

THE BASS SECTION IN THE CHURCH ORCHESTRA

by David Winkler

After many years of working with church orchestras, I have observed, as perhaps you have, that bass instruments, whether they be woodwinds, brass, or strings, are often in scarce supply in the church ensemble.

Several explanations could be offered for this dilemma. First, the lower-sounding instruments are usually large, requiring an able body to carry them, as well as a larger automobile to transport them (though I once knew a military band tubist who often came to rehearsal on a motorcycle, with his tuba strapped to his back!). And being larger, these instruments are also generally more expensive. In many cases, a player may not even own his own instrument, as he may have rented or used a school-supplied one in the past.

There's a psychological factor as well, which I call the "servant mentality." Players of bass instruments almost always find themselves in a supportive posture. Rarely are they asked to play a solo of any kind. If they wanted to play the melody, they would have taken up the flute, trumpet, or violin. It takes a certain amount of humility to spend most of one's musical life in the background, while others are taking the lead parts.

Musically, the bass line is a key, foundational part of almost any composition. With this in mind, what can be done to insure that this important element is present in the church orchestra?

First, the director should seek to procure an instrument for any players who are available to play but who may not have an instrument of their own. Beg or borrow if you must; find a good deal at a pawn shop or through the classifieds; accept donations or seek additional budget monies, but do what you have to in order to fill the need.

Secondly, the church director should consider taking advantage of some options which may not be available to a regular band or orchestra. The electric bass is an excellent choice to fill the need, unless your church's musical style is strictly traditional. It's fairly inexpensive, and can be adapted to many types of music. It's also an easy instrument for someone who may have played another instrument in the past to learn. Another option which should definitely be considered is the use of an electronic keyboard. Bass sounds of various types are some of the most realistic ones found in a sampled or synthesized format, and can be easily performed by a competent keyboardist. The pedals and lower manuals of the organ can also provide excellent foundational support. Finally, if nothing else is available, the pianist, being aware of the need for more bass support, can simply bring out the left hand parts, adding octaves where appropriate. However, note that, when there are bass instruments available, (and particularly in the case of the electric bass), the pianist should back off a bit from the left hand part in order to better balance the sound.

The final factor involves the actual music being played by the bass instruments. A typical orchestration may be scored for several bass instruments, such as bass clarinet, tuba, cello,

and string bass. But what if only one of these instruments is a part of your ensemble? To provide a more continuous bass line, you would need to take the time to create a new part for your one bass instrument which would combine all of the parts from the score. In other instances, the music available may be a generic “C Bass” part. Here, if more than one bass instrument is present, you may want to do some on the spot arranging, giving “tacet” or “play” directions at certain points in the music, so that not everyone is playing all the time.