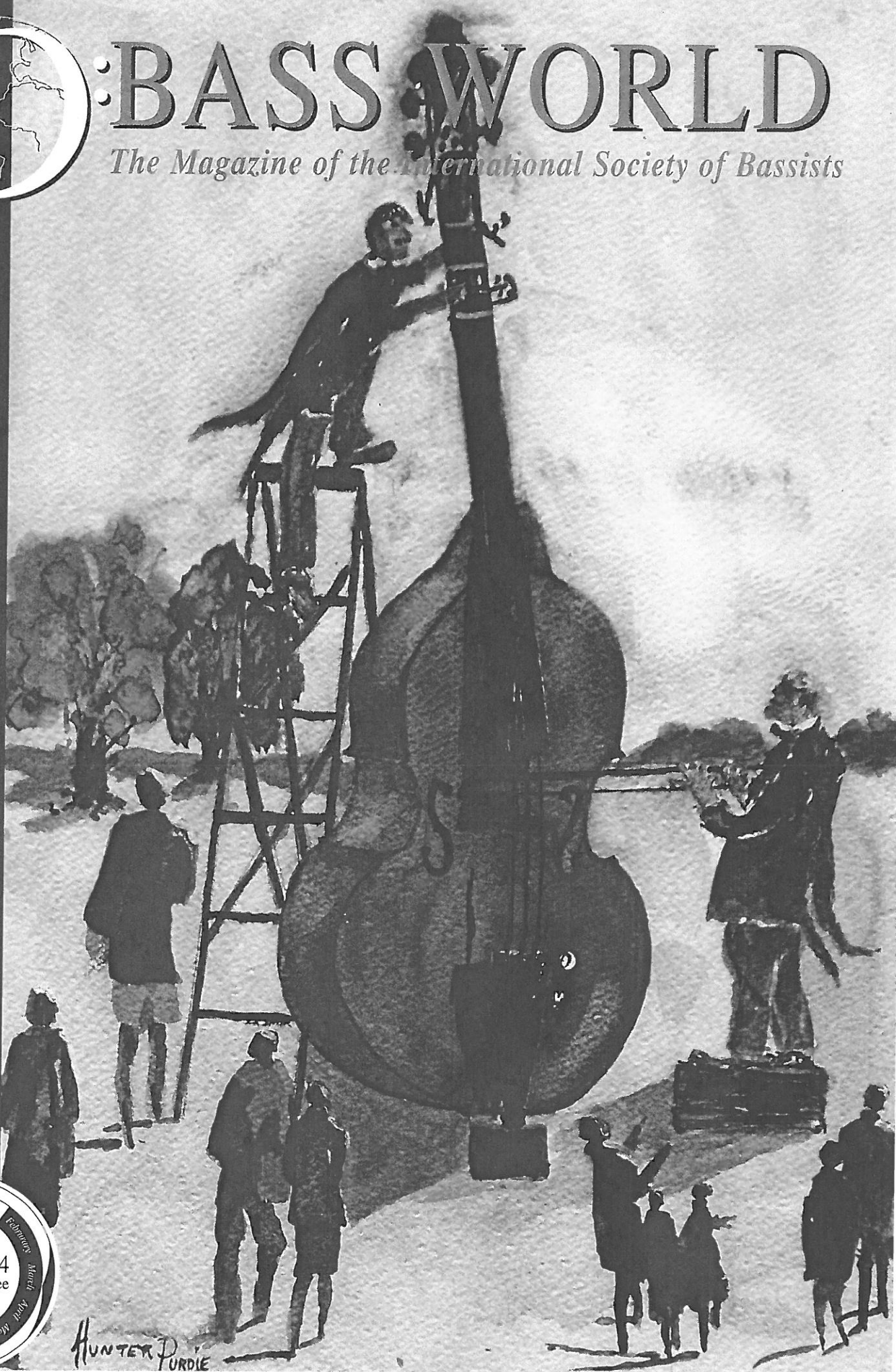




BASS WORLD

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Training as a Teacher in Argentina Ways to Teach Young Bassists — Where to Turn for Ideas



Spring flowers in October. Teachers attending Teacher Training offered by Asociacin Suzuki de Buenos Aires. Top row from left: Mariela Argentiari (Argentina), Sergio Nievas (Argentina), Juan Carlos Leon (Paraguay), Fernando Rosso (Argentina), Virginia Dixon (USA), Michael Montgomery (USA), Julian Gomez (Columbia). Bottom row: Santiago Carletti (Argentina), Miranda Bartira Sousa (Brazil). Photo by Lourdes Montgomery.

By Michael Montgomery

In this Child's Play column, Michael Montgomery recounts his experiences at Argentina's "Festival Suzuki en Buenos Aires" and writes about his thoughts on teaching methods (Simandl, Suzuki, and Vance). As we have increasingly more playable instruments in diminishing sizes, the smallest of which fits a three-year-old, the century-old methods of bass playing such as the Simandl Method just cannot be applied to

these young players. The method first introduced during the late 1980's by George Vance along the lines of the beginning Suzuki Cello volumes and the Rabbath Method and the more recent and traditional Suzuki Bass Method, already with five volumes published, are going a long way to fill this gap.

—Virginia Dixon

This year, as the Ozark summer began to give way to the colors of fall, I brushed up on my Spanish and headed south to

Argentina, where the sixth annual "Festival Suzuki en Buenos Aires" was to take place. Earlier in the summer I had gone to the Colorado Suzuki Institute at Beaver Creek in the Rockies for my first bout of teacher training in the "Method," and I was left VERY interested in learning more. As I considered the Argentina trip, my first to South America, I looked forward to the opportunity for the cross-cultural sharing of thoughts, especially thoughts about the way my instrument works and how those thoughts might be best presented to young students. When I did finally arrive in South America, I was more than pleased to find myself in the company of bassists from not only Argentina and the United States, but from Brazil, Columbia, and Paraguay as well. Half of the bassists in our group used the Italian 1-3-4 system of fingering. How cool is that?

I was also delighted to discover that, since several of the bass volumes were to be studied in our training sessions, there would be opportunities for inter-book seminars with the other teacher-trainers. As soon as I became aware of just how open and friendly the South American culture was (a culture in which not only the ladies but also the guys greeted me with a kiss on the cheek!) I knew this format was going to be successful.

During my tenure with the Florida Philharmonic I found myself with little time for teaching, and what little I had done had been at the college level. Since my recent move to the mountains of NW Arkansas, I have had more opportunities (and time!) to teach young beginning bassists. But I was more than a little naive to believe that Simandl's method book and a smattering of the standard double bass concerto/sonata repertory was going to make my time with them very productive. My big "Eureka!" moment came when I tried to find pieces for these youngsters to perform on a spring studio recital. I needed new materials and the know-how to make good use of them.



Gathered parents, teachers, and students take in the lesson of a classmate. Marcelo Jara (far right), a cello teacher in Buenos Aires, provides translation. Photo by Sergio Nievas.

Traditional vs. Non-traditional

Not that I'm ready to toss my Simandl book out just yet, I think it is a very important and useful part of the bass literature. I had, however, found difficulties in using it with young students. Simandl presents his first etudes in half position, and this unfortunately is the very place the strings are most difficult to press down. Additionally, some of these early etudes are somewhat intricate melodically. The challenge they

present can at times be overwhelming for the young aspiring bassist (see the Simandl ½ position excerpt). Neither is it practical to start with his fourth position studies, since many of those etudes incorporate lower positions presented previously in the book. Those that don't can have awkward intervals and accidentals that often make intonation difficult for an untrained ear (see the Simandl 4th position excerpt).

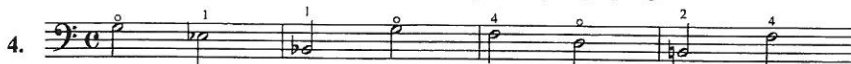
It was during our seminars in Argentina that I began to appreciate the way in which

positions are presented in the Suzuki books. In Book One we are offered the option of beginning in either the 1st or the 4th position, and early in this book the two positions are used in combination (see the *May Song* excerpt). Since up to this point only first and fourth fingers have been used, the student has time to develop a nice left hand position. After several more songs the 2½ and 3rd positions are introduced, and it is here in the 3rd position that the second finger is first used. By the end of Book Two the student is playing in 6th position. The manner and sequence in which the positions are presented in the context of simple and familiar melody is one aspect of many which I believe makes this material an important addition to our literature.

At the heart of the Suzuki mindset is an exploration of all the different approaches and styles of learning and playing. Its intention is to be universal. So, as I also learned in our seminars, it is possible to be creative and deviate from the norm, as it were, with this material. For instance, at the time 2nd position is introduced in Book Two, it is used in conjunction with 1st position. Depending on the student, I may talk about Francois Rabbath's system of positions and pivoting at this point: The notes of Simandl's 1st and 2nd position are combined to form Rabbath's 1st position. The thumb remains stationary (it does not shift) as the left hand pivots on it. George Vance

Franz Simandl's New Method- p.9 Exercises in the Half Position (carlfischer.com)

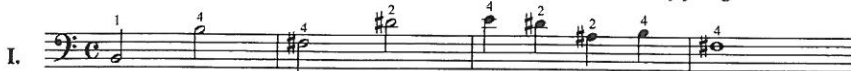
Challenges presented here can at times be overwhelming for the young aspiring bassist



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Franz Simandl's New Method- p.27 Exercises in the IV. Position (carlfischer.com)

Awkward intervals and accidentals can often make intonation difficult for very young bassists.



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Suzuki Bass School Volume I.
p. 15- May Song (alfred.com)

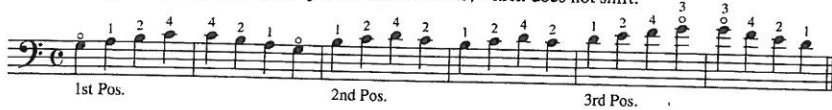
In this selection the First and Fourth Positions are combined- only 1st and 4th fingers are used.



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George Vance's Vade Mecum. pp. 9- 12.
Exercises on the Pivot Movement (carlfischer.com)

In this book Vance explains Rabbath's First, Second, Third Positions- Within each position below the hand "pivots" on the thumb, which does not shift.



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introduces the Rabbath system in his "Vade Mecum" (see the "Vade Mecum" excerpt). How much pivoting (as opposed to shifting) should a young beginning bassist attempt at this point? Perhaps this will be a topic we can put on the table for next year's seminar in Argentina!

**Spreading the Word Locally—
Double Bass Teaching**

Digging into the books with the other bassists was quite helpful, but also of much interest to me was the observation of the teaching that was going on in the city, and especially finding out about the

ways in which the South Americans were introducing the bass to young musicians-to-be. We had many opportunities to sit in and watch as young bassists of different levels worked with their teachers one-on-one in lessons.

One of the local bassist-teachers, Sergio Nievas, has set up a system at the Varela School of Buenos Aires in which all students have the opportunity to try out the double bass by receiving three weeks of lessons as they decide if bass is the instrument for them. A wonderfully devoted teacher, Nievas has had some success converting cellos to little basses for the younger students to play. The cello strings and pegs are removed and replaced with electric bass strings and tuners. The cello's 27½ inch string length is comparable to the 28 inch string length of a one-tenth size double bass. Unfortunately from these cello/basses, students who continue double bass studies must graduate directly to a 3/4 size bass as they grow. The school has a big need for 1/8 size basses (which have 31¾ inch string length) and 1/4 size basses (whose string length is 35 ½ inches). These are instruments that would be



International Music and Dance Academy
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July 10th to 24th



Paul Ellison
July 24th to August 6th



Étienne Lafrance
July 10th to 24th



Ali Yazdanfar
July 10th to 24th



David Allen Moore
July 24th to August 6th



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July 24th to August 6th



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appropriate for the students in their pre-teen years. While we are fortunate these days to have many sources of mini-basses, finding funds can still be a challenge.

Getting Around and Seeing the Sights

I found my time in Argentina well spent, and I am hoping to go back to Buenos Aires this summer. With its twelve million inhabitants, it is (literally!) a great city to see, the home of Eva Peron and the Casa Rosada, Carlos Gardel and the tango, and a place where you can find restaurants and *locutorios* (computer cafes) on every corner. Due to its location in the southern hemisphere, the seasons in Argentina are the opposite of the seasons in the northern hemisphere. For example, during our July heat wave, the Argentinians will be nice and cool. The Buenos Aires flavor is to a large extent European, which could be attributed to the fact that the population is made up largely of persons of Italian and Spanish descent. Since the peso crises of 2001, prices are quite reasonable, and most Argentinians speak a little English. I came a couple of days early to see the sights, museums, and cafes, sample the steaks,

and just take it all in. Of course we HAD to spend an evening at one of the literally hundreds of tango clubs!

Should you be interested in attending next summer's sessions, American Airlines has direct flights from Miami to Ezeiza Ministro Pistarini (EZE), the international airport of Buenos Aires. Getting around in this pedestrian-friendly city is more than easy. South America's first *subte* (subway) system, built a century ago, can still get you almost anywhere in town for pennies and there are taxis on every corner. This summer I plan to check out apartment rentals, which can be quite inexpensive in Buenos Aires.

The Suzuki Association of Buenos Aires plans to offer teacher training in Bass Books One, Three and Five in the first two weeks of July 2011, with Books Three and Five meeting in Buenos Aires itself and Book One in the nearby city of Rosario (suzukiba.org.ar). To learn more about Suzuki training, the SAA website (suzukiassociation.org) has just about everything you could want to know, including contact information for the folks offering Bass Book One in June in Colorado and Book Two in August in Wisconsin.

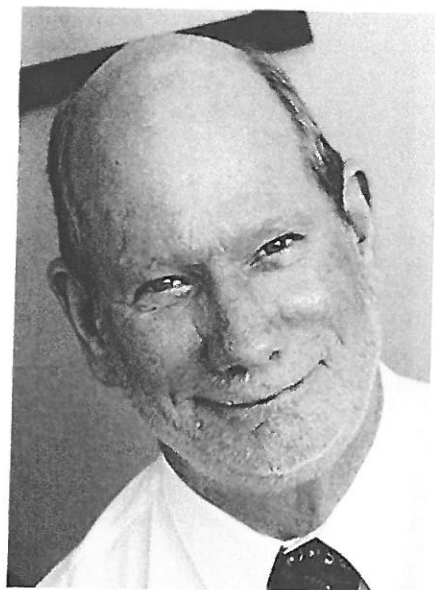


Photo by Studio 1791
(Victoria Stone/Gaëlle Reboul)

Double bassist Michael Montgomery, a student of Robert Rohe and Lucas Drew, has a Doctor of Musical Arts degree, played in the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra for many years, and now resides in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, where he teaches at the University of Arkansas Fayetteville and the Suzuki Music School of Arkansas.



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