

MAHLER'S SYMPHONY NO.1 AND PROKOFIEV'S LIEUTENANT KIJÉ SUITE: DOUBLE BASS SOLOS

OWEN LEE explains how a wise choice of fingerings, bowings, shaping and dynamics can best convey the songlike simplicity of two great bass melodies



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The third movement of Mahler's First Symphony and the Romance from Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kijé* Suite contain the most famous double bass solos in the symphonic repertoire.

Orchestral bassists often complain that there are not many solos written for our instrument, but I must say that when we do get solos

they are real gems, as in the case of these two pieces. After all, hardly any standard symphonic movements feature a solo stringed instrument playing the movement's main melody from the outset, let alone arguably the most famous melody ever written by the composer in question.

The two solos have many similarities. Both are simple, folk-like melodies based on vocal music, both are roughly the same tempo, and both tell specific stories. Moreover, the universality of these melodies transcends classical music. Almost every lay person knows the Mahler solo as the nursery song *Frère Jacques* – set in a minor key; and the Romance from *Lieutenant Kijé* was used prominently in the 1980s hit pop song *Russians*, written and performed by Sting.

The story told by the third movement of Mahler's First Symphony is based on an engraving by Moritz von Schwind that is well known

in Austria from children's fairytale books.

The engraving is a highly ironic depiction of a funeral cortège – ostensibly a sad occasion. But when we look closely at the procession we see that it is forest animals carrying the coffin of a hunter who once sought their demise – hardly a sad occasion for the animals!

Lieutenant Kijé also tells an ironic story. Originally a novella by Soviet author Yuri Tynyanov, *Lieutenant Kijé* is about a fictional soldier concocted by bureaucrats serving Tsar Paul I in late 18th-century Russia. The ruse is created because the Tsar mishears one of the bureaucrats' conversations and subsequently believes that there is an actual Lieutenant Kijé. Because it is a crime to contradict the Tsar, the bureaucrats go through the motions of giving the imaginary Lieutenant Kijé a real military career. In 1933, the Soviet director Aleksandr Fajntsimmer made a film based on Tynyanov's novella and Prokofiev provided the score, from which he subsequently extracted the *Lieutenant Kijé* concert suite.

Bassists should have these solos well ensconced in their repertoire because these two warhorses are programmed with great frequency and each is a cornerstone of any principal bass audition. In my twelve seasons with the Cincinnati Symphony, we have played Mahler's First Symphony every three seasons (and the third movement alone in countless educational concerts) and *Lieutenant Kijé* every four seasons.

THE SINGING LINE

For me, the overriding objective when playing these solos is to sing very simply and beautifully, with a vocal quality. Because these solos are simple melodies, they should sound easy to play. As anyone who has ever had to perform these solos well knows, this is easier said than done. The very simplicity of the melodies is one of the main

difficulties, in that every note must be perfectly in tune. Any error is magnified manifold times, as opposed to a solo like the one in Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* where so many notes are flying by so fast that slight imperfections are more easily overlooked. Play the Mahler and *Lieutenant Kijé* solos with good intonation, good rhythm and a nice tone, and most of the battle will be won.

[1] Mahler's Symphony no.1, third movement, bars 3–10, with annotations by the author

[2] Mahler's Symphony no.1: exercise to practise shifting

[3] Prokofiev: Romance from *Lieutenant Kijé*, bars 3–6, bowings by the author

FINGERINGS AND BOWINGS

To achieve good intonation and the impression of great ease, the fingerings and bowings that I recommend in this article are those that I have proven to myself to be the most secure and reliable in the crucible of performance. They are the result of much trial and error. I have found that fingerings and bowings that work well in the practice room do not always work well in the pressure of performance. Each of the many times I have performed Mahler's First Symphony and *Lieutenant Kijé* with the orchestra, I've gone back to listen to the performance tapes to see what worked well, what did not and what could be better. So you never know, I might deviate from the fingerings and bowings in this article the next time I perform these solos. Therefore, one of the main principles I wish to convey here is the importance of experimenting with many different fingerings and bowings – research and development!

FINGERINGS FOR THE MAHLER SOLO

Every player is different, and has different strengths and weaknesses, so what works for one player will not necessarily work for another. For example, one of my very first concerts with the Cincinnati Symphony back in 1996 included Mahler's First Symphony. At that time, I used the fingerings given to me by one of my teachers, Edwin Barker, principal bass of the Boston Symphony. In the third and fourth bars of the solo, Barker likes fourth finger on the F followed by first finger on the G. This works beautifully for him, as anyone who has ever heard him play the symphony well knows. Listening back to my performance tapes, however, I was not happy with the way that I sounded shifting from fourth finger F to first finger G. This shift is one of my biggest Achilles heels. Therefore, since then I have simply shifted to a thumb (+) harmonic on the G from fourth finger F – a shift that I am able to accomplish with great ease, and one that holds up well in the pressure of performance (**example 1**).

Although I am recommending fingerings that differ from Barker's, I would like to repeat some of his general words of wisdom regarding

fingerings for these solos. He said that because so many notes are repeated, he plays each one with the same finger every time it returns so that it is more likely to match the previous occurrence. This makes sense because, like it or not, our different fingers have different tendencies when playing the same note. My suggested fingerings therefore follow Barker's strategy of assigning a particular finger to specific notes.

PRACTISING FOR ACCURATE INTONATION

In addition to having reliable fingerings, good intonation is achieved by daily practice of scales and arpeggios in all keys throughout the range of the bass. Also, these solos lie for the most part on the G string, so playing them while droning the adjacent open D string is another effective way to monitor your intonation. Recording yourself is yet another effective way to monitor all aspects of your playing.

Both solos also contain some shifts across wide intervals, which can be a challenge to play accurately. One way to teach yourself the distance between two notes is to simply shift back and forth and up and down repeatedly between the two notes. Let's take the longest shift in the Mahler solo as an example. This occurs in the last two bars of the solo between the high A and the A an octave lower. Practise shifting back and forth between the two notes as shown in **example 2**. Again, droning is very helpful: make sure that the high A sounds a perfect 5th against the harmonic D and that the lower A is a perfect octave above the open A string.

BOWINGS FOR THE PROKOFIEV SOLO

Another instance of trial and error came with the way I used to bow the *Lieutenant Kijé* solo, which was precisely in accordance with Prokofiev's articulation markings (**example 3**). Listening back to the tapes, however, I did not like the way that the F on the down-beat of bar 2 of the solo stuck out from the line – a bow distribution problem of using up a lot of bow on the F in the space of a quaver (♩) in order

[4] Prokofiev: Romance from *Lieutenant Kijé*, bars 3–6, with annotations by the author

[5] Prokofiev: Romance from *Lieutenant Kijé*, baritone version, bars 3–10

to have enough bow for the following slur over two quavers. I solved this problem in subsequent performances with the bowings in **example 4**. I have found that this simpler approach not only adds to the impression of ease that I wish to convey, but also brings the solo closer to the more straightforward markings that Prokofiev writes in the solo baritone version of the Romance (**example 5**), which are quite different from those in the double bass version. I feel that Prokofiev's markings in the baritone version sound more vocal, helping me to achieve my overriding objective of singing a simple melody.

SHAPING THE MUSIC

In the music examples I have quoted, I have used hairpins to show how I shape the music. In the Mahler solo (**example 1**), each bar is a one-bar mini-phrase within the context of the overarching eight-bar phrase. I phrase each bar to the middle of the bar except in the last two bars, where I play the resolution D a little bit less than the more interesting dominant As – dissonances in music are almost always more interesting than the consonances they resolve to.

In the *Lieutenant Kijé* solo (**example 4**), I find that there are two-bar mini-phrases within the overarching four-bar phrase. I use very long, sustained and connected bow strokes in this solo to help the line sing. Some players like to emphasise the staccato dots that Prokofiev writes over the quavers in the fourth and eighth bars of the solo, but I prefer to emphasise the tenuto dashes that Prokofiev marks over the dots. I feel that playing these quavers very long emphasises the vocal, melodic quality of the solo.

DYNAMICS AND MUTES

The dynamic markings for the Mahler and *Lieutenant Kijé* solos are all at the softer end of the spectrum; piano in the case of the Mahler and mezzo piano to mezzo forte in the case of the Prokofiev. Despite this, I would recommend thinking a solo piano rather than a tutti piano. Many times in music, a dynamic marking indicates a tone colour or mood rather than a specific decibel level – it's all about

context. This applies especially to the *Lieutenant Kijé* solo, which is accompanied by a full post-Romantic orchestra. A true, soft mezzo piano would not be heard over such an accompaniment. Therefore I think the goal should be a full, singing, yet gentle sound. The most important thing is to sing! Relax your bow arm and let it fall naturally into the string. Feeling your arm weight in the string is especially beneficial in mitigating 'the shakes' related to performance anxiety or stage fright.

A word about mutes: a number of great post-Romantic orchestral works feature a muted double bass solo. In addition to the two works covered in this article, other examples include Berg's *Three Pieces for Orchestra* and Webern's orchestration of the *Ricercar* from Bach's *Musical Offering*. Except for the Mahler solo, where the double bass only has to compete against pianissimo timpani, I find it highly impractical to use a mute in these works. The double bass is one of the softer instruments of the orchestra, and this dynamic is exacerbated by the instrument's low register. Moreover, I find that the character of the double bass tone generally blends with other instruments rather than projecting over them. I have found that using a mute in these works makes the solo bass almost inaudible against the backdrop of a large and unmuted orchestra.

My theory is that the composers scored these solos for double bass because they wanted the instrument's special, dark tone. Muting the double bass heightens this dark effect. However, the resulting balance with the full orchestral accompaniment is impractical, and the fact that a double bass is playing these solos already provides a dark enough effect. So, when performing with an orchestra, I suggest using a mute for the Mahler solo but not for the other three works. However, when playing the *Lieutenant Kijé* solo for an audition, do use a mute because there are no other instruments to drown you out, and make a definite difference between mezzo piano in the first four bars and mezzo forte in the last four bars. When I play *Lieutenant Kijé* in the orchestra, I basically play the solos full voice throughout in order to project over the accompaniment. ■