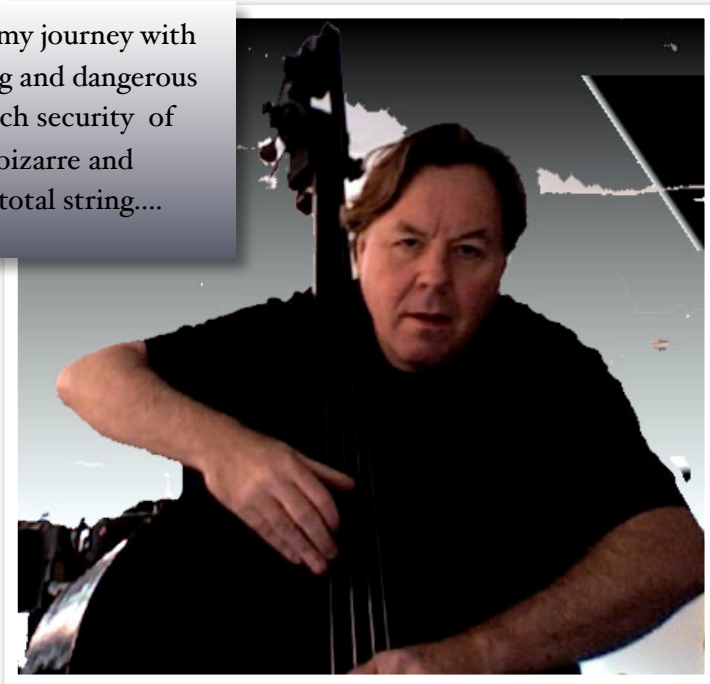


Hello, this is an account of my journey with the double bass... an exciting and dangerous trip away from the fixed-pitch security of the piano, and into the the bizarre and wonderful landscape of the total string....



Nick's Bass Journal

I'm about six years in now. I know enough about what I don't know to write some of it down.....

Tuesday, June 24th, 2008

Scale Schemes

My first job for July, as I have no teaching in that month, nor many gigs, and will be living mainly on beans, is to make a decision about some Scale Schemes.

Virtuosi can be very annoying. One legendary improviser was said to have replied to a student's earnest question about his approach by going to the piano and playing the twelve notes of the chromatic scale, adding "Well, I just play around with these".

Another, if I remember, a violin monster named Godzillanini, explained the secret of his amazing technical abilities thus: "It's all scales and arpeggios, you see". Helpful buggers, aren't they!

Which scales, then, and scales how?

Before launching myself as a jazz pianist (my breathtaking climb to the top end of this muddy field is well documented elsewhere), I learned very thoroughly 41 scales, that is the major and harmonic and melodic minor scales in all twelve keys, as well as the three diminished scales and two whole tone scales. I learned how to play them starting from any degree, and from any digit, including the thumb.

Later, in order to understand more fully the sounds of the scales when launched from different degrees, I also studied them as modes. Later still, I added in the Harmonic Majors, the Double Harmonic Minors, the Dring Scale and the Shoefactory Scale.

As an improviser, I'm glad I didn't start with the modes, because once you modalize the basic 41 scales you end up with 257 varieties, all with different names, and you run the risk of frying your brain before you have played a note! And I'm glad I didn't know about the esoteric scales until much later, because I would have found the sounds too fragile and complex to deal with earlier on. I was happy enough with the first 41 on the piano, and I'm sure they'll do me fine on the double bass as well.

Which brings me to the Scale Schemes.

On the piano, most people are taught only + 2 3 + 2 3 4 5 (+ = thumb) with variations to avoid starting black note scales on the thumb. This is quite useless for the musician playing unknown music, either sightreading or improvising, for this musician needs to be able to go anywhere on the instrument, at any time, and from any note. I teach my piano students to start scales from any note and from any finger, and also to cross the thumb under at any time, that is after fingers 2 3 4 or 5. Being able to cross fingers over and under each other is also useful in some circumstances.

The point is, when dealing with unknown music, when you don't have the luxury of planning your best fingering in advance, flexibility is everything.

Obviously, I'll be aiming for this total flexibility on the double bass.

I spent a couple of years on Simandl with the excellent Tony Hougham (Principal Bass at Covent Garden, who is a fantastic teacher, very precise and demanding, but also supportive and tolerant, and jazzier-friendly to boot!), and I think this position based 124 fingering system is a very good basis for a player, as it promotes finger strength, good tone and secure intonation. But I've seen players (and from the piano chair I've seen a lot of bass players!) who are stuck inside this system and who play with very stiff arms, using only three basic positions (near the nut, near the neck and near the octave harmonic), and I think this is very limiting. Mind you, they do play in tune, which is more than can be said for some of the fluid experimenters from elsewhere in Europe and America, who tend to float over the fingerboard quite beautifully, but at some distance from pitch centre.

The best Simandl exponents combine fluidity through the positions with secure pitch and tone, and I would be happy enough with this! But I still find some of the limitations of the system annoying and strange, and so have been looking to the Russians.

The Russians are kings of string technique. Their basses, violas, cellos and violins (in order of merit) are principal players in major orchestras all round the world. Their approach to the double bass is sensational, for their aim is total flexibility and total accuracy over the total range of the instrument. Oh, and total beauty, besides.

Eugene Levinson is one such master. You can see a great video of him talking about his life and methods at <http://www.xbass.tv/>.

His book, *The School of Agility*, documents the approach he has evolved to achieve mastery of the instrument. It is a valuable, but alarming document. The first six pages are devoted to sixteen different fingerings for a three-octave scale of E major, with liberal use of the thumb and third finger this side of the octave harmonic.

At the end of the first my first day with this book, my body system was so overwhelmed with new information that I could not resist a flu virus, and so fell into something like a coma for three weeks. When I awoke, I found that I had written a short novel (available at www.jazzschool.co.uk), and that I had lost all desire to re-open Maestro Levinson's book.

Nevertheless, returning now to the double bass, I decide to take some small amounts of what I have gleaned from Levinson, and mix it in what I already know, slowly and carefully, as one would amalgamate beaten egg white with whipped cream.

What I already know is what Bert Turetsky showed me. (Bert is an inspiring player and teacher whom I had the privilege to meet during one of the Double Bass Weeks organized by David Heyes). "Just start with one basic fingering", he told me, "through which to learn the fingerboard thoroughly".

This basic fingering, for a two-octave scale on one string, is very simple.

I call this Finger ❶

From an open string root it is: 0 1 4 1 4 1 4 + 1 2 3 + 1 2 3 and down the same way.

From a stopped root it is exactly the same, except that it starts 1 1 instead of 0 1.

For the stopped root scale you can choose whether to shift back on 1 or 4 at the end of the downward movement. Now, this is great. But not for all circumstances. Crucially, it puts the first finger on the 4th and 6th degrees and the thumb on the 1st and 5th degrees in the upper octave, which is fine unless you are playing any phrase which has any of these notes as its highest one. I'm finding this different fingering to be very useful:

0 1 2 4 1 4 2 3 + 1 2 + 1 2 3 I call this Finger ❷

From a stopped root, I'm starting this 1 4 or 1 1 instead of 0 1. I'm also starting to use 3 lower down, in place of 2, for less of a shift, and more of a pivot/extension

fingering. This will help build up the strength in my third finger, I hope. I'm being careful about isolating this weak finger and making it do too much in the lower positions, though, as I know injuries are easily picked up down there!

The main features of this fingering are that all the semitones in the scale are played 2 3 or 2 4, and that the thumb kicks in on the ninth; whereas in the basic Bert Turetsky scale, the semitones in the lower scale are played with shifts 4 1 and 4 + , and the thumb kicks in on the root.

I'm going to concentrate on mastering my 12 major scales with Fingers ❶ and ❷ before going on to add some variations involving a switch between the two scales. For example, going up in Finger ❶ and switching to thumb on the sixth degree of the scale transfers me neatly into Finger ❷ for the second octave. Going up in Finger ❷ and switching to the thumb on the fifth degree of the scale gives me a choice of staying in Finger ❷ or switching to Finger ❶. And so on.

In summary, rather than trying to rote learn Maestro Levinson's multiple varieties in all keys, I'm going to concentrate on two basic major scale fingerings with a small number of variations, always relating my fingering and shifts to my awareness of the degrees of the scale and the underlying tonality. I will then go on to tackle the remaining 29 basic scales in the same way, and finally I will address the modes and the esoteric scales, and multiple fingering variations.

That's my plan for the first week. No seriously, I'm in for a few months there, if I work hard. I'll let you know how I get on.

Oh, one more thing. I'll be playing them all with a reference track at A440 tempered pitch, and I'll tell you more about that later.

Nick Weldon