

THE STRING BASS: ITS EXPANDING ROLE
in
THE ORCHESTRA

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This study has shown the steady progression of the string bass from an instrument whose only purpose was to double the cello to one capable of carrying an independent line of music.

The compositions of Haydn and Mozart reflect the function of the bass as a double for the cello, taking advantage only of its ability to play an octave lower to add depth to their music.

With the expansion of the orchestra in the romantic period, the string bass became more independent, predominantly in the works of Beethoven. The bass part is separate and contributes harmony and color to the scores. He did much more along these lines than his contemporaries, who recognized the ability of the bass to add color and contrast to their works, but used the instrument much less boldly. Yet in most of the works of these composers the bass part contributes significantly in adding depth and contrast to the orchestra in its new harmonic role.

Later in this period the bass suddenly falls back into its original doubling role in the works of Bruckner, but emerges even more triumphant in the works of Tchaikowsky and Mahler. The music of these composers establish for the bass a berth in orchestral music never to be relinquished. Both employ the bass's depth of tone and energy of stroke to lend powerful contrast to lighter and softer passages.

Even with the trend toward the return to the smaller orchestra in the contemporary period the bass maintained its independence. The bass plays as integral and important a part in the delicate works of Debussy and Prokofieff and Milhaud as it did in the highly-orchestrated works of their predecessors. The bass part is highly diversified throughout the works of these composers, given solo status as well as singular recognition in its role of supplying harmony, rhythm, support and a good melodic line.

The string bass has now been firmly established as a very important orchestral instrument. In the years that follow, this is emphasized in the works of Foss and Carter by specific markings which indicate clearly and exactly how and when the basses are to be divided, and how every note should be played.

This study, then, is designed to show how the string bass--which has existed for over three-hundred years--has been successively ignored, humbled, recognized, experimented with, and finally given the position it richly deserves--a useful berth in orchestral music.