

Equipping the Beginner

If the teacher cannot make an acceptable sound on a student's instrument, what reasonable person would expect the beginner to have any success with it? That is why when a new student comes to me the first order of business is to see if his instrument and bow are playable. Perhaps the bass came from school or was rented from one of the local shops. If the bass is the correct size for the student, I check that the bridge has been adjusted to the lowest possible action throughout the full range of the instrument. If this has not been done, I ask the parent take the bass to a shop to have the bridge adjusted. In order to do that the fingerboard may need to be planed. Invariably the strings on school basses need to be replaced. The endpin must be in working order. If the bow hair is old or dirty it must be replaced. The shops in my area are all acquainted with the specifications I require and it is usually not too expensive to have the school instrument put in serviceable adjustment.

It is essential that the beginner have a bow that is not too long. There are no industry standards about the designations "quarter-size," "half-size," etc., but my observation is that the young bass player has usually been supplied with a bow that is longer than his arm. He will find it impossible to draw the bow perpendicular to the string. In addition to being too long, the fiberglass bows often seen in school programs are so tip heavy that the student cannot manage the bow in a normal way. Later, when he acquires a bow that is properly balanced, he will have to retrain.

The parents of the beginning bass player will understand, sooner or later, that the instrument and bow must have some fine qualities in order for the student to make progress. Carved basses made in Germany are available. My students typically trade up through the small sizes until they grow big enough to handle the "Q Model" double bass designed by Christian Laborie after his famous Quenoil pattern. (A trade-in program also makes good economic sense for the parents. The student has good instruments to play as he grows and when the time comes to purchase an adult-size bass most of the investment has already been made.

All of my basses have Corelli tungsten strings. If a new student's bass has another type I require that they be changed because Corelli strings will help the student learn to bow correctly.

The bows made by Jean Grunberger for bass virtuoso François Rabbath are ideal for our purposes. They are, however, rare and expensive. Rabbath has also worked more recently with Gilles Duhaut. The bows of the Canadian maker, Zdzislaw Prochownik, are recommended and reasonably priced. Many of my students are using the carbon fiber Carbow by LNM which was designed by Grunberger. The Carbow has the feel and characteristics of Grunberger's fine wooden bows, but in a price range for students.

My preferred bows for the young players are the brazil wood models produced by Ary France. They have the wide ribbon of hair and deep camber necessary to produce the beautiful tones possible with the technique I teach.

I always install a piece of pure latex surgical tubing on French bows over the place where the frog meets the stick to create a cushion for the thumb. This is something the teacher can do at almost no expense to make a huge difference in comfort for the student.

Every bass player must have a cake of rosin. Carlsson is my preference. There are many others on the market. For some reason schools are often supplied with rosin that does not work at all.

Although a stool is not a necessary piece of equipment for a developed player, I expect a beginner to play in a seated position so that he will not be distracted by trying to balance the instrument while so many other matters occupy his attention. Any inexpensive wooden stool is serviceable but the height must be correctly established by the teacher and the legs sawed off accordingly.

From Rabbath we have learned that using an endpin installed at a 44° angle solves many problems. (Read the article “A Few words about the bent endpin.”) On school basses and rental basses I install a bent steel rod in the existing endpin socket.

After trying the Bent Endpin many players who own their own basses make the decision to have the Laborie graphite endpin installed. This simple solution to the endpin problem is a huge advance among the technologies that assist us to play the bass more easily.

And finally, among all the items a beginner must have is some device for tuning the bass to A-440. See “Tuning Procedure” in *Progressive Repertoire, Vol. 1*. The simplest thing for someone who does not have experience is a battery operated chromatic tuner such as the Korg CA-30. It enables the student to tune the open strings accurately. As the student becomes more sophisticated he can use an inexpensive tuning fork or tune to the pitch produced by most electric metronomes. I prefer the chromatic tuner for beginners especially if there is no one at home who knows how to assist with the tuning procedure.