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Watertown Bow Maker Practices Musical Alchemy

By Jeremy Eichler GLOBE STAFF APRIL 23, 2016

Yo-Yo Ma remembers preparing to be diplomatic. His wife had just surprised him with a newly commissioned cello bow for his 60th birthday. Such a lovely gesture, he thought, while at the same time feeling slightly skeptical. He already played on a 19th-century bow by the most revered maker in history. Ma's friends, who had gathered last fall for a festive birthday dinner, zealously insisted that he give the new bow a try. So he did. "In a few seconds," Ma recently recalled, "I switched from being polite, to being like, 'Oh.' " His friends reached for their cellphones. "We were all just floored by the clarity and projection and the color this new bow was producing," said David Perlman, a friend of Ma's who was present at the dinner and had helped engineer the gift. "There was just something electric about it, something that was totally unique."

Benoit Rolland, the maker of this mysterious new bow, was not present on this occasion. But, curiously enough, neither was he far away. Born in Paris, Rolland learned his art in the French town of Mirecourt, the storied center of the French instrument-making tradition. You might expect to find him now in a well-appointed shop on a leafy side street in one of Paris's more elegant districts. Yet this undisputed master of bow making has been quietly plying his trade for the last several years from a brightly lit home studio in a certain north-bank arrondissement of greater Boston, one that is perhaps better known as Watertown.

If you attend concerts in the area, chances are you've heard a player performing with one of Rolland's creations. Recognized in 2012 with a MacArthur "genius grant," he has made bows for several leading soloists on the circuit today — including violinist Anne Sophie Mutter and cellist Lynn Harrell — and for 20th-century legends such as Yehudi Menuhin and Mstislav Rostropovich. He also keeps Boston's own string players well cared for. In just one typical example, on Monday at New England Conservatory's Brown Hall, a Music for Food benefit performance will feature no fewer than four prominent string players — violists Kim Kashkashian and Paul Biss, violinist Miriam Fried, and cellist Marcy Rosen — who rely on Rolland's bows. So do about a dozen Boston Symphony Orchestra string players, including concertmaster Malcolm Lowe.



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In person, Rolland, 61, exudes an air of calm and a keen intelligence that seems to concentrate behind his warm, watchful eyes. He is quick to apologize for his English, but nonetheless speaks with a streamlined eloquence about his personal approach to his art. “The violin makes the sound,” he likes to say, “but the bow makes the music.”

A trained violinist, Rolland asks to hear a musician play before beginning a new commission. Listening carefully, he then forms what clients describe as an almost eerily insightful picture of a musical personality: one that can encompass the specific expressive contours of a performer’s style, and perhaps even hidden potentials waiting to be unlocked by the right bow.

“He has a great gift of watching and sensing,” says Mutter, by phone from Austria. “It’s more than only knowledge.” The Boston-based Kashkashian concurred: “I don’t know anyone who hasn’t felt that he captured what they needed,” she said.

To match bow to player, Rolland works meticulously to select wood with the right density and sensitivity to vibration; he then tapers, shapes, and cambers the stick according to a particular balance he deems right.

Most recently, however, Rolland has been channeling his mental, physical, and spiritual resources for a client more discerning than most: himself. Rolland in December began the bow — his 1,500th creation — that he sees as a kind of personal celebration. For it, he has used an uncommonly beautiful and resonant piece of Brazilian Pernambuco wood he had been saving for years, and the rarest ebony from the island of Mauritius, given to him by his teacher, Bernard Ouchard, almost a half-century ago.

In the new bow's frog — the rectangular part at the base of the bow that moves to control its tension — he placed mother of pearl he harvested himself from a French island off the coast of Paimpol. The frog has been adorned with two diamonds and a delicate gold inlay inspired by a painting of a swallow by his wife, the painter and poet Christine Arveil.

This bow, he explained, would also be a celebration of their partnership. "For me, it is a way to gather all of the ideas I have so far about bows, and to put everything in one bow: this bow."

When Rolland first elaborated on his plan and the delicacy of work entailed, with adjustments measured in hundredths of a gram and inlays that would require him to construct an entirely new set of tools, it seemed like an almost quixotic quest — as if a leading writer was fearlessly announcing that his next novel would be written on a grain of rice. But he seemed coolly undaunted. He also spoke of his initial journey into this career and of his early years as a student, when the wood was "so hard, so hard" and it would cut into his sensitive violinist hands. Many times he considered abandoning the profession. "In a way," he said, "this is a celebration of a victory over myself."

It is a strange fate to be a master of an art at once so essential and hidden from view. The public often hears of Stradivarius instruments; bows, by comparison, are rarely discussed. If you are not a string player or married to one, chances are you cannot name a single bow maker, living or legendary. But without the bow, and its way of keeping a tense string in a state of perpetual excitement, the violin resembles a small, handsomely varnished guitar. "The bow is a very old concept," Rolland offered one afternoon, sitting at his large oak workbench. "I don't know, but I think it was born with the first human being, and the first wish to reproduce the human voice through an instrument. There is no way to do that without a bow."

Horse hair hangs beside pieces of wood which will both be made into bows inside the home studio of MacArthur winning bow maker Benoit Rolland. Yet to actually create a bow from scratch is to practice an odd type of alchemy, transforming what is essentially a hunk of wood and the hair from a horse's tail into the conduit for the most sublime thoughts of composers through the centuries — and of the players who translate and interpret them.



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“It’s just amazing,” says Lowe, the BSO concertmaster. “Some people look at a note or phrase of music on the printed page and ask, ‘Oh, how does it do that to my heart?’ For me, it’s the same thing, but I look at a tree and think, ‘How does Benoit turn this into a bow?’ ”

“Slowly” might be the first answer. Rolland works in an airy studio, his desk placed at an angle below a skylight. He uses many tools he built himself about four decades ago (“They don’t sell bow making tools in Home Depot,” he jokes) and others that he inherited from his teacher. The French school of bow making, he explains, prizes physical contact with the wood itself. No power drill or vice is ever used. Rolland grips the bow with his strong left hand, often passing it over the length of the stick to feel its qualities but also, surprisingly, to listen.

“When you work, all the senses must be awake,” he said. “The sound of the wood will tell you if your plane is well-sharpened, if your wood is docile or rebellious, and if the wood is good for transmitting vibrations. “This one has a very clear sound,” he continued, holding up the deep auburn stick that was to become No. 1,500. “It conveys vibration very fast, so it will produce a very bright sound.” As for the basic physics of the bow, as Rolland explains it, the horsehair sets the string in motion, and the vibration is transmitted to the instrument. But the vibration then returns through the bridge back to the wood stick, creating a kind of closed feedback loop of sound creation.

Rolland says the ideal bow requires the harmonizing of opposing goals: strength and flexibility. It should also feel completely natural in the hand, “as if a piece of wood has been transformed into an extension of your own muscle.” In other words: countless hours of his work are invested in the creation of an object that, if he has achieved his goal, will effectively disappear. Being invisible, however, should not mean taken for granted. “Composer, interpreter, and maker: they form three corners of a triangle,” Rolland says, his eyes brightening just before he turns back to his workbench. “Without any one of them, there is no music.”



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