

iDoubleBass

Handbook

Micah Howard

www.micahbhoward.com

www.idoublebass.com

Dedication

Dedicated to the loving memory of my mother and first music teacher, Pasqualina "Patty" Cesidia Lattanzi Howard. - Micah Howard

Credits

www.alisagarinphotography.com, Photography

Esther Howard, Editor

Rachel Martin, Model

CJ Inkenhaus, Model

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Equipment and Setup

The double bass is a very physically taxing instrument, and for this reason it is important for the student to have a bass and bow that are well maintained and suitable for his/her size. The following are some suggestions for the teacher and student to make the learning process fun and enjoyable with as little pain as possible.

Double Bass Size: The size of the instrument is one of the most important factors to consider when starting on the double bass. If the bass is too big, it will be very difficult to play even a simple tune. Bases come in a wide variety of sizes from 1/8 (or smaller) to 7/8. Because of this, a student can start on the bass at a very early age. Today students are starting as early as the age of four. When deciding on a bass size, the most important thing to consider is the size of the student's hands. If the student must stretch too much or even shift to play a whole step in half position, the bass is too big. The other thing to consider is the height of the student. If the end pin must be fully extended to suit the student, the bass is probably too small.

Bridge: It is very important to have a bass with adjusters on the bridge. String instruments are very susceptible to climate changes. For this reason, too much humidity can cause the strings on the bass to go so high that the student will have a lot of difficulty pressing the strings down. With adjusters, you can keep the string height fairly consistent throughout the year. For a student, keeping the strings approximately 4mm to 5mm above the end of the fingerboard is advisable. It is also important that the bridge be cut and aligned properly. If it is not set up well, it will also cause great difficulties for the student, such as string crossing challenges and tone production problems.

Fingerboard: It is imperative that the fingerboard be properly planed and dressed. If it is not, it will be very difficult for the student to shift properly because of the disparity in string height along the fingerboard. A poorly planed fingerboard can also cause the strings to snap and buzz while playing.

Bow: The size of the bow should correlate to the size of the bass. Additionally, using real hair instead of synthetic hair is strongly recommended. The difference in tone is quite drastic on the bass when using man-made hair. It is also important to have the freshest hair possible on the bow. This means changing the hair every three or four months. As the hair gets older, it becomes more and more difficult to draw out a good tone, and it usually causes the student or performer to press more than necessary.

Strings: It is important to have fresh strings on the bass. This means changing the strings every six months or every year at the most.

Rosin: Pops' Double Bass Rosin is highly recommended.

Cleaning the Instrument: Use a rag to clean the rosin off the body of the instrument, but do not use a rag to clean the strings. For the strings use a Scotch pad or a copper scouring pad. When you use a rag to clean the strings, fibers from the rag stick to the rosin on the strings, and in turn, end up on the hair of your bow.

Guidelines for Holding the Double Bass While Standing

Step One: Adjust the end pin so that your right hand touches the bridge somewhere between the tips of your fingers and your knuckle while the bass is facing you. **For the teacher:** This will vary depending on the physique of the student and dimensions of the instrument.

Step Two: Hold the bass at arm's length with your left hand. The side of the bass should be directly in front of your left leg with the bridge of the bass pointing directly to your right.

Step Three: Bring the bass in toward your body and lean it on your left upper thigh. Then, turn it at a 45° angle to the left so that the top back edge of the bass is resting on your pelvis just above your left inner thigh and somewhere on or below your waist. **For the teacher:** These contact points will vary depending on the physique of the student and dimensions of the instrument.

Step Four: While transferring your weight on to your right foot, turn your right heel slightly in to the left, turning your foot to the right, and take one step forward with your left foot. **For the teacher:** This is just a good starting position for the student. Flexibility and freedom of movement should be encouraged. While playing, it is entirely acceptable to shift weight from leg to leg.

Step Five: To check the height of the bass, hold the neck with a fist in your left hand just below the peg box and nut. Point toward your head with your index finger. If your finger is pointing into your left ear, the height is approximately correct. **For the teacher:** The height of the bass also will vary depending on the student and the bass. There are two general guidelines for the height. First, the student's left elbow should not be higher than the shoulder while playing in the lower positions, and, secondly, the student's right hand should be able to hold the bow comfortably between the fingerboard and bridge without bending at the waist or bending the elbow at an acute angle.



Step One



Step Two



Step Three



Step Four



Step Five

Guidelines for Holding the Double Bass While Sitting

Step One: Adjust the end pin so that your right hand touches the bridge somewhere between the tips of your fingers and your knuckle while the bass is facing you. **For the teacher:** This will vary depending on the physique of the student and dimensions of the instrument.

Step Two: If your stool has four legs, situate it so that one of the four legs is facing forward. Sit near the edge of the stool with your right foot placed firmly on the ground with a slight bend in the knee, and the left foot placed on a rung. **For the teacher:** If there are two rungs, generally the top rung is the best place for the left foot. Ideally, the foot should be placed high enough for the left leg to support pressure placed on the strings and fingerboard but low enough to grant full access over the shoulder of the bass for thumb position. In most cases neither rung is ideal. For optimal performance, it is advisable to attach a small piece of wood to two of the legs of the stool as a rung, so the student can have both full access and support. This will take some experimentation by both the teacher and the student.

Step Three: With both of your hands on the back shoulders of the instrument, hold the bass approximately at arm's length and bring it in to your body and between your legs. Turn the bass so that the back of the bass is resting on your left leg and the right side of the bass is resting on your right inner thigh and pelvis. **For the teacher:** These contact points are only guidelines and will vary from student to student.

Step Four: To check the height and angle of the bass, hold the neck with a fist in your left hand just below the peg box and nut. Point toward your head with your index finger. If your finger is pointing into your left ear, the height and angle are approximately correct. **For the teacher:** The height and angle of the bass also will vary depending on the student and the bass. It is good to experiment with the height and placement of the end pin, because these will both affect the height and angle of the bass. There are four general guidelines for the height and angle. First, the student's left elbow should not be higher than the shoulder while playing in the lower positions. Second, the left shoulder of the bass should be low

enough to allow easy access to the end of the fingerboard. Third, there should be enough clearance so the student can draw a full down bow on the E string without hitting his/her leg, and, fourth, the student's right hand should be able to hold the bow comfortably between the fingerboard and bridge.

A Word about the Stool

Generally speaking, a wooden stool with four legs and two or more rungs for each pair of legs is very good for a student. Some players find that a cushion makes playing much more comfortable. If the student is fairly short, it is best to wait until he/she is taller before using a stool. The stool should not be so high that the student cannot place both feet comfortably on the ground while sitting on the edge of the seat, and it should not be so short that both knees are too bent. Once again, these things should be determined by a qualified teacher who will take the student's physique into consideration.



Step One



Step Two



Step Three



Step Three (b)



Step Four

Guidelines for the Left Hand and Arm in the Lower Positions

Number One: There should be a half step space between the first and second fingers and another half step space between the second and fourth fingers. The third finger is usually not employed by itself in the lower positions for beginners, so it will be used to support the fourth finger.

Number Two: The thumb should be placed on the back of the neck somewhere behind the first and second finger. Everyone is different, so your thumb will find a place that is natural. You should not have to strain to keep your thumb in position.

Number Three: Your wrist should always be slightly arched out. This should also feel natural and not forced.

Number Four: Your elbow should be up just below the height of your shoulder. You never want to raise your elbow above your shoulder, and you never want to rest your arm on the shoulder of the bass.

Number Five: It is important to use as little effort as possible to press the strings down. Avoid clutching the neck with your thumb and fingers. You should primarily use weight from your arm and back for this. Although the weight should be applied by all of the fingers on the string, most of the weight should be shifted to the finger you are using. This is especially true for slower passages where vibrato becomes a key factor of your tone. For faster passages this is less of a factor.

Number Six: Hand shape should be maintained, without straining, while learning the lower positions. Remember, it is important to remain flexible and to use only the necessary amount of tension. While playing second and fourth fingers, keep your other fingers on the string in their proper position. Have your other fingers ready to play with the proper hand shape when you are playing a first finger.

Number Seven: Keep your fingers arched at all times. This will allow for greater accuracy and prevent future joint problems. Your fingers will have much more strength this way.

Number Eight: Keep your fingers close to the fingerboard at all times. This will improve your facility on the bass. This guideline goes hand in hand with number six. While playing an open string, keep your hand shape and hover closely over the string you are going to play next, giving the string enough room to vibrate.



Hand Shape



Thumb and Wrist



Thumb and Wrist



Elbow

Basic Guidelines for Shifting

Number One: Most shifts should be made in the string. This means that when you are moving from one note to another through a shift you should not lift your fingers out of the string or fingerboard, leaving the weight of your hand in the string. This keeps the shift under control and it allows you to hear all or part of the shift, depending on bow use (see number 4). Jeff Turner, the former principal bass of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and double bass professor at the Jacobs School of Music, Indiana University, gives a great illustration to show how a shift should work. He points out that when Tarzan goes from tree to tree, he doesn't jump. He swings on a vine and lands softly onto the next tree.

Number Two: It is essential to consider the speed of the shift. Most students tend to shift too fast, while lifting their fingers off of the fingerboard, making a sort of clutching shift. The tempo of the music, the distance of the shift, and the character of the music should determine the speed. In general, the shift should be at a speed that allows for the most control.

Number Three: When shifting you should think about what finger you are shifting on. There are primarily three choices. First is the "old finger shift", when you shift on the finger you were using and change to the new finger at the end of the shift. Second is the "new finger shift", when you start the shift with the finger you will use for the next note. The last option is a combination of both when you start with the old finger and change to the new finger before you finish the shift. The music should determine what type of shift you use.

Number Four: It is also essential to determine when to shift while using a bow. Using the character of the music as a guide, you can shift before, after or during a bow change. During a slur you can decide how much of the shift you want to hear by lifting the bow off of the string to hide all or part of the shift.

Number Five: One of the best ways of making accurate shifts is learning to "map out the fingerboard". This cannot be fully explained here, but generally it means using guideposts on the instrument (i.e. shoulders, nut, thickness of the neck, et cetera), measuring a shift by the interval your hand will move, and using your hand as a reference point (for instance,

moving your first finger to where your fourth finger was in order to move a whole step). A good teacher will be able to help a student understand how to do this.

Number Six: Use your ear as your guide.

Vibrato Basics

Vibrato is an expressive technique used by string players and achieved by slightly shading the pitch alternately sharp and flat at varying speeds and widths, while keeping the pitch focused and not distorted to the point of becoming unrecognizable.

On the bass, vibrato is created by swinging the forearm from the elbow down toward the bridge and back toward the scroll, using the wrist as a guide and the finger on the string as the pivot point. This motion should be very smooth and should be done with a great amount of control. A mature player will never let his/her arm swing wildly and uncontrolled.

The hand should remain flexible, and the student should not clutch the neck while vibrating. Clutching will only make the vibrato very narrow and difficult to control.

Always keep your fingers curved. Remember there is strength in arches.

While vibrating, it is important, especially for a beginner, to maintain a proper hand shape with all of the necessary fingers down, while focusing most of the weight on the finger which is being used to play the note. This is true even in thumb position and is very important for many reasons, such as accurate shifting, intonation, and control of vibrato. The only exception is to occasionally lift the first finger while vibrating on the fourth finger to allow for a wider vibrato if the music calls for it.

Learning Vibrato

Step One: Raise your left arm as if you are about to play the bass and touch your shoulder with the tip of your middle finger, almost like you are going to flap your arm like a chicken wing.



Step Two: Using your wrist as a guide and your middle finger as a pivot point, move your forearm from the elbow slowly and smoothly up and down.

Step Three: Once this motion begins to feel comfortable and fairly controlled, it is time to try it on the bass. Start by using your second finger in a position and on a string with which you feel very comfortable (remember to keep your first finger down as well). Make the same motion as above. If it doesn't feel right at first, move your hand away from the bass and try it on your shoulder again. Move back to the bass and try again. Keep doing this until you feel comfortable vibrating on your second finger.

Step Four: Try it with your first finger. If it doesn't feel right, move back to the second finger. Once it is comfortable again, move back to the first finger and try to maintain the same feeling and control you have with the second finger. When you feel comfortable with the first finger, do the same thing with your fourth finger.

Step Five: Now it is time to move to other positions. Once again, start with your second finger in the position and on the string with which you began. Shift to the new position and vibrate with your second finger. If it does not feel right, move back to the original position

and vibrate there. Move back to the new position and try to maintain the same control and feeling you have in the original position. Keep repeating this until you feel comfortable vibrating on your second finger in the new position. Now do this with all of your fingers and in any position you wish. Then do the same thing on all of the other strings.

Step Six: Do not expect your vibrato to change over night. It takes a lot of time and patience, but the payoff is well worth it.

Vibrato Exercise with Metronome

This exercise is designed to help you gain more control over your vibrato, so you can change the width and rate of the vibrato depending on what you are trying to express musically. It is important that you have a solid understanding of how vibrato works as well as its function in music as an expressive technique before you begin this exercise:

Set your metronome to 52.

Start with a finger on a string and in a position with which you feel most comfortable.

Using the swinging motion of your forearm, alternately shade the pitch sharp and then flat at the rate of a quarter note. Keep the swinging motion fluid so that the vibrato is “round” in character. Be careful not to use a sharp or abrupt motion, and do not exaggerate how sharp or flat you shade the note. For the more advanced player who is used to vibrating for expression, this exercise will seem very cold. Remember though, the point of this exercise is to develop control so that you are able to be more expressive with your vibrato.

Once you become comfortable vibrating at a quarter note speed, it is time to move to eighth notes, then triplets, then sixteenths, et cetera. At some point the motion will turn into a pure vibrato, with no discernible rhythmic pulse, which of course is what vibrato should sound like. However, at this stage you should have more control over the speed and width of the vibrato, giving you more ways of expressing yourself musically.

Use this same procedure to improve your vibrato with other fingers, strings, and positions. Over time you will develop a very beautiful and mature vibrato.

It is also a good idea to incorporate this exercise with your long-tone scale studies. As you move from note to note, vibrate at the same rhythmic pulse, such as quarters or eighths. Go through the scale again at a faster rate, perhaps as triplets, sixteenths, et cetera.

Brief Overview of Thumb Position

When playing in the upper positions on the bass, the thumb is employed to stop the strings just like the other fingers, and the third finger is used instead of the fourth finger.

When approaching thumb position while standing, you must take a small step back and rest the neck of the bass on your shoulder. This is not easy to do at first, and it can be very awkward, but with practice it can start to feel quite natural, as long as you do not tense up or shrug your shoulders. If seated, no special adjustment will be necessary.

While playing in thumb position, the elbow should be up enough so that the arm does not rest on the shoulder of the bass. It is fine if the arm occasionally touches the shoulder, but it should never rest on it.

The wrist should have a slight arch to it.

As you place the thumb on the string, it should be pointed to the right and fairly parallel with the nut and bridge. It should touch the string just in front of the joint on the side.

The other fingers should all be arched, but slightly more on the tips than in the lower positions.

There are three basic hand shapes used:

Chromatic: half step between each finger

Semi-Chromatic: whole step between the thumb and first finger, with half steps between the rest

Diatonic: whole steps between the thumb and first finger, and first and second fingers, with a half step between the second and third finger

Remember that the upper body should not feel tense at all. Do not shrug and be careful not to bend at the waist too much or tilt your head down excessively.



Chromatic



Semi Chromatic



Diatonic

A Brief Word about Pizzicato

Below I describe three basic approaches to pizzicato (plucking the string). For all of these examples, it is important to remember to pull the string to the side and not straight out and away from the fingerboard (unless you want the string to snap against the fingerboard like a Bartok pizzicato). Also, it is good to remember that the tone will change depending on where you pull the string. Plucking the string closer to the bridge will bring out a crisper and less booming sound while playing over the fingerboard will make a deeper, less penetrating sound. How you approach the string should be determined by the music you are playing.

Three Basic Approaches

Number One: One of the most widely used approaches is plucking with the side of your index finger from the second joint to the tip. This is one of the best ways to play jazz bass lines, and it is also employed in the orchestra as well. When playing this way, I usually like to anchor my thumb on the side of the fingerboard. However, there is a school of thought that greatly discourages this because it does not allow the player to use the weight of his/her arm to pluck the string. I like to anchor my thumb because I feel I have more control and stability this way. You should experiment to see what works best for you.

Number Two: Another approach, which is primarily used by orchestral players, is to pluck the string with the fatty part of the tip of either the index or middle finger. When I play this way, I generally do not anchor my thumb. However, once again, you should see what works best for you.

Number Three: The third approach, using the tips of both the index and middle fingers, is used by all bass players, and it is generally employed when playing faster passages. When playing this way you alternate between both fingers quickly. The downside to this is that you cannot play with as much power. Also, it takes a lot of practice to get an even sound out of both fingers. When I employ this technique, I generally anchor my thumb. However, this is not the way everyone does it.

What if I have a bow in my hand?

French Bow: Hold the bow at the frog in the palm of your hand with the hair facing away from your palm. Use either the index finger or your middle finger to pluck. I generally do not anchor my thumb when I play this way.

German Bow: Maintain your bow hold and point the tip of the bow to the ground. Then extend your index finger out and use it to pluck the strings.



Approach 1



Approach 2



Approach 3



With French Bow



With German Bow

Learning to Hold the French Bow

Step One: Touch the tip of your right thumb to your middle finger between the first and second joint. This is basically how the relationship between those two fingers should look when you are holding the bow.

Step Two: Have your teacher or a friend hold the bow at the tip and frog in a horizontal position in front of you with the hair facing down. Be careful not to touch the hair.

Step Three: Start with your right hand relaxed at your side. Then, while maintaining that relaxed feeling in your hand, raise it up and place your fingers, palm down, in the middle of the bow. You should feel the stick touching your first three fingers somewhere just in front of the second joint. Your pinky will be touching the stick closer to the first joint or tip.

Step Four: Slide your hand toward the frog and stop when your middle finger reaches the point where the frog meets the stick.

Step Five: Gently curve your fingers over the bow. You will know you are in the right spot if the tip of your middle finger is touching the point where the hair meets the metal part of the frog or the ferrule. Do not allow your index finger to wrap around the stick and only gently touch the bow with your other fingers. **For the teacher:** For smaller hands, it may not be possible to touch the point where the hair meets the frog. In this case the tip of the middle finger should stay suspended above that spot until the student's hands get bigger. Do not force the bow into the palm of the hand in order for the student to have contact with this point, and do not allow the student to wrap his/her finger around the stick either. This will only restrict flexibility in the fingers of the right hand.

Step Six: Place the tip of your arched thumb in the corner where the frog meets the wood of the stick. Your thumb should not be placed inside of the frog or directly under the stick. The tip of your thumb should have contact with the stick and the frog. Always remember to keep your thumb arched.

Step Seven: Now carefully take the bow away from your teacher or friend. Try not to clutch the stick too much, but hold it just enough so that it will not fall. You never want to clutch the stick so hard that it causes you pain or tires you out too fast. You should always try to hold it as effortlessly as possible. Hold the bow as if you are holding a baby bird. You do not want to hold it so tightly that you crush the bird, but you want to hold it firmly enough so that you do not drop it.



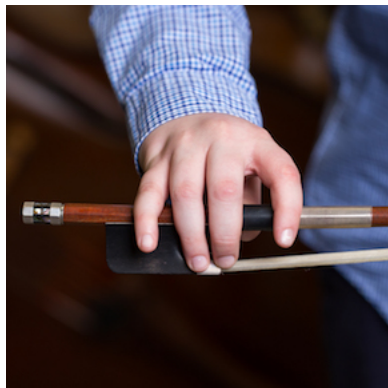
Step One



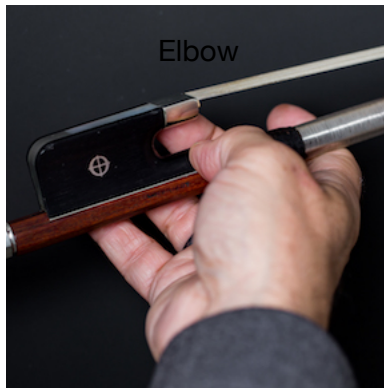
Steps Three and Four



Steps Four and Five



Steps Six and Seven



Thumb Placement



Middle Finger Placement



Relaxed Hold

Learning to Hold the German Bow

Step One: Start with your right hand relaxed at your side.

Step Two: Extend your hand slightly in front of you with your palm facing up while maintaining the relaxed open shape you had while your hand was at your side.

Step Three: Have your teacher or a friend place the bow into your hand. Be careful not to touch the hair. The frog should lightly touch the skin between your thumb and index finger, often called the "thenar webspace", without going too far into your palm. For the teacher: The exact position of the bow inside of the hand will vary depending on the student. For smaller hands, it may be necessary to hold the bow further into the palm. However, this is not optimal because it will limit flexibility. As the student grows, the bow should come out of the palm.

Step Four: Place your arched middle finger on the stick just in front of the frog. As your teacher carefully releases his hold on the bow, balance the bow with just the webbing of your thumb and the tip of your middle finger. The foot of the thumb will serve as a counterbalance to the tip of the bow.

Step Five: Your third finger should be freely cradling the inside of the frog, without grabbing or clutching, and your fourth finger should be placed under the ferrule. Your index finger should be placed comfortably next to your middle finger. Again, it is important to maintain arches in your fingers and flexibility.

Step Six: Try not to clutch the stick too much, but hold it just enough so that it will not fall. You never want to hold the stick so hard that it causes you pain or tires you out too fast. You should always hold it as effortlessly as possible. Imagine you are holding an egg in your hand. If you hold it too hard you will break it, and if you hold it too lightly you will drop it.



Step One



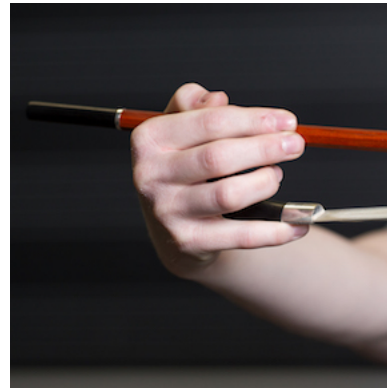
Step Two



Step Three



Step Four



Step Five



Relaxed Hold



Bow Arm Exercises

These exercises are designed to help the student gain a better understanding of how each of the joints in their right arm, from the shoulder down, is used with the bow. When doing these exercises, the student should keep in mind that all of the joints work together. The famous violin pedagogue, Ivan Gallamian, likens these joints to “a system of springs.” The analogy of a spring is perfect for the joint because, while each joint provides an amount of resistance, each is also very flexible. This balance of resistance and flexibility enables the arm to pull the bow in a variety of ways while keeping it straight.

The Elephant Trunk: The student should stay seated on a stool or stand while smoothly swinging his/her arm back and forth from the shoulder like an elephant swings its trunk. As the student is swinging his/her arm, be sure that all of the other joints, from the elbow down, remain flexible and fluid. This will help the student see how the shoulder is utilized when bowing, especially for longer bow strokes. Also, the student should observe how the other joints naturally move and follow through each pendulum-like motion.

The Baby Elephant Trunk: For this exercise the student should stand leaning against a wall with his right arm, thus prohibiting the shoulder from moving. Now have the student swing his arm smoothly and gently from the elbow down like a baby elephant. This is a very critical exercise because most young bassists want to lock up their elbows while playing. The student should observe how the wrist and fingers naturally move with each swing.

Windshield Wipers: For this exercise the student should hold the bow out in front, pointing it to the left with the hair facing to the floor. Now have the student swing the bow from left to right like a windshield wiper, using only the forearm and wrist. Make sure the student maintains a proper bow hold while keeping the fingers as flexible as possible, so they can follow through with each swing.

Waving Goodbye: Once again, the student should hold the bow out in front while pointing it to the left with the hair facing to the floor. For German bow students, the bow should point to the floor. Now have the student wave goodbye using only the wrist. Make sure a

proper bow hold is maintained with flexibility in the fingers. This will help the student see how flexible the wrist can be for every bow stroke.

Tips Up: For this exercise have the student point the bow to the ceiling. While maintaining a proper bow grip, have the student inch the bow up toward the ceiling and back down again using only the thumb and fingers. This is usually a challenging exercise, especially for French bow players. However, it is a great way to teach a student how the fingers should be involved in every bow stroke.

Air Bow: Have the student pretend to bow on the strings away from the bass. This is an excellent exercise to do after doing each of the preceding ones. The student should try to keep the bow parallel to the floor while keeping each joint flexible and involved.

The ABCs of Tone Production: Contact Point, Bow Speed, and Bow Pressure

The ABCs of tone production are all interrelated. One cannot work without the other. The following gives a very broad description of each factor and how each relates to the other.

Contact Point: This is where you place the bow on the string in relation to the fingerboard and bridge. When you play closer to the bridge, the string gives you more resistance, producing a more penetrating sound. When you play closer to the fingerboard, your tone will be rounder and have a softer quality to it (I am not referring to volume, only tone), and the string will give you less resistance. Generally, as you play closer to the bridge, you will use less bow speed and more pressure. The opposite is true when you play closer to the fingerboard.

Bow Speed: This refers to the speed at which you move the bow when playing any given note. Generally, the faster you move the bow, the more sound you get. However, the pressure you apply to the string will also affect the volume as well as the tone. As I stated above, bow speed is also affected by the contact point.

Bow Pressure: This is the weight applied to the string from the arm through the bow. Generally, the more weight you apply, the louder the volume and the more penetrating the tone. However, the speed of the bow will significantly affect the resulting tone as well as the contact point, as described above.

Micah Howard joined the world-renowned Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in 1996 at the age of 25. He regularly performs as a recitalist and chamber musician, and has been featured as a soloist with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Howard has had the privilege of working with young musicians not only as a private teacher, but also as a lecturer and coach for various universities and music youth groups. In 2010 Howard received the Pennsylvania-Delaware String Teachers Association's Outstanding String Teacher Award. Since that same year, he has served as Artist Lecturer in Double Bass at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Micah Howard is passionate about promoting the arts and helping the next generation of musicians to achieve their greatest potential.