

MAKER'S BENCH

Designing a Personal Model — Old Masters, New Expressions

Part 3: The Frog and Button

by Roger Zabinski

The first part of this article dealt with the design of the head. The second part dealt with the shaft. This third and final part addresses the frog and button with some concluding thoughts.

The Frog

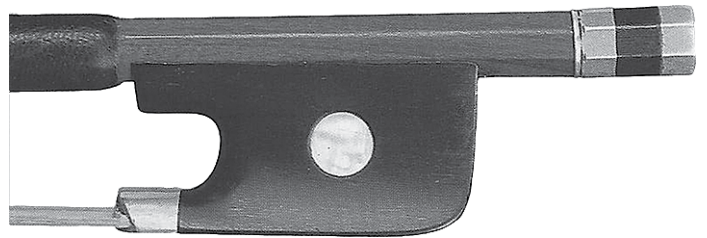
English-speaking people borrow a word from the French “ensemble” which expresses the union of separate elements into a synthesized unity, a “wholeness,” or “togetherness,” if you will. Whatever an artist’s intent might be, his creation has to accomplish this sense of integrity and oneness if his efforts are to give any fulfillment to aesthetic sensibilities. The bow for stringed instruments is no exception. The same sculptural elements that come together and

define the style of the head must also come together and define the style of the frog. The head, frog and button of a fine bow must join together into one aesthetic whole.

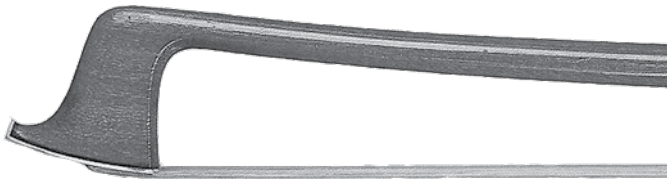
Take a look at the Tourte frog and compare it to the head; the somewhat vertical, angular movement of the back of the head is reflected in the throat of the frog. Likewise, compare the head and frog of the Pajeot; the shape of the throat evokes the same sense of movement as that of the back of the head. For contrast, look at the



Etienne Pajeot (violin bow)



Francois Tourte (cello bow)



Alfred Lamy (violin bow)



Roger Zabinski (violin bow)

Lamy and compare it with the Tourte and Pajeot; its movements are quite a different expression than the older models, but remain harmonious and integrated, an “ensemble.” You will see in the head and frog of my model the same integration of shapes; the throat of the frog echoes the same somewhat flat, backswept movement at the back of the head.

The thumb seat, too, helps define a model, and it normally correlates with the period of the bow. The rounded thumb seat of the Lamy reflects the rounded expressions of the head, typical of the late 19th into the 20th century aesthetic. In contrast, the thumb seat of the Tourte and Pajeot are rather square—typical, though not universal, of the time. Because it is inspired by the early 19th century aesthetic, my model uses that same rather square shape. For many players who grew up with an inexpensive student bow, this detail can feel somewhat foreign, and even uncomfortable. A younger student is more inclined to “squeeze” the bow, using force and tension, pressure and fast bow speeds to propel the sound from the instrument. The early 19th century bow needs a different approach to the hand and bow arm; rather than “squeezing” the stick as the smaller, round thumb seat allows, the square thumb seat of earlier style demands less tension in the hand. And from the bow arm, more the feeling of weight rather than pressure. On the contrary, the square thumb seat becomes a luxurious point of control, a little more wood into which the thumb may rest.

There are many more elements of the frog, which we could discuss, e.g., the decorative eyes at the side of the frog, the ferrule height, width and shape, the three-dimensional sculpture of the sides, the angle of and shape of heel plate. No less important are the species of shell products and the alloys used for the frog. These are significant but lesser elements that create an aesthetic impression, and we note them only in passing.

The Adjuster Button

Like a precious little vignette in a museum which gets lost in the midst of great works of art, the adjuster button, though relatively inconspicuous, bears a significance all its own; the minute details of the button are integral to the overall concept of the bow. Unique to the early 19th century French bow, the button usually flares a bit as it approaches the outer ring. That flaring movement picks up and extends the increasing diameter of the shaft as it nears the frog, continuing past the frog right through to the outer ring. This flaring movement stands in contrast to later generations, Lamy providing our example of a later aesthetic. Compare the image of the Lamy with those of the Tourte and Pajeot; you will understand the point.

Not insignificant to the button’s execution is the forward collar, which adjoins the end of the shaft. As a norm of the early 19th cen-

tury, the diameter of the collar is slight larger than the flats of the button. Aesthetically, the larger diameter gives a sense of strength and rich elegance to the whole; practically, it provides a better protection against wear to the end of the shaft.

In the Round

Up until this point I have spoken of the elements of bow design only in 2-dimensional terms. But the bow, as any sculpture, is a three-dimensional object. This third dimensional aspect “realizes” the whole, creating highlights and shadows as the eye moves over surface of the piece. A little story here will be useful in making the point.

A little over 20 years ago when I moved into my new workspace, I thought how wonderful it would be to install skylights. “Just think of all the light,” I thought, “and so very smooth and even.” How wrong I was! Plenty of light, yes, but the wrong kind of light. All the shadows upon which I depended to shape the head and frog had disappeared. The shapes looked lifeless, ghostly, difficult to perceive. I never understood until then how much the 3-dimensional shadows give substance and “reality” to the 2-dimensional elements.

We might liken this difference to a person’s shadow and their real presence. The shadow presents us with an idea of what a person might look like; but when we see them in person, how different our perceptions might be. How rounded are their cheeks? Are they flat? Well-rounded? Maybe a bit sunken? In the same way, a maker can choose to make a surface very flat, or convex, or even concave; these contribute a sort of dialogue between the two-dimensional elements, completing them, giving them depth and reality.

Conclusion

In the course of this article, I have talked about a number of ideas of which bow makers are aware when they fashion this little object so very essential to the music making process. Some of these ideas address only what is technical; some of these ideas penetrate to what is uniquely human, i.e., our remarkable ability to both create and appreciate an object of beauty. And in that dialogue of creating and appreciating, we are all made a bit more human, we are all a little bit more connected. Perhaps the next time you look at a fine bow, you will see it with different eyes.

Roger Zabinski works in Minneapolis and has made over 780 bows. He has won numerous awards from the VSA, including a Gold Medal for his violin bow in 1986. In May 2011, he was elected a member of the Entente Internationale des Maitres Luthiers et Archetiers d’Art. †