

# Drawing the Sound

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A BOW

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

Many string players struggle to decide what sort of a bow to play. Musicians can sometimes develop rigid opinions about what qualities are acceptable or desirable in a bow: Some violinists maintain that a bow must be no lighter than 60 grams, some ‘cellists insist that a bow under 80 grams is useless, some players insist on a very strong stick, and some players are adamant that an octagonal bow is not desirable as a playing tool.

Most hard and fast rules are simplistic where evaluating the playing qualities of fine bows is concerned. Generally speaking, the differences in the playing qualities of fine bows can be expressed as a set of trade-offs between the highest quality sound on the one hand, and incisiveness and ease of manipulation in short fast strokes, both on and off the string, along with consistency of tone production, tip to frog, on the other hand. Where any informed player ideally compromises these issues will vary, based on the player’s specific technical method for bowing, that player’s instrument, the application(s) to which the bow will be put, along with budgetary concerns.

Usually, more flexible bows make the most beautiful sounds. The most famous and desirable bows, such as those of François Tourte, and Dominique Peccatte are normally relatively flexible. This flexibility provides a “shock absorbing” effect which helps the player draw a rounder tone and gives the feel that one can “get deep into the string,” without the sound becoming harsh. But flexible bows can seem somewhat precarious to use in fast, off-the-string passages, or in loud, double and triple stop playing. In the case of the best bows in the “flexible” category the liabilities associated with the flexibility are minimal, and those problems that exist are clearly offset by the tonal color possibilities.

As the degree of flexibility becomes greater the worth of this offset becomes less clear. For any string player on any instrument in any application, there is a threshold beyond which the difficulty of maneuvering the bow through a range of technical demands simply overwhelms the positive effects of a beautiful sound. Beyond that even, a bow that is too soft altogether simply lacks the spine to convey downward pressure and get into the string; with a bow that is objectively too soft it is not possible to produce a solid, dense tone.

Add into this equation the relative weight of the bow and the ratio becomes complicated. Lighter bows are typically easier to maneuver but don’t “bite” the string as easily. Lighter bows are less consistent in spiccato passage work and do not make as dense a tone as their heavier counterparts. Heavier bows can feel clumsy and awkward and can lack delicacy and nuance. The consideration of weight cannot be fully understood without taking issues of balance into consideration as well. A light bow that is tip-heavy may feel heavy and awkward. A heavy bow that is light at the tip will feel insubstantial in off-the-string playing.

One other question is round stick or octagonal? Bow makers often make octagonal bows to compensate for a wood that they presume to be too soft for a round stick, or to make an especially strong bow for a player who might want that. Often octagonal bows end up sounding bright and feeling stiff. But some of the greatest playing bows are octagonal Tourte bows, which feature an ideal balance between strength and weight, and produce the most magical sound of any bow. In general bow makers who make more flexible bows fare better producing octagonal bows than makers who make heavier, stronger bows.

Certain factors can combine to make a bow, which is extreme in one category, workable, or even desirable overall. Bows by Nicolas Kittel for example tend to be extremely light but the quality of wood is almost unusually high with this maker, and the strength to elasticity ratio of these bows make them unique as playing tools. While they can feel soft and insubstantial upon an initial trial, the best Kittel bows combine unequalled speed of handling with beauty of tone in an attractive package. Once a player has adjusted to the qualities these bows offer, they can become highly desirable as playing tools even with a violin bow weighing 56 grams!

Bows by Eugene Sartory and Emile A. Ouchard are usually stronger and heavier than those by the generations before them. While not in the class of the more expensive bows by makers such as Peccatte, Tourte and Kittel, Sartory bows in particular, often combine excellent volume of tone production with reliability and speed of handling in all situations. The consistency and wide availability of Sartory bows has made them the fine bow of choice for a majority of professional string players. Sartory bows almost never produce the kind of luminous tone one experiences in a first class older bow such as a fine Maline, Persoit or Pageot, but usually Sartory bows are totally reliable to play on. They handle beautifully in difficult passagework, and they produce at least a passable quality of sound. Sartory bows do not require much thought or intervention on the part of the player, except in the area of flexibility: stiffer bows demand that a performer cushion the sound. For this reason octagonal bows by Sartory are usually too stiff and bright sounding to be considered optimal.

Sartory bows are also relatively easy to identify, and the name Sartory is universally recognized due to the prolific and consistent output from the Sartory atelier. All of these qualities to make Sartory's among the least difficult bows to sell. Consequently the margin between wholesale and retail pricing is narrower with Sartory bows than with other fine string instruments and bows.

As playing tools, bows by Emile A. Ouchard are similar to those by Sartory in that they are designed to accommodate the player's need for weight and strength in a bow. Some in the trade have maintained that bows by E.A. Ouchard are often actually superior in craftsmanship to those by Sartory. There is merit to this argument, but in general Ouchard bows go further in the direction of strength and weight than Sartory bows, and they require even more cushioning intervention to produce the optimal tone quality. While many Ouchard bows make very good playing tools, few Ouchard bows can survive a player's comparison with an average Sartory, since Ouchard bows frequently exceed the optimal range for strength in a bow.

The best bows of F.N. Voirin play with nearly the strength of a Sartory but with greater refinement, elegance, and beauty of tone. The fact that Voirin's output varies with regard to weight and strength has kept the prices of Voirin bows from going up as fast as Sartory bows.

The best Voirin bows are rare, but they are a relative bargain in the market place.

Hill bows have not seen much inflation over the last two decades. The reasons for this vary, but the best Hill bows are relative bargains in the market place as they are highly functional and sometimes produce a very good tone. Hill bows tend to be softer, which frequently makes octagonal Hill bows desirable as playing tools.

In general, flat arched, dark sounding instruments such as a del Gesu model J. B. Vuillaume violin, will favor stronger, heavier, brighter sounding bows that enhance the performer's ability to overcome the natural resistance inherent in the design of the instrument. Brilliant sounding violins with higher arching will often fare better with softer, lighter bows that help to make a round sound to overcome the thinness of tone sometimes associated with higher arched instruments.

The development of an evolved set of criteria by which to judge bows requires an open mind and an elastic technique. A productive mental attitude for a musician is to regard each bow as a learning opportunity. A meaningful comparison among bows can only be drawn when a player has found the voice and technique peculiar to each particular bow. If you are relatively inexperienced with switching bows, this may take some patience. 🎵

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