

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: THE 6-STRING BASS

Extended-range instruments pose special challenges for the bassist, yet such instruments yield rewarding results if these challenges are overcome. 4-string bass players may be attracted to a 5- or 6-string instrument through inspiration by our popular stars of the instrument today - such as John Patitucci and Anthony Jackson (the inventor of the “6-string electric contrabass guitar”). As these artists demonstrate, the 6-string bass gives them the ability to feature themselves melodically and chordally, as if they were a guitarist, as well as to render those deep gutsy bass lines that descend below low E. Like a chameleon, the master 6-string bassist can change colours and roles quickly, and be a versatile addition to countless formats of ensemble.

CHOOSING A 6-STRING BASS

Consider the following points when shopping for a 6-string bass. A general discussion of bass physiology is made in Chapter 14, but the particular items listed below come into play more critically with 6-string basses. Always try a new instrument several times to see how it feels before you buy it. Use your own amplifier if possible and get impartial advice from other players. Please note that the quoted specifications are subject to change as manufactures modify their models over time.

Number of frets

These instruments almost always have 24 frets, and some have 26, so the sheer range is staggering!

NUMBER OF FRETS ON DIFFERENT BASSES	
Bass	Frets
6-string Warwick Thumb	26
6-string Yamaha TRBJP II	26
6-string Yamaha TRBJP	24
5-string Music Man Sting Ray	22
4-string Music Man Sting Ray	21
4-string Fender Precision	20

Weight

More wood and more metal means more kilograms on your shoulder! This makes a good, wide strap very important. It also means that maintaining a healthy posture is critical. When choosing a 6-string bass, its own balance is an important factor in its playability. The shape of the horns of the body, and the size and weight of the headstock and machine heads all contribute to the instrument’s balance.

WEIGHTS OF DIFFERENT BASSES	
Bass	Weight
6-string Warwick Thumb	5.4 kg (12 lbs)
4-string Warwick Thumb	3.5 kg (7.7 lbs)
4-string Ken Smith	4 kg (9 lbs)
6-string Ken Smith	5 kg (11 lbs)
4-string Music Man	4 kg (9 lbs)
5-string Sadowsky PJ	4 kg (9 lbs)

String spacing

In choosing a 6-string bass, one should be aware that the string spacing is typically narrower than that of a 4-string, though there are no real conventions about how much narrower. If one wishes to slap a lot, it is better to go for a more widely spaced instrument (such as the Ken Smith BSR6GN or Patitucci signature Yamaha TRBJP) rather than a narrow one. Herein lies the first difficulty of playing a 6-string: getting used to the string spacing. The change in number of strings can be disorientating at first, especially when you wish to continue playing your 4-string!

In terms of the challenge presented to the left hand by the string spacing of a 6-string bass, the new player should be ever-aware of the need to keep the left hand technique in good form. I.e. the thumb should remain behind the neck and the fingers should curl to reach the lower strings.

STRING SPACING OF DIFFERENT BASSES (as measured at the bridge)	
Bass	Spacing
6-string basses	17-19mm
5-string basses	18-19mm
4-string basses	20mm (“traditional” spacing, as in the 4-string Fender)