NICK LLOYD UPRIGHT BASS

By Chris Fitzgerald

When a player approaches a new bass for the first time, there are a lot of criteria that come to mind as important aspects of its viability. The most important of these is the sound of the bass, but this is tied together with other parameters, such as playability, ergonomic comfort, responsiveness, esthetics, and practicality. In this article, I will detail my experience with one of master luthier Nick Lloyd's hand-carved basses, affectionately named "#34" – a violin-cornered instrument with a flat back and a removable neck, making it a suitable instrument for air travel.

Nick drove down to Louisville and dropped the bass off in the morning, and left to go see a movie so I could spend the afternoon playing and recording the bass. The first thing I noticed on taking it out of its case was the rich, deep varnish of the instrument, and the fact that in spite of the fact that the bass was brand new, it looked like a much older instrument, due to the antiquing process that Lloyd used on both the wood of the bass and the varnish. As primarily a jazz player, the look of any bass is normally pretty far down my list of importance, but I have to admit that on first glance, the bass appears as a beautiful work of art; it has the look of a restored instrument that is over 100 years old, yet somehow manages this without any obvious structural repair marks or the normal sorts of defects that come with age – no mean feat for an impression made before the first note was played.

As Lloyd explained in a later interview, his basses are often targeted toward the orchestral bass market, and one primary aspect of that market is that a bass be able to blend not only sonically, but also visually in an orchestral section. "Makers have been making antiqued instruments as for as long as there have been older instruments already in the market. There are violins from 1820 that were antiqued at the time they were built, because at the time they were built, there were already 150-year-old instruments in existence." Based on what I saw with this bass, it would fit right into a section of older basses, without a second thought.

But the proof is in the playing, and in this department, the bass felt like an engineering marvel. Before I write more about the bass, I should confess that I usually don't like flat-back basses, because as a seated player, the bracing on most

flat-backs disturbs the purity of vibrations transmitted to the body where it touches the bass. The very first thing I noticed while playing this bass is the incredible responsiveness of the instrument in the kinesthetic sense. It feels like driving a sports car, in that any small motion of the wheel moves the car immediately in the direction of the turn, while still keeping glued to the road, even on sharp turns. In terms of the player's experience, every vibration set in motion carries through both the body and neck of the instrument, allowing the player to feel the pulse of each pitch immediately as it is played. This helps the player stay in touch, not only with the rhythm of the music being played, but also to better feel the intonation of the notes being played. It is easily the quickest-responding flat-backed instrument I have ever played.

Two aspects of the bass' construction contribute to this responsiveness. The first is the bracing pattern of the flat back. Rather than having a heavily braced back that dampens vibrations and causes cracking problems during seasonal changes, this bass has an inverted "Y" bracing pattern that allows the back of the bass to breathe. As Lloyd puts it, "Flat backs are notorious for cracking a lot, because they are over-braced; there are usually too many braces, and they are often too thick. On many basses, there are four braces, and four are not needed to support the back. I like to keep things very resonant in the upper part of the back, because the place where the bass touches the player's body is like a monitor for the player." The bracing on the back of this bass consists of one long diagonal brace running from upper left to lower right, and then a second, shorter, brace running from the lower middle of the longer brace to the lower left of the bass. From the player's perspective, the effect is simply of an extremely resonant back. It reminded me of the responsiveness of the round-back

basses I normally play, which was a happy experience I have never before had from a flat-backed bass.

The second feature that helps create this responsiveness is the removable neck joint assembly. Designed by Canadian luthier Jim Ham, the neck is attached to the body in such a way that string height adjustments are made by changing the tilt of the fingerboard under full tension in minute increments, making bridge adjusters unnecessary. This feature is amazing in itself, just for the ease of string height adjustment – string height adjustments are made with a simple turn of an Allen wrench on the back of the bass – but the neck joint mechanism that makes this possible also adds stiffness to the neck itself, which results in a more responsive feel, in terms of vibrations felt by the left hand while playing. The neck joint involves reinforcing the neck with an inlay of carbon fiber under the fingerboard that connects to the joint at the body, and the overall effect is of a body and neck that seemingly hums under the fingers while playing.

The solidity of construction is evident from the first note played. As a *pizzicato* player, the first thing I look for in a bass is an evenness of response up and down the range of the instrument. Many basses have strong ranges and weaker ranges, causing the player to have to adjust their technique in order to achieve an even line when the line crosses a weaker register. This bass simply has none that I could find. Playing it felt easy and relaxed, even with the string height adjusted on the high side for maximum punch and volume. I play seated with three points of contact between the sides of the back of the bass and my body: the left knee, the inner right thigh, and the right shin

inside the bass side bout. The bass was so easily responsive and ergonomic that I quickly forgot that it was an unfamiliar bass, and I found the range of producing a voice on it very easily to the point where it simply felt like a part of my body.

Musical selections and recordings

When evaluating any instrument, I always have a number of musical situations that tell me how a bass would respond as a part of my musical life. First, it must feel natural to play it unaccompanied. Next, it must be able to fill the three basic roles of the improvising jazz musician in an ensemble setting: being able to carry the melody while accompanied by piano and drums, walking a line while occupying the right space in the same mix, and as an improvised solo voice. I made two recordings of the bass: half of a movement of a Bach suite for the *a capella* test, and another of a jazz standard with overdubbed piano and drums to test the three jazz functions, described above.

[**A note about the sound clips:** The clips were recorded with an inexpensive large-diaphragm condenser mic directly into Logic. The only EQ used was a high-pass filter. The sound that you hear on the clips is a brand-new bass (I don't think this makes a lot of difference on a bass of this caliber) with brand-new Spirocore orchestra strings on it (brand-new, unbroken-in strings have a distinctive sound on any instrument of any caliber; this effect is magnified with bright *pizzicato* strings, like Spirocores). My long experience with new strings on my own basses is that they start to sound "organic" only after 3-6 months, and I consider them to be in their "prime" from about 9 months to 7 years. I think these strings were about a week old, which means the midrange had not even begun to mellow. I have zero doubt that this bass would sound tremendous with a broken-in string set.]

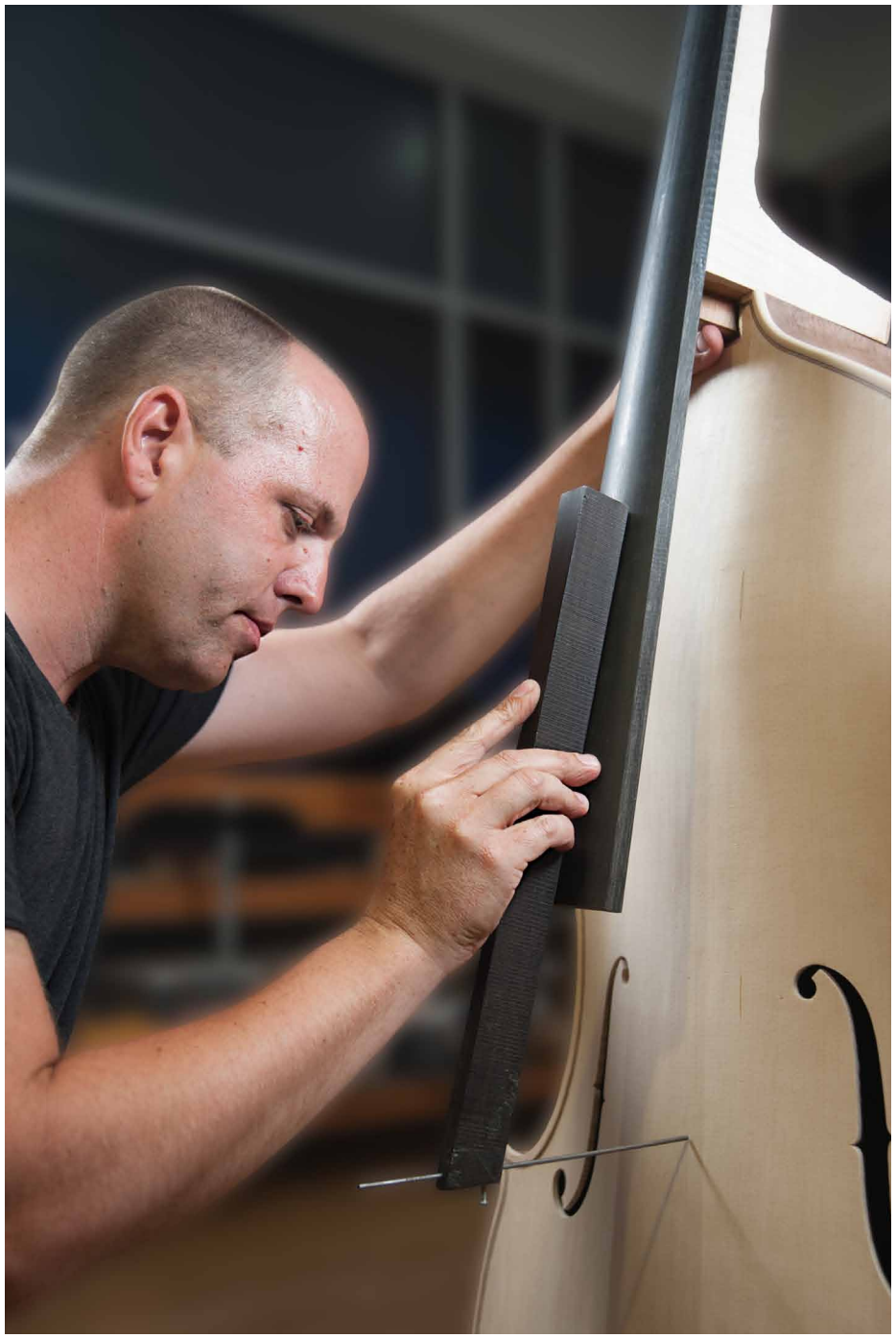
Solo Test: Bach Cello Suite II in *D* minor, *Courante* (1st half)

This movement is one that I was practicing on the day that Nick delivered the bass, and not one that I have previously recorded or "mastered" in any way. As such, I thought it would be a good litmus test for the responsiveness of the bass. If it was a test, the bass passed with flying colors. The responsiveness and evenness of the bass made a kinesthetic awareness of pitch an almost effortless endeavor. The fingerboard was wonderfully set up for ease of playing with the string heights at about 7mm for the *G* to 10mm for the *E*. Pitch was easy to feel both in the body contact points and in the left hand, and spoke clearly even at the softest dynamic. The natural resonant frequency of the bass seems to be in the *A* to *Bb* range on the *G* string, which is about a 5th higher than the resonant *D* on both of my round-back basses. I have no idea if the flat back has anything to do with this or not, but in my experience, every bass has resonant points, and as players, we come to automatically adjust our technique to these spots. On this recording, you may hear that I had not yet adjusted to the natural resonance of the *Bb* in particular. Had I had the chance to play the bass for a week or a month, rather than only a few hours, I feel certain that my natural musical "lizard brain" would have made this adjustment automatically. This caveat aside, I find it hard to imagine any other bass that I have experienced with new Spirocores on it sounding as pure or as even as this bass did.

https://soundcloud.com/user-766402821/nnick-lloyd-bass-review-solo/s-bQxKT

Trio Test: "If I Should Lose You" with overdubbed piano and drums

Since I am primarily a jazz player, no test of a bass would be complete without hearing how it sits in a mix with piano and drums. One of the reasons for this is that the sound of the ride cymbal occupies an overlapping slice of the sonic space with the front end of the attack of the *pizzicato* note, making it harder to intonate, unless the bass speaks



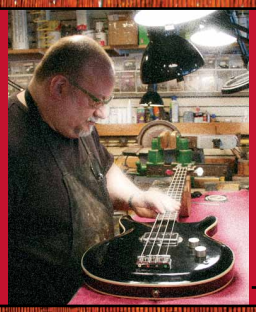
clearly and quickly at the attack. In short, in my experience, a jazz bass must be punchy and articulate for me to have a chance to play in tune.

For this cut, I recorded the bass along with a drum loop live (not with headphones), then later overdubbed the piano part over the bass/drum track. In regard to the front end of the note, the bass responded like a true sports car corners – instantly and almost unnervingly responsive. I had absolutely no trouble both hearing and feeling the pitch and rhythm quickly enough to feel sure-footed when playing with the drums, and I would feel completely comfortable playing the bass in any conceivable jazz setting, for this reason. Any pitch deviation on the bass track comes entirely from my own limitations in conception and technique, and the fact that I recorded the bass before the piano, rather than after it (where I could have used it as a reference). The attack and sustain envelopes of the bass are absolutely optimal for any type of playing I can conceive of, but are especially suited to the more modern lyrical/articulate type of playing that I personally aspire to. For the rest, the sound clip should speak for itself.

https://soundcloud.com/user-766402821/nnick-lloyd-bass-review-trio/s-T3d5m

Summary

This is easily one of the best-playing, sounding, and best-constructed instruments I have ever laid hands on. Given my circumstances, I cannot afford an instrument in this price range, but if that were not the case, this instrument would easily put Lloyd in my “top three” instrument makers to approach when looking to have a new instrument built. The removable neck option and the way it is integrated into the design are an incredibly compelling addition to an already top-shelf instrument. If you are looking at basses in this range of the market, don’t pass over Lloyd’s basses, or you may regret it when you later encounter one owned by someone else. BGM



Phil Maneri's

BASS LAB

Nick Lloyd Upright Bass

This double bass is a work of art. As far as I can see, it's perfect. I could stop right there, and that would be enough. But I'll tell you why I think so. Most importantly, it plays incredibly well. Clean and clear, up and down the instrument, in every position. The tone is quite consistent across the range, as well. Notes are neither boomy nor absent in any spots I could find. It doesn't have the *gravitas* of an old instrument, but I'm not sure that matters so much; at least not compared to the lack of quirks always present in aged instruments. Put some years on this bass, and I'm guessing it will eclipse a huge portion of instruments that have an aged sound, but not near the level of craft in the build.One caveat to this review is that I am not an orchestral *arco* player, and a true *arco* artisan would undoubtedly be able to coax greater nuances of performance out of this

Nick Lloyd Upright Bass

bass. That being said, I am no stranger to the bow, and what stands out to me with regard to this bass' *arco* performance is the balanced response. Not many double basses truly roar on the *E* string, and this bass does. Many basses which do achieve substantial output from the *E* string do so at the expense of reduced sensitivity on the *G* string. Not so with this bass. The balance from top to bottom, *pizz* or *arco*, is amazing.I would also like to address the applicability of the measurements of the various dimensions listed in this review. Every handmade double bass is an individual creation, and no two are remotely the same. Furthermore, while these dimensions may help to understand the physical dimensions of this particular bass, Nick Lloyd – or any highly qualified double bass luthier – will obviously work with the individual customer to build an instrument with dimensions that work the best for that individual.Laying down on its side,

the instrument's lines are smooth and flowing. It's perfectly asymmetrical, as any hand-made instrument would be. The varnish is gorgeous and perfectly antiqued. It indicates the subtle attention to detail that is required to demand the top dollars in the industry.The arching is graceful and just right for great midrange. It's neither too arched, nor too flat. Walnut back and sides are great for adding warmth, like an aged bass might have. The purfling is perfect. Every miter is executed with care. All the details of this bass are like that. The plates, the joinery, the bracing, the linings; everything is done with an eye for detail and executed perfectly. It achieves an amazing balance between factory like perfection and hand-made idiosyncrasies. In playing position, the neck angle is precisely set so transitions to all the positions require minimum effort. The sound is balanced across the registers, and it is warm, fat and punchy. Everything is lined up just right. The overstand, the bridge height and width and how it relates to the bass bar are right on the money. The *f*-hole cuts and positioning, and virtually all the angles associated with an instrument playing and sounding great, are exactly where you'd expect them to be for optimum performance.At first glance, it seems simple and straightforward. There is no signature calling card on this bass, like an unusual pegbox or unique shape or strange *f*-holes. It doesn't draw obvious attention to itself. One must examine it in closer detail to see the effort brought into the total package. And it's really something. There aren't too many builders around that can do this level of work on their own, and do it consistently. It is exceptional. If you like his work, I'd get one sooner than later, because they'll never get any less expensive. BGM

GENERAL	
Company:	Nick Lloyd Basses 1760 Hanfield St Cincinnati, Ohio, 45223 Tel: 513.681.1863 www.nicklloydbasses.com
Country of origin:	USA
Warranty:	Lifetime warranty for workmanship and all original materials.
Price:	$34,000.00
Options:	5-string, C-extension, travel neck, violin outline, gamba outline, 3/4 size, 7/8 size, flat back, round back, string lengths varying from 40" to 42" upon client request.
Accessories:	Padded gig bag in several colors, travel neck fiberglass flight case.
Available colors:	Antiqued and distressed reddish-brown varnish.

NECK	
Scale length:	40 1/8"
Neck width at nut:	42mm
Neck width at 12th fret:	66mm
Neck thickness at nut:	42 to 48mm
Neck thickness at 1st position:	42mm
Neck thickness at 3rd position:	46mm
String spacing at nut:	11mm
String spacing at bridge:	11mm
Bridge height:	6 3/8"
Fingerboard Radius:	66mm radius at end of board (compound; flatter at nut)
Neck shape descriptor:	D shaped
Neck heel cheek taper:	66 to 42mm
Overstand:	40mm (adjustable from 30-40)
Top overhang:	4mm
Rib depth neck joint:	6"
Rib depth bottom block:	8 ¼"
Rib depth lower corner:	7 7/8"
Rib depth upper corner:	7 ¼"
Arch height:	(32-42) 40mm
Top width upper bout:	19 7/8"
Top width lower bout:	26 ¼"
Top width C bout:	14 ½"
Body length (back; including button):	45"
Pegbox angle:	12mm
Bridge width:	165mm
Button size:	42x30mm

TEST RESULTS

1-5 (unacceptable to impeccable)

In-hand

Features:	5
Tonal Flexibility:	5
Ease of Use:	5
Aesthetics:	5
Ergonomics:	5
Tone:	5
Value:	4

In-Hand Score
4.85 average

On-bench

Overall Construction	5
Wood Choice	5
Materials Choice	5
Joinery	5
Fit and Finish of Adornments	5
Quality of Finish Work	5
Ease of Repair	5
Potential Range of Setup	5
Quality for Price Range	5

On-bench
5.00 average

SONIC PROFILE:
Lows: Quick and define
Mids: Articulate and immediate
Highs: Overtones are present but even and not overbearing

TONE-O-METER

Obviously, everything about this review is filtered through brand-new spirocore strings for pizzicato playing. In my experience, a bass of this caliber can do just about anything asked of it with the right strings of the right age, provided the player has the technique to draw the desired sound from the instrument. This is a very articulate instrument that could fit in anywhere with enough subtlety on the part of the player