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CHOOSING A BOW

Choosing a bow can be a daunting task, given the multitude of products on the market. Here are several simple points to consider when, cheque book in hand, you venture off to visit your favourite dealer in search of the perfect bow to suit your needs.

If you're a beginner with limited technical skills, you make few demands of your bow. It isn't likely that you'll yet need the qualities of a fine and expensive bow. For now, you simply need a bow with a reasonably strong stick and a good camber (curve); a bow that's not too heavy or light and with a proper balance. As your skills increase, however, so do your demands on the bow and hopefully your ability to recognize the differences.

The best way to describe the best bow for any player is simply this: When you are performing, you don't have to think about it. A good bow should become an extension of your right hand. It should flow with you as you play—with little effort or thought. When you pick up a fine French bow—perhaps a Peccatte or a Voirin—or a well-made modern bow, you can instantly feel that the bow has the power to perform better, giving you more confidence and allowing you to play with less effort. So, if you fail in your bowing technique, it's due to your own lack of skill or preparation—and not the bow's fault.

Before you start your quest for a bow, there are a few things you should know about the selection process.

Type of Material

The three basic materials used in bow sticks are brazilwood (originally an alternate name for Pernambuco), pernambuco (*Caesalpinia echinata*), and carbon fibre.

Brazilwood is now used as a generic name given to several kinds of tropical hardwoods used for inexpensive bows. It comes from Brazil as well as other tropical countries. Brazilwood violin bows are normally priced between about £21 and £150 (pro rata increase for Viola, Cello & Bass) and are suitable for beginning or possibly early intermediate players. We always aim to supply bows in this category made from Brazilian hardwoods, although the bows supplied with outfits may be different and beyond our control.

Since the late 18th century, pernambuco has been the wood of choice for the best bows. It's a dense, heavy wood that comes from several areas in Brazil and seems to possess just the right combination of strength, elasticity, and responsiveness. There are many subspecies and enormous variation in quality. Top master bow makers will spend a great deal of time looking for and choosing only the very best pernambuco sticks, rejecting most everything else. Due to environmental degradation, pernambuco is now scarce, and as a result, the government of Brazil has put severe restrictions on the export of this wood, making it rare and expensive. It is in fact C.I.T.E.S. listed making trading of any wood not legally harvested in a managed manner illegal. The trade of brazilwood is likely to be banned in the immediate future, creating a major problem in the bow-making industry which highly values this wood (see Smithsonian, April 2004, cover story). The International Pernambuco Conservation Initiative (IPCI), whose members are the bow makers who rely on pernambuco for their livelihoods, is working to replant it. IPCI is advocating the use of other woods for violin bows as it raises money to plant pernambuco seedlings. The shortage of pernambuco has also helped the carbon fibre bow industry to thrive

The lack of available pernambuco may be responsible for the quality of products on the bow market. Many players consider the work of the great 19th-century French makers as the ultimate bows. Why have the later makers not been able to equal their work? Some say that the species of pernambuco used by their predecessors no longer exists and that it became extinct at the beginning of the 20th century. Others feel that makers like Tourte, Peccatte, Simon, Pajot, W.E. Hill and their contemporaries were simply the best makers. Certainly their bows are unique. Many have a smooth, supple quality that makes the bow almost part of your hand; the sound these bows produce can be full and rich. More than once, I've heard the phrase "smooth as butter" in describing a fine old French bow. However, other players prefer modern bows that are stiffer, stronger, and quicker in response.

Within the last 20 years, carbon-fibre bows have become popular, in part because of the shortage of pernambuco as stated earlier. Carbon-fibre bows—manufactured from various grades of carbon fibre bonded with a resin—possess many of the qualities of pernambuco. Carbon fibre is also durable, but the World shortage of Carbon Fibre means that they are not inexpensive as it was at one time expected. Also due to the continuing development by manufacturers, this cost needs to be factored in, ensuring that the price for the foreseeable future remains high. So you don't buy a Carbon Fibre bow because it is cheap, however the performance most say is similar to a like priced Pernambuco bow, but with less variation between models of the same type. The ongoing development does mean that however much you pay for a carbon fibre bow, it is likely to be superseded by the manufacturers fairly quickly. Some carbon fibre models have moveable internal weighting to allow for personalisation of the characteristics, but in some way it seems that technology is making things too complicated, and we could be in the position of having mechanical unreliability in the future, something rarely happening on traditional wood bow, if you discount the frog adjusting screw & eye.

Fibreglass has also been used for inexpensive bows sometimes found with the lowest-priced student instruments. Their main advantage is durability and affordability, but their response is very poor.

Playability

Regardless of the material you select, all bows share certain considerations when it comes to their playability.

Sound: Inexperienced players are often surprised at how different bows can create different sounds on their instruments. These differences are subtle and can be clearly heard by the player under the ear, but can sometimes be heard by the audience as well. Leading bowmakers tell us that a suppler bow will have a smoother, fuller sound. However, if the stick is too soft, the sound can lack clarity and definition. A stiffer, stronger bow will give a brighter, more focused sound. Sometimes, an overly stiff bow can produce a rough, edgy sound. It's difficult to find a bow that will give both a smooth broad sound and at the same time have great clarity of focus and the quickness of response that comes from a stronger, stiffer bow.

Weight and Balance: The average weight of a violin bow is about 60 grams (a viola bow is 70 grams; a cello bow, 80 grams). But remember, this is only an average. Many bows by the great makers of the past weigh as little as 54 grams and yet play beautifully. On the other hand, a 66- or 68-gram violin bow would be too heavy for almost anyone. Proper balance is far more important than weight. Many players who say they can only play with a heavy bow, because that is what they are used, to often confuse weight with lack of balance, and when confronted with, say an average weight bow with good balance, suddenly find a whole new vista confronting them. I know of players who won't even look at a bow if it doesn't weigh 60 grams. By holding to this standard, they are missing out on some great bows. If a bow feels right in your hand, it probably *is* right. I will often pick up a bow and hold it at a 45-degree angle. A bow should feel natural in the hand—well balanced from tip to frog with equal weight throughout.

Round or Octagonal?: The great French master makers rarely made octagonal bows. Even today, most top makers produce predominantly round bows. Yet, as an instrument dealer, I sometimes have players who only want to look at octagonal bows. With two bows made from the same wood, the octagonal shaft will be stiffer. Some octagonal bows are quite stiff, creating a hard, one-dimensional tone, lacking nuance. Some of the German commercial-bow producers make a round and octagonal version of the same bow, the octagonal being a bit more expensive. I think this has added to the myth that octagonal bows are better. However experience shows that certainly at the lower price levels, the octagonal stick compensates for perhaps the limitations of not such a good

stick, and can improve its ability to perform beyond its price range. There are also many players who find it easier to hold an octagonal stick, although this is often caused by the incorrect method of holding the stick. There really is no hard & fast rule, and to that end we always recommend giving bows of both types a good trial, using our approval scheme.

In the Shop

So how should you go about finding the best bow? The first step is to establish a budget, but do expect to look at bows that are a little more expensive. If you don't know much about bows, I suggest you try lots of bows to educate yourself about what is available.

When you go to a shop, be sure to bring your own violin and current bow with you as a benchmark. Each bow will perform differently on different instruments, so remember that you're looking for a bow that complements *your* violin. We usually offer players a number within their stated price range. Once you've chosen one or two from that batch, ask to see some more, continuing until you have whittled the number down to a realistic level. Then play the same very brief passage with each bow, one right after another. There's a good chance that one or two will stand out. Beware however extended visits to try bows, we find generally after a couple of hours the player is becoming confused, so we suggest a break, maybe go for a walk, have a cuppa or just relax. After say ½ hour, you will feel relaxed, and ready to go.

First impressions are very important. The bow shouldn't seem too light or heavy in the hand. It shouldn't be too weak or soft: It shouldn't collapse easily on the hair when playing, or flex too much laterally. And it should be straight when viewed down the stick.

Play a combination of bowing styles, including legato, spiccato, sautillé, and so on. Choose a piece at the limit of your playing ability, to give me an idea of how the bow performs in difficult, rapid string-crossing passages. Alternatively use some of the Sevcik bowing exercises. Play a passage near the frog, in the middle, and near the tip. You should be able to play comfortably with all parts of the bow. Playing slowly, listen to the sound each bow produces and feel how the bow handles. You'll notice subtle differences in clarity, fullness of sound, surface noise, and so on. Does the bow enhance or detract from your instrument?

While you're in the shop, use your time efficiently. You're there to find a bow, not to perform or practice. Once you've picked out the two or three bows you prefer, ask to test them out for a short period. Try them more extensively at home, in your ensemble or orchestra, and show them to your teacher for comments. If your teacher's suggestions are important to you, be sure that they are available within the approval time period. However, showing the bows to too many other players will only confuse you. Everyone will probably have a different opinion and those opinions may not be helpful.

Remember, the bow will be *yours*, not theirs, YOU must make the final decision.

If you are ready to look towards an upgrade, please telephone us and we will happily send you a representative list of bows within your price area. Ideally we always prefer you to have the choice of as many bows as possible, which means of course a personal visit, but if that is not possible we do offer a free Bow Approval service. Please enquire. As we are space limited, we also ask that if you are able to visit, we would ask that you telephone first for an appointment, to ensure that we can accommodate you and give you the assistance that you may require. Please note however that we do NOT stock old Master bows, but leave that very specialised market to the several specific specialist bow makers and dealers. Old Master bows need very special handling, and we recommend that purchases of these be very carefully considered, as we always feel that when purchasing such bows, you are really agreeing to be the careful custodian for the period of time the bow is in your care!

This is one of a series of Information sheets prepared by JPB Music to help players gain a better understanding. We write these to assist, but if you are still unsure, please either phone for more advice, or ask your teacher for help.

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