

TEEN STRINGS

Tip Sheet № 8

IDEAS, NEWS & FUN FOR STUDENTS OF VIOLIN, VIOLA, CELLO, BASS & FIDDLE

6 THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN BUYING A FINE BOW



1 CONDITION AND DEPRECIATION

The depreciation on bows from missing parts or even minor damage can be enormous—an antique bow without its original mounts can be worth half the value of one with all its original parts. Of course, these less-than-pristine bows can still be good buys and can offer years of service, at the right price. I often counsel players to get a nice, old broken stick for orchestra pits or other tight spaces. If you run a fine bow into a wall and break it, you've lost most of its value, however, if you do it with a previously repaired stick, you've lost the cost of repairs.

2 WEIGHT AND LENGTH

There are thousands of beautiful 55-gram violin bows and 75-gram cello bows loved by their owners in the 1880s, but modern pedagogy leans toward heavier and stiffer

bows. It takes a skillful and sensitive player to handle these lighter bows without crushing the stick into the strings, so these otherwise lovely bows are often difficult to resell to players who have a modern playing style.

3 ORIGINALITY AND DOCUMENTATION

The pleasure of a fine bow purchase can turn sour if the bow turns out to be a fake. Make sure you deal with responsible and respected parties when purchasing, and make sure you get documentation as some proof of provenance for further protection. If worse comes to worst, a shop will likely be more responsive to the situation than your stand partner because the shop's business is based on maintaining its reputation and credibility.

4 TIME FRAME

Sellers these days would have you think that you can buy something and turn it over in no time for a handsome profit, but is rarely the case for violins and bows. Their appreciation can be considerable, but past growth does not guarantee future growth, nor is there certainty that another buyer will be waiting in the wings at any moment. Buy for the long haul, with the expectation of having the bow for years of pleasurable service.

5 NATIONAL ORIGIN

The French have dominated bow making just as much as the Italians have dominated instrument making, and the prices of French bows will probably always lead the market. The best bargains—those with the most potential—are often those from other schools, such as the Germans (Bausch, Knopf, Nürnberg, and Pfretzschner families) and English (especially those makers who came out of the Hill shop:

Samuel Allen, Arthur Bultitude, or William Watson). However, you should still buy what you like and enjoy using.

6 USE AND BOWS

Once you have a fine bow, use it. Being able to make music with it is a major part of the pleasure of owning a bow and the reason why they are valuable. An added benefit of using this piece of art is that playing music presents an opportunity to keep an eye on the bow's condition. By playing with the bow, you can catch issues before they become problems, such as short hair that can tighten in dry weather, potentially breaking the head, or discovering mites that can eat the bow hair, tortoiseshell frogs and buttons, and whalebone wrappings. Use, though, is not the same as overuse. Be careful when handling the bow to avoid eroding the heel and fittings.

—Philip Kass

FIRST THINGS FIRST

“At any given time, any member of the group can be in command in terms of gesture and timing and emotional content, and the rest of the group has to make quick adjustments. Giving a cue is not as simple as the first violinist indicates and the others follow. After that gesture happens, everyone's involved, and you end up following as much as leading. Great quartet players have to switch gears from giving a confident gesture to making adjustments in midair to what the others are doing so the group will be together.”

—Geoff Nuttall
of the St. Lawrence Quartet on the role of a first violinist



4 Ways to Achieve Masterful Bowing Dynamics

1. PRESSURE

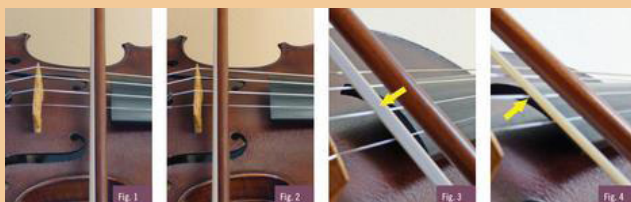
More pressure through the bow creates more volume. Unfortunately, added pressure can quickly lead to unintended sounds.

To avoid this, recognize the difference between pressure created by gripping and pressing versus that created by simply resting into the string with a “heavy” right arm.

To further prevent the crunchy sounds that are often the bane of beginning students, bear in mind that pressure and the next factor—bow speed—are closely linked. When applying more pressure through the bow, increase your bow speed—use more bow. To maintain a consistent, though softer, sound through less pressure, decrease your bow speed—use less bow.

2. BOW SPEED

Since it's hard to measure the actual speed the bow is



traveling across a string, the easiest way to think of bow speed is in terms of length. Using more bow for a phrase transmits more energy into the string and therefore, assuming your pressure remains constant, creates a louder dynamic.

Because the act of applying more pressure through the bow often leads to tension in the bow hand, using bow speed to create contrasting dynamics is often a better choice.

3. SOUNDING POINT

Your sounding point is the location at which you draw the bow across the string to create sound. As for dynamics, first notice that the string yields more the farther you move away from the bridge. When playing over

the fingerboard only a fraction of the energy you apply through the bow will transmit back as sound. When speed and pressure remain constant, playing closer to the fingerboard creates a softer dynamic (**Fig. 1**) while playing closer to the bridge creates a louder dynamic (**Fig. 2**).

4. BOW-HAIR USAGE

Using full bow hair will contribute to a fuller sound while using partial hair will create a softer, more airy sound.

For full bow hair, tilt the bow stick away from you, just slightly (**Fig. 3**) so that the bow doesn't slip on the strings. For partial hair, continue tilting the stick farther away (**Fig. 4**).

—Laurel Thompson

3 Tips from Yo-Yo Ma



KNOW SOMETHING DEEPLY

In our age of specialization, you want to know something deeply so you have your own niche. Know a tradition deeply—be passionate about it.

BE FLEXIBLE

Because people roam around, you want to have enough flexibility and knowledge to be able to sit down with anybody from any other tradition and make it work. You have to understand not only the values of your own tradition but to also know what are the values in another, which means you have to be able to know the other. You have to be able to have analytical skills; you have to be open-minded to be able to do that.

BE ACCESSIBLE

You want to be able to transmit what you know from your tradition to somebody else without your being there, so they can do it themselves without your being there.

—Rory Williams

Did You Know?



Composer Edward Elgar wrote his Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85, after regaining consciousness from oral surgery. He asked for a pen and pencil, and scribbled down the melody that was to be the first theme in the concerto.