



MAKER'S BENCH

Preserving Pernambuco

by Matt Wehling

Many times when people contact me concerning commissioning a bow, they will ask me whether I have a large stock of pernambuco, the wood used to make the highest quality bows. Many people have a vague idea that distribution of this wood has become regulated, perhaps even banned, but are unaware exactly what the regulations are and who enforces them. In this article I'd like to explain a little bit about what I know about the regulations concerning pernambuco.

CITES

The regulating body for endangered species is called the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES). "Convention" in this case means any country that signs up to be a part of the group, similar to the idea of the Geneva Conventions governing torture and warfare. According to the website of CITES, there are 175 countries which have become parties to this Convention. We probably know most about the actions of the Convention from its work on restricting trade of animal materials such as elephant ivory and rhino tusks, but they regulate plant species as well. Regulating a species doesn't necessarily mean enforcing an outright ban; it may mean limiting exportation or use of a material. The individual countries are responsible for enforcing the regulations using their own systems and interpretations. In the U.S., CITES enforcement is controlled by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In September 2007 CITES listed raw pernambuco as a species which could not be transported across international borders without a permit from the country it was leaving as well as a permit from the country it was entering. I used a very important word in the previous sentence: "raw." This is to say that the CITES decided not to attempt to regulate the international traffic of finished bows for musical instruments, only "unfinished wood articles used for the fabrication of bows for stringed musical instruments" (to quote the CITES website). Thus, it's OK for you to take your bows to another country, but not OK for me to send

an unfinished bow to a colleague in another country, or for me to receive raw wood boards from someone outside the U.S. Most U.S. bowmakers have stopped buying wood at all, assuming that the wood was brought into the U.S. under dubious circumstances.

At the meeting of CITES member nations which resolved to restrict the movement of pernambuco, CITES initially wanted to ban the international movement of any piece of pernambuco, much as ivory is currently classified. This would have meant that for you to take your bow to visit Winnepeg you would have had to have a permit issued by the U.S. government to take it out of the country, as well as a permit issued by Canada to allow the bow to enter



Canada. And then you would have needed a permit from each country to bring it back. So that would have been four permits for an individual musician with one bow. Imagine the Minnesota Orchestra's recent tour to Europe under these conditions. Each musician (carrying, say, two bows) makes at least three border crossings (U.S. to U.K., U.K. to Amsterdam, Amsterdam home to the U.S.). If there are 50 string musicians that means 50 musicians times two bows times six permits (one to leave one country and one to enter the next) equal 600 permits would have been required for this relatively short tour. To ensure no monkey business goes on, each bow would have had to have some form of identifying document, perhaps a certificate by a qualified shop. That would have been an awful lot of paper involved to help conserve trees (and I doubt

the permits would be a single page long)!

(Of course, that identifying document for the bow may or may not have been acceptable to any given country, which might result in confiscation and potential destruction of the bow. Ouch!)

IPCI

It was largely because of the efforts of a group called the International Pernambuco Conservation Initiative (IPCI) that CITES was alerted to the bureaucratic nightmare that would have ensued if all objects made of pernambuco were regulated. Representatives from the IPCI were at the actual CITES meeting and vigorously brought up the shortcomings in the proposal to the delegates. In part because of their urging, the regulations were written to include only raw materials. Just who is this group, the IPCI?

The IPCI started out as a group of about 60 bowmakers meeting during an annual trade show in Paris in 1999, but has grown to include musicians, violin makers and dealers, and just "normal" people interested in conservation of natural materials who may or may not have much interest in music. According to the IPCI's website, the IPCI is working to carry out inventories, research, propagation, replanting and educational outreach concerning pernambuco. In practice, this has meant that the group has paid for planting hundreds of thousands of pernambuco trees, financed studies of the plant and attempted to get the average Brazilian involved in replanting. The tree is a national symbol of the country; in fact the country itself was named after the tree (often known as part of the generic "Brazil wood"). The IPCI has helped to give seedlings out to schoolchildren to plant in their neighborhoods and villages, garnering national pride, and also partnered with Brazilian research institutes to perform studies on various aspects of the tree, its environment and population density. The IPCI is a grass roots organization that is really doing positive work to save an endangered species.

Funding for the IPCI has always been a low-key affair. There are many violin and bow shops which suggest musicians give

a donation to the group with every rehair, some shops which themselves give a donation with every rehair or bow sold, and many bowmakers who belong to the group and send in annual dues. Recently I was involved in a fundraising effort where I was part of a group of three professional Minnesota makers who collaborated in making a bow to be sold with all proceeds going to the IPCI. The bow, made by Lee Guthrie, Roger Zabinski and me, was sold through the shop of John Waddle and brought in

\$4000 for the IPCI. It's possible we'll make another one some time in the future.

The conservation and regulation of the irreplaceable natural resource pernambuco are important issues for everyone who loves music made by strings. Even though you may not realize it, the International Pernambuco Conservation Initiative has already made a difference in your life through ensuring easy international travel for all string musicians. Please consider going to the IPCI web site www.IPCI-USA.org

and making a tax-deductible contribution, and ask about the IPCI next time you get a rehair.

Matt Wehling'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. ♪