

JAZZ BOWING TECHNIQUES

for the Improvising Bassist

A New Approach to Playing Arco Jazz

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Introduction

The arco bass tradition encompasses a long and noble history. Jazz bassists use the bow in many different ways to expand the sound of their improvisation. This book is about the possibility of expanding your improvisational sound.

The bass in a jazz group has traditionally been an ensemble instrument serving a specific function. The main responsibility of a jazz bassist is to provide a continuous pulse while outlining the harmonic structure of the music. The bass works in conjunction with the other “rhythm section” instruments (drums, piano, guitar) to create a unified sound. All of the bassists mentioned in this book are great rhythm section players. These bassists play with a group performance in mind.

The bass player spends most of a performance playing “time” with the rhythm section, creating a backdrop for the other soloists to improvise over. This role is the most important aspect of a jazz bassist’s playing. A bass player is not a good player until he or she can blend with an ensemble and play strong, consistent time. A bass player who plays well with the rhythm section and also solos well has a distinct advantage. Most bassists who come to mind as great players perform well in both roles.

The great New Orleans bassists Pops Foster and Wellman Braud were innovators in the early days of jazz. Bassists during this period played with a wider variety of techniques than most bassists today; plucking, slapping, and bowing the bass to produce sounds that would cut through as well as blend with the early dixieland and swing ensembles. Bob Haggart recorded the first arco jazz bass solo on “The Big Bass Viol” with the Bob Crosby Orchestra in the late thirties. Milt Hinton recorded an arco bass feature entitled “Ebony Silhouette” with Cab Calloway’s band in 1941. Jimmy Blanton, one of the many great bassists with the Duke Ellington Orchestra, recorded an album of duets with Ellington in 1940 that set a new standard for arco bass playing.

Leroy “Slam” Stewart was unique in his ability

to play an arco solo while singing in unison one octave above. Slam was best known for his work with “Slim” Gaillard (Slim and Slam) and later with the Benny Goodman Sextet, Charlie Parker, and Art Tatum. Slam transcended the boundaries between the “swing” and “bebop” jazz styles.

Major Holley is also known for singing in unison (and in the same register) with his arco improvisations. Other notable bowing bassists from the bebop era include Charles Mingus, Red Mitchell, Ron Carter, and Paul Chambers. Paul Chambers is the most recorded arco soloist from this period. In the appendix of this book, there is a list of some of the bassists, past and present, who improvise with the bow.

Of all the great bassists, only a small percentage choose to play any solos with the bow. The players who explore arco improvisation have special advantages over those who do not. The possibilities of sound creation and rhythmic swing are expanded when a bassist picks up the bow. Since bassists spend most of their time playing pizzicato, a great deal of practice must be devoted to arco technique in order to make improvising with the bow an option that sounds good. Improvising with the bow is musically important for several reasons:

1. A bassist who plays well with the bow has expanded sound and rhythmic possibilities.
2. Practicing with the bow increases technique and aids in other areas of bass playing such as intonation, rhythmic accuracy, and musical concept.
3. A bassist can produce more sound with the bow and cut through a loud band. This extra volume is especially useful when the bass is not amplified.
4. Many different instrumental and vocal sounds can be imitated with the bow. A bassist can sustain sounds indefinitely, like a horn or a guitar. Legato phrasing and détaché phrasing can be used in combination to create a rhythmically interesting line, similar to that of a horn.
5. Ballads can be played with more nuance and freedom.
6. Ensemble passages can sometimes be played with the bow, adding a different color to the overall sound of the band.

7. Audiences like to hear a bassist play with the bow!
8. Studying jazz and classical arco techniques narrows the gap between these two art forms and promotes musical understanding between jazz and classical bassists.
9. Studying the jazz bassists who improvise with the bow aids in understanding the jazz tradition.
10. Improvising with the bow is enjoyable, once the proper techniques are acquired.

There are many more reasons to improvise with the bow. You will find your own reasons as you explore the areas of arco improvisation. If you are a beginning bassist, read the next chapter on practicing the bass before you proceed through each chapter consecutively. If you are a more experienced jazz or classical player, read the next chapter and proceed through the book in whatever order interests you.

The key first step in learning to improvise with the bow is to know how the great bass players sound. You may need to find recorded examples first in order to have the sound in your head. Refer to the discography of bowing bassists in the appendix for records that contain improvised arco solos.

There are many books and methods on improvisation, so I have not spent much time explaining theory in this book. There are also jazz bass method books that deal with “walking bass” and the many different ensemble and solo styles, for example, *Bass Notes* [Aebersold Jazz]. If you are not familiar with ensemble bass styles and improvisation techniques, then you should study those aspects of playing and then return to this book.

In the appendix of this book, you will find information on bassists who bow, bass books and methods, and information related to bass playing in general. Have fun ... Good luck!

Learning The Bass

Musicians learn from a combination of five sources: listening, instructors, role models, mentors, and other musicians. The most important knowledge you need in order to bow the bass is the awareness of how the arco bass sounds. You can learn from recorded examples or from a bassist whom you frequently hear in person.

Recorded examples provide a history of jazz arco techniques from the 1920's through the present. You must know the jazz tradition in order to expand that tradition and create your own style. You must learn how jazz bowing sounds. I can not stress enough the importance of knowing the recorded jazz history.

A bass instructor can also be extremely helpful. A good instructor can guide your course of study so you do not “re-invent the wheel” or spend excessive time figuring out techniques that are common knowledge. A bass instructor can make the learning process much easier by showing you the specifics of practicing the bass. A good instructor will direct your practicing and listening. A jazz instructor (even a non-bassist!) can tell you who to listen to on recordings. An instructor can set up a practice method for you to follow and monitor your progress.

One of the most important lessons you can learn from an instructor is how to teach yourself. You can then learn to analyze and correct your own playing. Many great bassists have learned to play the bass without formal instruction. These players probably learned by imitating their role models.

Role models can be musicians you hear in person or musicians you hear on recordings. You need to imitate the music of your role models while you study the bass. Analyze them and decide what techniques they use to produce their music. Once you know how great players make their music, you can expand upon their ideas. This imitation may seem like a cold, uncreative process at first, but it is the essence of the jazz tradition. The jazz tradition has been carried forward by musicians imitating role models and then developing their own style.

A mentor is a person who sets an example for you. You learn from musicians who are more experienced than you. You can learn about all aspects of music, life, and art from someone who is your mentor. A relationship such as this can last anywhere from a few days to many years.

Learning the bass requires the dedication to teach yourself and to use all the resources available. In order to learn to improvise with the bow, you need the aural image of a good arco sound, the visual image of someone playing with the bow, and some knowledge of jazz phrasing. This information can be gathered from various sources if you do not have a good jazz bass instructor who improvises with the bow.

Classical soloists and symphony players are experts in arco technique. If you find that there are no jazz bassists who teach arco technique, check out classical instructors from your local symphony or music college.

A jazz instructor on any instrument can help you find music that is important for you to hear and learn. The knowledge of jazz repertoire and history is just as important as the ability to execute the music technically. In listening to recordings, you will find the sounds you want to learn.

Practicing The Bass

Practice is the discovery, analysis, and expansion of technical and musical capabilities. Practice is the organized repetition and refinement of skills. We repeat basic skills over and over in order to learn them. We incorporate many individual skills into a complete package that we call technique. Everyone has a different level of technical proficiency depending on the individual skills they have practiced. Usually, skills are acquired through hours of practice time, but skills are also learned and refined in actual playing situations. A performance tests a musician's ability to control technique and use resources.

Great musicians are in control of their technique. If a great musician does not possess extraordinary technique, the musician still keeps his or her performance within the boundaries of available technique. If a musician knows the limits of his or her technique, great music is possible. Your practice sessions should expand your technical abilities and give you more freedom to make music.

When organizing your practice session, you should know why and what you are practicing. You can control your practicing by setting long-term and short-term goals for yourself. For example, a long-term goal might be this:

"I want to play all the major scales at a fast tempo with the bow."

A short-term goal might look like this:

"I want to practice the F major, Gb major, and G major scales with five different bowings."

The long-term goal could take months or years to work out. The short-term goal can be practiced in one day.

I advocate some structure in your practice routine. You need an idea of a long-term goal. Your goal may seem unclear to you at the moment, but it will clarify the longer you play the bass. You also need a list of short term goals that you work on every day.

The list may change slightly from day to day, but keep organizing and reorganizing the list so you do not waste practice time. Your daily routine should complement your long-term goal of how you want your music to sound.

Do not dwell in the comfortable domain of practicing what you can already play. Some practice time should be given to reviewing what you know and most of your time should be spent expanding what you know. The quantity of practice time is not nearly as important as its quality.

Here is a sample schedule from a typical practice session:

- Long Tones
- Left Hand Exercises
- Vibrato
- Scales
- Arpeggios
- Melodic Patterns
- Classical Repertoire / Etudes
- Jazz Repertoire / Etudes

When practicing, you must separate music from technique. Music is what we perform; the thing that moves us and allows a feeling to be transmitted from player to listener. Technique is merely a means to a musical end. Some make music with poor technique while others fail to make music with good technique. Even so, the possibility of making great music increases as technique and musical awareness grow. It is often important to separate practicing technique from practicing music in order to isolate the techniques that make the music work.

For example, if you want to play a fast scale passage with the bow, you must first be able to:

1. Get a good sound on one string with the bow.
2. Move the bow from one string to another in rhythm with a good sound (string crossing).
3. Move the left hand across and up or down the neck to the proper pitches, in rhythm (shift).

If you fail to execute any of these techniques, the

scale will not sound good, and the music will suffer. The best way to practice is to repeat the correct techniques over and over and isolate any mistakes. If you make a mistake, repeat the passage at a slower tempo. There will be a specific reason why you make a mistake repeatedly, and it is your job to pinpoint that reason and prescribe a technical solution. With left-hand technique, problems usually occur during a shift. With right-hand technique, problems usually occur during a string crossing or a change of bow direction.

These basic techniques become second nature to an advanced bassist through repetition during practice and performance. You must organize your practice time so you work on single techniques and combined techniques as well as music. Do not underestimate the value of practicing simple technical exercises. Music can be interpreted with more expression and freedom as technique increases.

Many students get stuck because they “don’t know what to practice.” You choose what you want to sound like and your choice determines what you need to practice. If you want to be a better player, you must assess what you know and what you can play and then methodically expand your knowledge and ability.

You can avoid common practice mistakes:

1. Do not repeatedly practice techniques you are comfortable with except for review, warm-up, or improvement.
2. Do not repeat mistakes over and over, hoping they will work themselves out. They won’t.
3. Do not aimlessly use practice time.

These mistakes are rather comfortable, but very unsuccessful ways to try to learn to play the bass. The best way to practice is to do what is necessary to improve! You can assess your knowledge and ability and then expand on them daily. The daily improvements compound over time and become a rich resource of technique and musical intuition. Improvement may not be comfortable but it offers the rewards of greater freedom and self-expression.

Practice Suggestions

1. Have an idea of what you are practicing before you pick up the bass.

2. Outline short-term goals for your practice and organize your practice time accordingly.

3. Practice with and without the metronome and at all tempos.

4. Practice your music by isolating problem areas one at a time and working on tone, rhythm, and intonation at realistic tempos. If your intonation or rhythm is sloppy in practice, your performances will sound sloppy. Your sound in performance directly reflects what and how you practice.

5. Fine-tune your playing by spending time improving interpretation and phrasing. Practice simple passages as well as complex passages. Adjust the nuances of your musical voice.

6. Practice away from the bass by thinking through the music you are learning. Visualize playing the bass with good technique and producing the sound you want to hear.

7. Record yourself while practicing and performing. Listen to yourself and be honest about your playing. What do you like about the way you play? What do you dislike? What would you like to hear more of in your playing?

8. Practice in front of a full-length mirror. Monitor your playing visually to promote energy-conserving techniques. Strive for a relaxed playing position by eliminating tense, unnecessary movements.

9. Practice with and without an amplifier. The pickup and amplifier are components of modern music that need to be understood and controlled.

10. Learn to play the piano. The whole spectrum of melody, harmony, and rhythm is laid out on the keyboard.

11. Think of your long-term goals. Where do you want your practice to lead you? You choose how you want to sound and your choice dictates what you practice to achieve your goal. In one year, five years, or ten years . . . your long-term goals will clarify as you continue to play the bass.



Exercise 26 consists of three staves of music in 4/4 time. The first staff begins with a whole rest, followed by eighth notes. The second and third staves continue the eighth-note pattern with various fingerings and accents.

EXERCISE 27



Exercise 27 consists of three staves of music in 4/4 time. The first staff starts with eighth notes and rests. The second and third staves continue the eighth-note pattern with various fingerings and accents.

EXERCISE 28



Exercise 28 consists of three staves of music in 3/4 time. The first staff starts with eighth notes and rests. The second and third staves continue the eighth-note pattern with various fingerings and accents.