

DENNIS CONNORS



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4 Things They Don't Tell You About Playing the Double Bass

Congratulations—you've decided to play the double bass. It's a wonderful instrument that can bring you an incredible level of fulfillment and enjoyment. There are, however, a couple of things you might want to know about playing the bass that not everybody talks about. Every instrument has its quirks and pitfalls, and the double bass is no exception; identifying the issues endemic to the instrument is the first step in managing and overcoming them. I can think of four major challenges you will need to address in order to achieve success on the double bass.

You won't hear all the notes you play. Come again? How can you expect to play music if you can't hear all the notes you play? Welcome to life on the low

end of the sonic spectrum. The bass, especially when it's plucked with the fingers as it usually is in jazz, is one of the quietest instruments traditionally found in jazz—it lacks the power and volume of an instrument like the saxophone or the drums. Simply put, the louder an instrument is, the easier it is to hear it. Couple that with the fact that notes that are lower in frequency have a harder time separating themselves from the overall fabric of the music in many circumstances.

Things get even more complicated when we have to compete with instruments like the lower-pitched drums in the drum kit and the lower part of the piano. Both instruments live in the same sonic space and have the ability to overpower the bass in terms of volume and timbre. This is a challenging thing to deal with wheth-

er you're playing in a purely acoustic setting or whether you're playing with amplification.

So, what's to be done about this? The first thing is to understand that there will be times when your notes will not have all the clarity you normally would have, if you were playing by yourself in the practice room. Most of the time, as bass players, we are in the role of accompanist, and that means we are there to support and not to stick out. In those moments when you feel you're getting buried by the other instruments, it's important to remember not to panic. The natural instinct is to start pulling harder on the strings and gripping the instrument more tightly. It's best just to ride it out and stay relaxed and calm on the instrument. Pulling harder, squeezing harder and forcing the issue in general usu-

ally just leads to a loss of control and intonation.

There are a few technical tricks you can use. Picking closer to the tip of your fingers, rather than the side of the fingers, tends to create a slightly thinner sound that can cut through the texture. Also, moving your hand a little closer to the bridge will brighten and tighten the sound for a little bit more clarity. Keep in mind that if you are a player who likes to play with gut or synthetic gut-style strings, your sound is naturally going to be a bit more diffuse, as opposed to playing with steel strings, which will have a better chance of cutting through.

Some basses naturally have a very warm and round sound, while others can be a bit more “punching” in quality. Knowing about your gear and your setup can help you put yourself in a position where you’re most comfortable dealing with this issue. Sometimes, the notes we play are “felt” more than they are heard. It’s just part of the beauty of playing the double bass. It’s true that playing through an amplifier can help with this issue, but it also presents the bassist with a whole new set of challenges.

For an instrument that is acoustic, you’re going to spend a lot of time dealing with electronics. Amplification and sound reinforcement are realities of modern music today. Unless you’re playing the smallest and most intimate of venues, chances are you’re going to need to play with some kind of amplification. As acoustic bass players, we practice for hours and hours to develop our sound. It’s that beautiful, resonant sound of the instrument that caused most of us to fall in love with it in the first place. The minute we plug our instrument into an amplifier, however, the game changes.

While playing through an amp can solve the problem of not having enough volume for your bass, there has not yet been invented a system that perfectly replicates the tone of an acoustic bass through an amplifier. Because we spend so much time performing through an amplifier, it is just as important to learn how to get a good sound through an amp as it is to get a good sound acoustically on your bass. After all, most of the time, people are going to be hearing you play while you’re performing at a concert and not at home in your bedroom. The better your sound is through an amp, the more likely people are to hire you, since they don’t want to listen to an unattractive bass sound any more than you do.

The good news is that technology finally is catching up to the acoustic bass. It seems that every day there are new companies that are improving all of the different electronic gadgets we use to help us get closer to a sound that truly represents the instrument. Some people prefer to use a combination of a pickup, microphone and preamp to give themselves the widest range of possibilities for dialing in a good sound. The advantage of this is that you are better able to

adapt to the sound of each individual room you play in. Other people prefer a simpler setup with a pickup that works best for them along with an amp that is paired to match. Whatever your combination of gear, it’s always a good idea to try out a lot of different options to see what sounds best on your individual bass and what responds the best to your style of play.

If you’re new to be playing through an amp, or if you have new gear to play with, it’s a good idea to practice at home through your amplifier for a period of time, so that you know how to best manage your sound on the gig. Remember that volume doesn’t always equal clarity. Often the best way to be heard on the gig is knowing which frequencies on the amp to either boost or cut. Sometimes, turning down the bass frequencies might add more clarity. Other times, it’s about raising the high-mid frequencies. The more you know about how your amp works and responds, the better you’ll be able to make those decisions on the fly during a gig.

Getting to the gig is half the battle. The bass is a large instrument, and no matter how you choose to transport it, it’s always going to be difficult. However, there are also a few less obvious issues to contend with. If you’re able to drive to gigs, there’s still the issue of getting your bass and amp in and out of the club. Are there a lot of steps? Maybe buying that 40-pound amplifier that gives you an amazing sound suddenly doesn’t seem like such a good idea. Keep an eye on weight and portability of the gear that you buy. Maybe you live in the city and rely on public transportation to get to your gig. Which bus lines can you fit on, and which ones don’t have room? Which entrance to which subway can you get your bass into, and which ones will it not fit through? These are all questions you want to address before you find yourself coming home from a gig at 1 a.m.

Then there’s the question of playing out of town. If you have to fly to a gig, just how are you planning to get your bass there? Sure, there is the possibility of borrowing an instrument at your destination, but there’s never any way to know what kind of instrument you’re going to get. There are a number of companies that make travel-sized basses that are popular with a number of players. Some have bodies that are cut down, so that they fit in a case that’s a little bit larger than a cello. Others make a regular full-size bass with a detachable neck that allows it to fold up into a smaller, more manageable size. Even with these travel options, you have to think about just how big of a suitcase you can drag around along with what is still a rather cumbersome object.

Learning to physically address the instrument will take years. I remember attending a college master class with the veteran jazz double bassist Dave Holland. One of the other

bass players in the audience was Martin Wind, a great player in his own right. Wind asked Holland what his approach to standing with the instrument was. I remember hearing a few other people around us snickering at the question, thinking that it was a trivial thing to ask someone like Dave Holland. Holland gave a very thoughtful and serious answer about his different approaches to his weight distribution and posture as he held the instrument. That’s because any serious player knows that just to stand with the instrument with the minimal amount of tension in your body is something that takes years and years of constant practice and attention.

Learning to play the double bass is not about finding a comfortable position to play from and being set for life. It is a constant journey of developing your body awareness, so that you can move freely anywhere on the instrument as the music calls for it. It’s about finding greater positions of leverage on the instrument that allow you to use less brute force and be more efficient in your movements. The more effort you spend trying to hold the instrument up and keep it stable, the less time and effort you can spend actually playing music on it. Finding that position of leverage is about experimenting with how high or low you set your endpin along with an awareness of where you’re holding tension in your body. Is your back tight because you are trying to counter the weight of the bass leaning into you? Do you raise one shoulder more than another to get your right or left hand in a more comfortable position? Could you achieve the same effect by relaxing a certain combination of muscles in one or both arms?

Your ability to play time, create a vibe and interact creatively with the band all directly are impacted by how relaxed and in control you are on the instrument. The best players are always experimenting with how they address the double bass, with the goal of finding every possible advantage in translating the music from what they hear in their head to what you hear them play.

If all of the above seems like a lot to deal with, don’t worry—you’re in good company. These are all issues that every bass player has to reckon with. It’s helpful to talk with other players about how they deal with these issues and share experiences—you just might find someone who has come up with a solution to a problem you’re having. Just remember that with effort and concentration, you can make plenty of amazing music on the double bass, in spite of the many challenges it presents.

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Mark Wade has been an active bassist on the New York scene for more than 20 years. He is also a jazz faculty member at Lehigh University. Wade was voted one of the top 10 bassists of 2016 in *DownBeat*’s 81st Annual Readers Poll. His new album, *Moving Day*, is available in Europe on Edition 46 Records and worldwide on his label Mark Wade Music. To find out more about Wade’s music and his upcoming performances, and to continue the conversation about the double bass, visit his website: markwademusicny.com.