

Constructing good bass lines

You can make a huge difference to any piece by making the bass line interesting. There are two main ways you can do this:

- Use octaves and fifths of the chords to make the bass line more mobile.
- Fill in notes between those written in the bass line—this works particularly well when there is a gap of a third between two notes.

Have a look at the example below to see how a static bass line can be made more interesting. First here's the bass line if you just play the first note of each chord once:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G major. The first staff illustrates a static bass line for the chord sequence D, EM, Asus4, and A, where each chord is represented by a single note on the same line. The second staff illustrates a static bass line for the chord sequence Dsus4, D, BM, BM/A, G, EM, and A, also using single notes on the same line.

Below is a bass line for the same chord sequence. This time the rhythm has been made more interesting, fifths and octaves of the chords have been used to make add movement and passing notes have been added where appropriate. You may like to circle some of these features to help you recognise them. You can use these ideas to enhance any bass line.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G major. The first staff illustrates an enhanced bass line for the chord sequence D, EM, Asus4, and A, featuring moving bass lines with passing notes and octaves. The second staff illustrates an enhanced bass line for the chord sequence Dsus4, D, BM, BM/A, G, EM, and A, also featuring moving bass lines with passing notes and octaves.

Try to look for opportunities to use different rhythms in the bass than are present in the melody as this helps to maintain some musical tension.

Using passing chords

The next step from adding passing notes to the bass line is to put chords on top of them. When doing this you will usually need to use first inversions of chords (i.e. chords with the third in the bass). A good example of this would be adding two chords to the bottom line of the example above (see if you can spot them):

The image shows a single staff of musical notation in G major, which is the enhanced bass line from the previous example. Two additional chords, A/C# and D/F#, are written above the staff, indicating their placement on the bottom line of the previous example.