

# A Brief History of the Bow as a Playing Tool

by Stefan Hersh, from Soundpost Online, Spring 2003 issue.

The dawn of the modern bow can be traced to around 1780 with bows of Francois Tourte, that were the culmination of apparent experimentation on the part of the maker. The precursor to the modern style of bow can be observed in the extant output from the Tourte atelier. The bows directly preceding the invention of the modern bow (sometimes known as Cramer Head bows) are shorter, far lighter and more flexible, by comparison with the modern style bows that follow them. The heads and frogs of these pre-modern bows are relatively tall, and as a result the clearance between the hair and the stick is much greater than with a modern bow. This larger clearance and increased flexibility, along with the lightness and shortness, all have a profound effect on the playing qualities of pre-modern bows. A range of color unheard of in a modern bow is accessible with a so-called “Cramer Head” Tourte (see below).

Transitional Violin Bow from the Tourte workshop circa 1780



Detail and variety in articulation seems limitless and the endless possibilities for articulation encourage “on the string” strokes as opposed to the relatively awkward and flimsy “off the string” feel of “Cramer Head” bows. The old style bow also allows for passages in double and triple stops to be rendered with more suppleness and finesse than with a modern bow.

For all of the attractive qualities of a pre-modern bow, it would be totally impractical to think of projecting this detail and color in a large space. The move toward larger performance venues

must have made this type of bow impractical, and finally obsolete once Tourte established the set of compromises that led to the modern bow. While heavier and stronger than their precursors, the earliest modern style bows from the Tourte workshop are often quite light and flexible, relative to modern bows. Over the course of his career, Tourte seemed to move increasingly in the direction of heavier, stronger bows with lower frogs, and heads that would enhance a performer's ability to project sound and articulation in large spaces, and to play off the string strokes loudly.

Makers in the years just after Tourte's output, such as Persoit, Lupot, Eury, Pajeot and Maire picked up the Tourte trend toward heavier stronger bows. These makers frequently produced their stockier bows alongside lighter, more flexible ones, as if unconvinced that the heavier bow was necessarily the only desirable bow in their age. Whether or not the makers were responding to specific orders from musicians, or anticipating trends in performance is a matter of speculation, but the relatively increasing number of heavier bows produced is a clear indication that this style of bow was finding favor with musicians, and was becoming a commercially viable product. In London, John "Kew" Dodd also made "Cramer Head" bows. At some point Dodd apparently noticed the heavier Tourte bows and reacted with a range of Tourte-inspired experiments, sometimes very heavy and stiff even by today's standards. At their most extreme some of these bows are virtually unplayable because of their cumbersome weight and stiffness. Still, at other times Dodd could achieve stunning successes with his bows as playing tools, partly owing to the inventiveness of the maker, and partly because of the spectacular pernambuco he sometimes used.

In all of these post-Tourte bows one can easily observe the general trend toward bows which produced a large sound, and which could articulate clearly and loudly off the string.

Dominique Peccatte, (who is presumed to have learned his craft with Persoit, and apparently worked in the Lupot atelier as well, before a stint in the Vuillaume workshop) continued the trend with a bow patterned after Tourte's strongest, heaviest model. The Peccatte concept for a bow was generally heavier than anything before him in France, and his output was vast and consistent. If not as flexible as earlier bows, Peccatte bows are still normally fairly flexible; the increase in weight from earlier concepts makes Peccatte bows well suited to the production of the volume of sound and degree of articulation appropriate to large, modern concert halls. The Peccatte bow is one (but not the only) ideal compromise in terms of tone production and handling. Although it neither produces the beauty of tone of a Tourte, nor handles with the nimbleness of a Nicolas Kittel, a fine Peccatte does everything it must do very well, and with a thick rich sonority.



Peccatte's two most well-known pupils were Joseph Henry and Pierre Simon. Henry produced a bow similar to a Peccatte but of a somewhat lower general quality. Henry bows sometimes play very well but with the occasional exception seem coarse and clunky by comparison with a fine Peccatte. Simon, on the other hand, was one of the most skilled makers ever. He made bows on several patterns and of varying weights. Sometimes he used a model similar to the Peccatte interpretation of Tourte, and these heavier Simon bows play similarly to Peccatte bows. But the classic, bell-shaped Simon head is derived from an earlier Tourte model. These tend to be lighter and more flexible than the classic Peccatte model. The finest Simon bows can have a highly attractive, lithe flexibility and a genuine beauty of tone.

In Czarist Russia Nicolas Kittel served as violinmaker to the court, and produced a unique style of playing bow, often using beautiful, highly flamed wood. The design of Kittel bows is also derived from an advanced Tourte model although this interpretation of Tourte is distinctly different from the French interpretations. Kittel bows are nearly always quite light and flexible. Despite their flexibility, Kittel bows have extremely quick playing characteristics alongside a unique beauty of tone.

Although he probably did not make bows himself, J.B. Vuillaume exerted a profound influence on bow making. Vuillaume experimented with the design of the bow: innovations such as the self-rehairing bow, by which a musician might change the hair without the aid of a repairman, and the Vuillaume style frog and button, designed to mitigate against normal wear and tear, as well as the invention of the Steel bow, which while lacking in terms of warmth and beauty of tone, handles remarkably well. None of these modifications or experiments have had a lasting

impact on subsequent makers however, and Vuillaume's most important legacy to the art of bow-making was his capacity to extract the highest quality output from the many bow-makers who worked for him. In particular, Nicolas Maline produced his most carefully finished and best playing bows for J.B. Vuillaume. Other makers such as Charles Peccatte and F.N Voirin made extremely fine bows for Vuillaume. Maline's bows were presumably influenced by Peccatte, whose bold hatchet head they seem to emulate. While they generally do not possess the kind of subtlety and color nuance present in a fine Peccatte, Maline bows often play very well, and the vast output of Maline's atelier subsequent to his tenure in the Vuillaume workshop gives us plenty of chances to become familiar with the playing qualities of his bows after his affiliation with Vuillaume. The Vuillaume bows are nearly always the best of Maline's output.

Francois Nicolas Voirin was the most skilled maker of his generation, one of the finest makers ever, and he produced a uniformly high quality product. But Voirin bows suffer from inconsistency with the quality of wood, and many of his bows were produced on a lighter, smaller model. The best Voirin bows are exquisite playing tools; they are strong and nimble and produce a beautiful tone. These represent a relative bargain in the market place since the general price for Voirin has been held in check by their inconsistency in playability (not quality of workmanship!).

By 1880 many makers were beginning to consistently aim for an even heavier, stronger model, with varying degrees of success. Alfred Lamy picked up where Voirin left off, with similar variance in weight and quality of materials. The best Lamy bows are very good but often feel stiff and unyielding, never coming close to equaling the beauty of tone, or nimble handling qualities of a fine Voirin. Victor Fetique was capable of producing some very good bows, but the attention of his atelier seemed to focus on quantity, and thus the output is frequently of a more commercial quality.

The apex of the trend toward heavy, strong bows was exemplified in the output of Eugene Sartory, who developed a style of bow to which his atelier adhered consistently for decades. Vigneron and Jules Fetique produced bows that at times could rival a Sartory in terms of strength and handling, but the consistency of Sartory bows has made them a perennial favorite among musicians even if they lack some of the subtlety of older bows. But Sartory bows are utterly reliable as playing tools. Following Sartory, E. A. Ouchard produced an even heavier and stiffer type of bow. There are some Ouchard bows that perform beautifully as tools, but many of them are just too stiff to be considered optimal as playing tools.

Over the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most important bow-maker was probably Jean-Jacques Millant who made excellent playing bows following the Peccatte pattern more or less faithfully. J.J. Millant bows function much as good facsimile Peccattes. The combination of choice of materials, weight, strength, and flexibility make them excellent playing tools, and bows by this maker are becoming increasingly desirable in the market today.

The current crop of makers is a varied and exciting group. Many of these craftsmen are producing true masterpieces of bow-making that play at the highest level. The modern revival and interest in bow-making has been led by makers such as Stephane Tomachout in France, and Charles Espy in the US, but the list of excellent bow-makers may be longer now than it has ever been. Years ago there had been fear that Pernambuco stocks would eventually dry up, leading to a crisis in bow making. But the modern bow makers have begun to band together and organize major conservation efforts designed to protect the future of the numerous Pernambuco subspecies suitable for bow making. With the modern access to information, we now find master bow makers dotting the globe, working in eclectic styles, both inventing for the future and successfully simulating the past...A boon for modern day musicians! 🎵

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