

Going Low

Abraham Prescott built a legend making instruments that take music way down
By Darcy Kuronen

Lawrence Wolfe loves his double bass, an imposing four-stringed instrument whose low insistent tones underpin and anchor higher-pitched notes and chords and melodies in nearly every musical genre; Wolfe's is classical. More than 50 years ago, playing that instrument, a new acquisition, he auditioned successfully for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, becoming its youngest member, in time advancing to assistant principal of the bass section. Wolfe describes his bass's tone as "deep, resonant, and having great projection, especially from its lowest notes." The flexible, multi-layered sound enhances solos, chamber ensemble performances, and orchestral work. But he adds a caveat: his big-bodied instrument's very generous volume can be "a bit too much," becoming "overly dominant" in some settings. Since Wolfe bought the bass, around 1968, the imposing instrument has undergone repairs, but still retains the characteristics associated with its maker, a sometime farmer, insurance salesman, and Baptist deacon active in instrument making in southern New Hampshire in the 1820s and 1830s. His name was Abraham Prescott.

Early New Englanders sang most often at church, though rarely to accompaniment. For centuries, European churches had used organs, large instruments driven by human-powered bellows to generate notes through

Holding It Down, Blessedly

A late 19th century engraving imagines how church choirs once stayed in key and on time.



flute-like pipes made of lead or wood. However, in the New World no one was making pipe organs, which were not only large and costly to import but scorned as an ostentatious fetish of Roman Catholicism by Christian sects arising from the Reformation, especially the severe Calvinist strain. Hymn-singing Puritans, whose meetinghouses dotted New England, traditionally shunned instrumental accompaniment.

Few Americans underwent musical training, and nowhere was the discordant result more evident than in church. Ministers' diaries report congregations dragging the tempo and singing woefully off key. One remedy was the singing school, whose proprietors trained pupils to read



and perform music. Itinerant singing masters—James Fenimore Cooper assigned that trade to a character in his novel *Last of the Mohicans*—traveled town to town. Boston singing master and blacksmith William Billings (1746-1800), one of America's earliest composers of sacred music—he was said to have introduced pitch pipes to help choristers find their starting notes—may have introduced the idea of using a large cello-like instrument in church; a distant cousin of his made such instruments.

European stringed instruments played with a bow—violin, viola, cello, and bass—have a long history, especially in northern Italy, where they debuted in the mid-1500s. Cremona, a city in that region, is famous as the hometown of Antonio Stradivari and other celebrated stringed-instrument makers, or luthiers. The particular evolution of the bass is elusive; the low-toned instrument shares features with the violin family and an earlier instrument, the viola da gamba. Called a viol in England, the viola da gamba had a flat back and six strings. Basses had a flat back and the same tuning, though generally only three strings until the 19th century, when orchestral demands led to luthiers to make basses with four strings, like the rest of the violin family.

Bass nomenclature is tangled. Much confusion surrounds the term “bass viol,” a term that New Englanders used between about 1780 and 1850 to mean a large, cello-like four-stringed instrument used in church. Bass viol size varied by maker. Thousands were made, and many survive, some still in church hands, hence references to bass viols as “church basses.” Other synonyms include double bass and contrabass, both denoting an instrument that plays an octave lower than the cello.

In modern times players and listeners began to say “string bass”—as opposed to the bass tuba—“standup bass,” referring to the peg on which players balance the instrument, and the slangier “doghouse bass” and “bull



Early Relics of American Music

Clockwise from top, an unusual layout of sheet music, the label used by the luthier Benjamin Crehore, and a Crehore bass from 1790.



fiddle.” Miniature versions of the instrument were sized to fit young musicians and players of smaller stature, and an informal fractional system came to distinguish among the sizes of bass a given manufacturer offered: ¼, ½, ¾, 1/1, 5/4—the last towering so high and wide as to seem to defy playing. The ¾ label fits most current-day basses, making that the standard.

The double bass, originally a three-stringed instrument, was common in Europe in the early 19th century. No evidence exists of the double bass being used in churches on the Continent, but based on Abraham Prescott’s output and the instrument’s longstanding presence in American churches, it’s reasonable to assume they were.

A bass suggests a six-foot tall violin, including scroll-shaped head, raised off the floor by a footpeg. Body size and shape vary. Many basses have sloping shoulders like those seen on a viola da gamba; others sport violin-style rounded shoulders. One eye-catching outline, the so-called Busseto model, named for Italian luthier Giovanni Maria del Busseto, features decorative bumps at the lower corners of the body. Metal mechanisms control gears on either side of the tuning head, or pegbox. Players use these worm-gearred “tuning machines” to adjust the strings’ pitch.

In 17th century England some Anglican churches supported congregants’ singing with small bands—violin, flute, clarinet, and, to provide a

bass line, a low-pitched cello or bass played with a bow. That tradition emigrated to the colonies to a limited degree. An ocean away from the training and discipline of European trade guilds, American colonists, who fashioned every object, whether utilitarian or decorative, out of the only material at hand—wood—were slow to develop as instrument makers. After the Revolution a handful of woodworkers began manufacturing instruments commercially. By the 1790s New England luthiers were fashioning a kind of oversized cello favored by an increasing number of churchmen to keep their congregations’ choirs in tune and on tempo.

Many believers who wanted instrumentation



in church preferred bass viols to the shrill pipe organ. With bodies generally longer, wider, and deeper than were a cello’s, bass viols projected robustly to a meetinghouse’s furthest corners, effectively guiding singers. Congregants called the bass viol “God’s fiddle” to distinguish it from the “Devil’s fiddle”—the violin, long associated with dancing and pleasure.

Bass viols varied in size, shape, method of assembly, decorative elements, and materials. Luthiers typically fashioned them of locally lumbered maple and white pine. Some displayed remarkable finesse; others worked more in the

The Interloper

Above, a Prescott bellows-driven melodion of the sort that came to replace the church bass.

Below, a Paul Revere engraving illustrates a 1770 hymnal by William Billings.





realm of folk art. Few craftsmen, especially in rural areas, could make a living fabricating only instruments, so they often were hyphenates: luthier-cabinet maker, -cobbler, -barber, -farmer.

The earliest extant bass viol from New England, dated 1788, was made by Benjamin Crehore, the cousin of composer William Billings. Besides musicianship, manual skill ran in that extended family. An “ingenious mechanic” who lived in Milton, Massachusetts, Crehore fashioned pianos, stage machinery, and, for a war veteran, an articulated artificial leg. His bass viols clearly found a market; eight are known to survive, and a double bass almost certainly made by him recently turned up at the First Church of Dorchester, likely purchased around 1800 by that congregation.

Historians have documented at least 30 makers of bass viols who were active in the New England states, largely in Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire.

Crehore, who stopped making instruments around 1810, might have inspired younger luthiers. A few bass viols by other Massachusetts makers, such as William Green in Medfield and Benjamin Willard in Lancaster, predate 1820, and so might reflect Crehore’s influence.

The most prolific and widely known New England bass luthier was Abraham Prescott,

Portrait of the Luthier

Abraham Prescott, above circa 1820, converted a knack for handicraft into a trade, making fine instruments like this 1823 three-string bass.



COURTESY OF THE NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY; MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON; MUSEUM PURCHASE WITH FUNDS DONATED BY FRANK G. WEBSTER

who made Lawrence Wolfe’s instrument. He was born in 1789 to a well-established and successful family in Deerfield, New Hampshire. As a youth he taught himself how to make a bass viol, though it is unclear what he used as a model. With much of New England still primeval forest, however, he surely had access to superb old-growth wood. Prescott made his first bass viol in 1809 and his first double bass in 1820. Like many European versions of his era, his basses all had three strings. In a 40-year career Prescott, according to legend, is said to have produced 2,400 instruments—an astounding average of 120 annually during 1820-40, his shop’s peak years. Half that number seems more plausible, and would still be a prodigious tally, equal to far more bass viols than all other New England makers combined built.

Like Crehore, Prescott had relatives who were good with their hands. He likely learned woodworking from a cousin, James Prescott, who eventually became Abraham’s father-in-law. James also helped his cousin at the shop, and in 1822 the two took on as an apprentice 12-year old David Dearborn, from nearby Pembroke. In 1825 the Prescotts hired David’s older brother Andrew. The Dearborns worked for Prescott for years before starting shops of their own, as did subsequent Prescott employees, giving rise to a “Prescott school” of instrument making.

Prescott, raised in the puritanical Congregational Church, converted to Baptism at 26. The Baptists, then a minor sect in New Hampshire, offered emotional spirituality, flexible doctrine, and music—all characteristics that appealed to young Prescott, then experiencing a crisis of faith. He became a choir master and eventually a deacon at Deerfield Baptist Church. His shop’s output and sales grew.

In 1831 Prescott moved his business to Concord, the state capital and a port on the Merrimack River with easy access to Boston and beyond. He opened a music store. His work force grew to as many as 18, including his four sons. Certain Prescott artisans inscribed and dated their names on interior surfaces of instruments they worked on.

One viol component in particular required precision metal-working skill: the worm-gear tuning machines that Prescott began installing on his instruments in 1821. By holding each string in place at the proper tension, tuning machines kept strings from changing pitch, an occasional problem with wood tuning pegs that relied only on friction. The Prescott imprimatur helped machine tuners become fairly common on bass viols. Prescott also made other ecclesiastical stringed instruments. A workshop ledger mentions tenor violins, presumably used to play the tenor line in hymns. Prescott double basses boasted a robust, resonant tone, and would have been used to reinforce the line played by the bass viol, but an octave lower. Their oversize sound chambers, topped by thin but fine-grained and strong pine wood, projected notes with great power.

Treasured Artifact

A four-string Prescott bass of maple and pine dating to 1833-45, top, featured the metal tuning heads whose embrace by the master helped assure their widespread adoption by the instrument industry.

WITH MUCH OF NEW ENGLAND STILL MADE UP OF PRIMEVAL FOREST, PRESCOTT SURELY HAD ACCESS TO A STEADY SUPPLY OF OLD-GROWTH WOOD.



COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON; FRANK B. BEMIS FUND; NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY

It's unclear how direct a hand Prescott had in instrument production once his business took off. He probably weighed in on quality control, but definitely leaned in on sales, initially at his store in Concord. As a Baptist deacon, he was acquainted with neighboring congregations and had ready access to marketing opportunities. He reportedly traveled southern New England with a wagonload of instruments, selling church to church—a bass viol cost \$50. Contributing to the confusion over what to call the instruments he was selling, in advertisements Prescott

inconsistently used the terms “double bass” and “single bass,” throwing in an occasional “cello.” He exhibited instruments at trade fairs in Boston and New York City. The judges in Boston called his work “much in need of improvement.” In New York, however, judges were “agreeably surprised” by Prescott’s instruments, described as being “of the highest order.” Music stores in Boston, such as John Ashton’s and Henry Prentiss’s establishments, carried Prescott-made goods. Surviving bass viols by Prescott and other early New England makers now largely belong to museums, as they are too cumbersome to be played effectively as cellos and too expensive to resize. Realistically, Prescott produced some 200 double basses that earned plaudits for delivering a deep, powerful sound to support choristers. A few New England makers, some trained by Prescott himself, produced double

basses prior to 1850, though Prescott’s instruments outrank theirs. Prescott produced three models in varying sizes. Some had arched backs. Others had flat backs. Some had sloping upper shoulders, some rounder shoulders. Later models had an outline with Busseto corners. But as orchestral playing developed, three-stringed basses came to be considered inadequate. Most Prescott basses still in use—about 100 are thought to exist—have been converted to four strings. Properly restored, they are prized by both classical and jazz players. A Prescott that sold in 1828 for \$50 can bring \$50,000 today. Billerica, Massachusetts, musician and instrument restorer Volker Nahrman, who owns seven Prescott double basses and six of the master’s church basses, has restored dozens of other Prescotts. He appreciates their “highly resonant sound with a deep fundamental tone” and deeply admires Prescott’s design and craftsmanship. Nahrman attributes much of the luthier’s historic success to his access to high-quality old-growth wood, positing that at some point Prescott must have had access to a “well-made European bass, most likely from Mittenwald, Germany, on which he based his later designs.”

To assure his production line of a source of wood, Prescott built a sawmill. He frequently bartered for goods and services with bass viols. He stepped away from active instrument making in the late 1840s. When two fires within two years consumed the buildings he owned in Concord, Prescott became an insurance agent, a trade he practiced for the rest of his life.

Enthusiasm for ecclesiastical bass viols crested in the 1830s. Congregations, especially in rural areas, regularly used the instruments until at least the 1840s, when a new type of organ appeared. These instruments, known as melodions, had a compact bellows that moved air past small brass reeds rather than through large flue pipes. A melodion could provide four-part

chorded harmony as well as a bass line. Portable, reliable, and relatively inexpensive, melodions made bass viols obsolete.

One of the most successful early makers of reed organs was Prescott’s firm, by now called A. Prescott and Son(s), then Prescott Brothers. Around 1845 the company dropped stringed instruments to focus on the reed organ trade.

Different styles of playing the double bass emerged as American music branched out. The instrument became a fixture in popular music, particularly bluegrass, jazz, and, until the introduction of the solid-body electric bass, rock ‘n roll (“The Deep End,” August 2019, p. XX this issue). In recent years the rise of a strain of pop known as Americana has brought a double bass resurgence. Whatever the category, Prescotts have a special resonance among enthusiasts.

One tragically legendary Prescott belonged to jazz prodigy Scott LaFaro, famous starting in the late 1950s on his own and as a member of pianist Bill Evans’s groundbreaking trio, which also included percussionist Paul Motian. In 1961, looking for a smaller bass to fit his compact frame, LaFaro bought a $\frac{3}{4}$ Prescott made around 1825 and brought the instrument from Los Angeles to New York to have bass expert Samuel Kolstein restore and set it up. LaFaro, who recently had played his Prescott when making the LP *Sunday at the Village Vanguard* with Evans and Motian and appeared at the Newport Jazz Festival with saxophonist Stan Getz, was traveling between Geneva and Canandaigua, in upstate New York, on July 6, 1961, when the vehicle in which he was riding crashed and burned. LaFaro died in the wreck. The collision and fire all but destroyed his Prescott. The LaFaro family presented Scott’s bass to the Kolsteins for conservation. From 1986 to 1988, Samuel’s son Barrie painstakingly restored the LaFaro instrument. Kolstein Music still cares for this bass, now the property of the International Society of Bassists; worthy musicians may borrow it for performances and recordings. Musicians who have used the instrument rave about its playability all along the fingerboard as well as its commanding timbre.

Lawrence Wolfe’s Prescott bass has served him well for nearly a half century. Its big sound is admired by many, especially at Boston’s Symphony Hall, where an important aspect of his role in the orchestra is to respond to what the first-chair bassist is doing and relay his musical

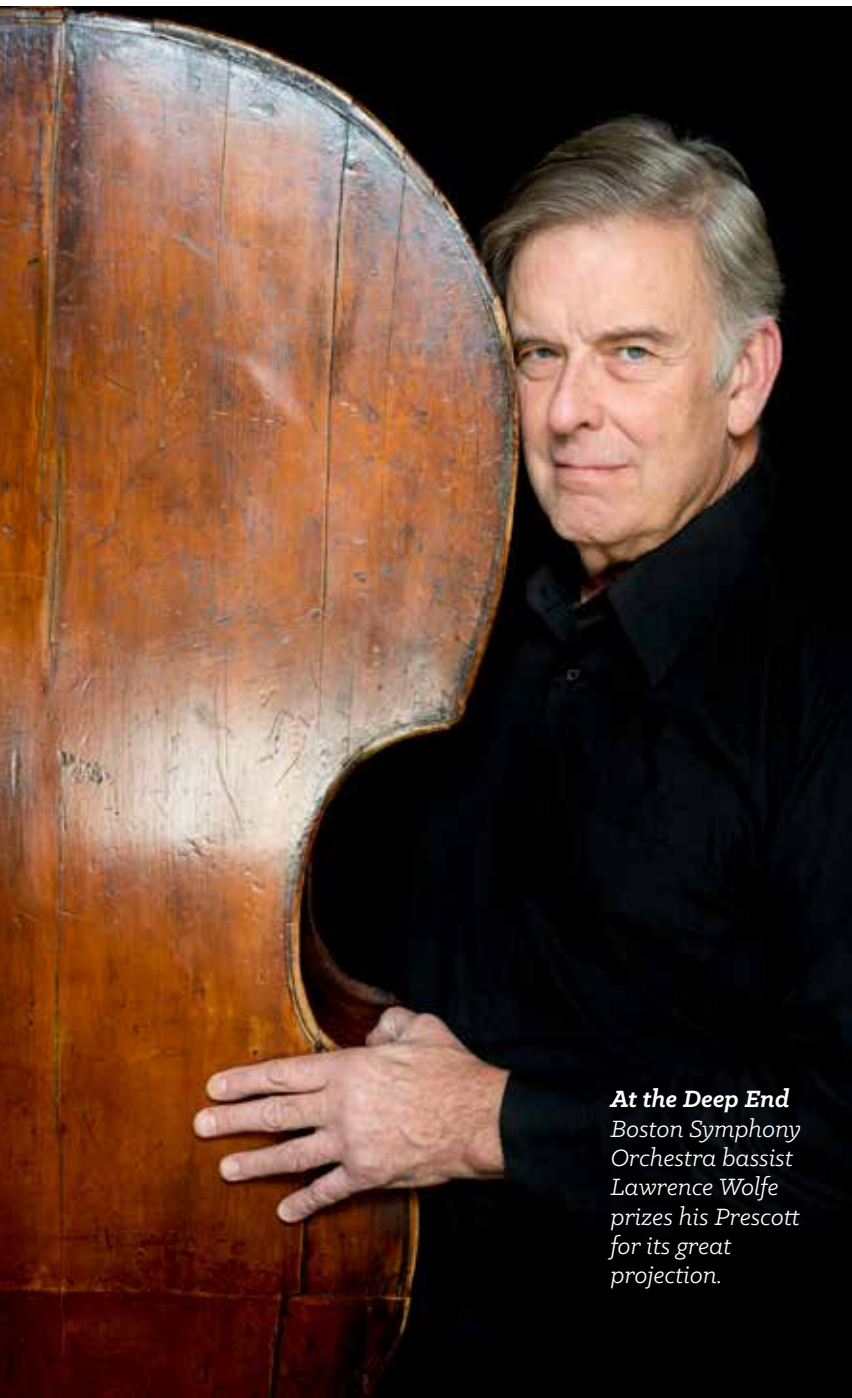


Prodigy Gone Too Soon
Scott LaFaro, at Monterey in 1960, was 25 when a car crash took his life in 1961.

MUSICIANS WHO HAVE USED THE LAFARO BASS RAVE ABOUT ITS ROBUST TIMBRE AND EASE OF PLAYING ALL ALONG THE FINGERBOARD.

gestures to the section’s ten or so other members. BSO players say the orchestra’s bass section always sounds better when Wolfe is present, a characteristic he credits to his Prescott.

Though a fervent Baptist, Abraham Prescott in his later years seems to have reconnected with the dour Calvinism of his youth. In an 1853 letter to his son-in-law, he told the younger man, “I have been led in my meditations at various times to look upon the world of mankind around us as one great Musical Instrument miserably out of tune—not being in Harmony with the Will and Word of God.” Abraham Prescott died in Concord, New Hampshire, on May 1, 1858. ★



At the Deep End
Boston Symphony Orchestra bassist Lawrence Wolfe prizes his Prescott for its great projection.

COURTESY OF THE BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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