

# Chamber Music Treasures: An Annotated List of Bass Players' Favorites

By Jeremy Kurtz

Beginning in March 2010, the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) began an initiative called the "Year of Collaborative Music" (YCM). The ISB is a partner organization in the YCM, and we are encouraging ISB members to present concerts and events that promote the role of the bass in small ensembles. This is an inclusive initiative, open to amateurs and professionals in all styles of music: jazz, rock, classical, folk, free-form improvisation, and everything else that our members play. It can include classical chamber groups, bass ensembles, jazz combos or any other small group. As a part of the yearlong celebration, MTNA has designated January 22, 2011, as the International Day of Collaborative Music (IDCM), one special day devoted to collaborative music making throughout the world. We are hoping that ISB members around the world will create events that celebrate this ideal. You can read more about the initiative at [www.isbworldoffice.com/news/MTNA\\_Collaborative.htm](http://www.isbworldoffice.com/news/MTNA_Collaborative.htm).

One area of focus for bassists in YCM is classical chamber music. While there is a great deal of repertoire for the bass in chamber music, much of it is unknown—both by the bassists and the general public. One great resource for bassists searching for classical chamber music repertoire is Paul Nemeth's "2000 Chamber Works with the Double Bass" web page: <http://www.paulnemeth.com/basschamber.htm>.

Such an immense list can certainly be overwhelming, though, so we have asked some prominent members of the bass community to weigh in on some of their favorite, lesser-known chamber works with bass.

**Robert Black: Founding member of the Bang On A Can All-Stars; Associate Professor of Double Bass, Hartt School; Faculty, Manhattan School of Music, Contemporary Performance Program**

**James Sellars: Palm Court Music** for violin, viola (or clarinet), double bass, and piano

In 1985, James Sellars composed *Palm Court Music* as an homage to the music and the bands that played in the genteel palm courts found in luxury hotels throughout the United States around the turn of the twentieth century. It was a graceful and elegant scene. The music was often based on dance forms, although dancing was not the principal function of the Palm Court. Each of the four movements is based on a dance: Foxtrot, Peabody, Tango, and Boston. The work is delightfully melodic and happily tonal, although there are rhythmic and harmonic complexities that will entertain even the most sophisticated ear. Each of the four parts is equally important. The bass part is rich with solos and melodic moments while also supplying traditional foundation support. It is a demanding and well-written part that is fun to play. *Palm Court Music* is very user-friendly and audience-friendly. It would add a refreshing twenty minutes to any concert program. It is published by Hog River Music at [www.hogriver.com](http://www.hogriver.com).

**Deborah Dunham: Principal Bass/Violone, Boston Baroque and Mercury Baroque Ensemble; Adjunct Professor of Bass, Sam Houston State University**

One of the most satisfying chamber works to both play and hear in recent years is Roland Kato's arrangement of Maurice Ravel's beloved *Mother Goose Suite* (for violin, viola, violoncello, double bass, and piano.) Roland is the Principal Violist of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and is also known for his arrangements and transcriptions, which have been performed worldwide. Seeking a companion piece for the Schubert *Trout* Quintet, the New Hampshire-based Apple Hill Chamber Players commissioned Roland to arrange Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite* for the same instrumentation. Roland worked primarily

from the original piano four-hands score, yet achieved even more seductive coloring with piano and strings. The Apple Hill Chamber Players premiered it in 2000 at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C. and the Washington Post wrote, "[Kato] surprisingly caught the subtleties of the composer's sparsely tinted orchestral brush strokes and poetic watercolor depictions of the five fairy tales." The most demanding parts in this arrangement are for the violin and cellist. The violinist has "piccolo duty" in the *Laideronette* movement and the cello writing tends to be high overall. Roland does invite *ossia* options between the cello and viola parts. Some cellists seem to have no complaints with what is printed but others work with their violists to trade lines where necessary. Although there is also occasional high, lyrical writing for the bassist, the piano and bass parts always lie well on their respective instruments. Roland leaves the bassist many octave displacement options. For optimum voicing, I would recommend taking the top option in the contrabassoon solos in the *Beauty and the Beast* movement to maintain an octave between the bassist and the pianist, providing a fuller sonic spectrum for the ensemble. In the opening of the last movement, however, Roland writes only for strings. Here the bassist can take lines down into the lower octave while carefully observing the dynamics. This provides a breathtaking, luscious foundation into which the other strings can melt. But, for voicing reasons, again with the piano, try playing the last note an octave higher than the printed low "C" to enable a final ensemble chord that resonates more freely. Should the interior construction of the piano being used allow for it, the pianist (or page turner) could strike, with a full palm, the low strings of the piano at the points known as the gong strikes in the orchestral score. Without this, a literal reading can sometimes sound brittle to audience ears. This arrangement is available from Ludwin Music.

**Leigh Mesh: Associate Principal Bass, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra**

*Metamorphosen* by Richard Strauss (in the version arranged for two violins, two violas, two cellos, and one double bass) is one of my favorite pieces to play. I think it is one of the greatest masterpieces by a composer at the height of his powers, and at the very end of his life. Certainly the *Trout* and the Beethoven Septet are beloved masterpieces, but *Metamorphosen* appeals to me for its heart-wrenching melodies and dissonances. All of the string parts are equally satisfying to play, and extremely soloistic. It is a very difficult piece to pull off, though. You need to find seven people who are on the same page, musically and rhythmically. Don't under-rehearse this piece! The music is available for rental from Boosey & Hawkes at [www.boosey.com/usrental](http://www.boosey.com/usrental).

**Kurt Muroki: Artist Lecturer at Stony Brook University, Honorary Artist Member of CMS**

Written in 1898, Max Reger's *Lyrisches (Lyrical) Andante* is a beautiful and charming four-minute romantic piece that is perfect as an encore or a piece for a

younger group. The writing for the bass is simple and straightforward. Even though he wrote for roughly twenty-five years of his life, Reger (1873-1916) was a prolific composer, often composing in the style and structure of Beethoven and Brahms with extended harmonies and counterpoint. While this was originally written for a string orchestra, it works very well as a quintet with one player to a part. The piece is published by Edition Tonger.

**Robert Nairn: Faculty, Penn State and Juilliard; President, ISB**

**Franz Anton Hoffmeister (1754-1812): Quartet No. 2 for violin, viola, cello and solo double bass**

Many bassists know that Anton Hoffmeister wrote four quartets for this arrangement of instruments. There have been several editions over the years (the F. Hoffmeister editions from the late 1960's had the bass in solo tuning), but you can easily obtain a copy of the manuscript of the last three from the Landesbibliothek Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in Schwerin. As with so much of our extant classical repertoire, this is in Sperger's very easy-to-read handwriting, so it is simple to play from the

manuscript. The manuscript for the first quartet is available as a free download at [http://ims1p.org/wiki/Image:Hoffmeister\\_Contabbasso\\_Quartet.pdf](http://ims1p.org/wiki/Image:Hoffmeister_Contabbasso_Quartet.pdf). Like so much of our repertoire from this period, modern editions and playing styles often render the quartets much less interesting. On the Viennese bass with the traditional tuning (and a very different balance with the upper strings) the quartets come to life. I'm performing the second quartet (traditionally the most performed) for a concert with Monica Hugget, Robert Meale, and Phobe Carrai at Juilliard on October 21st, 2010.

**Orin O'Brien: Bassist, New York Philharmonic; Faculty of Juilliard, Manhattan School of Music, & Mannes College of Music**

**George Crumb: Madrigals I for Double Bass, Soprano and Vibraphone On Poems by Federico Garcia Lorca (1965)**

I performed this beautiful chamber music work at Sarah Lawrence College in 1970, and I was so struck by its beauty that it still resonates within me. I would love to play it again. The wonderful percussionist Ray des Roches virtually taught it to the soprano and me (since he had played it

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before) and we were enraptured by this work to the extent that we wanted to rehearse endlessly. It is delicate, transparent, and reminds one of Debussy and Ravel in that every note is carefully chosen for its particular sonority. The sheer tonal beauty of each measure is matched by the emotional content, wedded to the poetry of F.G. Lorca. The one difficulty I had in performance was whispering the words "Los Muer-tos" softly, while also playing. The bass part is rewarding because every note takes advantage of our instrument's unusual timbre and chameleon-like ability to melt into any sound. There are no "unnecessary" notes. One tip to the performer about the double-stopped tremolo pizzicati: in rehearsals I used a soft rubber eraser to practice with, since it hurts the fingers unless you have great jazz calluses. (I put the tips of my right hand fingers together to form a sort of "giant finger" so that I could make the kind of rapid tremolo that sounded right. Using just two fingers did not sound fast or big enough.) The piece is nine minutes long and is published by Edition Peters.

**Robert Oppelt: Principal Bass, National Symphony Orchestra; Faculty, University of Maryland**

*Divertissement* for Bassoon and String Quintet, by Jean Françaix (1912-1997) This work is typical of Françaix—light, witty, tongue-in-cheek—yet classy and debonair. It requires an excellent bassoonist, and the piece really keeps the ensemble on its toes with its rhythmic complexities. If you are tired of the big romantics, Françaix may be just the antidote. I performed this piece in 2005 with Kennedy Center Chamber Players in the Terrace Theater and other venues. Sue Heineman, our Principal Bassoon, was amazing. Published by Schott.

Sonata No. 3 in B-flat, ZWV 181, by Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679-1745) Zelenka was a violone player and composer much admired by Telemann and Bach. This work, one of six trio sonatas, is for violin, oboe, bassoon, double bass, and harpsichord. The music is challenging for all parts and full of surprises in tonality and contrapuntal techniques. I couldn't help finding something modern about it, too. This composer was ahead of his time in many ways, and his music is enjoying a revival. I performed this with my colleagues at University of Maryland in 2008 in Gildenhorn Recital Hall. It is published by Barenreiter.

**Volkan Orhon: Associate Professor of Double Bass, The University of Iowa School of Music**

I was first introduced to Vaughan Williams's Piano Quintet in C minor at the Tucson Chamber Music Festival in 2007, and I had the fortune to perform with great players. The live recording of the performance on CD can be found at <http://arizonachambermusic.org/cdweb.htm>. Vaughan Williams composed this piece in 1903. Even though the premiere in London (1905) was well

received, he withdrew the work in 1918. After his death, his widow decided to publish the work, and the revised version was performed in 1999 and published by Faber Music Ltd. in 2002. In my opinion, the work is superbly written and is a great addition to our chamber music repertoire. It highlights the bass very nicely. The bass part is very substantial and really fun to play. If you like Vaughan Williams's luscious style of writing, this is a perfect piece for you. I can assure you that you would not be disappointed!

## ARTEM CHIRKOV WINS INAUGURAL BRADETICH FOUNDATION INTERNATIONAL DOUBLE BASS COMPETITION



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Photographs by Jack Unzicker

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**Scott Pingel: Principal Bass, San Francisco Symphony; Faculty, San Francisco Conservatory of Music**

In 2009, I was fortunate to work first-hand with Sophia Gubaidulina and perform the world premiere of her breathtaking *Repentance* for cello, double bass, and three guitars (originally scored for cello and guitar quartet, but rewritten in 2008 for this occasion). The effect of the music is at turns spacious, luscious, surreal, and powerful, yet it always remains tangible. Ms. Gubaidulina ingeniously explores different sounds and textures through both conventional and unconventional techniques such as strumming the bass *con plectro* and bouncing rubber balls along the guitar strings. While the cello plays the prominent role throughout much of the piece with its soaring lines, there is plenty for the bass to do: a quasi-cadenza she instructed me to play "like wind," multiple passages of intricate rhythms, and exploitation of the full range of the instrument, to name a few. Of all Ms. Gubaidulina's music that I've performed or heard, this may be my favorite. The piece is available as a rental from Sikorski publishers.

More recently, I performed another lesser-known chamber work that I found to be exciting to play and quite successful in audience reception. Duo for Cello and Bass by St. Paul Chamber Orchestra bassist **Fred Bretchger** is somewhat of a *tour de force* of diverse techniques, driving rhythm, and rich harmony. It is three movements in one, all heavily influenced by the harmonic and rhythmic language of jazz and blues, and obviously written by someone who really knows the ins and outs of playing the bass. There is an optional improvisation section over a cello ostinato that I really appreciated as an outlet for my own jazz roots. It is available for purchase from Liben music.

**Timothy Pitts: Professor of Double Bass, Rice University's Shepherd School of Music**

One of my favorite collaborative pieces to program is *Fantasia On Themes Of Marin Marais* for viola and double bass by John Tartaglia. It's really a set of variations based on the popular suite that is often played on the viola. The music is moderately difficult for both players. It will take a little time to work out the ensemble issues, but it is certainly worth

the effort. The bass and viola share equal roles throughout, which makes it ideal for a viola, bass, or chamber music recital. You will most certainly recognize the themes, even though they are presented with a unique, contemporary flare. *Fantasia* is published by Liben Music and is about ten minutes in length. [Editor's Note: this edition is currently out of print, but may be available in various university libraries or through interlibrary loan.]

**Rodney Slatford: Founding bassist of The Nash Ensemble of London; Former Head of School of Strings at The Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester UK; Founder, Yorke Edition**

Having enjoyed thirty years playing with the Nash Ensemble of London, today—some fifteen years after leaving the concert platform—I can look back nostalgically on some wonderful repertoire that the Nash had the great fortune to perform and record. One of the rarities I found particularly challenging and yet extremely rewarding was the *Concerto for Piano and Nine Players* by Constant Lambert. It is a dark and often brooding work in a jazz-blues style, that reflects not only the many-faceted aspects of the composer's personal life, but also his unresolved battle with the bottle that led to his untimely early death in 1950 in his late forties. Scored for the unusual combination of piano (it has to be a virtuoso soloist), flute (doubling piccolo), three clarinets (with various doublings), trumpet, trombone, cello, double bass and percussion, there is something for everyone to enjoy. Lambert wrote Concerto largely in Marseilles, so it is imbued with the sunshine and energy that reflects the south of France. And yet it also reflects the death of two of his closest friends, the composer Philip Heseltine (alias Peter Warlock of Capriol Suite fame), the painter Christopher Wood, and also the death of his father. William Walton's popular *Façade* was written with Lambert's help, and the bubbling exuberance of the opening movement of Concerto for Piano and Nine Players, for example, is never far removed from the lively numbers in *Façade*, with the double bass stirring polyrhythms from below. There are a couple of nice little solos for the bass, which draws the work to a close, almost as a sort of lyrical epitaph. The piece is masterfully scored throughout, even down to the maraca that gives a haunting and somehow almost skeletal feel to the

central section of the second movement *Intermède*. There is a strong Latin-American influence within the piece too, with shifting time signatures and exciting effects, though the finale *Lugubre* perhaps sums up the mood most effectively. The score and parts are available for rental from Oxford University Press.

**Thomas Van Dyke: Faculty, Longy School of Music; Bassist, East Coast Chamber Orchestra (ECCO)**

Fred Lerdaahl's *Waltzes* for low string quartet (violin, viola, cello, and bass) is a work that contains virtuosic writing for all the instruments including the double bass. It is mostly tonal or quasi-tonal with beautiful harmonies throughout and plenty of intriguing sounds. Fred achieves these sounds not by the use of disparate pitches but by the very creative use of texture, color, and voicing. These are charming pieces that have a very fun and festive quality to them while never being short of interesting material. Some of them swing and dance while others lament (including an achingly beautiful bass solo movement) and effortlessly carry long beautiful lines. Fred says that he wrote the work for players who were used to the demands that the classical and romantic eras placed on string players' technical abilities. Big leaps that beg to be done upon one string and expressive legato lines are what characterize the writing in this work. It is not heavily saturated with extended techniques as much of the contemporary literature is. Instead it contains more traditional bowed and pizzicato techniques and relies on the imaginative phrasing, color, and voicing that he gives the pitches. These are fantastic pieces and they are great fun to play. While technically difficult to play and put together, the reward is immense. The piece is available from Jerona Music Corporation: [jeronamusic@sprynet.com](mailto:jeronamusic@sprynet.com).

Gyorgy Kurtag's *Bagatelles* op. 14d for flute, bass, and piano are typical of Kurtag's work in the sense that they achieve maximum expressive and dramatic effect with the minimum amount of material. Kurtag draws on an enormous dynamic range. Notes change instantaneously, between barely audible under one's fingers, to snap pizzicatos that make one want to schedule a luthier appointment. Kurtag also uses a very wide pitch palette: pitches on the bass often live in the stratosphere of thumb position and notes on the flute and piano are the extremes of their ranges as well. Kurtag draws the listener into

a strangely beautiful sound world that many other composers only achieve with a full orchestral compliment. In this piece, as well as much of his music, the performers must live completely in the moment with the most concentration demanded when the least, or seemingly least, is happening musically. Often, fermatas over rests are written and these can carry the most musical and expressive significance. While not as seemingly virtuosic as some of the romantic repertoire or even other contemporary repertoire, these pieces' virtuosity lies in the performers' ability to collaborate with the composer in striving tirelessly for extremes in the musical instructions given. Some of what feels like intentional ambiguity in the writing (often notes have no temporal value and do not line up in the score with other parts) requires the performer to be an equal part of the compositional process. This is an incredible piece that we, as bass players, are lucky to have in our repertoire. I strongly encourage bass players to explore this and other Kurtag works for their unique and powerful expressive force. The piece is available as a playing score (not separate parts) from Editio Musica Budapest.

**Jeffrey Weisner: Bassist, National Symphony Orchestra; Faculty, Peabody Institute**

**Louise Farrenc: Piano Quintets, Opp. 30 & 31**

Louise Farrenc (1804-1875) led a fascinating life as a composer, teacher and performer. She studied composition with Riecha, Hummel and other prominent teachers in France, and her prowess as a pianist led to a distinguished concert career and an appointment to the faculty of the Paris Conservatory. She struggled with the prejudices, traditions, and restrictions of the musical culture of nineteenth century France, where she lived and worked for her entire career. She, of course, dealt with all the difficulties of being a woman in music, struggling to be taken seriously and to be paid equally to her male counterparts. But perhaps even more damaging, she struggled with being a composer primarily of chamber and solo piano music during a time when to be taken seriously as a composer in France meant writing opera or large symphonic forms. She wrote a Nonet with bass, but the two works of hers I most enjoy are her two piano Quintets, in the same instrumentation as the *Trout* Quintet. They show her love of Schumann and Mendelssohn, and are delightful throughout! The bass parts are

of mild to moderate difficulty and are comparable to other bass parts in works of this time period such as the *Trout* or Schubert Octet; they can easily be mastered by an advanced student. There is an excellent recording of both Quintets by London's Schubert Ensemble on the ASV label, and very good performing editions exist from the Hildegard Publishing Company.

**Ali Kian Yazdanfar: Principal Bass, Orchestre symphonique de Montréal; Faculty, McGill University**

***Fisherstreet Duo for Viola and Contrabass (1997) by Evan Chambers***

I first heard this enjoyable piece when a former student of mine started working on it, and from that instant, I knew I wanted to learn it. The name "Fisherstreet" is a reference to the town of Doolin, County Clare Ireland, renowned as a destination for lovers of traditional music, of which the composer Evan Chambers cites a great involvement. The *Fisherstreet Duo* is set in two contrasting movements, beginning with the contemplative *Lament for JaFran*. Convergent and divergent lines create a tender atmosphere whose sighing harmonic tension each time inevitably resolves into clear serene repose. The second movement is itself split into two parts, hence the title *Two Jigs: The Barnacle and the Nautilus*. Starting pizz in the bottom register of the bass, the movement begins 'Funky and laid back,' growling its way through a bluesy tune. Becoming much to bear, the more and more dissonant

crustiness is broken off by a sudden silence. The second jig is suddenly quick, always in motion, and much more taut. The writing is virtuosic for both instruments, and notably includes an extended *col legno* passage (where the bassist is asked to use a drumstick). The piece is available directly from the composer's website: <http://evanchambers.net/>

**David Young: Principal Bass, Los Angeles Opera**

The Suite for Double Bass and Guitar by Alec Wilder (1968) was written for Gary Karr and his long-time collaborator, guitarist Frederick Hand. The music is a wonderful foray into the world of interplay between the timbre of both instruments. Capitalizing upon their natural affinity (sounding an octave below written pitch), it exploits interesting sound colors such as similar plucked sounds or soaring melodies for the bass played "arco." The music is lighthearted and tuneful while blending jazz elements with classical elements. The level might be described as moderately advanced because one must have a command of the singing lines in treble clef as well as fluency to play all over the instrument. The best (if not the only) recording available remains on the remastered CD **Gary Karr, Bass Virtuoso**, an essential recording which proves Gary Karr's preeminent accomplishment on our instrument. The music is available as a print-on-demand edition at J. W. Pepper music dealers at 800-345-6296 or [sheetmusic-plus.com](http://sheetmusic-plus.com), published by Margun Music.

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