

# Bass 101: A Comprehensive Guide to Bass Drumming in the Contemporary Marching Medium By: Chauncey Holder

Gone are the days of placing weaker players on bass drum. Arrangers at all levels are displaying increasingly complex and innovative compositional styles. Consequently, bass drummers are expected to have superb timing, mastery of tempo, rudimental skills comparable to those of snare drummers, and the ability to understand and adjust to ensemble tendencies both within the bassline and within the ensemble. These demands require the highest levels of musicianship.

This guide addresses many of the technical aspects of bass drumming and gives some insights into the methods utilized by the highest caliber basslines. Intended for use by musicians and instructors at the high school and college level, the guide consists of five segments:

1. The Visual Bassline
2. Approaching the Drum
3. Growing the Bass Ensemble
4. Characteristics of Top Basslines
5. Distinctiveness of the Bassline

Throughout each segment, the themes of relaxation and flow are emphasized. These two are essentially one in the same, and little is possible in the world of bass drumming without them.

## Part I. The Visual Bassline

### A. Posture

Correct posture is essential not only for the aesthetics, but also as a way to mitigate the strain of a cumbersome instrument. Four keys to good posture are relaxation, separation of body regions, "lifting up" or standing tall, and effective use of the abs.

Relaxation from head to toe, especially in the shoulders is central to good posture. Deep breathing and stretching are helpful. Avoid unneeded muscle tension at all cost as it inhibits technique and execution.

Once relaxation is achieved, separation can be addressed. The "Hindu," a popular body separation exercise best addresses how to conceptualize body separation. However, a description is beyond the scope of this guide. The point is to learn to visualize the upper torso, lower torso, and the head as separate entities functioning together.

To "lift up," visualize a steel rod running through the center of the body. The rod begins at the heels and exits through the center of the skull. Imagine a string attached at the top of the rod that pulls you up onto the toes. Now relax and come down from the toes and rest your weight on the balls of the feet. Resting the body's weight on the toes rather than the heels serves to tilt the body slightly forward. The result is a more aggressive and confident stance.

A strong abdomen is indispensable. Strong abs allow the player to easily control the drum while marching, as well as acting as a shock absorber to remove the bounce created from marching. Added body control from stronger abs will also take pressure off of the lower back.

Once the four keys to correct posture have been addressed, remember to keep the chin approximately 5 degrees above level, the shoulders back, and the chest cavity expanded to polish the look.

## B. Grip

The grip used for bass drum is similar to the matched grip for snares. That is, it is firm but relaxed and the right and left hands are symmetrical.

Drop both arms to your side and let them hang naturally. Place the shaft of the mallet in the crevice between the beginning of the fingers and the palm. The butt of the mallet should rest on the thickest part of the palm closest to the wrist on the pinky side of the hand. The mallet should never be choked up on.

The pad of the thumb should be on the shaft, pointing toward the head of the mallet. There should be **NO GAP** between the thumb and the pointer finger **at any time**.

Once the shaft is in place and thumb and finger placements appropriate, squeeze the shaft as tightly as you can and then relax. The resulting feeling is how tightly the mallet should be gripped: relaxed but firm.

Note how the weight of the mallet head naturally tugs the wrist. The angle created from the "tug" of gravity is approximately 45 degrees. This is the default angle to maintain in the set position. However, this angle will vary slightly from drum to drum, with a more acute angle used for smaller drums and a more obtuse angle for larger drums.

## C. Set Position

Bring the mallets up from your side, bending at the elbows. The forearms should be parallel to the ground or within 5 degrees. This 5 degree variance is due to the fact that bigger drums have a center-point below the parallel.

At this point it is important to set the drum to the player, and not the player to the drum. To set the drum, raise or lower the drum via the carrier until the mallet head is close to the center of the head. Adjust the carrier to bring the drum as close to the body as possible. The center of gravity is shifted closer to the body, decreasing stress on the back. This shift also makes marching and playing more natural.

While setting the drum, remember to maintain the aforementioned mallet angles. To accomplish this, the player may need to "push" the elbows forward or "pull" them back in relation to the drum.

Ideally, the distance from the center of each player's drum to the ground should be similar. However, varying player heights will cause discrepancies. It is important to exercise judgment in this situation. Setting the drum to the line should be a secondary priority, and never at the expense of proper approach and technique.

Once the drum is set, it is important for the player to be able to locate the center of the head without looking. Two techniques can be utilized. First, memorize where the wrist or forearm touches the rim when the mallet head is in the center. Locating a particular tension rod vis-à-vis the wrists is helpful. Additionally, when the mallet is in the center of the head, a warmer fuller tone is produced from the stroke. Experiment playing in different zones and learn to differentiate between them. Eventually, an "ear" for center will develop.

## Part II. How to Approach Playing the Drum

### A. Types of Stroke

The two primary strokes for playing bass drum are the legato and staccato strokes. The legato stroke is the most natural, requiring maximum relaxation and facilitating the strongest fullest sound with the clearest articulation and tone. It is the stroke most frequently used. A staccato stroke is utilized for maximum impact. It is more rigid and similar to a downstroke. All unisons require a staccato approach, as well as in instances warranted by the compositional style.

### B. Stroke Execution

There are two primary sources and one secondary source of movement in executing the bass stroke. All strokes are initiated from the rotation of the forearm and wrist. A crude analogy is the turning of a doorknob.

At this point in the stroke, the wrist should be in line with the forearm (i.e. not bent relative to the forearm), with little or no lowering of the forearms. This remains true for the entire rotation at lower playing levels.

The second source of movement is the forearm in relation to the drum. There will be a slight lateral movement (an inch or two) of the forearm away from the drum. This movement, which pivots at the elbow (i.e. the elbow remains stationary relative to the body) is inherent in the stroke and helps to create velocity.

The secondary source of movement involves dropping the forearms from the parallel set position. This movement toward the ground occurs simultaneously with the other movements. But, it is only utilized at heights above twelve inches. This facilitates maximum audio-visual impact.

There has been some debate considering if the wrist should break during the stroke. Many find that a slight break of the wrist in heights over nine inches is beneficial because it adds velocity to the stroke. Many use a bullwhip analogy to visualize this concept. When the wrist breaks slightly during the stroke, the mallet head accelerates, generating more velocity into the head. Breaking the wrist is also more ergonomic and gives the player greater range of motion.

Once the mechanics of the stroke are understood, it is important to understand how these mechanics relate to the path of the mallet. From the initiation until impact, the mallet travels along a single imaginary plane. The natural motion of the player's arm governs this path provided all mechanics are in effect. The mallet follows a sweeping motion characterized by movement away from the drumhead, down in elevation, and slightly to the rear of the player.

These motions occur very fluidly as to form one continuous motion. The degree of each motion component is dictated by the height of stroke.

Mastery of stroke is a difficult and tedious process. Most players attempt to develop it too quickly and do not take the time to slow the process for evaluation. Begin slowly and use a mirror. It is helpful to position yourself at a 45-degree angle in relation to the mirror to best see the path of the mallet. The path the mallet follows away from the drum during the initiation of the stroke should be identical to the mallet path during the execution of the stroke.

#### C. Height System

The height system for bass is typical of that for snares and tenors. There is some overlap. Three inches corresponds to *p* and *pp*. Six inches corresponds to *mp*. Nine inches corresponds to *mf* and *f*. Twelve inches corresponds to *f* and *ff*. Any height over twelve inches corresponds to *ff* and *fff*.

Because it is difficult to see the mallets to adjust height and position, it is find it helpful to think of a clock. The thumb is the hour hand of that clock. 12 o'clock corresponds to the set position, 1 o'clock to three inches, 2 o'clock to six inches, 2:30 to nine inches, 3 o'clock to twelve inches, and 4-6 o'clock to anything over twelve inches.

#### D. Things to avoid

A common tendency is to overplay or "pound" the drum. This creates a harsh sound that sticks out of the ensemble, and it is difficult for other players in the bass ensemble to match. Pounding typically is indicative of tight rigid playing and is not conducive to flow.

Players sometimes have too much arm movement particularly in the elbows. The elbows should remain close to the side of the player. Movement in the elbows causes undue stress on the shoulders and creates too much of an angle between the head and mallet. This combination makes rolls and 4's impossible at fast tempi.

### Part III. Putting it All Together: Growing the Bass Ensemble

#### A. Flow is everything.

Flow is a somewhat ambiguous concept. Flow is a state where everything clicks. For the bass ensemble, it occurs when the line is cohesively displaying mastery of individual parts, control of tempo, and musicality. The bass ensemble must flow not only within itself, but also within the full battery and full ensemble. Adjustments are few, but when they occur, they are fluid and unnoticeable to the listener.

#### B. 4 Basic Components of Flow.

Flow begins with timing. A unified concept of time is essential to the success of a bassline. It is important to frequently practice with a metronome, but experiment setting it at half the tempo marking so the ensemble does not become "metronome dependent."

Unified time begins with unified feet. The feet must have an unwavering pulse, and the player must be able to line his or her hands up with the feet and not the opposite. When players get new parts, they should automatically learn them with their feet. They should use them as a reference point and as a tool to check for rhythmic accuracy. Good feet are the bread and butter of the bassline.

THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR KNOWING THE PART! Not only must one know his or her part, but an understanding of how it fits with the rest of the parts is essential to developing flow. One sign of not being comfortable enough with the part is using another part to cue your own part. This creates a stutter in the ensemble and disrupts flow.

The fourth key component to flow is the ability to smoothly switch meters or "feels." Today's arrangers utilize duple, triple, 5/4, and 7/8 meters and switch among them constantly. Once again, an unwavering pulse in the feet and using the feet to help in checking accuracy is a must.

#### C. Tempo

There are three ways to approach tempo: on top of the beat, on the beat, or behind the beat. While snares often need to play behind the beat (as slowly as possible without dragging) to compensate for a tendency to rush, the bass ensemble almost always plays on top or in front of the beat. This adds momentum and energy to the ensemble. Also, the nature of bigger drums makes dragging an issue, so adopting this approach mitigates that factor.

It is important that students understand the distinction between rushing and playing on top of the beat. This process takes time and is often dependent on how well the student understands time in general.

#### D. Musicality

Musicality results from the incorporation of all the aforementioned topics, and is also another component to flow. Musicality begins with uniformity. Once the bass ensemble can "play" together, individual parts can be manipulated, to add to the composition. These nuances come in the form of muffling, rim shots, and varying dynamics. Muffling "dries" the sound and is excellent in softer passages, but also can be utilized for impact-oriented unisons. Rim shots are for certain timbres and textures, and varying the dynamics from player to player easily creates balanced crescendos and diminuendos.

### Part IV. Characteristics of Great Basslines

First and foremost, great bass ensembles have immaculate timing!

Great basslines also play check patterns well. Any run or phrase can be broken down into its component parts: the check pattern. The check pattern is the underlying rhythm and can take the form of eighth notes, triplets, and occasionally 16<sup>th</sup> notes. 16<sup>th</sup> notes, septuplets, and 32<sup>nd</sup> notes all have an eighth note base, while duple three's have an eighth note triplet base. Split 32<sup>nd</sup> notes have a 16<sup>th</sup> note check pattern.

Great bass ensembles play check patterns in time, use them as a reference, and as a foundation for more complex parts.

Great basslines play with great sound quality. This is facilitated by approach, timing, and rhythmic accuracy. The question to ask is, "If someone unfamiliar with the part listens to it, will he or she understand what the part is?" If they can, the line is on the right path.

Great bass ensembles play great rolls. Rolls are more difficult on bass, but add substance to the entire ensemble. Rolls are no longer the domain of smaller drums either. Articulate, full-bodied rolls are expected on all size drums. Practicing double beat exercises and long open/closed/open rolls on a pillow is a good way to develop roll quality. Strive to draw sound out of the drum by making the second note of the double beat equal to the first in volume.

## Part V. Bass Drums Have Unique Personalities

Each drum is different and possesses different issues to be addressed. This warrants experimentation and minute variations in approach. For instance, rolls on an 18 inch bass require different fingers and a different firmness of grip than a roll on a 28 inch bass.

The range of sizes to use in the ensemble depends on several variables. Does the ensemble call for a high or low sound? How big are the players? How large is the ensemble? All these factors determine the appropriate size. For mature ensembles a four inch range between drums (16-32 inch) provides maximum flexibility. But the average ensemble will only need an 18, 20, 24, 26, and 28 inch drum. Large ensembles may use six drums, with a 32 inch bottom.

Tuning and muffling can aid in the overall sound of the line as well. Generally, too much muffling and head tension produces a dry sound and exposes errors. For a large ensemble, or for less advanced players, less foam, and lower tuning is desirable. Experimentation is important in order to find just the right sound for a particular situation.

### **Conclusions:**

It is important to realize that the marching medium is continually evolving. Increasing demands are placed both on the individual and the instrument. Undoubtedly, both individual achievement and technology will continue to evolve with the medium. One only has to look the advent of the free-floating snare drum and Kevlar heads for proof of the latter. Thus, it is important to keep abreast of trends on both fronts.

The bass ensemble has evolved with the rest of the medium. As such, it be given due consideration. Consideration includes investments of talent, time, and energy early in the process and the continual development of players throughout the season. The dividends of such investments will be great for both individual and ensemble.