

The Role of the Bass Guitar in Liturgical Ensembles

The Fundamental Musical Tasks (to attend to...)

The chord progression

Much of the artistry of playing bass is in how the bassist attends to the harmonic movements of the piece.

1. A bare-bones approach would consist of simply following the roots of the chords.
2. A next step would be to include bass runs that are already written into the progression. The progression C G Am G, for example, might be written C G/B Am G to denote a descending run from C to B to A to G. This has the effect of increasing the feeling of motion through the progression and strengthens the “landing” or “resolution” into the G.
3. And a next step would be to derive your own runs where appropriate. This requires an artistic decision as to when to increase the sense of motion and resolution through a passage. It also requires some combination of knowledge of chord theory and a good ear. A complete musician has both.
4. Music by nature has movement and one way it moves is harmonically. That movement has a structure called “phrasing.” An effective bass line has phrasing that mirrors the phrasing of a given piece. When a bass line’s structure mirrors the phrasing of a piece, the effect is to increase the solidity of the whole ensemble. This solidity, in turn, leads to greater congregational participation because it instills trust and confidence.

The rhythm guitarist and/or percussionist

The rhythm guitarist and/or percussionist’s primary role is to discover and provide the rhythmic backbone of a song. Melodic lines are always couched in a stylistic framework and rhythms are part of what defines a style. When a melody is created, its rhythms are taken from the style. This ensures that a melody has stylistic consistency. For accompaniment to be effective, it must likewise be based in a piece’s stylistic framework. If the accompaniment fits the style, then it will necessarily reinforce the melody. *So, if the rhythm guitarist and/or percussionist are accomplishing this then the bassist can select rhythms from those already being played or sung.*

The vocals

The primary goal of a liturgical ensemble is to encourage and support the heart-felt singing of the assembly. It follows, then, that every artistic choice made by the members of the ensemble must be made in terms of this goal. Beyond choosing **rhythms** that are taken from and/or reinforce the melody, the bassist can be that much more effective by attending to the **harmonic movement of the melody**. When does it ascend or descend? Is it better in this or that place to imitate or contrast the melody’s movement? Does the melody move in **small steps or large?** An angular melody (making large jumps) can often be best accompanied by angular bass lines. A melody with small steps can often best be accompanied by a lyrical approach to constructing a bass line. The **phrasing** of a

melody is also crucial. How is the melody structured? Where are its tensions and resolutions? Mimicking the melody's structure, using its phrasings to construct the bass line, is a powerful way to reinforce singing. **Cadences**, the patterns that come at ending points in the melody are absolutely crucial also. Making the bass line sound like it resolves when the melody sounds like it resolves reinforces the cadence and so reinforces singing. Another important moment in the melody is in **the space between** the end of one phrase and the beginning of the next. This can make or break an assembly's participation. The goal should be a clear, understandable re-entry into the melody. The bassist can give the assembly confidence by choosing a clear solid transition through runs that are stylistically appropriate, that do not conflict with other instruments in the ensemble, and that make the re-entry of the melody seem obvious and predictable. "Obvious and predictable" can mean that the run lands on the root of the chord that accompanies the melody at its entry point. It can also mean that the run doubles the rhythms of the melody's pick-up notes.

Conclusion:

As you can see, mastery of the bass requires a mastery of music. The more you understand about how a particular piece is put together, the more you be able to write a bass line that reinforces and augments the piece. The more you understand about how ensembles function, the more you will be able to 1. hear how your ensemble is approaching a piece, and 2. write a bass line that reinforces and augments the whole ensemble.