

Keynote Speech: *We've come a long way, brothers and sisters!*

By Gary Karr

Given at the 2017 ISB Convention, Ithaca College, Ithaca, New York, June 2017

This is the most important speech since my Bar Mitzvah. In the life of a Jewish boy it's the day that you proclaim, "Today I am a man." Well, now I'd like to proclaim, "Today I am a grandpa" of the most important family of my life: the brother/sisterhood of the International Society of Bassists.

As a youngster, I was a terrible disappointment to my very athletic father because I hated sports, I was a fat, roly-poly kid, I was constantly bullied by my peers and homophobic relatives, but, as with the previous seven generations of my mother's side of the family, I found refuge as a bassist in the musical world. But even in this world, prior to the plethora of viola jokes, bassists, in both classical and jazz, were made fun of, and I felt maligned by the very instrumentalists whom I greatly respected. When I realized that I wasn't the only bassist who felt this kind of humiliation, it became abundantly clear that for the first time in my life there was indeed a very supportive family in the bass brother/sister hood. I couldn't be prouder than I am for having played a small role in the formation of the International Society of Bassists that gave us a forum to share our deepest concerns.

Oh, yes, many of my bass playing brothers and sisters made it abundantly clear that even in our own circle we've had our differences. And I had often been made to feel like a sitting duck by many of my favorite colleagues whom I greatly admired, but I was aware that the boat was being rocked, emotions were running high, and, while all this was happening, there was a palpable rise of mutual respect. Now the feelings of fellowship in our bass family are stronger than ever before. What you, my supporting ISB family, have achieved in the past 50 years has transformed our image to a position that is now respected by all musicians and concertgoers alike. ***We've come a long way, brothers and sisters!*** And I truly love you all for what you have accomplished which is why you make me feel like such a very proud grandpa!

We now have many star players not just in jazz and rock but in classical as well—names that are widely known throughout the world. Not long ago my family physician recommended that I see a dermatologist for a minor skin condition. She told me to be sure to ask him about his violin playing because he probably wouldn't give me more than a minute of his time. As he removed his hand from the doorknob while holding my medical chart, he proceeded to give me his entire CV, which, admittedly, was quite impressive. He had studied with Jasha Heifetz, got his doctorate from Indiana University, has a photographic memory etc. Then he asked me if I played an instrument. "Yes," I said, "I play the double bass." "Oh," he said, "There's a very famous solo bassist living in Canada, but, at the moment, I cannot think of his name." I felt very humbled by that, especially since my name on my chart was staring right at him! A week later I had to return to his office for my second appointment and this time I was greeted like an old friend and colleague. "Please forgive me", he said, "I never forget names and I feel like an idiot for having forgotten the name of the world famous bassist. His name is Joel Quarrington!"

As proud as I am for having started the ISB, it would not have continued to this day without the brilliant, dedicated and hard-working efforts of Barry Green who came up with a much better name for the organization. It was originally called the "International Institute of String Bass," a name that was advanced by the University of Wisconsin who helped with the funding of the original organization. Our

first convention was held in 1967 and featured lectures and performances by such great teachers and players like Warren Benfield, Murray Grodner, Richard Davis and Ron Carter. My teacher, Stuart Sankey was hesitant in participating because as he said at the time, "A convention of bassists? Are you serious? I would rather attend a cat show." He later changed his mind when he realized the extent of the camaraderie we brothers and sisters shared.

After Barry Green's tenure, the executive directorship was passed to Jeff Bradetich and then in 1991, the organization became so successful under his leadership that it was given over to business professionals and for the past 26 years our beloved, Madeleine Crouch, has been at the helm and her love of our ISB family is truly palpable. We owe a hellava lot more debts of gratitude to Barry Green, Jeff Bradetich and to Madeleine Crouch than to me for the amazing continued prosperity of the International Society of Bassists. No words of thanks can do them justice for their hard work and devotion to our family, but if they would kindly stand we would like to thank them with a rousing round of applause.

As some of you brothers and sisters might have noticed, before Barry Green took over the ISB there was a hiatus of a couple of years during which time I did all I could to hold the organization together...that is, with the help of Elizabeth Wallace who played principal bass in the Halifax Symphony Orchestra and did a wondrous job in helping me to keep the ISB on its feet. Before moving to Halifax in 1971, I managed a crazy schedule of concert touring while also teaching at Yale, the New England Conservatory of Music and at Juilliard where, by the way, the bass was not included in the faculty of strings as it was considered only an orchestral instrument that should be paired with the brass instruments! Therefore, in order to keep the ISB running smoothly I rented an office in Plainfield, N.J. where I was living, and I hired a highly recommended middle age secretary. I should have seen the writing on the wall when she kept blaming the post office for the problems I had in distributing our magazine, "The Bass Sound Post." I kept receiving complaints from our members that they weren't receiving our publications and I couldn't understand why this was happening! Not only did I believe my secretary's explanation, but when I decided to take a two-year sabbatical from concertizing in order to teach general music to 30 classes of elementary school children in Halifax, Nova Scotia, without properly bonding her I turned over all my private affairs to her and even placed her and her elderly mother in my home. I was incredibly naïve and unbelievably stupid because not only did she all but destroy the ISB she also never paid my private bills, emptied my bank account and I even lost my home. So, with the help of Dalhousie University in Halifax, I was able to resurrect the ISB and even produce a fancier publication called *Probas*. When I decided to return to concert work, I packed up the ISB office in a 6-foot by 6-foot crate and sent it to Barry. I should imagine that he was quite shocked when it arrived but, to this day, I was too shy to ask him about it!

Many years ago I was asked to meet with the staff of the Johnny Carson show to see if I would 'fit' into their roster of guests. After playing a couple of tunes and telling a joke or two, they asked me, "What is your instrument called?" I said, "It's a double bass." "Why," they asked. I explained that it's a transposing instrument that doubles the note on the staff an octave lower. That explanation ended my chances for being on the show because, as they said, "We think that it's too esoteric for our viewing audience!"

There probably is no such specific thing called a bass. It, whatever it is, has had many different names throughout history: contrabass, contrabbasso, bass viol, violone, string bass, bass fiddle, upright bass,

bull fiddle, Baroque Dog House, double bass and now we have electric bass, bass guitar, Fender bass or just BASS. As for the electric bass, it is still evolving and the variations of physical style are too numerous to name.

At the first convention held on the campus of the University of Wisconsin, it seemed that the mood was set in exploring all options open to us classical and jazz bassists. Some of the topics presented 50 years ago are still being discussed today and now we're also talking about electric basses. Compared to the many different and colorful personalities of the bass, I should imagine that it must really be boring to be a violinist or a cellist where most aspects of their instruments have been standardized for centuries. Take, for instance just the physical nature of the bass. Here are some of the differences that after many centuries of the history of our instrument we're still discussing at the ISB conferences and in our *Bass World* magazine:

What shape should the bass be? Like a gamba or like a violin or should it be pear shaped or guitar shaped? Should it have a flat back or a round back? Should the bass have high shoulders or sloping shoulders and what effect does the shape of the shoulders have on the output of sound? How big should the instrument be? There is really no one standard size. How long should the strings be (they vary from around 36-46 inches)? How far apart on the bridge should the strings be? How long should the fingerboard be, and should it be round or cut-away for the lower two strings? When the first convention was held most manufactured endpins were no longer than 8 inches so a lot of players were forced to lean over their instruments in order to play. Because the bass is affected so much by humidity changes, rather than changing bridges, bridge adjusters became popular and they have been made of a variety of materials. When I travelled with the Koussevitzky bass I always carried with me 5 bridges plus a bridge jack. I've never liked bridge adjusters because I don't like the resulting feeling on the bow. It always feels to me like taking a bath with your socks on, or, I can think of another analogy but I'm determined to keep this speech clean. So my only solution was to carry all those bridges so as to make quick adjustments to humidity changes. Now, we have moveable necks so that we don't have to change bridges.

To get back to the historic differences regarding the physical bass, should an upright bass have 3,4,5 or 6 strings? What are the benefits of each? Do large basses project better than small basses? Can small basses produce a deep sound? And, of course, there's the bow...French and German, Dragonetti arched bows or swan head baroque bows, short or long bows, black or white hair, sticky or dry rosin etc. Lawrence La May, a luthier and bow maker, supplied the first Wisconsin conferences with 200 different styles of bows that proved to be an unbelievably influential door opener for understanding how bows work! I had moved to Wisconsin not to join the university faculty (which came later) but to work with Lawrence La May in building a user-friendly bass that would demonstrate to my brothers and sisters the great benefits of owning a new bass rather than an old one that is constantly in need of attention. Even before physiologists started writing about potential pains from playing it was pointed out in the early conventions 50 years ago that a lot of back pain came not from playing but from carrying the bass, so Robert Stenholm of Rockford, Illinois, who attended one of our Wisconsin conventions, came up with one of the first large suspension wheels that replaced the endpin. Of course, many more topics were discussed regarding the physical aspects of the instrument.

The actual playing of the bass excited a lot of conversation as well, and some of the issues debated were the use of Simandl/Bille fingering (1-2-4 or 1-3-4) verses extended fingering using all four fingers and even using the thumb in lower positions. The subject of tuning the bass also raised a lot of

questions. Many members felt that with metal strings there was no need for solo tuning. Solo tuning and orchestra tuning is still a hotly contested issue and to add to that controversy, many players are tuning in fifths or a combination of fourths and fifths. Another hot topic 50 years ago was sitting versus standing. With standing there were various postures presented, and with sitting there were concerns about the placement of the left foot and the height of the stool.

Back in the 60s the musicological purists still had a heavy influence on performance of all instrumental music, so any form of transcription was frowned upon at that time. Thankfully, attitudes have changed over the half a century and now not only have we discovered unknown original works, we can delve into the music of the master composers of the past without fear of criticism for our transcriptions. I cannot imagine going through life without Bach Suites and other solo literature by the greats of the past three centuries. As much as I would have liked, very little discourse about actual bowing technique was presented 50 years ago, but even then, with the presence of jazz bassists there was a lot of talk about pizzicato...one, two or three fingers and where to get the best sound. I don't think that classical bassists paid much attention to this topic and I wish that they had. I certainly learned a lot from the jazzers. Also, the jazzers talked more about setting up the bass than classical players and, of course, amplification was a big topic. As for the technique of bowing, I am still learning and I'm happy to report that at age 75 I've made a lot of progress during the past six months thanks to Tim Cobb whose inspirational performance of Bach's Third Suite was played with a baroque bow. After hearing him I decided to do my daily practice with my own baroque bow made by Max Kasper. It heightened the feeling of the connection between the hair and the string resulting in more control than I've ever had before. I've been so spoiled by the great instruments that I've owned that performing on someone else's bass seemed a Herculean task...that is, until I witnessed a concert of challenging Bottesini pieces given by Volkan Orhan on an unfamiliar instrument. I really don't know how he played so brilliantly on someone else's bass but his incredible performance influenced me to be more flexible. Yes, ***we've come a long way, brothers and sisters!***

I was very lucky to have had some marvelous bass teachers including Uda Demenstein who lived across the street and gave me daily lessons when I was 9 years old, and Herman Reinshagen who retired from the New York Philharmonic and settled in Los Angeles where he taught loads of professional bassists including Charlie Mingus who I often followed for my lessons. Then I studied with Stuart Sankey who helped me to expand the solo repertoire of our instrument in ways I never dreamed possible. One time I was playing four repeated concerts with a major Canadian orchestra during which time the bass section totally ignored me and made it painfully clear that they were avoiding me. Then, on the day of the last concert, the principal bassist, whom I had known from the past, greeted me warmly in my dressing room. When I asked him why the section had been avoiding contact with me he said, "We didn't relate what you were doing with our conception of a double bass, but we all finally decided that the instrument you play is NOT a double bass!" This attitude I had lived with since the early 60s because so many young talents who otherwise would have taken up the violin or cello were now coming to the bass and they wanted to play Schubert's Arpeggione Sonata, Bach Gamba Sonatas and Suites etc., but most bass teachers at the time were unfamiliar with this repertoire and in their defensiveness they created the gulf between orchestral bass playing and solo bass playing. Although this attitude has prevailed for the past 50 years it seems to me that the two styles of playing are slowly coming together in the same way it already exists on the cello, viola and violin. Some of the best examples of this had been demonstrated at many recent ISB conventions by ensembles consisting of just bass players. When I first heard Franz Pillinger's group perform I was totally blown

away by their high level of artistic achievement and, in fact, to this day their recording of Renaissance music is still my favorite bass recording and one that I play often. There are so many outstanding bassists that it's not uncommon for 120 bassists to show up for an orchestral audition. Yep, ***we've come a long way, brothers and sisters!*** Of course, how to succeed in one of these nerve-racking auditions has been a continuous topic at ISB conventions and in our *Bass World* publications.

At the time of the first convention there were hardly any recordings in existence. Now most of the performers at the conventions have their own CDs and or also seen in numerous performances on YouTube. ***We've come a long way, brothers and sisters.*** Were it not for Koussevitzky's 1929 recording I doubt if I would have had a solo career. I played his record so many times that I actually wore it out! To replicate the sound of our instrument in recording has always been a great challenge, and often discussed in the ISB conventions, but the most innovative recording of the 1960s was done by Francois Rabbath who carried the bass onto another level previously unknown to us. That recording of his was beyond awesome! There are so many great solo bass recordings today in all genres. Still, there's no substitute for a live performance. After having been wowed by John Patitucci on his recordings I heard him perform live a couple of weeks ago in a 60 plus minute program in which he performed totally alone! And that was on an acoustic bass! I was so captivated by his amazing playing that I felt like a kid all over again and couldn't wait to practice. Then, of course there's Victor Wooten, Jaco Pastorius and Michael Manring who had transformed the electric bass into a one-man band and have inspired a generation of great players. No one would have even dreamed of what we're hearing now on the bass. ***We've come a long way, brothers and sisters.*** Back in the '60s there were no contests specifically for classical bassists. In fact, in 1960 and '61 I was declared the winner of two contests mainly for violinists, cellists and pianists (one in Los Angeles and the other in Chicago) but, in the end, the jury and board decided that it would denigrate their organizations to give the first prize to a bassist so in one contest I shared it with a cellist and in the other contest I was given an honorable mention and allowed to play a concerto with a youth orchestra. Today, the famous Munich Competition, one of the long established major competitions of the world, holds a bass contest every four years! ***We've certainly come a long way, brothers and sisters.*** In 1994 Edgar Meyer became the only bassist to date to win the Avery Fisher Career Grant in Lincoln Center and in 2002 he was a MacArthur Genius Award recipient. This kind of recognition would have been unheard of even 30 years ago, let alone 50!

When I decided in my own mind that I wanted to perform it was not as a bassist but as a singer. In the synagogue I had heard a cantor sing so magnificently and with so much emotion that he reached the depths of my heart. I wanted to reach the audience in this same way so, after studying singing I gave my first vocal performance. To my dismay, everyone in the audience *cried* which seemed strange since I was singing happy songs. So the bass became my voice and now if I could sing I would like to sound like my double bass. So, since this bar mitzvah speech is now over I'd like to conclude by playing *Prayer* from *Sketches of a Jewish Life* by Ernest Bloch. [Editor's note: Gary also treated us to an encore, *Cavatina* by John Williams, after the audience demanded to hear more.)