

Sound investments



On a grey Sunday afternoon, three men were chatting in the rain, one hastily repairing his leaky roof. Oblivious to the downpour, they were discussing the intricacies of bow making: the man on the roof was a maker. This incongruous situation delighted Stephen Kates, who whispered to the third man, 'I must buy a bow here!'

Such improbable encounters always appealed to Kates, who loved to disguise the seriousness of his vocation with a veil of humour. But this was certainly not through lack of commitment. David Bonsey, head of musical instruments at Skinner auction house, recalls having an unbroken 14-hour discussion with him about the attributes of instruments and bows, and Kates regularly immersed himself in the extensive reference library collected for him over many years by his wife. When his collection of cello bows was auctioned at Skinner last October, experts and musicians from around the world gathered to examine and try them.

The collection is startlingly diverse, encompassing many different schools of making, and yet the spirit of the collector shines through in all the pieces. The subtle logic of the compilation, which seems eclectic at first, derives from one criterion: sound. The story here is not about exceptional frogs and mint heads, but about acoustically significant sticks that are bound to pass from musician to musician for centuries.

A professional string player commonly owns four or five bows, either for use with different instruments or repertoire, or simply to suit their mood. In this context, small collections often build up: moderately priced for most and easy to store, bows are a fairly natural object of commerce in orchestras, where trying new tools can be a good way to perfect a technique or find a particular sound. One could claim to have a collection with ten bows; after this point, collecting often takes on a momentum of its own. Fifty-seven bows of the Kates estate were presented

Not many bow collections place backroom finds by unknown makers alongside Tourtes and Simons, but Stephen Kates was only concerned with one thing: tone. **Benoît Rolland** reports



at the October auction, including 30 examples of particularly high quality.

Kates, a collector at heart, would gather anything that pleased him, from rosin tins and 78 and 33rpm classical recordings of a particular label, to fountain pens. However, his widow Mary-Louise Kates notes his unrestrained passion for bows: 'Stephen loved everything about bows; this was much more enjoyable to him than collecting instruments.' Under Kates, the collection was active: bows circulated and were played; he shared his discoveries with his students, loaning his bows and explaining the influence they could have on sound production. Magnifying glass and auction catalogues in hand, he gave a masterclass on bows at the Peabody Institute every year. Many friends affectionately remember how imaginative he was in his attributions; but in the end, Bonsey says, 'many of his observations were borne out by our research'.

Beside relentless investors, bow collectors can roughly be divided into two groups: those fascinated with the rarity of perfect pieces, to whom aesthetics is a requisite; and those more interested in a bow's playing potential. The groups naturally overlap when a bow that satisfies both criteria comes on the market. Kates belonged to the second group – his was a sustained love affair with a particularly melodic sound that he endlessly pursued. Kates's playing would charm with a sense of melody reminiscent of the Piatigorsky and Casals schools. These schools favour a technique that uses the hair ribbon along its full length, and bows selected for their flexibility. Tourte bows stand as the archetype. Their sensuality, combining precision and fullness, allows a musician to directly perceive vibrations in the instrument: a valuable feature when one is aiming to have a strong emotional impact.

The major bows of the Kates collection display very comparable technical characteristics. Four bows dominate the French section: a François-Xavier Tourte,

a François Lupot, a Jean-Dominique Adam and a Pierre Simon (made in the Vuillaume workshop). These bows are amazingly homogeneous in their playing style and represent the character of the collection alongside beautiful English bows, also known for their flexibility. A fine example by James Tubbs sold at the auction for \$9,000, a world record auction price for the maker. The four main French bows are similar in weight (all close to 80g) and were all made in the first half of the 19th century (three of them dating between 1810 and 1830). All four are made of a relatively long-fibred wood, slightly porous, of common quality and average density. The balance of the bows is very stable from frog to tip and they are all highly responsive regardless of the playing position.

The bows are all examples of typical work by these makers, not their most prized pieces. One of the collection's strengths is the way it reveals the sustained work of makers towards a defined musical goal. The Lupot is a particularly exciting piece. Its stick is an outstanding study of Tourte. Lupot's refined work is no mere copy, the frog reflecting his personal style, but is so deeply influenced by Tourte that it is impossible not to read in it Lupot's particular fascination for the maker. The stick is octagonal as most Tourte sticks are; Lupot works the plane as Tourte would have and the tapering is closely inspired by him. We can also see at a glance how ▶

ABOVE Kates loved the defective work involved in collecting bows. He died in January 2003, aged 59

BELOW Kates's beloved Tourte bow, c.1810, with its unusual violin bow-shaped head

OPPOSITE a revealing example of Lupot's work: Tourte's influence is clear in the octagonal stick but the maker displays his individuality in the design of the frog and in the metallic tube inserted into the end-stick (top)





ABOVE the Pierre Simon's head is particularly elegant, flowing seamlessly into the stick, although it has been damaged by bad filing

BELOW chamfers of the Simon bow (left), and the head of the Jean-Dominique Adam, which has been adventurously reshaped

Lupot's style developed from his observation of the master's work. Lupot directly quotes Tourte in this bow by placing the three pins affixing the heel plate in a triangle. At the same time, though, Lupot displays his ability to innovate. A metallic tube is inserted into the end-stick, a clever device that Persoit and Pajot also experimented with to prevent wear from the screw. It is truly moving to see the thought processes of such a skilled artisan imprinted in his work.

The Tourte bow also shows signs of experimentation. Its strange head shape probably caught Kates's eye first: he was always attracted to the unusual. He acquired a Panormo specimen weighing 97g, for example, which he had fun showing to his friends. Panormo, noted for his sometimes eccentric and often heavy octagonal sticks, retained a typically English style, though he may have worked for some time in France.

Tourte developed his own design at various points of his career. The playing characteristics of his bows remained constant, however, throughout his various alterations and refinements, and some rather wild aesthetic experiments. In this case, he gave a violin-like shape to a cello head.

The weight of the head is not so different from the usual one that it would affect the balance of the bow or its mechanics: this is a purely stylistic experiment.

The result was questionable and the master pursued other paths. The bow is essential here, though, as it served as Kates's 'working stick' as he called it, elected for its comfort in serving his technique and its perfect response. Jesse Levine, his closest friend and professor of viola at Yale University, reports that when it came to significant performances, Kates could not be parted from his Tourte, even after the bow underwent repairs.

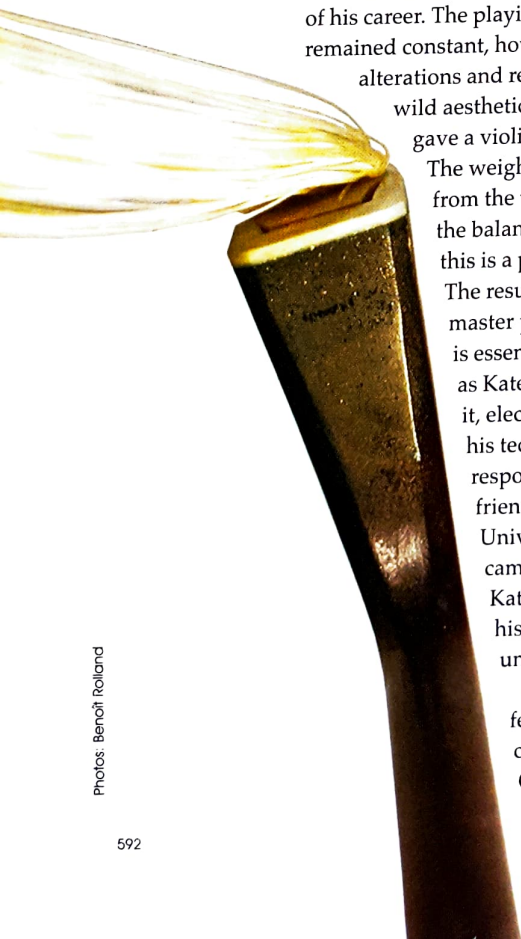
As time goes by, fewer and fewer pieces in mint condition circulate on the world market. Of the bows by great makers

still in use in the music world, most show signs of repair or general wear and tear. No rehairing is without risk; replacing an ivory tip might damage the original wood. Contemporary restorers have learnt to be extremely cautious in their work, but bows such as those of Kates's collection have run through numerous hands during their long career. The head of the Adam bow, for instance, suffers from an adventurous reshaping and the head of the Simon has had an unfortunate encounter with a file at some point. Such accidents used to be frequent; in this case, fortunately, they have not affected the playing quality of the bows.

Some bows in the Kates collection are composites – that is, the frog or the button are not original to the stick. Buttons can get lost and frogs are somewhat fragile mechanical parts that come away from sticks for many reasons: they crack; their fitting loosens. Sometimes a stick breaks and a valuable frog thereby becomes available. Over the centuries, bow makers have often mismatched frogs and sticks, sometimes through lack of knowledge but also deliberately: attempts have been made to enhance bows by fitting together valuable pieces from different bows, sometimes by different makers. This leaves us with interesting results: some excellent sticks with incongruously glamorous gold-mounted frogs, for example.

As knowledge of bows slowly increases, it is becoming more possible to attribute parts to particular makers, and occasionally to attempt to re-match bows with their original frog and button. At the same time, experts are coming closer to an understanding of the inner quality of bows that makes one more pleasing to play than another. The dialogue between experts and players is open as players develop their own knowledge about bows.

Understanding bows involves a lot of detective work, and this is another aspect of collecting that Kates loved. It was ▶





sometimes said of him that were he not a musician, he would have been a detective, and he was always fond of solving puzzles. He also enjoyed matching cellos with the bows that would best realise their sonic potential. The Kates home was always full of cellos – never less than ten at one time, apparently – on which he would try out bows, pairing them with instruments for his students or his own research, or simply for fun. But he always returned to his 1739 Domenico Montagnana cello.

The collection attained its full meaning when Kates acquired this cello, one of the finest pieces by the maker. He purchased it when he was only 28. ‘She’ – as he referred to it – embodied Kates’s idea of the perfect sound and became the magnetic centre of the collection. The Montagnana found its soul mate with the Tourte. Master bows joining the catalogue later never challenged the pair. Kates preferred French bows for his own playing, though he would recommend Hill bows to his students as the best value for their budget. Besides the Tubbs and several by Dodd, he owned eight interesting pieces from the Hill workshop crafted by Edgar Bishop, Samuel Allen and Albert Leeson. It was these bows that Kates would share with his advanced students, spending hours with them to find the exact match with their instrument, loaning a bow until they were able to purchase one themselves. His entourage often recount him speaking of Dodd and Tubbs bows, of their playability, and of his enthusiasm for the quality of Tubbs’s workmanship.

Part of the charm of the Kates collection lies in the presence of pieces of little value by unknown makers,

alongside pieces by the greatest makers of all time. These bows of lesser value do not affect the cohesion of the collection, and they add some spice to it. There is some craziness in the act of collecting; the thrill of finding exciting pieces in improbable places drives collectors to compulsive searches. Kates bought shops that were on the verge of closure, with dark back rooms full of bows and supplies. The gamble sometimes paid off in the form of a good find, but was always worthwhile to Kates because it enabled him to save something, however obscure, of the history of bow making. Some of the earliest pieces to enter the collection were a group of 15 German bows and some modest English and French pieces. One particular German stick that is not at first glance very eye-catching, remained of great sentimental value to Kates, who nicknamed it ‘Tchaikovsky’: the bow perfectly served his performance as he won the 1966 competition.

Levine recalls: ‘Without question the French bows were the ones that raised Steve’s greatest excitement. He never spoke down, however, about German bows nor others of lesser quality. After the appreciation of the beauty of workmanship, Steve returned to the idea that a bow was a playing tool: in that was its real value.’

At the auction at Skinner last October, Mary-Louise Kates offered the bows and instruments for sale in order to establish a scholarship fund in her husband’s name with the Peabody Institute at John Hopkins University. Fittingly, most of the outstanding bows were bought by musicians. Although the collection has been dispersed, then, its ultimate logic has been accomplished – to keep the music playing. ■

ABOVE bow by James Tubbs, which sold for \$9,000, a world-record price for the maker

F.X. Tourte

F. Lupot

P. Simon

J.D. Adam



LEFT wood samples from four of the most important bows in the collection. The pore lengths show that they are all medium-density woods

Photos: top: David Borssey