



# VIOLIN

## The Violin Bow, Part 1

by Lynnea Skeate

### Introduction: Why Study the Violin Bow?

Since beginning my string studio in 2011, I have been committed to being the best teacher I can be. I am always striving to teach my students how to play with a better, richer tone, more musically, and with emotional sensitivity while finding joy in their instrument. For me, this means practicing, working with other teachers, and studying so I can grow in my knowledge and skills, and in turn be able to help my students grow in theirs. While working on my music degree, I had the privilege of doing a research project with my violin teacher, Dr. Marion Judish. For this project, I chose to study the violin bow. It turned out to be an incredible experience and has inspired me to view the method of “teaching violin” in a different way. I am excited to share some of what I learned with you! This leads to a good question: Why study the violin bow?

Lucien Capet called the bow “the soul of the violin.” Fundamentally, it is a stick of wood strung with horsehair. Yet it is able to produce musical sounds so glorious that an audience can be lifted above the everyday world to experience a higher realm. The bow is really the main artistic tool used to draw the sound out of the violin. For this reason, it is important to understand each aspect of the bow in order to work with it to produce the exact sounds and phrasing necessary to turn notes on a page into music. Capet eloquently explains the importance of developing and studying the bow in his book *Superior Bowing Techniques for Violin*:

To achieve the greatest possible variety in interpretation, it is essential to develop all the capabilities of the right hand, because the superior character of a violinistic Work of Art resides, not in the technique of the left hand, but in the Bow.

My purpose in this series of articles is to encourage violin teachers in particular and students to study the bow and its application to their teaching and performance skills. Below I will give a brief overview of the history of the bow, observing the evolution of the bow’s design and the musical reasons why the bow makers made particular adjustments. In the next article, I will discuss the basic elements and philosophies behind the three basic schools of bowing including an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages in regard to tone. Beyond that, I plan to present some practical teaching ideas that I have learned through studying with my violin teachers, research, observation, and experimentation with my own violin students. Of course, I still have so much left to learn—a lifelong venture. But whether you have been teaching for years or are just starting, I hope you will find something in these articles that is both interesting and practical.

(Unless otherwise noted, information is drawn from *Violin Technique and Performance Practice in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), by Robin Stowell, and *The History of Violin Playing, from Its Origins to 1761 and Its Relationship to the Violin and Violin Music* (London: Oxford UP, 1965), by David D. Boyden.)

### Brief Overview of the History of the Violin Bow

#### *Origins*

The history of the violin bow is an intriguing mystery. The bow changed substantially over the period of 1600–1800 as makers attempted to keep up with changing musical styles and desires. Although no actual bows from the sixteenth century survive, drawings and paintings of early violins and bows offer some insight. The bow was convex in shape. As Robin Stowell described it, the narrow band of hair was attached directly to the tip and tied to the innovative “horn-shaped nut” at the frog, like the bow shown in Figure 1. This arrangement caused some problems with keeping the hair at the right tension.



Figure 1. Violin bow based on c. 1550 model with hair tied directly to tip of stick

<http://www.vanedwards.co.uk/bow.htm>

#### *The Seventeenth Century*

The biggest issue for violinists in the seventeenth century was that the bow hair tension was not adjustable, and they were stuck with whatever tension they could achieve by manually tying it to the frog. In 1694 screwknob frogs and, even more importantly, movable frogs were a part of the bow standard (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Close-up of possible Stradivari frog

<http://www.vanedwards.co.uk/bow.htm>

An actual bow head was commonly used by the late seventeenth century, as opposed to tying the hair directly to the point as had been done with earlier bows. Woods for the stick included snake-wood and some brazilwood. Although these features may seem rather primitive to modern musicians, it is important to remember, as David Boyden explains, that bows were “constructed for the musical purposes of the time.” Bow makers spent much time and effort on creating instruments of beauty and excellence, both in look and in sound.

#### *The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*

The pinnacle of the history of the bow is the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, each country had a different style of bow, according to what suited their musical needs and tastes. As the eighteenth century progressed,

there was a mixing of national distinctions, which affected the evolution of the bow. People began to desire greater dynamic changes and longer phrasing, necessitating a longer bow and a solution to the hair tension problem. The frog underwent many changes from having a fixed nut to a movable nut and finally to the “modern” screw nut by 1750. The mid-eighteenth century witnessed the beginning of a bow stick with a concave curve. However, this caused more problems with the hair because it brought the hair too close to the stick, which caused bow makers to experiment with different kinds of heads at the tip of the bow to raise the hair away from the stick.

### François Tourte

The history of bow design reached its summit with François Tourte who lived in Paris from 1747 to 1835. Contrary to popular opinion, Tourte was not a spectacular innovator. Rather, his genius lay in his ability to assimilate all of the advancements made in bow design up until that point and standardize them into the perfect combination. Through experimentation, Tourte concluded that Pernambuco was the best wood for the stick because it was light and elastic, yet strong. He chose a distinctly concave arch for the bow, which meant the head of the bow needed to be higher to keep the hair off the stick. However, this made the tip of the bow too heavy, so he added metal inlays, such as gold, silver, and tortoiseshell, to the frog to achieve a better balance. Tourte also took into consideration another bow hair problem caused by the unevenly bunching of the hair. He secured the hair at the frog with a wooden wedge covered by the ferrule, thus becoming, according to Robin Stowell, the “first bow maker to bring it [the ferrule] into general use,” and used a screw frog to adjust the tension. Tourte was aesthetic as well as practical, and he added a mother-of-pearl slide in the frog both to add beauty to the bow and to hide the hair. The last feature on the bow was the hair itself. Tourte chose French horsehair for its strength. Always attentive to the details, he made sure each hair was perfectly symmetrical, then scrubbed it with soap and rinsed it before attaching it to the stick.

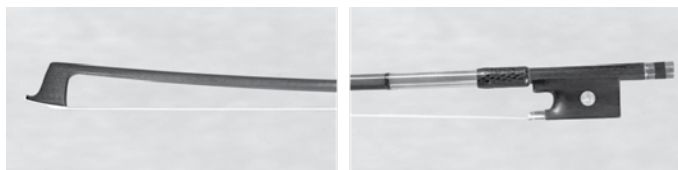


Figure 3. A late bow by François Tourte  
<http://www.magicbowpublications.com/TourtePics.htm>.

The bow of François Tourte was a masterpiece. Tourte the bowmaker has been noted by David Boyden to be “the Stradivari of the bow in his own lifetime.” Boyden goes on to comment that the “perfection of his craftsmanship...cannot be explained.” The musical results of Tourte’s bow were immense. It produced a stronger, more even tone and a wider expressive range, both dynamically and emotionally, than had before been achieved. The *sforzando* and the *martelé* stroke became common practice techniques through the use of Tourte’s bow. It enabled the introduction and exploration of

the various “thrown” strokes such as *spiccato*, *sautillé*, and *ricochet*. Finally, it allowed for smoother bow changes, especially between slurred and unslurred notes, bringing violinists closer, in Robin Stowell’s words, to the “seamless phrase” ideal.

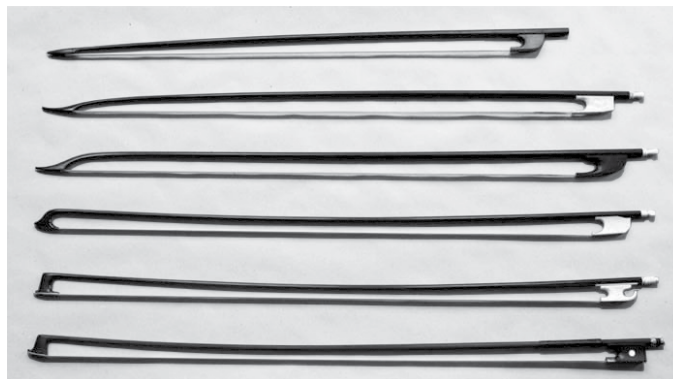


Figure 4: A brief evolution of the bow up to the modern bow  
<http://www.violintutorpro.com/the-evolution-of-the-bow/>.

### The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, bow makers seemingly unanimously adopted Tourte’s bow as their model, but continued to refine and perfect details. Respected bow makers include Frenchmen Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume, François Nicolas Voirin, Dominique Peccatte, Joseph Alfred Lamy père and Eugène Nicolas Sartory, and Englishmen William Ebsworth Hill and James Tubbs.

The twentieth century brought new challenges for bow makers. Although Pernambuco wood had been the standard for more than 250 years since François Tourte had proven its excellence for bow making, it began to be endangered due to agriculture and urbanization. Today, the International Pernambuco Conservatory Initiative USA estimates that only seven percent of the original forest remains.

With the advent of new kinds of technology, bow makers began experimenting with fiberglass in the 1960s and carbon fiber in the 1990s. For example, CodaBow International was founded in 1993 in Winona, Minnesota, by Stan Prosen and Jeff Van Fossen.

The future for bows looks both uncertain and exciting. The state of Pernambuco is a cause of concern, but efforts are being made to preserve this important wood for future generations of bow makers and violinists. In addition, the growth of technology offers seemingly endless possibilities. Regardless of what lies ahead for violin bows, all makers seem to have agreed on using the Tourte bow as their basic model, which only continues to prove that his bow was the culmination of centuries of craftsmanship.

*Lynnea Skeate lives in St. Cloud and graduated from St. Cloud State University with a B.A. in Music in 2016. She has been teaching privately since 2011, and currently teaches violin, viola and beginning cello. Her website is [www.tmstringstudio.com](http://www.tmstringstudio.com). She has assisted with several youth orchestras and loves playing violin and teaching! ♪*