

Bow Selection

By Reginald Williams

Could the selection of a violin bow really be as important as the selection of an instrument? In a word, yes. For many people it is also far more of a mystery and therefore more confusing. In this article I will address the importance of a proper bow and discuss condition, playability, sound production, and physical beauty and their relevance as selection criteria. In summary, I will address these factors and how they contribute to the bow's value.

The bow, because it is very much an extension of the bow arm, is critical to the development of many techniques. It is like the golf club to a golfer, the bat to a baseball player, or the hammer to a skilled carpenter. A bad bow must be overcome, many times by the development of the wrong muscles or the wrong technique in order to make up for its shortcomings. It is for this reason, especially, that the selection of the right bow is especially important to students. A bow does not have to be expensive to be very playable but should nonetheless be well balanced and both strong and supple, and all its parts should fit well and function smoothly. In discussing the various criteria for selection, it is perhaps best to begin with condition.

Condition. Without question, the condition of a bow is critical and must be addressed foremost. When purchasing a bow, before all else one must confirm that the bow has never been broken. Student bows and most lower-cost professional bows lose virtually all of their commercial value once broken, though they may be repaired and used. In general, student bows in any less than excellent condition should be avoided since there are always plenty available in good condition. In studying the condition of a bow, there are many details to consider. See the article titled "Physical Condition of Bows" on page 3 for more information on this topic. Once satisfied as to condition, the playability and sound production of a bow must be considered separately, and it is this two-part process that is often most confusing.

Playability. The playability of a bow is a function of how easy it is to use. It may be considered the tool, and the violin the instrument upon which work is to be performed. Here we must test its balance. Hold the bow in a natural bowhold and see how it feels when moving it through the air. Does it feel comfortable in the hand compared to other bows? Place it on the strings and draw a tone slowly, from frog to tip. Is it easy to control? Does it feel steady and stable, or does it seem to wobble? I recommend starting with just two or three bows in your price range at one time and checking just this much. During this same test, check also for strength. Strength is not a function of how hard or stiff the bow is, but rather how well it holds up as pressure is applied and tone drawn from the instrument. If one bow is less comfortable or harder to control or just feels worse, eliminate it, at least for the moment. Then try one or two more using only this much to eliminate one or two more, keeping only the best feeling ones. Having narrowed your selection to only those which are comfortable and easy to control, you may now consider further criteria.

Sound quality. At this point, you may wish to go back and compare the remaining bows for sound quality. Here, you are matching the bow to your instrument. A perfectly good bow that sounds good on another violin may not sound as pleasing on yours, so it is important to use your violin for this test. Some bows will produce a softer, sweeter

sound, some a smoother sound, others a grittier or edgier sound. Some will produce a focused, brilliant sound, others a darker sound with more breadth. The finer the bow and instrument, the more pronounced the distinctions will be. Here, too, playing slowly, even just a scale with vibrato, will be sufficient to get a good idea of the sound qualities of the bows you are considering. Eliminate those you don't like.

Response. Finally, you should go back and check another aspect of playability: response. At this point you will be primarily matching the tool to your technique, although, to a certain extent, here, too, there is a match with the instrument. This is where you will want to try any technique such as staccato, flying spiccato, martelé, string crossings, and other such quick-moving techniques which you may wish to employ. It is especially at this stage that you must find the bow which works for you.

In summary, then, I like to use the analogy of trying on shoes. First, the bow must be comfortable to hold and easy to use, much as shoes must be comfortable and wear well. Then, the bow must suit your instrument, bringing out the best in its sound, much like the right pair of shoes may complement the clothes you have already selected to wear. Finally, the bow should be well made and in good condition. Once these conditions have been met, you have found your bow.

Beauty. While the above listed criteria are the only ones that need be considered with respect to function, you may well find two or more bows suited to your needs and within your budget. At this point, you may wish to select the most beautiful of those that remain. Look at the wood under a good light. Examine the workmanship of all the parts. Select the one which appeals most, but only after all of your other criteria have been met.

Price. Much as with most other things in life, the challenge is to accomplish this within your budget. Here, a few guidelines may be helpful. I recommend that one restrict the search to bows made of pernambuco wood whenever possible, with perhaps the exception of bows for small children just getting started. For the purposes of this article, I will limit my discussion to bows priced up to \$2,000 and assume that we are talking always of bows in excellent condition. Since the cost of repairing damage to a bow can easily exceed the value of the bow itself, it is essential that the bow's condition be thoroughly examined before making a decision to purchase. This is especially true with student bows, since there are plenty available, and even a few seemingly minor repairs can easily add up to \$150 or more. In general, damage to the head or stick of the bow should be avoided at all costs; a break to the stick on any other than a truly rare bow (otherwise worth many thousands of dollars) will reduce the commercial value of a bow to virtually nothing.

Bows in excellent condition priced between \$300 and \$1,800 can be generally assumed to be commercial bows (not produced entirely by hand by one individual artist). With these bows, especially, it is best to keep in mind that precious materials used in the frog and adjuster, such as gold, ivory, and tortoiseshell, will usually raise the price significantly and are seldom associated with an accompanying significant improvement in playing qualities. If you are partial to these materials, at the very least you should consider comparing several bows not mounted in these materials (but rather in the more typical ebony and silver) that are selling at a similar price before deciding to purchase.

When searching for bows priced between \$300 and \$1,000 (a good price range for beginning and intermediate students), it is probably best to ignore everything but the condition, the wood, and the playability of the bow. Even the names found branded on

these bows are of little use as a reference, other than with new bows, since commercial bow companies are forever having bows produced by different groups of people under the same trade name, many times even shifting production from one country to another. Nonetheless, a careful search can uncover some surprisingly nice bows at very reasonable prices. Due to the fact that large numbers of bows are being produced in both China and Brazil and then stamped with various names by commercial concerns there and elsewhere, names are often, though not always, next to meaningless when considering bows in this price range.

One can expect to find more sophisticated playing qualities in bows priced between \$1,000 and \$2,000. The most frequently encountered bows that represent a good value here were produced in Germany 50 to 100 years ago as commercial bows; it seems that more care was taken in the production, and especially nice wood seems to have been more readily available than is today. I can suggest some names that may be more reliably expected to lead us to some special bows. These brandings include but are not limited to Pfretzschner, Nürnberger, Hermann, Schuster, Hoyer, Rau, Prager, Prell, Knopf, and Bausch. Each of these names represents a well-respected maker, the best of whose work individual work, when available, can be expected to cost upwards of \$2,000. However, in each of these cases, the bowmaker has also been responsible for a number of commercial bows of varying quality. The best of these commercial bows are often very fine bows also and can usually be found at prices between \$1,000 and \$2,000.