

# Selecting a Bow

SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

*By Mark R. Reindorf*

You're not alone. At some time, virtually every string player thinks about replacing a bow or acquiring a second, back-up bow.

Some specific desire may prompt you: Wanting a stronger bow, one that bounces better, gives a deeper or more resonant sound, or has a better sense of balance. Or you feel a vague dissatisfaction with current tone production or ease of playing that might be traced to the bow.

Often the search for a bow immediately follows the choice of a new instrument. This is not surprising, since the resonating characteristics of instruments differ (often markedly) with each and every bow. Each instrument has a unique palette of sound, and the perfect bow is the one that allows those characteristic colors of sound to speak clearly.

By the same token, a player who is not satisfied with the sound of his current instrument may be wise to first experiment with a change of bows. This is apt to be far less traumatic – and usually less costly – than a change of instruments.

You may also be prompted by feeling that the time has come to acquire a rare French or English bow or a fine bow by a contemporary maker. Such an acquisition often brings a psychological uplift along with its physical and musical benefits.

No matter what leads you to look for a different or “better” bow, the task of seeking out and eventually acquiring one will prove much simpler – and ultimately more satisfying – if you identify concrete, realistic objectives before you start. The first step requires using your current bow to examine and analyze two areas: Quality of sound and ease of playing.

## **QUALITY OF SOUND**

Start by trying to identify the type of sound you need and desire – and the problems, if any, you currently encounter in achieving it. This can depend on more than your instrument alone. Do you most often play orchestral music? Chamber music? Solo works? Are the rooms or halls in which you most often find yourself small or large, bright or dull? Being happy most of the time is better than trying to find a bow that will work everywhere, every time.

Help yourself with descriptive words about sound quality: Darker, bright, clearer, more focused, louder, fuller, less fuzzy, less surface noise, more lush, and so on. Establishing a bench mark of current dissatisfactions can lead you to specific goals while making the selection process more bearable.

## **EASE OF PLAYING**

Here, an equally wide variety of factors come into question. Group them in four basic bow characteristics: Strength, flexibility, weight, and balance. Together, these elements make for comparative ease of playing. They also influence performance requirements such as spiccato, sautillé, staccato, clean détaché, and chord production.

Continue by analyzing and noting the specific weaknesses of your current bow. You can then consult a check list when actually trying new bows. A written one is better than a purely mental one, and the accompanying chart may prove helpful to you.

Strength is often inversely related to flexibility. It can be identified from both the vertical and the horizontal/lateral aspects. Isolated areas of weakness are often traceable to problems of camber – the inward curving of the bow which is achieved by bending under heat. When cooled, the stick retains this inward flex which, along with the inherent strength of the wood, is responsible for the bow's basic playing characteristics.

An experienced bow expert may be able to impart new life – or at least correct minor problems – by simply adjusting the camber. Always leave this to an expert who will not distort the type of camber originally intended for the stick, which varies by historical period and maker.

The weights of bows – like all objects made of natural materials – vary distinctly. Traditionally, violin bows have weighed about 60 grams, viola bow, 70, cello, 80, and double bass from 120 to 150. Recently, players have been favoring slightly heavier bows. Bows under these standards are considered light.

In fact, the weight of the bow may increase by as many as 5 grams depending on the wrapping used. The wrapping, or winding, primarily serves to resist the pressure of the finger where the weight of the arm is transferred to the bow. The wrapping counters the tendency of the fingers to slip, while protecting the bow from excessive wear at this critical pressure point. Wrappings of tinsel or thread add virtually no weight to the bow, but they wear out quickly through rubbing and perspiration. Whalebone is equally light, far more durable, elegant and expensive. It is also now illegal in many countries. Silver wire is the most widely used wrapping material. Its weight is determined the length and gauge. (On bows with gold mounted frogs, the preferred wrap is, of course, gold wire.)

Like strength and flexibility, the weight and balance of a bow are often related. Balance is, after all, simply the distribution of weight along the bow. In general, the balancing point is about seven inches from the front of the frog. Bows which have a balance point significantly different from this norm will feel either tip- or frog-heavy.

Tip-heavy bows are the bane of orchestral players. Never underestimate the fatigue that comes of accompanying a soloist through long pianissimo passages while exerting counterbalancing pressure the little finger!

You can partially correct the imbalance of a bow which is too light at the tip. One way is to add a silver plate at the head; another, to replace the standard wooden wedge with a lead plug. But try these measures only if the bow already possesses generally favorable playing characteristics.

### **BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS**

For most players, purely financial considerations enter into the choice of a bow. Even those fortunate few who can afford anything will consider cost from another angle – investment potential and inherent value. Whatever your situation, you are wise to consider this advice:

Don't refrain from trying bows that cost less than what you are ready to spend. If you find what you need and save money, you'll be delighted. If not, you'll be consoled by knowing that you haven't spent

too much. If you try bows that cost more than you will pay, you are certain to find one you love. It will spoil you and make finding the right one all the more difficult and agonizing.

For the professional player or teacher, a bow is essential to business – one of the few depreciable capital assets which actually appreciates in value. (If sold later, the profit realized over the depreciated basis is taxed as a capital gain, generally the more favorable rate. And current tax laws permit the claiming of the investment tax credit, which allows one to subtract 10% of the bow's cost from one's overall tax bill.)

As pure investments, bows have performed spectacularly in recent decades along with other art works. With the current decline in inflation, this rate of appreciation could slow down considerably. But fine rare French and English bows will continue to appreciate for three reasons: Their playing characteristics are generally outstanding. Demand for them – internationally, from museums, private collectors, and players, is increasing. And, finally, the supply can only diminish.

The finest bows by François Xavier Tourte, for example, now range in price from \$25,000 to \$50,000, depending on the mountings and the individual history of each bow. For bows by Dominique Peccatte and Nikolaus Kittel, the range is roughly half that. (Kittel is a true anomaly: A German by birth, he worked in St. Petersburg. Because of his outstanding craftsmanship, he is referred to as the Russian Tourte.)

Next in value though not necessarily inferior in quality are bows by many makers: Paul Simon, Joseph Henry, Nicolas Maire, Guillaume Maline, François Lupot, Joseph Fonclouse, Louis Simon Pajeot II, Nicolas Eury, Joseph Rene Lafleur, Grand-Adam, François Nicolas Voirin, and others. At the next level is an equally diverse list that should include James Tubbs, John Dodd, Joseph Arthur Vigneron, Louis and Claude Thomassin, Jules and Victor Fetique, and Emile A. Ouchard. To these should be added the many but lesser makers of the Vuillaume shop.

Can we assign price limits when categorizing by maker? It is difficult, since the quality, condition, and mountings of each bow differ. One can safely say that bows by French and English makers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are generally not found for less than \$2,000, while prices above \$5,000 would be excessive.

The list above is far from exhaustive. Along with other English and French makers of note are many Germans, among the H.R. Pfretzschner, Ludwig Bausch, Otto Hoyer, Heinrich Knopf, Albert Nürnberger, August Rau, and Richard Weichold. They crafted many beautiful bows of the finest wood which are exceptional from the playing standpoint and far more reasonably priced than their French and English counterparts.

Why? Tradition and pride of place. The modern bow is essentially a French innovation. Tainturie is credited with the discovery, around 1740, of Pernambuco as the ideal wood for bows. Nicolas Duchene, Louis Tourte (traditionally called Tourte père), and his son François Tourte contributed the basic stylistic and architectural changes and refinements.

This does not explain why French and English bows are more highly valued than the German. To a great extent, prejudice, fetish, and snobbery are to blame. As in all fields of art, inexplicable niceties of judgment help to dictate the value of bows.

If you are concerned neither with a bow's antiquity nor the celebrity of its maker, acquire one by a good contemporary maker instead. Concentrate solely on the playing attributes of the bow until you have found the right one. The price will very likely be reasonable. Most likely, the bow will hold its value. And if you are fortunate in finding a very good bow – or if the maker subsequently acquires a strong reputation – its value will rise.

Consider also the “shop bows” hand made by apprentices or less experienced members of a shop under the supervision of an established fine bowmaker. While their craftsmanship and materials are generally inferior to those found in the work of the master, you may turn up something serviceable and relatively inexpensive among the shop bows.

Commercial-grade bows, on the other hand, are not intended to hold their value or even to last indefinitely. They are intended for beginners, whose enthusiasm may flag, and for public school music programs where damage is frequent and inevitable. The workmanship and materials are inferior, and many elements such as the frog are machine-made. There is no reason not to play with a commercial-grade bow – but there is no good reason to continue with one longer than necessary.

### **WHERE TO LOOK, HOW TO SHOP**

If you've used a checklist to answer the question “what is my ideal bow,” it may be wise to follow a similar procedure in deciding where and how to look for it. Consider...

- Can I trade in my present bow for the new one?
- Will the seller take by new bow in trade – or buy it back – if I decide to upgrade again?
- Can I take the new bow home on trial? For how long?
- Are the price and/or terms of sale negotiable?
- Will the seller guarantee the identity and provenance of my new bow? Will he take it back if they later prove dubious?

At virtually any reputable retail violin shop – and they are to be found in most major metropolitan areas in the United States – the answers to all these questions will be “yes.”

These shops will usually maintain a representative selection of bows, both consigned items and the shop's own inventory. Because reputation is of paramount importance to any business that deals in one-of-a-kind items, the violin shops stand behind their sales. They deal with problems quickly and appropriately, and depend heavily on the work-of-mouth “advertising” that comes of such performance.

What about the auction houses? Bows often enter the market when estates are dispersed. The heirs want to sell quickly and expediently, and may not know themselves how to evaluate each bow in a collection. So they rely on others, often the major auction houses. Dealers then acquire this supply in the sale rooms. Isn't sensible for you to join them these and avoid paying the dealer's mark-up? If you're a gambler, perhaps. But even then, several caveats are in order.

First, all the major auctions now take place in Europe; Christie's is the only house still conducting sales in New York. So the cost of your travel to London, Paris, or Cologne may wipe out any savings you might realize there.

Second, the sale is final. If you subsequently decide you don't like your new bow, your only real recourse is to sell it. And the fact is, you won't have had much time to try it out before buying – certainly not under calm playing conditions.

Finally, you're apt to see a good many bows of dubious origin and condition. Are you up to the task of sorting out the good, the bad, and the ugly? If not, be extra careful. Usually only an expert feels comfortable with the risks, pressures, and politics of the sale rooms.

All of this doesn't mean you should not use the results of the auctions as a source of information about prices and trends, and to get a sense of the relative value of bows by different makers and from different schools and periods. One of the greatest difficulties any buyer of a one-of-a-kind item faces is that he must rely so greatly on the word of the seller about the item's value. Knowing how comparable items sell at auction can be extremely helpful when you are shopping.

But if you won't be doing your shopping in the sale rooms, how about through your teacher? A private dealer? The present owner of a bow? Or the maker, if the bow is new? All of these are appropriate sources – provided you're aware of the pitfalls.

Some teachers involve themselves in bow sales, either directly by selling to a student, or by collecting a commission from a violin shop to which they have sent him. The merits of the latter system are debatable, but it is a business custom so firmly entrenched and pervasive that it is unlikely to decline in the foreseeable future. It is also preferable, frankly, to the practice of selling directly to a student. What happens if you buy a bow from your teacher and then decide you don't like it? Or wonder if you've been overcharged? It hardly seems worthwhile to endanger the complex, sensitive, teacher-student relationship.

What about orchestral colleagues? They often sell old bows when acquiring new ones, or when retiring. Several are self-styled "dealers" who do a little business on the side. Again, ask yourself not only whether you can live happily with the bow, but whether you can also live happily in the orchestra alongside its former owner.

In both cases – or when buying directly from the bow's individual owner – you can settle any doubts by having a competent authority authenticate (or dispute) the bow's identity and condition. Usually, this authority will be a professional dealer. Etiquette dictates that he give you an unbiased opinion. At the same time, each dealer has his own supply of bows for sale. Allow something for the proddings of natural self-interest when asking a dealer to evaluate someone else's bow. (One way to minimize its intrusion is to pay a fee for the appraisal.)

What about buying from the maker? There are two advantages: You'll probably have the opportunity to sample several bows by the same maker. And you should save money by buying directly. On the negative side, you probably won't be able to trade in an old bow. Nor do most contemporary makers buy their own bows back in the fashion of dealers. With contemporary European makers, buying directly presents pitfalls similar to those of the auction houses – lack of time for trial and travel costs. It makes more sense to buy through an American agent or dealer.

### **SELECTING YOUR BOW**

Visiting a major dealer can be overwhelming. You are led to a back room...presented with a case of bows (groups by price or country of origin)...and then...

Wait a minute. Prepare yourself before walking in. First, don't aim to find the ideal bow right away. Simply look for the one or two bows which warrant further trial.

Make sure the dealer knows you are shopping, not buying. At the same time, there's no need to be suspicious, adversarial, or close-mouthed. On the contrary, dealers like nothing better than having the confidence of players. Discuss your needs, but keep the initial discussion to musical and playing terms, not financial ones.

If you've developed your checklist, you know what's right and wrong about your previous bow. So now go into the back room and start trying out the candidates. If you've been presented with 12, play through them quickly separating them roughly by "like" and "don't like." You'll probably discard half this way. Now take up the remaining six and play the same passages or routine on each. This is the period to consult your checklist carefully. Be sure you're challenging the bow's range fully, even if briefly. Play legato, spiccato, piano, forte, etc. Don't take too much time with any one bow – five minutes each – or you risk "overloading your circuits" with too many impressions.

If you've found one or two that survive this process, ask to take them out on trial.. Most likely you'll be permitted to. The dealer may ask for your references, and will want you to sign a release form. Be sure to understand the terms, which will vary from shop to shop. If the dealer's insurance doesn't cover the bow's while in your care, find out if your own insurance will. There's nothing worse than paying for a bow you don't want because an accident befalls it while in your possession.

Keep the bows on trial for a few days. Don't just practice with them. Take them to actual playing situations, too. Make notes about the bows, even if you don't purchase them. These notes may help you at a later stage of the search – particularly if you've discovered some specifics about weight maker, price, etc. that can lead you to (or away from) certain bows.

Some players can find a satisfactory bow in a few weeks. Others take years, and never find exactly what they want. It is common for a player to search for months, finally find the ideal bow, and haggle over the price. Most dealers will not turn down a reasonable offer, but excessive bargaining will generally not work to your advantage. Consider the relative importance of the purchase, and the length of time you expect to keep the bow. Then see how far you want to go. And you might ask yourself how much less you'd be willing to take in your own line of work!

### **HOW CONDITION AFFECTS VALUE**

Playing characteristics and the maker's name are the principal factors that determine the price of a fine bow. Its relative condition – physical appearance and the structural integrity of the bow and all of its principal parts – are of considerable importance, too.

As with any work of art, the extent to which the artistry and intentions of the bow's maker have been preserved is revealed in the bow's current condition. Logically, were you to find two bows by the same maker with relatively equal playing characteristics (admittedly a hypothetical and rare occurrence) the bow in better condition warrants the higher price. Given two bows by the same maker in equal condition, you would simply choose the better playing bow.

Every component of the bow has a value and its condition enters into an evaluation of the whole bow. The three essential components are the stick, the frog, and the screwbutton, which respectively represent on average 70%, 20%, and 10% of the bow's value.

Typically, the frog is of silver and ebony, and the screwbutton also silver. When master makers found a piece of exceptionally beautiful wood, they would make mountings from materials of greater value – combinations using gold, silver, ivory, and tortoiseshell. In general, the value of a bow mounted in

ivory and silver increases by 25%. Bows mounted in gold and ivory, gold and ebony, and silver and tortoiseshell, by 50%. Gold and tortoiseshell mountings, by 100%. If you see a plain looking bow mounted in gold and tortoiseshell, you may be looking at a frog refitted from another stick. You may also see contemporary bows with expensive mountings whose sticks do not justify their use – but do permit the charging of substantially higher prices.

What about defects? A break in the stick, even if skillfully repaired, can reduce a bow's resale value by up to 90%. (The commercial value of such a bow remains higher, since its "salvage" value are in the frog and screwbutton, which together account for roughly 30% of the overall value.) The frogs on such bows are often sought out by dealers and repairmen for fitting to bows by the same maker whose frogs are either damaged or not original.

Some frogs have suffered considerable wear, and have been refitted to the original stick with an inserted piece of ebony called a cheval. When done skillfully, this repair has only a slight effect on overall value.

One should not, of course, confuse playing value with market value. Repaired bows often play as well as ever. If you are not concerned with resale value, you can sometimes find a damaged bow that plays very well at a very reasonable price.

Only the most skillful and experienced dealers and connoisseurs have the expertise to ascertain what repairs have been made to a bow – and what role they play in determining the bow's current value. As in everything about selecting a bow, you should consult an expert whenever any doubt arises about condition.

### **PROTECTING YOUR ACQUISITION**

Insure your new bow for its replacement value, which is generally higher than the price you paid for it. Make sure to secure an appraisal upon purchase, have it updated every two or three years, and be sure any increase in valuation is relayed to your insurer. (Be prepared to pay a modest fee for each reappraisal.)

It is wise to photograph any newly acquired bow, and essential with one by a noted maker. Extremely rare and expensive bows should be certified by a recognized expert. The certificate should note the provenance of the bow if it has ever been owned by an important musician.

And your bow should be looked after with a care equal to or even greater than that you lavish upon your instrument. Despite its flexibility and strength, it is extremely fragile and cannot endure severe shocks. How long will a good bow last? With proper care, indefinitely – and certainly long enough for you to start itching for yet another new bow. 🎵

## A Checklist for Rating Bows

*Suggested rating scale: Poor = 1, Fair = 2, Average = 3, Good = 4, Excellent = 5*

<b>ATTRIBUTE</b>	<b>YOUR BOW</b>	<b>IDEAL BOW</b>	<b>TRIAL BOW</b>
1. Strength/Firmness			
2. Flexibility			
3. Weight			
4. Balance			
5. Stability (No shaking)			
6. Firmness at tip			
7. Firmness at middle			
8. Firmness at frog			
9. Legato			
10. Staccato			
11. Ricochet			
12. Sautillé			
13. Piano quality			
14. Forte quality			
15. Overall quality			
16. Color of sound			
17. Ease of playing			
18. Appearance			
19. Condition			
20. Value			
21. Other			
TOTAL RATING <i>(add points)</i>			