

**What was the influence of the double bass  
on the way pieces were composed,  
orchestras were arranged and  
the development of different styles,  
throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th century?**

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## Introduction

A double bass, what's that? A bass times two?

Not as funny as the "Hey, is that a grenade launcher you've got there?". But then, that's a whole other story.

No, let's pretend we *know* what a double bass is. We acknowledge the years it takes to build one. We feel the love the wood sculptor has been pouring into the wood, molding, shaping, *willing* it into form. We have heard the rich, booming voice that sings from this mighty shape, shuddering, resonating with its own beauty.

Now how can anything this old and grand not have an effect on the world around it? It can't not have any.

As long as the it has been around, it has been influencing people: inspiring, impressing, mystifying. Its changes have been great, its names many.

I, personally, can't stay unmoved when I hear a double bass play. It called forth my curiosity, for one: where did this giant come from? What was and is, its influence on the world around? I was going to try to find out.

Over what has been almost half a year now, I gained a deep respect for the double bass: it has *changed* so much. Also, I wonder, how did the other instruments fare their path to today? Was it very different from the double bass? Probably not. But that's a question for another time.

First this question.

## 1. What is the history of the double bass?

There is no clear line as to where the double bass came into being. It is safe to say that during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, various luthiers and musicians found the same need for a bass. During the Renaissance already, however, people started experimenting on different musical instruments. That was also the time during which instruments were started to be grouped by families (starting out as voices, such as treble, alto, tenor and bass). One of these families was most influential in the double bass development: the *viola da gamba*, or *viol*.

Always, the contra-bass (or occasionally called the sub-contra-bass) was the largest member of the family. Today, a giant descending from those differentiating instruments is called the double bass.

While this paper is focusing on mainly the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century double bass, some attention will be spent on the time before this period and after.

### 1.1 - The bass before the 18th century

Before circa the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were various instruments in different forms called 'bass' or produced to function as such. The bass owed its rising popularity during the 16<sup>th</sup> / 17<sup>th</sup> century to its rich and sonorous tone.

Musicians, especially bassists at the time, were initially of the lower class of society. When the popularity of the instrument rose, so did the importance of the musician. Being well-trained and having a good reputation earned one a spot on a royal ball-band, for instance. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, some nobles even took it upon themselves to learn the instrument. By then, it was still too early to speak of one standardized bass.



1. Bass viola da gamba

One of the most well-known of these varying instruments is the 'viola da gamba', also called the 'viol'. The viola da gamba is rather a family of viols, da gamba shaped. Later forerunners of the present double bass are nearly all slightly based on this model, developed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. While at first glance resembling a violin, the viola da gamba has its differences in major characteristics, such as the manner of playing, the number of strings, the tuning and construction.

The viola da gamba, *da gamba* meaning 'for the leg' as opposed to the viola *da braccio*, 'for the arm', was unlike the violin, played holding the instrument between the knees (therefore called knee violins). The number of strings varied between 5 and 6 strings, rarely 4 or 7, the most common being 6. These were usually gut strings (whereas we nowadays use steel strings). The tuning is normally in fourths, which nearly all of today's double basses are as well. Like the double bass, the shape and size of the viola da gamba varied over the years, from relatively small, violin shaped viols during the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, to heavier and larger viols from the Baroque period (18<sup>th</sup> century).

The viola da gamba is divided over six sizes: the relatively rare and newer "pardessus de viole" (18<sup>th</sup> century), the treble, alto, tenor, bass and contrabass, the latest of which is

also known as a [violone](#)<sup>1</sup>. This viola da gamba family can be compared to the violin family: the treble being the violin, the bass being the cello and the contrabass the double bass.

Also, all viola da gamba were played using the German bow, held from below (see Chapter 2.1: Bows). However, the viols had frets, which is unlike any instrument in today's violin family. These frets could be untied and adjusted to fit the player's needs. Music written for or including a viol made use of arco (bowing), chords and pizzicato, allowing for different uses of the instrument.

The bass viola da gamba was frequently used until the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a solo instrument. Various composers (including J.S. Bach) wrote music for it. During the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the violin family became more popular, using the cello to fulfill the role of the bass viol. Nowadays historically-orientated enthusiasts use the viola da gamba during special projects or for personal enjoyment. Historic instruments can be found in collections at museums and universities.

The cello is by most laymen seen as the double basses' predecessor, which is not surprising judging by the resemblance. However, it would be more accurate to view the cello as a nephew of the double bass, seeing how both the cello and the double bass share a (partial) forefather: the viola da gamba. The cello originated at a much clearer defined date than the double bass; around 1550.

More important is the historic relation between the role of the cello and the role of the bass in assembled playing. Initially in orchestra's (not the modern orchestra) the cello's played their (bass) part, while the double bass was not in use in orchestras as of yet. When the double bass in one of its earliest forms was used in the orchestras, it played the same part as the cello, but then one octave lower. During the 18<sup>th</sup> / 19<sup>th</sup> century however, composers integrated the double bass in their pieces and they received a role of their own: the real bass.

<sup>1</sup>It would be best to explain the instrument, or rather, term 'violone'. While this is known to be a double bass most of the time, it was not always so. Thus, when we come across the term used by different writers, we cannot be exactly sure which instrument is referred to. It could have also been used to denote instruments other than the double bass, requiring a further investigation into whether it was a double bass, using definitions such as the position of the player (standing or seated), the use of a short endpin and the size (generally human sized).

While these definitions are used to, for example, justify the use of modern double basses in today's performances of Baroque music (when there is only the notion 'violone' as indicated instrument), there is also the problem that in for example 16<sup>th</sup> / 17<sup>th</sup> century France, the term violone was never used. Rather, the French used the terms *basse de viole* and *basse de violon*, both not entirely classifying as double bass predecessor.

To use names to prove the authenticity of an instrument as double bass would be as dangerous, considering the changing of meaning over time. Even today, there still are various names to the double bass. However, the function remains the same, regardless of the shape, name and technique of the instrument: the double bass will be any string instrument to play the bass line an octave below notation.

The *basso continuo* was the original use the bass was put to. This was a practice of playing the bass notes and improvising harmony above them. The basso continuo is also called the “thoroughbass”, “figured bass”, “basse cifrée”, “generalbaß” or simply “continuo”. This was common throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century and baroque period.

Continuo was not necessarily written for the (double) bass. In fact, instruments such as the lute, the harp, the guitar or instruments from the harpsichord and organ families were also common. Also often later in the baroque period, more than one instrument was used to play continuo. It was usually for the performers themselves to decide who was to play continuo. At first, only the most experienced players would do continuo, as there tended to be problems with intonation.

Like the double bass itself, to exactly find the first use of continuo is difficult. Predecessors were probably things such as organ accompaniment to singers and songs with a writ-down lute part. By the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it became standard practice to include a cello, double bass or both to reinforce the bass line.



2. Basso continuo of a cantata

## 1.2 - The 18th, 19th and 20th century

The period of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century is our main focus. By then, double basses were common, even though they were still in development: changes were being made. Also, its use changed: the use of basso continuo faded over the years while composers soon realized the expressive possibilities of the low, rich dark tones.

Soon, in early 1700 -the same time the bass was first used in opera- there was much experimenting with imitations of natural occurrences such as storms, thunder and earthquakes. An excellent example is the “Tempest Scene” from the 1706 Baroque piece “Alcyone” by Marin Marais. In this scene the basses provided the low and dark rumbling of a storm while others imitated the restless sea and howling wind.

This scene turned out to prove double basses invaluable for following tempest scenes, and for magical and demonic acts. Sadly this was not the trigger to the basses’ popularity. It turned out to only be used for these scenes, and otherwise be unoccupied.

In France, after the modern orchestra was developed around 1760 having been influenced by foreign ideas, the basso continuo slowly disappeared, as did some of the older instruments used for accompanying. This allowed today’s string family to develop. From then, the need for double basses became clear.

Also, where the bass first was avoided in chamber orchestras and small groups, because of its power (to somewhat compromise, smaller basses were also in production, so-called chamber basses), at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the double bass integrated into these settings. By 1733, it became, together with the cello, the most popular instrument to assist the harpsichord in basso continuo. These instruments also became the support for other players in large ensembles and orchestras, to provide a steady beat and stabilize the group.

Also for maintaining the beat in Paris 1767, the concertmaster (mostly the harpsichord) tapped the desk, stamped the floor or struck the floor with a heavy staff, according to Jean Jacques Rousseau. This was not to everyone's favour, but appeared to be the only way to create order in the sometimes chaotic groups. The basses proved to be valuable assistants.

By then, both the double bass sitting by the harpsichord as well as the cello next to it, felt the urge to correct the orchestra or give directions, unfortunately at the same time, every now and again. To allow all players to hear the bass parts, basses were spread throughout the orchestra, to steady it.

By 1773, a new type of orchestra developed, the 'Beethovenian orchestra', in which the conductor was more and more required to direct without playing his own instrument. Over the next 60 years, the use of the two players next to the harpsichord faded, surpassed by the conductor suggesting the beat by hand. More about the bass and the orchestra in Ch. 3.

During this time, the bass underwent some changes. Before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the tuning of the double bass (in fourths on 4 strings mostly G, D, A, E, or A, F, C, G; 3 strings being A, D, A; A, D, G or G, D, G). This was done using pegs, turned with much effort. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century some (German) players decided to find an easier way, mostly involving extra turning wheels and screws to replace the pegs.

In 1820s France, even though the instrument back then was hard to play (requiring considerably more strength than today because of the high tension, hard-to-press-and-hold-for-three-hours strings, in addition to holding the bow) the French did not feel the same urge as the Germans to change their basses, nor did they train as many musicians to play them. A few professional bassists gathered, though, in order to discuss advantages and disadvantages of possible changes to their basses.

One point of discussion was the bow, in France different from the Italian and German. As it had turned out, the bow the French used was not efficient enough to extract the most sound, while the Italian was. To not go too far into the subject of different bows, as this is about the bass, not the bow, it suffices to say there have been, like any instrument, many different forms of bows. The Italian bow was made in the old style of the bows for the viol. The old French masters voted against the use of the Italian bows in orchestras, but the students at the conservatories should learn the Italian bow.

Also the discussion was about using four strings instead of three, but this was turned down too (to be adopted only after the last professor teaching 3 stringed bass had died in 1832). Then in 1840, the Opéra orchestra decided to replace three 3 stringed basses with six 4 stringed ones, making up for the lack in strength caused by four strings, in number.

Furthermore, the sloping shoulders we see on the bass today, haven't always been there: luthiers tried to mimic the violin shape as good as possible, but reaching the higher registers with those violin shaped shoulders was not so easy. It wasn't until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that these registers became much required, though.

French bassist Edouard Nanny came across this problem in the piece 'L'enfant et les sortilèges' by Maurice Ravel. In order to solve the problem he decided to have his bass' shoulders cut away. Many other bassists thought this was a good idea, and followed suit.

The endpin wasn't adopted until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



In early jazz, contrary to what many may think, there was no double bass. The bass part was played by the tuba or sousaphone. The double bass arrived some twenty years later (depends on the area) but did not take over all business for ever: since the 1950s, the electrical bass guitar has ever been creeping closer.

Before, the tuba was used for outside, the double bass for inside. Therefore, the tuba would be called 'brass bass' and the double bass 'string bass'. These instruments would then quite frequently be played by the same person.

The task of the double bass in jazz is in most cases, apart from playing the bass line, to emphasize the beat. To do so, bassists can use the slap bass technique. To slap the bass one pulls the right hand from the string, pulling down and releases it against the fingerboard. What sounds is a slap, a distinctive sound.

In later styles, there's the 'walking bass' for the double bass to play. It is not actually a bass line, it's more of a counter melody to swing against the other melody. Today's jazz arrangements for double bass are faster and more difficult than the earlier jazz styles.

Whether they were experimenting for potential use or for fun, it is certain some bassists and luthiers had a fascination for 'big'. Up until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some giant basses were produced, some even that large, two men were required to play it; one pressing the strings from higher up, the other using the bow. These measurements were all, of course, to produce a so low and powerful as possible sound.

Largest of all was the Octobass. Invented in the year 1848 by luthier Jean Baptiste Vuillaume in Paris, it is nearly 4 metres high and has three strings. These are tuned C, G, C, the lowest of which is 16.25Hz, said to be below the range of human hearing. It can be operated by two people or even only one, using one hand to reach up and activate pedals which in turn press the strings, and another hand to use the bow. There are said to have been only three ever created (one replica). One currently resides in the 'Musée de la Musique' in Paris and a replica in a museum in North-America.

These instruments were a sight to behold but also were they exceptional to listen to. Composers even wrote special parts for these giants; it is said that well-known composers such as Mahler, Brahms, Wagner, Tschaikovsky and Richard Strauss wrote parts for them. Hector Belioz, who was enthusiastic with the Octobass, even designed his own orchestra around it: counting 467 instruments, 120 violins, 40 violas, 45 cellos, 18 3-stringed basses, 15 4-stringed basses, 4 Octobasses and more. Even though these giant basses each had their period and place of fame, their size made them unattractive: to build and to hold. Most have sadly been destroyed, others remain as mystifying museum pieces.



3. Sousaphone



4. Octobass



### 1.3 - 21st century

It seems highly unlikely these giant basses will ever return, but who knows what changes will be made to the future double bass? It seems at this moment there is not much to be improved. Today, the double bass is accessible to everyone: age 10-100, male, female, regardless of strength (except for the part where you still have to press the strings, of course).

Nowadays one double bass looks generally the same as any other roughly 60 pieced double bass, with the clear exceptions of the type of wood used, the colour, the size and the corners. Different sizes have been determined: a medium-sized double bass is a 3/4, ranging from 107 to 111 cm in length, a large bass is a 4/4, about 116 cm. The shape nowadays can be one of three; gamba, violin or Busetto. The Busetto shape is rarely seen. Most common are the other two.

The material a bass is made of can be experimented with in the coming years. One can find cheaper basses made of plywood instead of pine or maple. These suffer in quality, though. Microphones and pick-ups can compensate for their lack of sound.

Then again, maybe by the start of the next century, double basses will be gone altogether and everyone plays on electric double basses; these have already been around since the 1930's after all. What happens to the double bass then? Perhaps in 100 years, we find ourselves staring at (pieces of) them in cabinets, to be museum pieces for the rest of humanity. Or until subsidies run out.

## 2. How does one play the bass?

Over the years, different methods have been developed to play the bass. Nowadays, the most important to playing classical double bass is the bow. There are two styles on which I will elaborate as will I shortly comment on the history of the bass bow, of which there have been several. There is also the possibility of playing jazz style in different ways; without a bow.

Especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, methods have been written down as to how one should place their fingers and use the bow.

### 2.1 - Bows

There have been and still are discussions concerning advantages and disadvantages of German or French style bowing. It is an ongoing debate. There have always been differences in basses, as there have been in bows.

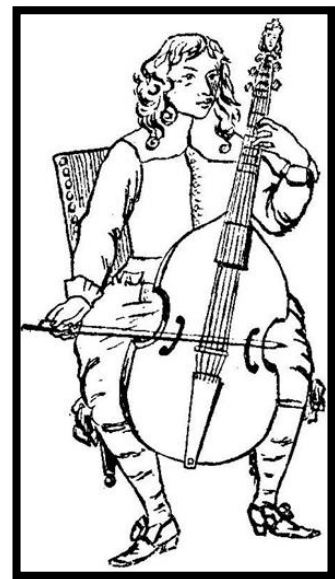
The first bow (up to the 16<sup>th</sup> century) was a simple stick with hair glued to it. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a wedge, to adjust hair tension, and a nut to keep the hair at a distance from the stick, were introduced. It was two centuries later when bow-maker Tourte sr. Added a screw to adjust the nut. His son, Tourte jr. a.k.a. François Tourte discovered the use of Pernambuco wood, excellent for making bows. He also changed the shape of the bow by curving it down instead of up.

At first, all smaller instruments like the violin were bowed with the overhand grip (palm-down) and all larger instruments were bowed underhand, palm up. There were, of course, exceptions, as there are to every rule, and some larger were bowed palm down, such as the Italians started with the Bass Violin, which refused to be bowed underhand. By the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, French cellists had accepted this hold. Soon, several double bass players had copied this, not only in France and Italy, but also Germany and the United Kingdom.

Not all bass players adopted this technique: some maintained the old one. A period followed during which various techniques ignored each other, everyone sticking to their own, even in the same orchestra, thus using [up-bow and down-bow<sup>2</sup>](#) at different occasions.

<sup>2</sup>Up-bow and down-bow (also called 'upstroke' and 'downstroke') are the different directions a bow can go. Either up; pushing the bow away from the player, or down; pulling the bow towards the player. In order to produce a clear sound, the bow must be pulled in one motion, held at a right angle to the string, or slightly tilting the bow so the hair faces the bridge.

The bow is thicker at the frog (handle) than the point. That is generally the area for shorter and faster notes, while the other end is used for loud passages. During the bowing, the player should take note to alter the speed with the pressure; the faster the speed and the more pressure, the louder the sound.



5. Musician playing a bass viol with a French bow and an underhand grip

At the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Paris conservatory luthier Gand Senior decided to make some changes to one of the already numerous bows around. Using the then cello bow, he created an incurved type, to be known as the French Bow. This version was still unfinished, to be ultimately perfected only in 1903 by Thomassin.

At some point, a number of players decided the volume of the sound depended on the weight of the bow and they decided to play with as heavy a bow they could find. This is a wrong deduction, seeing how the wrist operates the bow, not the arm. The current average French bow weighs 125-140 gr. Also, musicians could ask even ordinary woodworkers to get a bow made, as it didn't really matter what measures it had; there was no standard. Making a bow turned out to not be so difficult.

Meanwhile, the Germans preferred another bow technique currently on the market: the "Dragonetti grip" (named after the famous bassist and composer Domenico Dragonetti), underhand. They also long stuck to the idea of having the old, straight type of bow. Near the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Frantz Simandl, professor at the Vienna Conservatory and principal bass player in the Vienna Court orchestra, claimed to be the first to bring the German bow up to date with his new designs. The German bow became a mix of old and new. It hasn't changed much since.

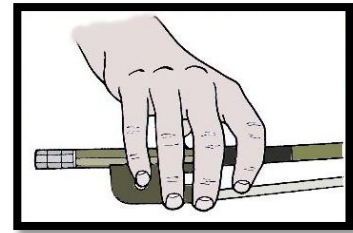
Then there is the question, the ever debated question; which is better, German or French? The answer is simple: there is no superiority. One has to decide for themselves what to choose. It is said the French bow is better for fast passages with precision, while German is said to be for powerful performance. There are, of course, exceptions; French players with power and German players with finesse, so there is really no matter of the one being better than the other. Usually the player uses the same type their teacher has.

A player can also choose to not use the bow, or do so when the composer has written it. This is called 'pizzicato' (when using the bow, it is called 'arco'). The player plucks the strings with the right hand (also possible while holding the bow). The closer to the bridge the note is plucked, the louder it is, but also the more strength goes into plucking it.

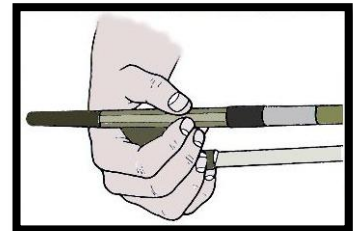
## 2. 2 - Jazz

Also in jazz there are different styles, but a bow is - nearly - never used, except for solos perhaps. As mentioned before, the original use of the bass in jazz was to emphasize the beat. To do so, players would slap the bass. There are also other techniques to playing the jazz bass. Playing jazz bass is essentially a form of pizzicato, only much stronger. A double bass playing jazz usually uses amplification (pick-up, microphone or otherwise).

To play jazz pizzicato, one places the right hand on the same place for regular pizzicato, this time resting the thumb against the E-string side of the fingerboard. The player can then pull the strings by raising the first finger, taking the string and releasing it. The first and the



6. Overhand, French bow



7. Underhand, German bow

second fingers can be used alternately in fast parts. There are many different jazz pizzicato styles and tricks, performance of which depending on the players preferences.

Aside from the before mentioned 'slapping the bass' there is also 'smacking the bass', depending who you ask, the same technique as slapping. Instead of pulling the string, the player smacks four fingers against the string(s), resulting in a percussive sound. Usually this is timed with the snare drum.

Then there is the electric upright bass (or EUB). It is an electronic and automatically amplified version of the double bass. However, when not plugged in or used amplification on, not much will sound, as it doesn't have the double bass' body. The EUB is preferred in salsa and some other styles, as its tone and volume fit to these styles. In other types, the double bass is preferred for the same reason: its unique sound.

## 2.3 - Methods

There are different opinions on how a bassist should place their fingers during certain sequences of notes, or how to use the bow. Methods have been written to illustrate these manners and to teach bassists.

It was furthermore a fact that it wasn't until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that these methods were written down. Before, bassists had to teach or learn one style over the years, and adapt when they saw fit. In fact, standards to playing the bass were at an extreme low halfway the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this being blamed upon the awkwardness of the instrument, the lower standing in the orchestra, the general lack of respect toward bass players and the absence of any at all instruction book.

This low social standing was the reason for the poorer musicians to choose double bass. For that matter, well-known bass players Giovanni Bottesini and Serge Koussevitzky took up the bass because it was the only instrument they could afford. As such, no one really bothered to write down any help to current bass players. They had to wait until the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century for the first written methods to show up.

Some of these well-known methods include the Simandl method, the Bottesini, the Edouard Nanny and the White method. Less known but also used are the Warnecke, Hause, Laska and Delamour. These were all written since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but many weren't full scale published until the 20<sup>th</sup>. Which method a student met with depended largely on the preference of the teacher.

### 3. What is the influence of the bass on the development of the orchestra?

At first glance, you wouldn't say the double bass had much to do with the development of the orchestra as we know it. When we take a closer look, however, it isn't just that someone couldn't be bothered with these basses and decided to leave them somewhere at the back; actual thought was spent on where and why. It also isn't that the composed pieces for orchestras were entirely without their bass influence.

#### 3.1 - Positioning and occupation

The double bass moved throughout the history of the orchestra up and down the social ladder, climbing and descending in importance. As mentioned before, the double bass part for basso continuo required the double bassist to be standing next to the harpsichord in early orchestras. Much was experimented with before we arrived at the orchestra as we know it.

Until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the seating arrangement of an ensemble was left to the director. Some still preferred the double basses scattered throughout the orchestra, as mentioned before. Ideal positioning depended on the concert hall or theatre in which was to be performed.

Hector Berlioz, composer, decided in 1844 a double row of cellos and basses behind the orchestra was to be recommended. This was adapted in 1881, at the founding of the Boston Symphony orchestra, placing four basses on the left and four basses on the right side of the orchestra. One bassist, together with a cellist, stood alone and at the back.

While the scattering throughout the orchestra first was necessary because of its rhythmic considerations, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the conductor improved the precision of the orchestra by enhancing the baton. Basses and cellos now were placed in two separate groups, no longer spread throughout the others.

Also, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in France, while the double bass was gaining popularity, the orchestra gradually employed more double basses. The orchestra of the Paris Opera in 1758, however had only one bass and three cellos in its *small choir* while it had 8 cellos and only 16 violins and 6 violas in its *great choir*. This resulted in a suffocation of melody, difficult to follow as there were too many cellos - and too few basses. It was during that time that audience and musicians decided the bass part was of great importance.

Meanwhile, during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Italians suffered the notion that in a bass part, double basses were most important and cellos were largely unnecessary. This resulted in more double basses than cellos in the orchestra, doing injustice to the beauty of the cello parts. For example, in 1773, the orchestra of Naples had 5 double basses and only 2 cellos.

In late 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany, the confusion was complete, where orchestras employed then 3 cellos, 5 basses, then 4 cellos, 3 basses. Local orchestras decided for themselves. It is said from letters of W.A. Mozart that his preferred orchestra consisted of 16 violins, 6 cellos and 10 double basses.

Modern orchestras usually contain more cellos than double basses. A small symphony orchestra usually has 2 double basses and around 5 cellos, ranging to 10-15 cellos and 8-12 basses in a (very) large orchestra.

### 3.2 - Music

One would be right to wonder how much -if much at all- influence the double bass had on the pieces of music that influenced the development of the orchestra. A better question is: how did the way they *performed* the music influence the orchestra?

In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and before, the double bass performed as doubling the cello part. While this was, in theory, supposedly easily done, the double bassist back then didn't always agree. Thanks to unfortunate physical complications (too high to reach), as well as the complication of false intonation, the double bassists couldn't perform the whole part. That's when they decided to start simplifying.

Simplifying was the art of... well, making the piece easier. Double bassists were allowed, and sometimes even expected to leave notes out. The fast sequences made it impossible for double basses to keep up with, so playing half of the notes turned out to be easier and beneficiary to the human ear.

An excellent example of the influence of the bass may seem somewhat negative at first: Paris, 1844, conductor François Habeneck refuses the double basses to play with in the scherzo in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. They would not produce a good effect (ergo they were false and too slow) they would slow the entire orchestra down.

Hector Berlioz decided to let them play, for that had been Beethoven's intention. First impressions didn't go well to say the least, but after a little practice, the piece could be played as it had been intended: the bass fulfilling its part.

Barely two years later, composer Wagner performed Beethoven's Ninth, with double basses included. It had taken twelve rehearsals to satisfy him, but the result was surprising to the audience as well as the orchestra. From then on, double bassists tried to play the original part, not simplify. The orchestra was whole.

## 4. In what way did the bass inspire composers from the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> century to write?

Ever since the double bass, or the violone or any kind of great bass has been in existence, there have been people drawn to its voluminous, rich tone. They imagined music to befit such power or found it the ideal voice in their symphony. Many other pieces have been transcribed to fit on the bass clef. All this resulted in a giant repertoire for any bass player to choose from.

### 4.1 - Orchestral

As mentioned before, the double bass inspired late 17<sup>th</sup> century composers to imitate natural phenomena, such as storms, or magical events like witch incantations. After foreign influences from Germany and Italy irrevocably changed music as it were in France, the string quartet developed: also thanks to the rhythmic support, the bass was more and more showing up in orchestral compositions.

Johann-Sebastian Bach was quite familiar with the double bass: he wrote parts for viola da gamba as well as violin double basses.

There were, over time, many composers (and other musicians) who disapproved of using double basses in orchestral work. They were said to be largely out of tune and thus “spoiling” the orchestra.

Luckily there also were proponents: Hector Berlioz, for one, encouraged the return of the double bass to the orchestra by proving that with practice, the basses could be in tune. Even Wagner approved (see previous chapter).

As time progressed, so did difficulty in the parts that were played: composers wrote the way they wanted to, and bassists had to follow - no more simplifying. Over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, conservatories were established to produce qualified musicians who could play the orchestral music.

### 4.2 - Solo

Two very famous -perhaps the two most famous- double bassists until today were Domenico Dragonetti (1763 - 1846) and Giovanni Bottesini (1821 - 1889). They, and each their own style of playing, had tremendous influence on various composers and musicians. They were known for also being able to play solo music on bass - a feat not many could claim.

The life of a solo double bass was very different from the usual orchestral players. For one, one had to be able to produce more than just basso continuo or a simplified bass line, but also create melodic music. On a ‘giant’ bass.

(Successful) more skilful musicians would be playing chamber bass in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. For this smaller bass, already solo music had been created. These solos would be stunning to people who’d never heard a solo bass before. Suddenly basses turned out to be able to play like a violin; as fast and nearly as high.

Around this time, 1760’s, the first violone concertos were composed. Solo playing spread around Vienna and around Austria; soon Germany followed the other in turning up a few soloists.

Many double bassists attempted to write their own, usually solo music. One such bassist was Johann-Matthias Sperger (1750-1812) from Vienna, Joseph Haydn’s virtuoso solo



bassist. He wrote many pages, including concertos (18), sonatas, quartets, trios and duos, all to accompany bass solos.

Once Sperger had died, the Vienna solo enthusiast period died with. Just before 1887, when one bassist played a solo in England and the audience didn't realize it wasn't an attempt to make them laugh, but to play an actual *solo* on a *double bass*, people decided the bass was not an instrument to play solos on and tried some experimenting to improve that (also resulting in other instruments such as the Octobass). In Italy, bassists faced the same problems.

It turned out, only people with a certain skill were able to reach the full potential on a bass, and only those could play solos. Music publishers by that time were producing transcript cello parts for double bass and good parts to play were hard to come by, much less to earn the trust to play any solos on the bass.

One of the people important to reviving the trust in bass (and not only solos) was Bertram Turetzky. He performed and recorded over three hundred new pieces for (solo) bass, jumpstarting, once again, a revolution in the popularity of the double bass, this time world wide, as today's communication has enabled us to.

More than ever, double bassists are creating double bass music, sharing with the world. Well-known double bassists who are participating in this (as well as creating their own styles), are, amongst others, François Rabbath, Gary Karr and Ludwig Streicher. Bass music faces a bright future.

## Conclusion

*Main question:*

*What was the influence of the double bass on the way pieces were composed, orchestras were arranged and the development of different styles, throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th century?*

*Sub question 1:*

*What is the history of the double bass?*

*Sub question 2:*

*How does one play the double bass?*

*Sub question 3:*

*What's the influence of the bass on the development of the orchestra?*

*Sub question 4:*

*In what way did the double bass inspire composers from the 18th, 19th and 20th century to write?*

I can't say I didn't expect a little that the bass has had quite an influence. What I didn't expect in the least.. okay, just a little then; the double bass has such an extensive history! All those names, those shapes, those looks. It's incredible that so many varying instruments from all over various countries, ended up in the same skin, ehm, wood. And in the process, that it exchanged so much with other instruments we know today.

In order to play the bass, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, you had to be strong. Nowadays, that's not much of an issue. What's still the same, though, is that there are so many different styles. Okay, it's been sort of boiled down to either German or French, when including the bows, but even then. One could choose to go without bow - get all jazzy. Or pizzicato. And man, who doesn't love that firm *ploink* when mixed with the higher tones of all the other strings in the orchestras?

The orchestra has changed, too, thanks to the bass, whether it knows or not. First, any groups of instruments playing together were just centered around the bass (if it was playing basso continuo, of course). The bass was, is, and will always be, the base of the orchestra. Even when it is shoved into the back of the pit. But then, mighty basses don't need to be with many; the audience can hear them just fine, while being outnumbered.

Then again, I suppose, one could say they are meant to be outnumbered. Composers noticed the double bass. Oh, they did all right. They might have been a little out of tune, back in the day, or just a little bit too loud, so the composers were forced to either adjust their pieces, or the orchestra. Or the basses. Easy choice.

But one can't say the double bass didn't have any influence on the history of music, can one?