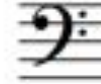# SONG Virtual Composition Project 2021
Writing for the Double Bass: Summary Handout

The Basics

CLEF: Double bass players usually read music in **bass clef**.*

** The notes in bass clef played by the double bass will **always sound an octave lower than written**, so remember that all musical examples below would actually sound an octave lower than they would on a piano or a cello! This happens automatically in double bass music, there is no need to notate this.*

STRINGS: The open strings on a double bass are **E, A, D,** and **G**. The strings are tuned a fourth apart, unlike other string instruments.

NORMAL RANGE: The most commonly used range in double bass music is from the lowest E string to the G an octave above the top string.

EXTENDED RANGE: Double bass players can also play higher than the normal range using thumb position, usually written in treble clef (sounding an octave lower than written). Notes from the low E down to a bottom C can also be played using a 'C extension' on the lowest string, if the double bass has one.

PLAYING WITH THE BOW: Write '**arco**' above music to be played using the bow.

PIZZICATO: Write '**pizz.**' above music to be plucked using the right hand fingers.

Remember: write 'arco' again when you want the player to play with the bow after playing 'pizz.' (and vice versa). Allow a small time gap in the music for the player to change between the two.

Common Articulations

legato – play notes smoothly. **Slurs** (curved lines connecting groups of notes together, different to ties!) can also be used to indicate that notes should be played in the same bow stroke.*

*Slurs are not usually used during pizzicato passages.

staccato – play notes separately and short. Dots can be used on top of the notes to indicate this.

Accents (>) on top of the noteheads can be used to indicate a strong, forceful emphasis at the start of a note.

tremolo – bow (or more rarely, pizz.) rapidly and repeatedly on a note to create a trembling sound. Use multiple dashes through the note stems to indicate *tremolo*.

Extended Techniques and Effects

CON SORDINO ('with mute'): play with a **mute** placed on the bridge for a slightly muffled sound (allow time for mute change, write 'senza sord.' when the mute should be taken off).

con sord.

SUL PONTICELLO ('on the bridge'): bow close to the wooden bridge of the instrument to produce a scratchy, icy sound (write 'ord.' to indicate a return to ordinary playing once the effect is finished).

sul pont.

SUL TASTO ('on the fingerboard'): bow over the black fingerboard to produce a soft, hazy sound (write 'ord.' to indicate a return to ordinary playing afterwards).

sul tasto

COL LEGNO BATTUTO ('hit with the wood'): use the wooden stick of the bow to percuss the notes, resulting in a short wooden tapping sound combined with a little note pitch (write 'ord.' to indicate a return to ordinary playing afterwards).

col legno

GLISSANDO: Use the left hand to **slide** between two pitches to create a swooping, siren-like sound (arco or pizz.). Use a straight line between the two noteheads to indicate this, you can also write the abbreviation 'gliss.' above the two notes.

BARTOK PIZZICATO: a note is plucked in such a way that it makes a **snap** noise as it hits the wood of the fingerboard (see symbol notation, use within a 'pizz.' passage). This is a very loud effect on the double bass and should be used sparingly!
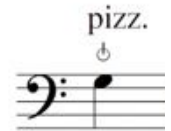
RICOCHET: the bow is dropped on the string and rebounds to create a bouncing effect in one bow stroke (see notation and write 'ricochet', arco playing only).

DOUBLE STOPS: play two pitches simultaneously using two different strings (must be adjacent strings if arco). Double stops of thirds, fifths and fourths work best due to the small reach of the left hand. Other intervals can work if you are using an open string as one of the notes, or if using pizzicato or thumb position.

PERCUSSIVE SOUNDS: knocking or tapping the wood or strings of the bass with the hands to produce a variety of tones. Use cross (x) noteheads for the rhythm, and text to describe the tapping location or the desired sound. Bow '**chops'** are another percussive effect in arco playing: the heel of the bow is stopped on the string to make an unpitched 'chop' noise (use a cross notehead and write 'chop' above the note).

AIR SOUNDS: use a fast, light bow on the wood, bridge or strings to create an unpitched airy, hissy sound. Use a different notehead to normal and write an instruction text above the note(s).

OVERPRESSURE: use excessive pressure in the bow to create a loud, distorted, crunchy tone. Write 'scratch tone' or 'overpressure' above the note(s).

BOW TAILPIECE: bow the tailpiece of the instrument to create a deep, low 'humming' sound. Allow time or some rests in the music for the player to move down to reach the tailpiece, and back!

NATURAL HARMONICS: high, flute-like tones produced by touching the string lightly with the left hand at key 'nodes', e.g. the halfway point of the string, also its third, quarter, fifth point (etc.) divisions.*

*The pitches available relate to the pitch of the open string: see below for the first 7 G string harmonic pitches, transpose these down a fourth for each subsequent lower string.

The **circle symbol** is used to indicate a harmonic.

Natural harmonics of the G string (sounding an octave lower)

N.B: Other high pitches of harmonic can also sometimes be produced by the player creating an artificial harmonic in the left hand (using thumb position).

NATURAL HARMONIC GLISSANDO: slide the left hand fingers lightly up or down an open string whilst bowing to create a sort of 'glissando' or flurry of natural harmonics. Notate using a glissando line and harmonic noteheads, and specify which string(s) to be used if it's not obvious.