



FROM THE MAKERS BENCH

Rosin & Rehairs

by Matt Wehling

Recently I had the pleasure of speaking to about 50 MNSOTA members at the All-State Teachers Workshop in Northfield. I enjoyed the many questions posed by the group, and would like to share a couple of topics that seemed to be of interest to most of the attendees: rosin and rehairs.

Rosin seems like such a simple thing; isn't it just tree sap after all? Sort of, but there are different ways to prepare the tree resin, different species of pine that can be used as the initial source, and then you get some companies adding extra ingredients to the mix, sometimes even precious metals. I just went to Amazon.com and over 100 rosin products are listed. These range in price from 99 cents to more than. There are a lot of choices out there.

A number of teachers attending the workshop wanted to know what the best rosin is. I sure wish I knew, then I could use it too. In my experience, there is no rosin that a majority of players feel is the best; I don't even think there's a rosin that could win a clear plurality of the vote. If only there was a "Magic Bullet" rosin that worked best for every player in every setting. In my opinion, the best rosin for you is going to depend on your instrument, bow, playing technique, as well as factors common to all of us such as humidity (some players prefer one rosin for the drier winter months and a different one for the humid summer). Experimentation is called for in order to find the best rosin for you, guided by recommendations of your colleagues.

Some attendees wanted to know if rosin loses its effectiveness as it ages and dries out, and how often they might need to get a new cake. One teacher said she just gets a new cake when a student breaks the old one, and thus far she hasn't had to worry about it getting very old. I personally feel rosin should be good for a few years. You don't want to use that old cake found in the attic with Grampa's Strad, but you also probably don't need to worry about changing the cake you're carrying around as much as your toothbrush or smoke detector batteries.

And how often should students be told they need to apply rosin? Here a lively discussion broke out, and I thought a good

general guideline for students was to put on small amount of rosin for every two hours of playing. I talked to one violin maker who felt that was too often, but I think it's an easy to remember guideline for students. One teacher offered that two hours would be about three months of playing for many of her students.

We also discussed rehairs at length. Like the rosin question, many wondered if there was a general guideline for how often a bow needs hairing. On this subject I have a few more concrete ideas than on rosin question, but it still comes down to your personal situation (how you play, what you play, how

Also, please emphasize to your students that the time to get a rehair is a few weeks before that big solo or audition, not the night before. The hair needs time to get broken in (not broken!) and get a good coating of rosin.

One participant wanted to know if the tone of the bow is affected by the hair. In particular, many of her students would get salt and pepper hair and she wanted to know if this was a factor in how poor the tone was for some of them. Good hair is a large component of bow tone. Salt and pepper won't sound as good as good white hair. In a quality rehair, you're mainly



often you play, how you treat your bow) and the common factor of Minnesota's variable humidity. I have some professional clients who have their bows haired every few months, and there are some I only see every few years. In general, I think it's good to get a rehair at least annually. The main thing you can stress to students to keep their bows from needing to be rehired often is to *always* loosen the hair after playing. I know that all teachers know this, but it seems most spend more time emphasizing not to touch the bow hair with their fingers. I've heard from many students and teachers that they know not to touch the hair, but I feel that forgetting (or not knowing) to loosen that bow after playing is a much bigger problem.

paying for a conscientious professional's labor and experience rather than materials. The price of good hair shouldn't add that much to the price.

Finally, for this edition, there were many questions and suggestions as to how to clean a bow stick on which rosin has accumulated. Just like the violin, a bow stick can be wiped down with a soft cloth after every playing. And just like a violin, you should leave the cleaning of accumulated rosin to a professional. Some participants told of cleaning with alcohol, but alcohol will take off not only the gunk, but also the shellac that is there to protect the wood. Unless you know how to reapply shellac to a bow you'll be missing this important coating. You also run the risk of getting alcohol on

the hair, which will dissolve all the rosin on that little portion of the hair, giving you a very uneven playing surface over the length of the bow. A good professional rehair should include a thorough cleaning of the stick as well as polishing the metal parts of the frog. So the best way to get rid of the build-up of rosin is to avoid the build-up

in the first place, by occasionally wiping down the stick.

That's it for our first column together; feel free to contact me with bow questions (please no violin questions, I'm honestly not qualified to answer if it's a real Strad) or suggestions for future columns.

Matt Webling's experience includes studying bow making in France for five years with modern French master makers. In 2002 and 2006 he was awarded Gold Medals for his violin and cello bows from the Violin Society of America, and he has contributed to Strings and The Strad magazines. His shop is in Northfield, MN. ♪