



# Making connections

Peter Askim's approach to bass composition is informed by his other disciplines as a bass player and conductor. He tells **Matthew Power** why knowing how to play the bass is key to writing well for it

**I**HAVE GONE ON A JOURNEY TO UNDERSTAND HOW THE BASS works, in order to forget how the bass works and just write music for it.' Peter Askim's self-knowledge is born out of years of academic study and an innate musicality which expresses itself via three personas (performer, composer, conductor). His bass writing is informed by his professional studies as a bassist which have been absorbed as a natural facet of his compositional style.

Training to a high level as player, composer and conductor has shaped Askim's perception of his instrument and the way he responds to it. After completing a doctorate in bass performance at Yale following study with Donald Palma and Dianna Gannett, Askim studied bass with Ludwig Streicher in Vienna. He joined the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra over eight years ago, and last year took a sabbatical from the orchestra to read for a DMA (doctorate in musical arts) in composition, at the University of Texas at Austin, which he has just completed.

All photographs by Matt Schoobar

For four years Askim taught composition and theory, and conducted the new music ensemble at the University of Hawaii; he now lives in Idyllwild, California, (about two hours' drive east of Los Angeles) and is resident conductor and composer at Idyllwild Arts Academy. 'I also coach chamber ensembles and teach music history and composition,' Askim explains. 'Musically talented high-school students come here from around the world – it is a phenomenal place. I have many students from Korea and Hungary – actually American students are in the minority.'

Askim's wholehearted dedication to music sprang from an early recognition of music as the core of his existence and of the bass as the means to a lifelong process of discovery. From an early age Askim was aware of the power of music as a means of self-expression. 'I also saw it as a means of working through feelings inwardly and of communicating and connecting with people outwardly.' Music, he says, served all sides of his

personality. Askim finds artistic fulfilment in one way as composer, in another through conducting and another from performing. 'There's always a little "jet lag" when I have to move between disciplines,' he acknowledges. But when and how did music take over his life and engender that determined study, which now he begins to feel is bringing his music-making to fruition? 'I remember the moment in high school when, aged 15, I looked around my room, and around my life, and realised that everything I thought about, everything that I wanted, all the Christmas presents on my list, had to do with music. You are taught that music is a very difficult thing to do and you probably shouldn't do it. But as I objectively looked at everything that was part of my life, it all had to do with music.'

Growing up in Maine, Askim studied bass at high school with George Rubino, a world-class bow maker and his first real bass teacher. Askim remembers playing a lot of jazz and rock in those days, and writing songs. But the biggest attraction the bass offered was that it was hard to learn. 'This,' Askim thought, 'is a lifetime project!' At 17 he played in Boston's Youth Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by the inspirational Benjamin Zander. Maine had been an isolated place, but Askim found this orchestral experience eye-opening. 'The standard of the other players of my age was inspiring.'

The triumvirate of facets (bassist, composer, conductor) he has to juggle, Askim would describe more as 'needs'. Each is a means of musical self-expression that requires different stimuli or 'nourishment'. 'I started out as a performer but right at the beginning that was inseparable from writing music,' he remembers. 'At Yale composition became more important to me; performing and composing come from the same impulse but manifest themselves differently. More recently I have turned further towards composing and conducting. It is hard to exist in all those worlds at once. I have to do one or the other, even if it's for an hour. I can't be a bassist and a composer and a conductor all at the same time.'

Surely, though, one discipline informs another? 'That's true. I know the bass very well and, by extension, I'm comfortable writing for strings, but being a bassist has influenced the way I think about composing in terms of structure and harmony. I think with a bass and a soprano outline – in a Baroque way – and my writing is influenced by working from the bottom up, structurally and harmonically.'

In the correct hands (of both composer and player) the bass's potential as solo instrument is profound, but such a reality is rarely achieved. We have all heard new music for solo bass that only sounds as if the other parts of the chamber ensemble – or at worst the rest of the orchestra – are missing. Askim's treatment, imbued with his own understanding of the instrument's nature, is key to his music's success.

'I try to make it organic,' he explains. 'The bass is just as legitimate a voice for expression as any other string instrument. It has a vocal quality. I am amazed and humbled by what people can do on the instrument these days. When I was a student I wouldn't have been able to play my own music! It is technically challenging, but it is also idiomatic; once you master the techniques behind it, it works very well. I have since played my music more than anyone else's.' For composers who are not



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trained bassists, the instrument can in some ways elude them. 'It is very difficult to conceptualise how to write for the bass and understand how it feels,' Askim continues.

What aspects specifically can be a problem? 'Very simple things like writing stretches that you physically can't reach. Then there are effects that might not come off – false harmonies work extremely well on all the other string instruments and they can work on the bass, but that's only possible, not optimal. On the most advanced level, it's about knowing how the instrument sounds, what makes the bass happy, how it likes to resonate. Music that is organically based has a resonance and a depth and a vibration to it that music which is "imposed" on the bass doesn't have.'

Influences on his composition have taken on two forms in Askim's experience. When he first started writing they were