

What Do You Mean, Someone Wants to Play Bass for My Choir?

BY MICHAEL MONTGOMERY

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Imagine this scene taking place somewhere just as Sunday Mass ends. Before the choir members have quite finished gathering their belongings and dispersing, and before the music director has picked up the morning's music to place back into the cabinet, a quiet fellow approaches from the congregation and waits a second or two before speaking up. Finally, he mumbles something about playing bass. He would like to play bass with the choir. Caught off guard, the music director shuffles several sheets of music and drops a pencil. In a quick few seconds of uneasy silence, several questions race through her mind: Where can I find or how can I write parts that a bassist could use to accompany the choir? What is appropriate? What in the world will a bass sound like in a liturgical celebration? Should I thank this man for the offer but dismiss him quickly?

What Can a Bass Really Add?

People often think of the bass as the keeper of time in the contemporary ensemble, establishing the pulse of the music's meter. This instrument can—and should—be much more than that, though. It can add variety to the orchestration, especially expanding deeper sonorities while adding new colors to the ensemble.

Dr. Michael Montgomery, a full-time double bassist with the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra, has played concert tours in cities across the United States with the Ronnie Kole Jazz Trio and the Mantovani Orchestra, and he has taught classical double bass and jazz electric bass at the University of Miami and at Florida International University. He also plays electric and double bass with his wife, Lourdes, at Mother of Christ Catholic Church in Miami, FL, where she is music director.



The low notes that provide such a firm anchor for the harmony can also, on occasion, move in counterpoint to the melody. And the bassist need not *always* "play time." A sensitive individual will know when a continuum of edgy rhythmic pulsation could disturb the gentle flow which much of our traditional liturgical music possesses.

Music intended for use in the liturgy certainly may differ in many ways from that used in other environments, and many instrumentalists are really just feeling their way toward that difference in the years since Vatican II. All instrumentalists (and vocalists as well, for that matter) must try to function within the context of the ritual as it unfolds, shifting moods between the various musical moments in a single liturgical celebration as well as adjusting the style of playing to fit the particular types of gatherings. What is appropriate for a charismatic gathering, for example, may not go over with a more traditional group, and what is appropriate at a wedding may not be at a funeral. Solemn traditional music, contemporary music for youth, and the Latin music of Spanish-speaking communities are all different.

Bassists are also quite different. Some play electric bass, others play acoustic double bass. Some play *arco* while others play only *pizzicato*. Some read quite well, while others improvise or play by ear. All have the potential to provide a big boost to your parish's music program. This article offers some guidelines for arranging bass parts to accompany and support the voices of the parish choir, to lay a groundwork that will provide the quiet bassist who introduced himself at the beginning of this article with a potential for full membership in the parish's music program.

I should also point out that, despite many similarities, there are some striking differences between double bass and electric bass. The double bass is much larger than the electric. Though both have four strings, tuned to E-A-D-G, which can be plucked (*pizzicato*), only those of the double bass can also be played with the bow (*arco*). The range of the typical electric bass extends at best to the Eb written in the top space of the treble clef, but pitches can be sounded on the double-bass well beyond that. Precisely because the electric bass is amplified, it can be played with a wide range of dynamics and tones which are varied electronically. The double bass, which also produces a very wide range of colors, can be

Ps 103: Loving and Forgiving

Scott Soper, OCP Publications, 1992.

BASS (example 1)
Refrain: F C/E B \flat /D F/C

B \flat F/A Gm7 C7 F

When composing a bass line, try to look for stepwise motion in the chord progression. The roots, thirds and fifths in the chords of this song suggest a simple descending F major scale for the bass part.

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amplified, though the unamplified sonorities are often preferable.

What Notes and Patterns Do I Play?

It need not be difficult to get a new bassist started with the choir. Perhaps the choir is using published music arranged for SATB. If the bassist reads music, and the choir is singing in parts, the bassist can easily double the bass voice part. Alternately, if the choir is using music with the symbols of the chords printed above the melody, bassists who understand these chord symbols (or who play by ear) can simply play the roots of those chords. Elementary bass lines can be enhanced by taking advantage of chord progressions that suggest diatonic (stepwise) motion. For instance, under the chords of Pachelbel's *Canon* in the key of C, a bassist could

choose to play a descending C major scale (C-B-A-G-F-E-D-(G)-C). The resulting chord progression would then look something like this: C- G/B-Am- Em/G-F-C/E-Dm7-G-C.¹ The refrain of Scott Soper's "Ps 103: Loving and Forgiving" also suggests a bass line which follows a descending F major scale (see example 1).

The musical tastes of today's church are indeed varied. If music for the celebration in question is traditional, a pulsating rhythmic bass part could distract from the music's flowing style. In that case, consider using the bass in a manner that imitates the sonorous long tones of the organ pedals. In this regard, even the electric bass can be made to imitate the expansive sustained sound so characteristic of the bowed double bass through discreet use of the volume knob (or pedal). To eliminate the harshness of *pizzicato*, pluck the string with the instrument's volume turned down, raising the volume *after* the attack. My own electric bass

Ps 92: It Is Good To Give Thanks To You

Christopher Walker, OCP Publications, 1992.

BASS (example 2)
Refrain: G C/G D/G C/G G Bm Am D

G C/G D/G G C/G D/G C/G G

The bass part in this example makes use of the pedal tone: a low G note is sustained while a gentle pulsation is produced one octave higher. The term "pedal" refers to, they say, use of this device on the pedals of the organ.

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is able to produce a very sustained sound because the fretless neck has a thick fingerboard made of hard ebony. Because the fingerboard is fretless, it is possible to use vibrato to enrich its deep tones. Even richer sonorities can be achieved by doubling low notes in a higher octave on the instrument, rearticulating these notes as desired to generate a *gentle* and *subtle* pulsation. Another device that is also effective and organlike is called the *pedal tone*, the sounding of one unchanging pitch in the bass as the harmony changes. The bass part (see example 2) based on the refrain of Christopher Walker's "Ps 92: It Is Good To Give Thanks To You" demonstrates how the bassist may take advantage of the pedal tone.

In many instances, the bassist accompanying liturgical music will want to play in the gentle sustained manner indicated above. Though the sound may be unsettling for some, it is good also to take advantage of the percussive nature of bass pizzicato. As Gunther Schuller points out in his book on early jazz,² the bass is an effective time keeper in the rhythm section. Since the initial attack of a note played pizzicato is sharp and hard and the tone begins immediately, the bassist is able to communicate clearly the pulse of the music—indeed, in some circumstances, it is often the bassist who holds the ensemble together!

Though it is possible to create many simple bass parts using only a quarter note/quarter rest pattern (in duple meter) built on the roots and fifths of the harmonic progression, bass parts are often more involved than this. Refer to the somewhat atypical bass line written for "Pescador de Hombres" (example 3) in a rhythm-and-blues flavored, gospel-type pattern built using the root, third, fifth, and sixth of the chords. Latin styles for Spanish-speaking congregations and contemporary styles for the youth generally call for fairly rhythmic and sometimes quite syncopated bass parts. Though not typical of most liturgical music, modern funky electric bass patterns can be quite complex rhythmically and center around the root, fifth, flatted seventh, and tenth. These patterns often make use of such techniques as slapping the string with the right hand thumb, plucking or hammering the string with the fingers of the left hand, playing grace notes or glissandi, and so on. I illustrate this point with a somewhat lively bass part (example 4) for Bob Hurd's "Ps 25: To You Oh God, I Lift Up My Soul."

Lord, You Have Come (Pescador De Hombres)

Cesareo Gabarain, OCP Publications, 1979

BASS (example 3)

Verses:

Gospel and rhythm and blues patterns often have a triple feel to them and make use of roots, thirds, fifths, and sixths. This song is normally played slowly and gently, but in a charismatic gathering this bass part could work. The chords of the piece as shown are somewhat simplified.

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Using Harmonics

A somewhat novel technique, especially to musicians playing electric bass, is the use of harmonics. Double-bass solo literature has made use of harmonics for two centuries, and the orchestrations of Ravel and Stravinsky include them. The "wake-up call" for electric bassists came from Jaco Pastorius with his recording, *Portrait of Tracy*,³ beautifully based on harmonics. Used sparingly, harmonic bell-like tones can be quite effective in

our churches. Although the practical range of the electric bass is slightly less than three octaves (beginning with "E" one ledger line below the bass staff), the instrument's range (and color palette) can be somewhat expanded using this series of overtones. Harmonics can be sounded by lightly touching the string above the twelfth, seventh, fifth, and fourth frets with the left hand while the string is plucked with the right hand. The first four partials of each string include notes that sound at one octave, one

Ps 25: To You, O God, I Lift Up My Soul

Bob Hurd, OCP Publications, 1991.

BASS (example 4)

Contemporary bass patterns can sometimes be complex rhythmically. The tempo for this piece is quarter note = 66, but this bass part works better at a slightly faster tempo. The first notes of measure one, three, and five are actually grace notes on the beat that slide into the next note. Play these by striking the string with the thumb of the right hand; do not rearticulate the following note. Throughout the part, a straight line indicates a glissando. The last notes of measure one, three, and five are meant to be plucked by the left hand as the previous note is released.

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octave and a fifth, two octaves, and two octaves and a third above the open string. A list of these harmonics by string are, on the G string, G-D-G-B; on the D string, D-A-D-F#; on the A string, A-E-A-C#; and on the E string, E-B-E-G# (see example 5).

It is possible to form chords using combinations of harmonics on the upper three strings with one pressed note on the fourth string. In the high register of these harmonics, it is possible to use major sevenths and added sixths and ninths in the chord voicings, in addition to root, third, and fifth. An organ-like effect can be achieved on the electric bass by plucking these notes while the volume knob is turned off, then quickly raising the volume to crescendo into the chord. Also effective are arpeggiated patterns of harmonics that can sound like handbells, as in the bass part to Christopher Walker's setting of "Ps 118: This Day Was Made by the Lord" (see example 5).

What About Bass Solos?

In *Liturgical Music Today*, the U.S. Bishops' Liturgy Committee noted: "Instrumental music can also assist the assembly in preparing for worship, in meditation on the mysteries, and in joyfully progressing in its passage from liturgy to life. Instrumental music, more than an easily dispensable adornment of the rites, is ministerial, helping the assembly to rejoice, to weep, to be of one mind, to be converted, to pray."⁴ So far, everything in this article has concerned the creation of ensemble bass parts to accompany others. It should be noted, though, that for the double bass, at least, there is an extensive repertory of solo literature, much of it with keyboard accompaniment. Slow movements, especially of baroque sonatas, can be appropriate during quiet times of celebrations. The sonatas of Marcelllo, Vivaldi, and Scarlatti are a good place to start.⁵

Conclusion

As quoted by Vittorio Messori in *The Ratzinger Report*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, cardinal prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has put the case for beauty in liturgical music: "Surrender of the beautiful [results] in a pastoral defeat. Simple liturgy does not mean poor or cheap liturgy. . . [C]annot . . . participation also include receptivity on the part of the

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Ps 118: This Day Was Made By The Lord

Christopher Walker, OCP Publications, 1988.

BASS (example 5)
Refrain: D G A A7 D Em A

D G A A7 D C D

4th fret 5th fret 7th fret 12th fret
G string harmonics

4th fret 5th fret 7th fret 12th fret
D string harmonics

4th fret 5th fret 7th fret 12th fret
A string harmonics

4th fret 5th fret 7th fret 12th fret
E string harmonics

This is an example of a bass part made up entirely of harmonics, whose tone can be like that of handbells. Harmonics are sounded on bass by lightly touching the string over the twelfth, seventh, fifth, or fourth frets with the left hand as they are played pizzicato or arco. In so doing, the pitches one octave, one octave and one fifth, two octaves, and two octaves and one third above the open string can be heard.

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spirit and the senses? Is there really nothing active in perceiving, receiving, and being inwardly moved? . . . A church which only makes use of utility music has fallen for what is, in fact, useless and becomes useless herself. Her mission is a far higher one: she must arouse the voice of the cosmos itself to glorify the Creator."⁶

The bass, when used correctly, projects a beauty that is contagious to all voices of

The bass, when used correctly, projects a beauty that is contagious to all voices of the ensemble.

the ensemble. This instrument can truly enhance sonority and, when desired, rhythmic vitality. Let us imagine that the quiet bassist in the opening scene was not dismissed but given his chance. If that were to happen, then these guidelines would help him and others like him effectively fulfill the ministry to which they are called. In whatever ways the bass might be used during the liturgy, it should be treated with dignity, as it is truly a noble instrument significantly able to enliven music and more com-

pletely to engage the congregation in glorifying the Creator.

Notes

1. Slash chords are a shorthand method for indicating inversions; the letter above the slash indicates the chord, the letter under the slash indicates the bass note. Therefore, in the second chord in this example, B, the third of the G triad, is played in the bass; in the fourth chord, G, the third of the Em triad, is played in the bass; in the sixth chord, E, the third of the C triad, is played in the bass. Dm7 can be thought of as an F triad with a D played in the bass; purists will here insist on an F chord in root position.

2. Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968).

3. Jaco Pastorius, *Portrait of Tracy* (Jaco Pastorius, Epic EK 33949, 1976).

4. National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee of the Liturgy, *Liturgical Music Today, A Statement of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy on the Occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of Music in Catholic Worship* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1982), no. 58.

5. Marcelllo, Vivaldi, and Scarlatti, *Sonatas for Cello or Double Bass and Piano*, ed. Lucas Drew (New York, NY: G. Schirmer, 1973).

6. Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1985), 127-129.