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Bow heirs

Benoît Rolland looks back at the traditional apprenticeships of Mirecourt, which have nurtured generations of bow makers

Nestled in the forests of north-east France, on a plain that runs across to the Vosges mountains, is Mirecourt, the home of French bow making. Pajeot, Simon, the Adams, Peccatte, Voirin, the Lamys and Sartory were all born in Mirecourt. Indeed, between 1720 and 1935 this quiet town was the birthplace of nearly all the French master bow makers, not to mention their apprentices and compagnons, or salaried employees.

Instrument making in Mirecourt began under the dukes of Lorraine, whose Italian luthier, Tywersus, settled there having accompanied the Lorraine court back from Italy. By the time the daughter of Charles III, Duke of Lorraine, became Grand Duchess of Tuscany in the 1590s, the dukes were already involved in overseas commerce and trading foreign goods. Court music enhanced their sense of luxury. The trade was also important because it spread to Africa and the Americas, providing a source for bow-making woods.

Visitors and residents enjoyed Mirecourt as a musical paradise, ideally suited to their wealth and

taste. A prosperous trade in dyed drapery thrived alongside the local lace production, run by the Ladies of the Monastery of Poussay; an enterprise that, in 1790, employed up to a thousand women. The town's wealth allowed it to make generous contributions towards the military forts that covered the area, and its position on the north-south corridor to Italy put it on the route between Paris and Germany. Travelling gentry, merchants and artisans exchanged goods and knowledge, and the town trained generations of craftsmen in an atmosphere of efficiency and excellence.

From these sound foundations rose the bow making. The instruments which passed to and fro between the workshops of Mirecourt and Paris were well made and displayed fine craftsmanship, which in turn boosted confidence in the bow trade. Unfortunately, Mirecourt was repeatedly plagued by wars and economic hardship throughout the 17th and 18th centuries and was in danger of being no more than a relic of its glorious past. It was not

until the second half of the 18th century that the town began to adopt the new styles and, by then, bow making had reached a climax and the best shops were already sited in Paris. Mirecourt survived by supplying the Paris shops with large numbers of bows from their moderately skilled but well-trained bow makers.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries bow making in Mirecourt developed in two tiers: workshops practising their craft to the highest artistic standards existed alongside mass-production bow factories. For example, Laberte, Fournier & Magnié merged in the 1920s and opened a factory with 800 low-skilled and badly paid workers; this consortium then showered the market with ordinary bows. Nevertheless, the factory bows continued to be handmade and retained some degree of craftsmanship, although there was a lack of individual character as the workers were each allocated a specific task on the production line to increase productivity. Several of these companies continued



operating until 1968–9, a time of great social change in France.

In the mid-19th century the French bow style fluctuated between two extremes: the square heads of Peccatte and the round heads of Voirin. The public consistently favoured the latter, to such an extent that it became

the only style produced in the factories – these bows are easier to appreciate, visually and musically. Now labelled as Mirecourt Bows, they are not the best in the world, but the result of an honest craft and have helped carry the name of Mirecourt round the globe. At the same time,

Mirecourt-trained makers, such as Eugène Sartory, Emile Ouchard, Victor Fétique and Hippolyte Camille Lamy, created outstanding bows and continued to express their attachment to Mirecourt, although they often lived and worked a great distance from this remote corner of France. ▶

ABOVE a pair of 1930s factory bows made in Mirecourt. They were sometimes stamped with the name of a famous maker to add prestige

BELOW Bernard Ouchard's bow making class in Mirecourt in 1973



Photo of workshop: Sylvie Casson; all other photos: Benoît Rolland



TOP the bowed drill is still in use in Mirecourt workshops, which traditionally pay great attention to the tools

BOTTOM players favoured the round heads of Voirin bows (top) over the square Peccatte ones and this became the only style produced in Mirecourt's factories

Desolated as the place has become – merely the remnants of a town by the end of the 20th century – the deeply rooted spirit of training bow makers has never deserted it. When, in 1969, Etienne Vatelot asked Bernard Ouchard to re-establish a bow making school, only one location was ever envisaged – Mirecourt – and, today, the latest project for such a school is managed by a Mircurtien, an inhabitant of Mirecourt.

Bows in the French tradition – this phrase is so widespread that it must embody a consensus. How do contemporary bow makers around the world relate today to the old *feseurs d'archets*? What are the fundamental elements that convey such a sense of identity in this expensive market? Certain

characteristics of the heads and frogs and other fine details may be visible to the expert, but the main concern for musicians is the sound of the bow; and great French bows do, indeed, sound. Only a particular treatment of the stick can create this fascinating harmony of strength and flexibility. A fine bow should achieve a balance between mechanical properties, musical power and aesthetic Classicism. The ultimate aim is an intuitive playability that brings out the quality and power of the instrument and a beauty that transcends the functionality of the stick. Bows like this may be difficult to play at first, but they soon reveal their potential.

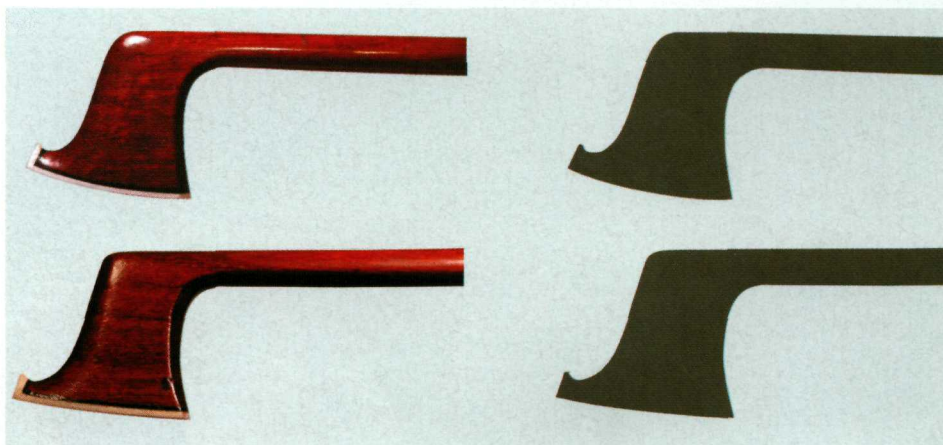
Apart from the contribution of pre-eminent makers, who obviously influence subsequent teaching, the general learning process and tool usage is of the utmost importance. Mirecourt provided apprentices in great numbers while retaining in the town a few shops of high standing. This repository of knowledge, preserving a historic educational framework, continued to make a distinctive contribution to the art of bow making. The migration to Paris, where the major shops gathered, has provoked mixed feelings in Mirecourt: bitterness at losing many of its heirs in search of fame in Paris; and pride at the lineage of some the greatest artisans in the country. A few great makers, like Pajeot, remained in their home

town, but many more left for good or returned, as Peccatte did, when they retired. Mirecourt was a source, and remains a reference, of valuable experience for bow makers who spent their three years of initial training there.

Why have the greatest makers always moved to Paris? The effect of the guilds cannot be ignored: until their abolition in 1791 under the Revolutionary government, they imposed very high fees on apprentices. In Paris, few bow makers could afford these fees, but more lenient terms applied in the Duchy of Lorraine. Could this be why Mirecourt offered only its best talents a chance to work in the mother city, a place of high education and unmatched musical dynamism? In return, and following Tourte's fame, the knowledge and skills that emerged in Paris were brought to Mirecourt and standardised the principles of bow making across the country.

The Mirecourt apprenticeships achieved remarkable levels of consistency in the methods of bow making, and the guidelines, which aim to instill an efficient attitude at the bench, never impaired the creativity of a confident maker. Looking back at the teaching that some of us received from Bernard Ouchard in Mirecourt, and at the constant similarities in antique bows, it appears that four main principles have underpinned French bow making: maintaining the correct posture at the bench; creating a specific set of tools; learning to analyse the wood vibrations; and the concept of a single master bow-maker whom students should try to emulate. In the austere classroom which he had turned into a workshop, and where he displayed many photographs of composers, Ouchard hung only one ornament: in the light of a window, a miniature stained glass of François Tourte, watching over our endeavours.

This traditional apprenticeship pays particular attention to the ►



tools and their design, and the *forêt d'archetier*, or bowed drill, is still in use today. This allows sensitive control and absolute precision of direction and speed, while the absence of an electric motor preserves the silence that is beneficial to any musical craft. The apprentice learns to build a prescribed set of general hand tools, which obviously acquire certain unique characteristics in the course of their manufacture; such details sometimes appear discreetly on a bow, revealing the identity of its maker. The number of tools is kept to a minimum, encouraging an economy of means and movement that improves concentration while shaping a stick. First of all, this allows for speedy bow production,

across it prevail over the mechanical aspects of the craft. Visual control comes second.

A tradition stays alive, and worthy of the name, only if it evolves within its realm; otherwise, the work is merely a soulless reproduction, conservatism buried in its own past. This transmission of French bow making techniques from masters to apprentices and the exchange of ideas between Mirecourt and Paris provided the correct environment to revitalise the industry regularly.

Evolution has been stimulated by the pairing of making with invention. The masters constantly introduced clever technical modifications – one drawback was that bow making seduced more

THE TRANSMISSION OF TECHNIQUES FROM MASTER TO APPRENTICE PROVIDED A SUITABLE ENVIRONMENT FOR REVITALISING THE INDUSTRY

an attribute much appreciated by workshops and manufacturers – twelve bows per maker per week was still the norm in the 1970s. On the other hand, it can lead to a completely artistic experience – making a bow as a work of art – in the same way that oriental calligraphers or sword makers learnt to focus their concentration on every stroke. Some musicians have commented that the gestures of a French bow maker at work remind them of the very movement of the bow on the instrument.

The students teach their arms to recognise the vibrations of the wood as they shape it, and recognise their significance. Even during the planing, the stick remains in continuous contact with the palm of the left hand; heads and frogs are held the same way. This intimate contact, emphasised in the French school, provides constant control over the profiling and tuning of the bow. The feeling of the wood and the sound of the blade moving

engineers than musicians. From flights of fancy, including aluminium threads instead of horse hair and Vuillaume's iron bow, to incontrovertible improvements, innovation stands as a key part of the French tradition of bow making. It was natural for any accomplished master to engage in experimental development: Tourte 'le jeune' summarised the functional criteria of the bow and its profile; Lupot introduced the metallic underslide on the frog; Pajot designed a metallic constraint for the frog; Vuillaume promoted under his name an interchangeable hair system and a rounded underslide; and, more recently, Jean-Jacques Millant proposed a fixed forward part of the frog. These are only a few examples of the creativity of the French bow trade. Yet new techniques never refuted the long-established expertise of Mirecourt. Rather they built upon it, deepening our understanding of bows and the established materials,



and introducing new ones – our work using synthetic fibres cast new light on several areas.

Today Mirecourt is a lonely town, with a few shops which continue making refined instruments and bows. But, in the streets, memories of the two sides of bow making – the workers toiling in the factories and master bow makers practising their art in their shops – linger alongside each other. ■

TOP a quiet town today, Mirecourt was the birthplace of nearly all the great bow makers

ABOVE an 18th-century stained-glass image of François-Xavier Tourte, hanging in Bernard Ouchard's classroom