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MUAG 5360 – Instrument Pedagogy and Repertoire  
University of North Texas - Spring 2015

## **German Bow vs. French Bow**

The double bass seems to be the only instrument on the orchestral strings family that hasn't yet completed its evolution. It can be 4 or 5 strings (even 3 sometimes, believe it or not), with or without a lower register extension (commonly used in the U.S. orchestras, whereas the 5 string is the norm in most countries), tuned in 4ths, classical Viennese tuning or 5ths, played standing or seated, with a tall or short stool. Even its pedagogy seems to be still under development with its various technical approaches: divided in bigger or smaller amounts of positions, depending on the school; played on the lower register with fingers 1, 2 and 4 or 1, 3 and 4 (old Italian school) or even with all 4 fingers (even 5) on more modern approaches. The list goes on, but one topic that undoubtedly rules in all bassists' discussions is the bow: French or German?

Different bow grips are common in other instruments, but on the double bass not only the grip can be different, but the bow itself is different depending on your grip. Let's start from the beginning.

The German bow is the older one. Its design is a direct descendent from the Viola da Gamba instrument family. The Gamba is a type of instrument that first appeared in Spain around the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The German bow is held basically like a "hacksaw", with the hand under the stick, with its palm facing left. It allows for an easier drop of the arm's weight in comparison to the French bow, allowing the bassist to play heavier strokes with less difficulty. Also because of this, many people believe the German bow to be an easier option for beginners.

The French bow only began to be popularized after being used by Italian virtuoso Giovanni Bottesini on the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is an evolution of the violin family bow, similar to the cello bow.

Although many people believe the bass on its more familiar tuning (in 4ths) is an evolution of the Gamba instruments, the construction of the instrument is based on the violin. It is broadly believed that the French Bow is harder to teach for beginners. A possible explanation would be that this grip (also known as "overhand"), which is made with the hand holding the bow from above the stick (with the palm of the hand facing down) makes it easier to release weight off the arm from the instrument, which is very useful for all the other string instruments (if you drop your weight on a violin you might very well brake it). The problem is the double bass requires more pressure on the strings to make them vibrate (because of its size and the thickness of the strings), and many french bow players take more time to understand the physical process of relaxing the shoulders and letting the arm weight transfer to the bow. This was the case with me, for example. It is a consensus though that once you manage to realize the mechanism of relaxing the shoulders

and using the weight of your arm to transfer this pressure to the strings without effort, the French bow can be a very skillful tool.

In relation to pedagogy, I don't see this duality changing very soon. Even though the German bow might be easier for beginners, many bass players become so after playing other string instrument. Since the bass is too big for a child to learn and small scale instruments are hard to find and expensive, most kids will start playing violin or cello and later move to the bass. For these people, the french grip is obviously a more natural transition. Another reason is that in many elementary schools the bass is taught by a cellist or even a violinist or violist, and for these teachers it is easier to teach the French bow.

One might find weird that there isn't a standardized bow for the instrument, although some orchestras do require that their players use all the same kind of bow. I believe, however, there is a tendency, on a more liberal society, that this becomes more and more unusual within time. Even in France and Germany, many orchestras already accept both kinds of players.