Hear, 2016), 8.

For example, if the left hand can reach the 1st position on the string bass, but the right hand cannot place the bow below the end of the fingerboard, then the bass is too low. On the other hand, if the bow placement seems to be appropriate for the right hand of the player, but their left-hand reach to the 1st position is too far, the bass placement is too high. As a result, players must use both hands to find a bass's proper height according to classical bass pedagogy. Later, two frequently used positions in classical bass performance, i.e., standing and sitting, were demonstrated to the students.

Standing position

The researcher continually emphasized to the jazz bass students that when holding a bass according to classical bass pedagogy, there should be no pressure or weight on the left hand. Their right arm must be close to the instrument. If the player leans the instrument back into their body or forwards away from their body, there will be more trouble maintaining intonation with their left hand and bow placement with their right.

Sitting position

The sitting position is favored by professional orchestra players. Jazz bassists adopting this position can feel more at ease and relaxed throughout lengthy rehearsals and performances. In addition, the pose may facilitate a jazz bassist to learn more how to monitor and adjust the balance of their instrument when performing and practicing. The researcher explained that while sitting to play, the jazz bass students should lean the instrument against their left leg first with their left knee touching the body of the bass. The players may place their left foot on the rest foot of the stool, which for a bassist should be at a height of around 60–90 cm. Alternatively, some bass players may sit with the bass directly in front of them and let the instrument touch both of their legs, similar to the sitting pose used by cello players.

As a result, there were no exercises for the pupils to practice. After teaching the classical bass posture, the researcher only advised the pupils to determine the best posture to use during performances.

Lesson Two

Bowing

The second lesson focused on bowing technique. In fact, playing a double bass with a bow allows for a louder and more obvious sound than when playing pizzicato. For this reason, the researcher believes that this technique can help the bassist to learn to play

the pitches more in tune. In a classical bass performance, two distinct bows—the German and the French—are used. This lesson, however, used only the former.

The researcher later demonstrated how to hold the bow by following by these steps:

1. The bow is held in the palm of the right hand,
2. The tip of the little finger should be placed under the frog next to where the hair of the bow meets the frog,
3. The tip of the thumb should be placed on the bow stick,
4. The index and middle fingers work together and are placed gently on the side of the stick, and
5. Every finger should be relaxed.

Consequently, the students were able to grip the German bow using the classic bass technique and were prepared for the following stage. The researcher then noted that the jazz bass student should recognize that the bow placement always affects the tone when producing a sound. For example, with the bow close to the fingerboard, the tone is darker, less intense, and soft, but if they set the bow near the bridge, the sound is bright, intense, and more focused. Normally, when the classical bass player plays a low voice, they should put the bow close to the fingerboard and if they desire to play a high note, the bow should be moved lower and closer to the bridge.

After the discussion of bow holding and placement, the researcher demonstrated one exercise—the bowing method on open strings—before giving it to the students to allow them to continue practicing their bowing skills, as shown below.





Figure 1 Bowing exercises

Source: by author

Lesson Three

The left hand and its position

The left-hand position is crucial for the production of the correct pitch. Before learning any piece of music, every classical bass student is required to learn proper left-hand technique. For the third lesson, the researcher began by indicating to the students that only three fingers are used on a string when playing the double bass, with the first, second, and fourth fingers being the predominant use in classical bass methods – the third finger is commonly utilized to support the fourth finger.) In addition, the shape of their left hand also should be curved in the same way as when holding a glass or a can of soda, which is known in classical pedagogy as the “hammer” method.

The researcher later continued by explaining to the pupils that the left-hand curves in the hammer pose also help bass players use greater force while compressing the string on the fingerboard. It is important that the angle of the left wrist of the bass player should be straight and at rest so the player will be able to keep the top of the forearm and the left hand horizontal. Even when they move their left hand from one position to the next, the hand pose must remain the same. There are many common problems in the use of the left hand, such as the bent left wrist and the collapsed finger, which the researcher later highlighted to the students.

The position

The position is determined by the placement of the fingers of the left hand at a higher or lower point of the fingerboard. Starting from the nut and moving up the fingerboard in semitones, we can distinguish between several positions. These positions, according to Franz Simandl, are symmetrical to make it simpler for the classical bassist to grasp the concept.¹⁷

In classical bass education, the bassist may use more than twelve locations on the fingerboard. To make it easier to understand, the chart below was given to pupils to demonstrate the left-hand positions.

Table 1 Positions of the left hand

Source: adapted by the author from Franz Simandl, *New Method for the Double Bass* (New York: C. Fischer, 1964).

The signs of the position	The signs of fingers
h. p. = the half position	1 = the first finger
I = the first position	2 = the second finger
II = the second position	3 = the third finger (used for the thumb position)
II half = the second-and-a-half position	4= the fourth finger
III = the third position	0 = open string
III half = the third-and-a-half position	+ = thumb
IV= the fourth position	
IV half = the fourth-and-a-half position	
V= the fifth position	
V half = the fifth-and-a-half position	
VI = the sixth position	
VI half = the sixth-and-a-half position	
VII = the seventh position	

Before the end of the third lesson, the researcher also demonstrated a couple of musical exercises related to position techniques for the students to practice. The figure below provides an example of the position exercises demonstrated during the third lesson.

¹⁷ Franz Simandl, *New Method for the Double Bass* (New York: C. Fischer, 1964), 6.

1. The half position: F major scale



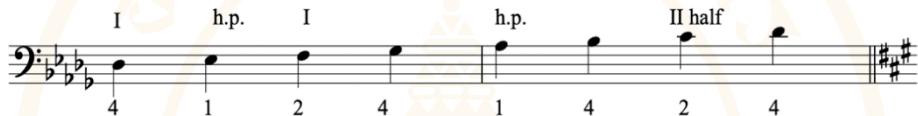
2. The first position: G major scale



3. The second position: C major scale (in combination with the first position)



4. The second half position : Db major scale



5. The third position : A major scale on A string



Figure 2 An illustration of the position exercises

Source: by author

Lesson Four**Shifting and the thumb position**

When playing the bass in multiple positions, jazz bass players may not be able to play intonation precisely. For example, it can be challenging for the player to keep an accurate pitch when using the first finger on the left hand to play the A on the G string and then sliding the finger to the D in fourth position. The technique of shifting is necessary to help the bassist move more effectively from one note to another.

The researcher proceeded to advise the students to carry out the following actions in order to employ shifting:

1. The first and fourth fingers of the student's left hand should gently touch the neck. The finger will be able to move more freely,
2. The students should then delicately press their finger down on the string to the desired note. (It is highly advised that the player begin with the index finger),

3. The students should relax the thumb pressure on the neck after playing the primary note so the hand can move smoothly, and

4. Students must begin sliding their fingers to the desired note without pausing.

In order to put this into practice, the following figure was offered as part of the shifting exercises and demonstrated by the researcher during the fourth class. The exercise can also be played pizzicato.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Figure 3 Demonstration of the shifting exercises

Source: by author

The thumb position

The final classical bass lesson conducted for this research was on the thumb position technique commonly used in classical performance. Mastering thumb position techniques also enables jazz bassists to perform in rapid passages, facilitating massive intervals without too much shifting or moving across the fingerboard.

In order to acquire this technique, players should use the side of their thumb, placing the base of their thumbnail on the string. The placement of the thumb position should be also established where the player can produce the first harmonic, which on the G string is also the G in seventh position as stated before. The index finger should also be curved and touches the string to produce an A. The students must later verify that the A note is a whole step away from the G being pressed down by the thumb. The middle finger is also slightly curved (less than the 1st) pressing the string down to produce the B-flat, which should be a half step from the A. The ring (i.e., third) finger is straightened out in order to produce the B pitch. The students may slightly lean the instrument while they are playing in thumb position.

The figure below provides an example of the thumb position exercises given in the fourth lesson. These can be also played pizzicato.

1. The thumb position on G string

2. The thumb position on D string

3. The thumb position on A string



4. The thumb position on E string



Figure 4 Thumb position exercises

Source: by author

Results

After completing the four classical bass training sessions, the researcher noticed significant similarities in the results between the two students. Four criteria from the class observations can be used to assess whether their musical experiences with classical bass training can improve the quality of jazz performances:

1. Both students agreed that the approach to posture presented in classical bass lessons can help them to perform and practice more comfortably. For instance, the students stated that after practicing for a while, they always experience backaches. Nonetheless, after understanding the classical bass approach to posture, they can now sense that his body is more relaxed during practice and performance. As a result, both students decided to alter their bass height in accordance with the classical bass pedagogy demonstrated in the lesson,

2. Both students agreed that the left-hand position is the one that gives them the best understanding of how they can use their fingers on the fingerboard, enabling them to pick their fingers more effectively when playing walking bass lines in jazz performances. Additionally, the method also enhances the overall quality of their intonation,

3. The students also highlighted how the shifting method is a crucial tool when they need to play a note that moves across the strings, as they frequently do when playing the melody of jazz songs. In addition, one student also suggested that this technique may help them to play basslines at a slow tempo for ballads.

4. Both students stated that the thumb position technique and its exercise can help them organize their fingering more effectively and efficiently when performing in the high register in jazz tunes

Both students, however, struggled with using a bow and were skeptical of whether this method could improve the quality of their jazz performances. The researches indicate that this may make teaching bowing to jazz bass students somewhat more challenging. Moreover, learning this technique may take students more time than other methods.

Nonetheless, introducing a jazz bassist with bowing expertise, such as Paul Chamber, Christian McBride, or John Goldsby, may inspire students to continue sharpening this technique, which the researcher believes could be advantageous for jazz bassists in the long run.

Conclusion

The observation from the demonstrated lessons for this research revealed that these four classical bass lessons can help jazz bass students improve the fundamental understanding of their instrument. In jazz studies, the typical learning of the jazz bassist may primarily focus on improvising over chord progressions through the use of walking bass lines and solos. However, learning classical techniques can help the jazz bassist comprehend the fundamental skills that they need to build up a solid foundation, which can help them perform jazz tunes more efficiently and effectively. Having classical bass training can also help jazz bassists explore new techniques, such as utilizing a bow and a shifting technique, that may improve the quality of their jazz performances.

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