

Ridiculous 2 Sublime

STORIES, PUNDITRY, MUSINGS, AND OBSERVATIONS OF
CHUCK GOLDSTONE
SPOKESPERSON FOR OUR SPECIES

My Bass Instincts

© Copyright 2012. All Rights Reserved. And then some.

I recently took up playing the upright bass, not so named because it, of all instruments, is so "morally righteous," but because of its vertical posture, standing fully plumb, rearing up as is the bent of most things that spiral higher on the evolutionary coil. It is the biggest and beefiest of all the stringed instruments, the portly sibling to the violin, the slightly bloated viola, and the cello, which looks like a toddler-sized bass and approaches upright status, though not enough to permit the term "upright " to be attached to its name.

The upright bass is also called the double bass, a quantitative description that has confused me because I am not sure what has doubled. It similarly goes by the name standup bass, string bass, acoustic bass, bass viol, bass violin, bass fiddle, contrabass, contrabasso, contrabass violin, bull fiddle, and to the non-musical, "one fucking big cello." I can think of no instrument with as many names, but I suppose it is because the bass is one of the easier instruments to play, and perhaps bass players, self-conscious about this, take some comfort by boasting they can play upwards of ten instruments.

Of its defining musical characteristics, the one mentioned just after how hard it is to carry up stairs, is that the bass, unlike brass and reed instruments, penny whistles, ocarinas, and certain throat instruments played by indigenous cultures, can be played without having to put any part of it in your mouth.

Compared to musical contrivances with a lot of finger holes, with five feet of linear keys like the piano, two or more rows of piano-like keys like the organ, or an unwieldy number of strings like the harp, the bass is relatively simple to operate. It has a mere four strings and you generally play only one note at a time. While it can take a long time to learn to play a bass well, anyone, including an orangutan, can sound passable in short time.



*Chuck Goldstone and his bass.
Chuck is the one on the left.*

Unlike the bass guitar that ensures precisely pitched notes by pressing down behind a fret, a bass is fretless and its player has to guess where on the long string to press. In most cases, a bass is thought to be played well if the note is anywhere close to the right pitch.

The role of bass is to define the very bottom edge of the music, and its presence is felt as much as heard, as a deep, visceral, thumpy heartbeat and a bouncing one-note-at-a-time harmony that is simultaneously chord-like and percussive.

Generally, the centerpiece of a band or orchestra is one of the higher register instruments such as the piano, clarinet, violin, trumpet or sax, that carry the melody on its own or can riff in wild abandon with improvisation or lightening fast arpeggios. Playing a bass really fast is a little like trying to sprint while carrying a heavy bag of mulch.

The string bass is seldom the focus of attention, more often the supporting actor, the runner up, the genial sidekick, the best friend who never gets the girl/boy. It is infrequently soloed, and generally only after all the other instruments have had their moments in the spotlight and only as a pathetic gesture to make the bass player feel a little more included. Bass melodies are not so toe-tapping and low notes all sound pretty much the same. This is why conversations in nightclubs, which were quieted during a sax or trumpet solo, resume when it is the bass's turn. At its very *virtuoso*-best, a bass played extremely well sounds like a cello being played badly.

More accomplished musicians, knowing full well the hierarchy of instruments, are happy to patronize, often suggesting that because the bass is a subsonic metronome, it is "the most important instrument in the band," which everyone but the gullible bass player knows is an affable falsehood meant to make self-conscious bass players, who are seldom anywhere but in the back row, feel just a little better about themselves. It is said in the same way that friends of parents of not-so-bright children feel obligated to comment "Isn't little Billy so smart?" after he performs an embarrassingly simple task, when in fact they are only saying it because they feel so uncomfortable in the presence of a child that pitifully addled.

I am on my fourth music lesson, feeling pretty good about my progress and at a point in bass playing when it no longer sounds like I am eviscerating some kind of livestock or putting a bass, well, to death. I have so far learned six of the major and minor scales, and if I ever do come upon a song written in a key I do not know, I will just play in some other but very softly.

Unless I plan to perform classical music, and I probably won't because I do not have much opportunity to gig with a symphony orchestra, I will play mostly pizzicato, or pluck the strings, as is the custom in jazz, folk, rock-a-billy, and bluegrass. For a few pieces, however, I may find occasion to produce long, low, luxurious nether-tones with a bow, using a technique called *arco*. I do not know why it is called that, and this is one of those rare facts that is not important enough for me to look up.

There are two bowing techniques, French and German. In the French style, preferred by most American classical bassists and the only one that is not treated with snobbish derision in France, the narrower bow is held in the same way a violin, viola, or cello player holds one, daintily by the tips of the fingers, with the palm facing the instrument and the wrist ever-so-effeminately limp. Its advocates claim the French style is more delicate and nuanced and provides a heightened feel of the strings on the sensitive fingertips.

The German style uses a muscular bow and it is gripped underhand as you would a small bowling ball, with the cupped palm facing up and away from the bass. Those who prefer the German bow claim it produces a decidedly authoritative and forceful sound. I have chosen this more vigorous *bratwurst-lederhosen* grip, because it is not only more comfortable for me, but because it looks oh-so-much cooler. If they ever come up with new grip that will better help me meet women, I will adopt it without hesitation.

My bass teacher tells me I am making extraordinarily rapid progress. He has been playing for thirty years, and because the bass is not a complicated instrument, I am confident that I will sound as good as he does in a month or two.

Though the bass is technically easier to play than, say, the saxophone or steam calliope, I still hold that bass players should be paid more than the other musicians, for no other reason than the bass is the most awkward of all instruments to cart about, a little like trying to carry a backyard patio grill. Piano players, granted, play a larger instrument, but thankfully they are not required to drag it up a flight of stairs by themselves before each engagement. A very bad flute player can quickly leave a session before violence erupts, but not so a bass player who has to carefully lay the fragile instrument on the ground, pack it into a cumbersome case that often weighs as much as the bass, and then find a way out of the building conveying an object as large as the player himself. The only thing more difficult to move up or down stairs is a Sears side-by-side refrigerator. Luckily, bass players can now use lighter-weight gig bags, thickly-padded soft-cases that are designed to protect the bass as it is battered against walls and balusters. Still, drop a bass down a stairwell and even the more bosomy gig bags will do little good to prevent a \$5000 bass from shattering, though the zipped container will hasten clean up and disposal by conveniently containing all the splintery pieces in one place.

Basses can cost as little as a few hundred dollars, made of materials that mimic wood but produce a sound not dissimilar from one you can derive by stretching strings across the box your Ikea bookcase came in. Orchestral basses, at the other extreme, can run to hundreds of thousands of dollars. While I do plan to get good playing in the near future, the sounds I can produce now on either are pretty much identical.



Chuck Goldstone

This Book Is Not a Toy:

Friendly Advice on How to Avoid Death and Other Inconveniences
St. Martin's Press. New York.