



# BAROQUE PRACTICE

## Transitional Bows

by Mary Sorlie

As with string instruments, bows have changed and evolved over the centuries. We continue to see this today in the bow making process, with advancements and developments in the use of material such as carbon fiber. This article will give a brief history of the evolution of the bow, with focus on the transitional period between 1750-1780. While all string instruments have seen changes in both their function and design, this article will focus primarily on the violin bow.

The earliest known bowed instrument is the Arabic *rabāb* and is considered to be the ancestor of all European bowed instruments. In medieval times, the word *rabāb* was a generic term for any bowed instrument. The *rabāb* can be traced back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century through illustrations and literature.

Prior to 1600, there were some unifying characteristics of a bow, but there was also a great variety in style and form. Some of the unifying factors in these early bows were: the bows were always convex, the hair was horsehair or a string-like material and the hair was attached directly to the stick.

“In order to keep the hair and the stick apart on the flat type of bow, various forms of (non-adjustable) nut were introduced from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards: a natural bifurcation of the wood could be exploited, one of the branches being cut down to a stump;

or the player could insert a piece of wood or his finger between the hair and the stick.”<sup>1</sup>

Certain norms also developed during this time. Generally, when the player held the instrument slanting upwards or sideways from his body, the bow was held in an overhand grip and when the instrument was supported on the knee, the bow was held in an underhand grip.

During the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the bow length varied, depending on the use. Bows that were used for dance music were short and light. In addition to dance music, these shorter bows worked well in quick passages in the music of composers such as Claudio Monteverdi. Also known as a Monteverdi bow, these shorter bows were barely longer than the violin. One of the most common principles of Baroque string playing is that the important notes are to be played with a down bow. (These notes were in fact referred to as *nobilis* and marked with an “n”, which has become our down-bow marking. The metrically weaker notes were referred to as *vilis* or poor, and marked with a “v,” which has become our up-bow marking.) During this same time, bows that were used for playing solos or in ensembles were longer. As the demands for more difficult and virtuosic violin music grew, so too did the changes in the violin and bow.

1600-1750 are the years that we use to

define the Baroque period. Baroque music did not stop being played or written in 1750. This was also true of the instruments. Older instruments and bows were still being played alongside the newer models. During the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the bow was gradually lengthened and strengthened. Up until around 1750, violin bows were designed for a specific use and expected only to fulfill this function. They were designed to resonate rather than project, and consequently had thinner bow hair to avoid dampening the gut strings. While during this time there were quite a few changes in the frog and shape of the bow, the material that was used remained the same. Whether for dance or solo use, the wood for all of these bows was snakewood, brazilwood or pernambuco.

After 1750, melody played a far more important role in violin music, as well as concert halls and orchestras becoming larger in size. It became necessary for bows to be able to sustain and project more sound. Bows during this time are often referred to as Classical bows or Transitional bows. The rapid developments in music required both musicians and bow makers to adapt.

During this transitional stage, the stick gradually became concave and longer. The result was a stronger bow, that was better suited to sustained playing and more varied bow strokes. A stronger design for the moveable frog was developed and a wider



Top to bottom: Monteverdi bow, Baroque bow, Transitional bow and modern bow.

Notice the changes to stick length, stick curvature, shape of the tip and frog, and development of the screw adjustment.



Top to bottom frog and tip detail: Monteverdi bow, Baroque bow, Transitional bow and modern bow.

ribbon of hair was adopted.

Perhaps the biggest step towards the modern bow during this period was when makers abandoned the convex bow stick in favor of a concave one. The separation of the hair from the stick became greater, particularly at the head. The most famous Transitional model was developed by Wilhelm Cramer and used in the Mannheim Orchestra.

Wilhelm Cramer (1746-99) was a violinist who lived the early part of his life in Mannheim. It is thought that he brought the bow to Paris around 1770. The Cramer model had a head that was stronger, heavier and taller than Baroque bows. This was the first step towards a bow that could produce a more equal sound at the heel and the tip and was better suited to playing sustained melodies. More weight at the tip of the bow was a big change from the earlier bows. The Cramer bow had a battle-axe head, delicate frog and a bow stick that was

slightly concave. Cramer model bows were replicated by many makers in Paris between 1772-1792. Other makers of the Transitional bow included Duchaine and Edward Dodd.

During the Transitional bow making period, there was still no standardization of bow features. Every bow was different in weight, length and balance. In particular, the heads differed depending on the maker. Around 1786, Francois Tourte (1747-1835) produced a bow in Paris that continues today to serve as the model for bows.

As we continue to research the music and instruments of our predecessors, we will continue to find new ways to perform. The idea of a sharply curved bow (also referred to as the modern Bach bow) has been promoted several times throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century. A prominent supporter of this bow was Albert Schweitzer. This bow enables string players to control the tension of the bow hair in order to play one,

two, three and four strings simultaneously and to change easily among these possibilities. The high arch of the bow allows full, sustained chords to be played and there is a lever mechanism that affects the tension and release of the bow hair. Perhaps the most famous artist to perform using this bow was Mstislav Rostropovich. No matter what period of time it is, what resources are available, or what style of music we have been trained in, we will continue to explore new ways to express ourselves with our instruments.

<sup>1</sup> Sadie, Stanley. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (New York, 1980) 126.

*Mary Sorlie conducts the GTCYS Philharmonia East and West Orchestras, and teaches at the Harmony Program at Riverview Elementary. She maintains a violin and viola studio in her home. ‡*