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Symphony No. 2

Mahler

(opening excerpt)



About the Course

In this lesson, Ali Kian Yazdanfar explores the intricacies of the famous opening excerpt from Mahler's 2nd Symphony, a masterwork performed by symphony orchestras around the world and a staple in the North-American double bass audition repertoire. He explores bow strokes, performance strategies, and many aspects of what an audition panel would be listening for in a performance of this excerpt. The lesson finishes with a performance of this excerpt in its entirety.

Contents

Overview	03
Opening line	03
Theme	05
Subito piano	06
Straight sixteenth notes	06
Extension	07
Piano range and contrasts	07
Climax	08



If you have any corrections, comments, or critiques relating to this workbook, please send them to marek@tonebase.co. We strive to deliver the highest quality enrichment experience. Thank you!

Overview

The opening ~90 seconds of Mahler's Symphony No.2 in C minor is one of the most iconic and powerful pieces of music we can perform as orchestral double bassists. It commonly makes appearances on professional orchestral auditions because it showcases so many facets of playing and musicality that can easily convey a player's discipline, seriousness, and depth of feeling to an audition panel. The mixture of dynamics, duple vs. triple rhythms, requirements for both powerful and soft contrasts in sound production, and the length of the excerpt make it a mainstay of the audition repertoire. It is similar to the more beginner-friendly *Meistersinger von Nurnberg* Overture by Wagner but takes all those concepts to a more advanced level.

Opening line

Take a moment to review what Mahler writes in this opening line:

- *fff*;
- *sfz*;
- marcato accent on the first note, usually interpreted as a combination of an accent and a staccato marking;
- "Wild" (wild/energetic/restless);
- "Mit durchaus ernstem und feierlichem Ausdruck" (with a thoroughly serious and solemn expression).

Mit durchaus ernstem und feierlichem Ausdruck.

wild

fff (\Rightarrow)

fff (\Rightarrow)

ff accel.

sf

f

Now try to apply Ali's method for making sure this will speak consistently and clearly:

- Use the edge of the hair here instead of flat hair.
- Start from just above the string rather than with the weight already in the string.
- Dampen the adjacent strings with the left hand so there is no extraneous noise.

Tip: Practice this stroke using just the first note first (C); then add the other notes and string crossing to the D string (or alternatively shift up the A string).

Other things to look out for:

- The first note should be the loudest.
- The last note (the eighth note) should not be accented or louder! This note can taper in dynamic, and the length can be dictated by left-hand vibrato rather than bow sustain.
- Make sure you keep the rhythm clear (sixteenths).

The second entrance should be approached the same way and is worth practicing by building up from the strong starting E-flat on the thinner D string. We are looking for a sound that is:

- dry;
- clean;
- explosive.

The final scale is very similar but involves an accelerando:

- Start at a slower tempo and accelerate to the “tempo primo”; Ali suggests quarter note = 80.
- Use vibrato on the top note of the scale and the octave C below it to help shape the phrase, give it character, and dictate the length of the note’s decay.

Mit durchaus ernstem und feierlichem Ausdruck.

6 *a tempo* *immer wuchtig* *(vib.) mf* III

Theme

The theme starts with the character of a march. It needs to stay heavy, but the notes all have dots, so they should be detached or even short.

- Make a difference between staccato eighth notes and staccato quarter notes.
- Use a vibrato that helps you to articulate and define the length of the notes, especially the endings.
- Help your phrasing by changing the note lengths to show direction
- Pay careful attention to the changes in dynamics.

In the passages that cadence (G-D-G) you must always diminuendo.

- Start from piano, make a crescendo to forte, and phrase off.

6 *a tempo* *immer wuchtig*
 (vib.) *mf*

10 *ff* > (*p*) (*p*) < *ff* > < *f* (only) *p subito* *p*³

14 *f* > *p* *f* > *p* *f* *geth.* *mf* *unisono* *p*

Tip: A strategy for keeping the same pulse throughout

- Put your metronome on, but play so that the metronome clicks on the “off-beats” (the second eighth note of each beat in the bar) instead of on the beat.
- This tool will help you become more aware and precise with your subdivisions and pulse accuracy, especially useful for triplets and dotted rhythms.

10 *ff* > (*p*) (*p*) < *ff* > < *f* (only) *p subito* *p*³

click *etc.*

Subito piano

The goal is to play with a sound that is just as present as in the forte dynamic but quieter. Speed, weight, placement, and bow angle are all variables that you can change to get a different sound.

- In this case, try to change the angle without making too much change to the position of the bow.
- Not changing the weight means that you can keep your right arm comfortable and not tense.
- You can also slow the bow speed somewhat to help accomplish a noticeable contrast to the piano dynamic and a faster bow speed at the forte dynamic.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in bass clef, starting with a key signature of two flats. The first staff begins at measure 23. It features a series of sixteenth notes with various articulations. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 above the notes. Dynamic markings include *fp* (fortepiano) and *(p)* (piano). The second staff begins at measure 27 and continues with similar rhythmic patterns, including triplets and slurs. It also includes dynamic markings *fp* and *(p)*.

Straight sixteenth notes

Play them detached (not legato), starting from the string, with a bit of bounce in the stick. It is not really a spiccato but a marcato stroke with a release, where the bow hair remains in contact with the string, but the wood of the bow bounces.

- You can use the edge of the hair again to round out the length of the articulation. Depending on how much rosin you use, playing with flat hair may create too much friction to create a pleasing sound and end to each note.

Extension

If you have a low C with an extension, fifth string, or how you tune your bass, this is for you! Try playing this passage three different ways and decide which is best for you. Ideally, you want to play what the composer wrote (option 1).

1. Play what the composer wrote, and practice getting your D-capo closed (for capo-style extensions) in the rests of m. 20.
2. Try playing without closing the D on the capo extension, as Ali suggests in this video.
3. Also, try raising the octave of your playing for any note that would be below the E string on your bass.

14 *f* *p* *f* *p* *f* *mf* *p*

18 *ppp* *sempre pp* *XD*

Piano range and contrasts

The second half of the page is mainly in the piano dynamic range. Try playing on the side of the hair and using an up-bow in the slurred sixteenth notes so that the *fp* markings are easier to perform, as you will be close to the frog at that point.

18 *ppp* *sempre pp*

23 *fp* *(p)*

27

3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 4 2 Λ 1 2 4 4 1 0 2 *fp (p)*

When you arrive at the third-last system, make a difference in your note length and bow sustain for the quarter notes.

- Use vibrato.
- Play the quarter notes for their full value.

27

3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 4 2 Λ 1 2 4 4 1 0 2 *fp (p)*

32

mf 4 4 4 1 0 4 1 0 3 3 3 3 4 4 1 4 *sempre cresc.*

Climax

We have arrived at the end of a crescendo with a fortissimo dynamic. This descending scale should be dramatic, powerful, and give a sense of finality. Give yourself space to make this crescendo as dramatic as possible by beginning in a piano dynamic where Mahler writes “sempre cresc.”

For the final tremolo, try one of the following options:

1. Start in the upper half and move the bow towards the frog throughout the bar.
2. Start close to the frog (in the lower third of the bow), and perhaps counterintuitively, start with flatter hair in the pianissimo dynamic, rotating it to side hair but faster bow speed as you get louder.

32

mf 4 4 4 1 0 4 1 0 3 3 3 3 4 4 1 4 *sempre cresc.*

37

ff 2 4 1 4 1 4 1 1 4 4 1 4 1 4 1 2 *tremol. ff* 2 1 *pp molto cresc.*