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Arranging 1

Lesson 5:
Bass Notation

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Lesson 5
- **Topic 1**
- Topic 2
  - ➡ Page 1
- **Topic 3**
- **Activity 1**
- **Activity 2**
- **Topic 4**
- **Activity 3**
- **Activity 4**
- **Topic 5**
- **Topic 6**
- **Activity 5**

Course Contents
- 📑 **Syllabus**
- ➡ **Bookmark**

Communication
- ❗ **Announcements**
- 📋 **Class list**
- 🔳 **Discussion**
- 🖥 **Chat**

Range and Transposition

First of all, let's get acquainted with the bass. Everything discussed in this lesson will pertain to acoustic and electric bass, 4-and 5-string. To begin with, and most importantly, the bass is a transposing instrument. That means that the bass sounds an octave below where you write it. Therefore, we say that the bass is transposed or written up one octave from where you hear it, or where it sounds.

The next thing it is important to know are the names of the "open" strings on the bass. The open strings on a 4-string bass, from low to high, are E, A, D, and G. A 5-string bass would have an extra lower note, which would be B. The bass strings are tuned in fourths. It is especially important to know the lowest note of the bass so that you don't write something that would be impossible to play.

The other thing to keep in mind is the bass range. The lowest note they could play will be their lowest open string, usually either E or B, up to about G above the bass staff. It is possible a bass player could play slightly higher than this, but this is a very safe and workable range. The bass can also be tuned lower than the "open" E, but for our purposes we will stick to the usual tunings.

Written:

Now that we are aware of these important elements of the bass, let's discuss bass lines.

⬅ **Previous Page**   **Next Topic: Bass Lines for Swing** ➡

Lesson 5
Topic 1
Topic 2
Topic 3
→   Page 1
Page 2
Page 3
Activity 1
Activity 2
Topic 4
Activity 3
Activity 4
Topic 5
Topic 6
Activity 5

Course Contents
Syllabus
→ **Bookmark**

Communication
Announcements
Class list
Discussion
Chat

Bass Lines for Swing

Various types of bass rhythms can be played in the swing style, but usually the first type of bass line you think of, when considering swing music, is a "walking bass line."

If you listen to a walking bass line on a medium swing tune, you will notice that quarter notes are predominant. You would only write consistent eighth notes when writing for a really fast swing or bebop type feel, and they would sound like straight eighths, not swung. For now, we will be writing with a medium swing feel. You may use some eighth notes, but they would be a variation within the walking bass line, and used to emphasize anticipations, for example. Also, these few eighth notes would be played swung, in the same way that the eighth notes on the ride cymbal would be—again, written as eighth notes, but actually feeling like a dotted eighths and sixteenths.

Here are some basic rules to follow when writing a walking bass line. Keep in mind that you may have heard some bass lines that do not follow all of these rules. However, for the sake of this course, these guidelines will help you understand how a walking bass line works and how the player comes up with their ideas.

- First, place each root of the chord on the beat (or subdivision) where a new chord change occurs.
- Next, on the beat before each root, add a note that is a half step either above or below the root of each chord. You can also move a whole step rather than a half step; however, in most cases the half step provides a strong "leading tone" into the root. This could also be referred to an "approach note" going to the "target note."

Notice in the above example that the half step, or "approach note," may not be part of the chord, but not to worry. It sounds fine and the more unstable the leading tone, oftentimes, the better it serves as an approach to the root, or " target note," giving the line a stronger push into the next chord.

- The other notes between the root and half step will be chord tones and non-chord tones. If you want to write a stepwise line, you will write combinations of half steps and whole steps, and chord tones and non-chord tones. This is where it is helpful to play your bass line on piano so you can make your own decisions about which of these notes work the best for you.

Previous Page   **Next Page**

Lesson 5
Topic 1
Topic 2
Topic 3
Page 1
➡ Page 2
Page 3
Activity 1
Activity 2
Topic 4
Activity 3
Activity 4
Topic 5
Topic 6
Activity 5

Course Contents
🗐 Syllabus
➡ Bookmark

Communication
❗ Announcements
🗎 Class list
🏭 Discussion
🖳 Chat

Bass Lines for Swing

⬅ ➡

There are many variations on a walking bass line, as far as intervals to use from note to note. You can write:

- Stepwise, as we have just seen
- Predominantly chord tones (1, 3, 5) to the half step
- Leaping roots and fifths
- Leaping octaves
- Repeated roots

Many bass lines use a combination of these intervallic variations. This creates a much more interesting bass line than just moving stepwise all the time, for example.

Be careful *not* leap *into* a non-chord tone. This may create a very undesirable effect. Listen to this example of leaping into a non-chord tone.

When choosing the pitches for beats 2 and 3, keep the chord symbol in mind. The chord may have accidentals that are not contained in the key signature, so for example, on an F7, be careful not to use an E-natural instead of an E flat, as might be suggested by the key signature.
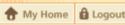
⬅ **Previous Page**   **Next Page** ➡

Bass Lines for Swing

When writing walking bass with two chords per measure, then all you have to think about is root on the chord change and a half step before the next root on the next chord change. Or you may decide to just repeat the root, if the chords are descending by half step, for example.

Other types of bass rhythms you hear in the swing style would be a four-feel and/or two-feel on the roots. A four-feel is simply whole notes. A two-feel would be half notes. This can be effective, for example, when writing a slower swing feel. Begin with whole notes in the A section, go to half notes in the B section, and then walking bass in quarter notes in the C section, for example. This will affect your arrangement dynamically and create a smooth flow from one section to the next. It will also give the listener a break from hearing constant walking bass from beginning to end.

Remember, if you're writing a walking bass line, there can be many choices of pitches. You need to choose the ones you like to hear, and the best way to do that is to play it yourself somehow, so that you can hear what you're writing.

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