

TUTION TIP: AUDITION TIP - GET THE BASICS RIGHT

Hello and welcome to the fourth in the new series of Tuition Tips brought to you by Guitar-X – part of Tech Music Schools in London. For the full Tuition Tip archive including sound files and videos, visit the website: <http://www.guitar-x.co.uk> - Interact – Tuition Tips. Each issue I will be focussing on a specific class taught at the school, giving you a bite-size chunk of the lesson, and an insight into what it's like to be on a full-time course.

Rather than focus on a specific lesson, this time I'm going to look at the assessment/audition process we have at the school. Before anyone commences a course of study with us they have to sit an assessment. This isn't some form of X-Factor-style humiliation session; it's a chance to sit down with one of our bass tutors and discuss your playing - what your strengths and weaknesses are, get some advice on how to improve and the best course of study.

Out of all the aspects of bass playing that we look at during an assessment, there are a few issues that crop up regularly and we give advice upon. These are things that most bass players could improve or might be doing wrong, or are even causing them a severe hindrance and massively limiting their potential. Now you might think that this list of 'common faults' is very long and varied, but nearly all of the time it boils down to one or both of two problems. These two things are common to everyone (except an unfortunate few), and you are using them right now to hold this magazine. Yes, your HANDS!

Any sound that your instrument produces is a direct result of your hands, so the way in which you use them is very important. Your approach and touch of the strings is the foundation upon which everything else is built, so it is something everyone should constantly evaluate and reconsider. All too often, people arrive at something that sort of works, and then rush off trying to play their favourite music and never look back. There's nothing wrong with pushing yourself and learning new and difficult things, but a portion of your playing time should always be spent addressing the basics. This is your bass playing 'house' we are talking about, and the technique you use is the foundation of that house. We all know there's no point spending ages installing the latest hi-tech surround sound flat-screen cinema technology in your front room if the walls are about to fall down! Instead, start off with the right approach and build up from there. As you progress keep checking those foundations and make improvements where possible – don't be satisfied with anything less than perfection. It should be a constantly evolving and improving thing - we don't still build houses out of wattle and daub, do we?!

THE PLUCKING HAND

Strings ringing on? Having trouble articulating notes or crossing strings? General lack of clarity and poorly executed rhythms? Want to play faster?! Most likely it's your plucking hand that needs work.

There are many varieties of technique that people use with their plucking hand. While there is no one 'right' way of doing it, this method is the one I've had most success with

both personally and through teaching, and will address all of the issues mentioned above.

EXERCISE ONE

- When you pluck the string use a firm strike and try to play across the string, rather than plucking up and away from the body of the bass. Play through the string so that when you finish the stroke your finger ends up resting on the next string.
- Strictly alternate your plucking fingers (as numbered).
- To improve your damping (eliminating unwanted string noise) start with your thumb resting on the pickup or the body of the bass. As you change string bring your thumb with you and rest it on the strings below the one you are plucking, following the list below:

- E STRING – thumb on pickup/body of bass
- A STRING – thumb on pickup/body of bass
- D STRING – thumb on E string
- G STRING – thumb on A string

THE FRETTING HAND

Stumbling around the fretboard? Tripping over notes and getting tired quickly? Stuck to the same old licks and positions? Can't keep up with your plucking hand? Let's work on that fretting hand.

EXERCISE TWO

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Exercise Two. Each system consists of a bass clef staff with a 4/4 time signature and a corresponding guitar tablature staff. The first system has four measures of music. The notes in the first measure are G2, F2, E2, D2. The second measure has G2, F2, E2, D2. The third measure has G2, A2, B2, C3. The fourth measure has G2, A2, B2, C3. The tablature for the first system shows the following fret numbers: 5 6 7 8, 5 6 7 8, 5 6 7 8, and 5 6 7 8. The second system also has four measures. The notes in the first measure are G2, A2, B2, C3. The second measure has G2, A2, B2, C3. The third measure has G2, F2, E2, D2. The fourth measure has G2, F2, E2, D2. The tablature for the second system shows the following fret numbers: 8 7 6 5, 8 7 6 5, 8 7 6 5, and 8 7 6 5.

- Use one-finger-per-fret. The fingering for the first line of the exercise should always be 1, 2, 3, 4; the second line 4, 3, 2, 1.
- Play the notes just behind the fret, not in the middle.
- Arch your fingers over and press down with the tips, don't squash them flat.
- This exercise is all about 'economy of motion'. Play only the very first note and look at your hand. Each of the fingers should be stretched out and hovering over their respective frets. To play each note should require only the smallest of movements. It will take time and deliberate practice for your hand to learn this position.

The most important thing with these exercises is that you aim for perfection all of the time. If you are not playing perfectly it is a sign that you are playing too much or too fast. It is far better to play only the first note very slowly and get it perfect, than to play the whole thing poorly. The whole point of practicing is to put information in so that it can come out without thought during a performance. If the quality of the information going in is suspect or less than perfect, then that's how it will come out.

When you can play the exercise perfectly, try introducing a metronome at a slow speed. This will help regulate your practice time and improve your consistency. If you make any mistakes or deviate from perfection, then slow it down or turn it off and start again. There are videos of both these exercises being performed on the Guitar-X website.

Any questions or thoughts about this article, or anything you'd like to see, email me on andrew@guitar-x.co.uk. See you next time!