

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Recruitment time again and this year a large number of students have signed up to play the double bass. For the past several years very few bassists have continued and those who have are far behind students of the violin, viola, and 'cello. With deficient skills, and lack of progress, both the teacher and student are unhappy. New instruments were ordered in an attempt to solve the problem, yet beginning bassists continued to leave the string program. Students complained of arm pain and difficulty in holding the bass, but the instrument seemed fine. When the student was given a bow the problems were compounded. The other children, however, were successful and enjoying their newly - found orchestral experience. The bassists were complaining, not practicing, and dropping out. Unfortunately, teachers who are not bassists but teach the instrument often hope "... the needed technical information would perhaps be assimilated by osmosis."¹

Attrition rates for the other string players were much lower. Stuart Sankey, in a survey by Jim Scoggan says that many students quit due to the poor set - up of many string basses.² The unfortunate students who are brave enough to continue are often given unreasonable assignments on an instrument that a professional would struggle to play.³

What should the disheartened teacher do? First of all, the string teacher must realize the double bass is very different than the other string instruments, especially, contrary to popular belief, the 'cello.⁴ The instrument is the "least understood of the strings, [and] the double basses are often the most neglected."⁵ Changing methods is a possibility, but may not be practical for a string class. Starting bassists later than the other players is another possibility. However, the answer is often found when the instrument itself and the players are examined.

0. Jim Scoggan, "What the Non - Bassist Should Know about the Bass: A Forum,"

1. Ibid.

2. Roger Ruggeri, "Equipment for the Beginning Bassist,"

3. Scoggan, 20+.

4. Paul Robinson, "Double Basses in the Schools: Idealism and Realism,"

American String Teacher 40 (Spring 1990): 70.

PROBLEM:

The purpose of this study is to examine physical characteristics of students and instruments contributing to the variance in the starting ages of double bass players.

SUBPROBLEMS:

1. What are the physical limitations of the human body that affect the age at which a student is first able to play the double bass?
2. What are the physical limitations of instrument construction that affect the age at which a student is first able to play the double bass?
3. What are new innovations in instrument construction that affect the age at which a student can begin the double bass?

DELIMITATIONS:

This study will examine general characteristics of the human body and characteristics of the instrument itself that affect the starting ages of bass players. Social aspects, logistical considerations of public school teaching, and physical disabilities or abnormalities are beyond the scope of this study.

DEFINITION OF TERMS:

Starting age - age at which a person, who has not previously played the double bass, begins study of the instrument.

PROCEDURE OF THE STUDY

The procedure for the study is comprised of the following:

- I. The preparation of a bibliography.
- II. The collection and organization of the data.
- III. The organization of the study.

PROCEDURES

I. Preparation of Bibliography

The sources used in this study include books, theses, and journals and periodicals in the fields of music, music education, music performance, and double bass.

A preliminary bibliography was created through the search of The Music Index, Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, The Humanities Index, and the SUNY Potsdam Library Catalog.

Searches of theses, journals and periodicals in the fields of physical therapy and physical problems associated with musicians will also be conducted.

II. Collection and Organization of Data

Information was examined through the research of articles and books dealing with double bassists, bass playing, and bass pedagogy.

A systematic search was conducted of *International Society of Bassists* from 1975 through 1995 and *American String Teacher* from 1951 through 1995 for all relevant articles.

Data was organized and classified in to categories of instrument characteristics, physical characteristics of the player, and their relationship.

III. Organization of the Study

Chapter I will state the problems and subproblems, delimitations, definition of terms, need for the study, and procedures.

Chapter II will discuss the physical aspects of students and instruments, and their effect on playing the double bass.

Chapter III will suggest possible uses of this information in teaching bassists.

Chapter IV will discuss and summarize the previous chapters.

Need for the Study

The double bass is an integral part of any string program, yet few teachers are bassists.⁶ Upper string players and ‘cellists often receive their music education degree with insufficient knowledge of the string bass.⁷ The student who chooses to study the instrument is often neglected in favor of the large number of students who play other members of the string family.⁸ While the orchestra director strengthens the violinists, violists, and ‘cellists, the bass players are being taught to play in only half, first and second positions.⁹ The young bassist is “...plagued from the start with bad habits, dull parts to play, and little or no help from the teacher who more than likely has little more knowledge than the student of this unwieldy instrument.”¹⁰ The same teacher is also unfamiliar with many aspects of double bass playing and therefore does not know instrument

6. James Bates, “Hope for the Future,”
International Society of Bassists 13 (Spring 1987): 42-43.

6. Lyle Wolfrom, “The Cellist and His Bass,”

8. Bates, 42-43.

8. Allen Warner, “Notes on the Teaching of the String Bass,”

9. Scoggan, 20.

characteristics to consider when ordering a bass.¹¹ This leads to situations where “...one or two [bassists] are playing the parts and the others are stabbing at it.”¹²

Attrition rates for young bass students are usually quite high.¹³ This can often be attributed to the method book used in the beginning instruction of the young, aspiring bassist. Many traditional methods of playing the string bass, such as Simandl and Bottesini, are directed to students with “...well - developed musculature and advanced cognitive and motor skills of older students, but they were totally inappropriate for eight - year - olds...”¹⁴ Instruments that are unresponsive, poorly crafted, or incorrectly proportioned can frustrate the beginner, causing attrition.¹⁵

Students are also likely to stop playing if the instrument is in poor playing condition, which can cause discomfort or pain, as are many public school instruments.¹⁶ The bass is the largest of the string family and therefore has the most physical difficulties associated with it.¹⁷ “Almost every player can recount stories of “bad bass encounters”...and strings high enough above the fingerboard to cause vertigo in an astronaut.”¹⁸ Students are much more likely to continue if the bass and its related equipment are in good playing condition.¹⁹

11. George Vance, “Instruments for the Young,”

12. Warner, 22.

12. Patrick Neher, “A New Pedagogy for the Mini - Bass,”

13. Ibid., 45.

14. Ruggeri, 15-16.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Robinson, 70.

18. Ruggeri, 15.