

Birmingham Conservatoire Historical Instrument Collection

“Studies in The History of Western Musical Instruments”

Podcast 1: English Transitional violin Bows

Martin Perkins and Margaret Faultless

Transcript

Martin

My name is Martin Perkins; I am the curator of the Historical Instrument Collection at Birmingham Conservatoire. This is a podcast exploring the string bows in the collection. Birmingham Conservatoire was founded in 1886 as the Birmingham School of Music, and since these early days instruments of historical value have been donated to the School. The collection of English violin, viola, cello and double bass bows by members of the Dodd family has been in the possession of Birmingham Conservatoire since the early twentieth-century, when it was donated to the School of Music by E. S. Fry in 1904. At this time there was generally far less interest in historical instruments, either from a music history point of view or an instrument makers' point of view, particularly in bows for string instruments. It is perhaps reasonable to suggest that Fry accumulated the bows out of general curiosity, and not necessarily out of musical or historical reasons, but it is noted in the School of Music minutes that the following year he offered to give a talk on the collection and the history and development of string bows. Had the collection been kept in private hands it may not have remained complete. Fortunately, its donation to the School of Music has meant that the collection has remained intact and has been added to in recent years through further donations, and is now one of the most extensive and comprehensive of its kind. There are example from every major member of the Dodd family as well as one example by Louis Tourte and examples by William and James Tubbs. Edward Dodd (1705 - 1810) is generally held to have been a bow maker, and most surviving eighteenth-century bows are attributed to him. His son, John Dodd, (1752 - 1839) is considered to be the most important of the family and the most important English Classical bow maker. Nephew to John, James (1792 - 1885), is also represented in the collection.

I'm here with Margaret Faultless, violinist and leading exponent in historically informed performance. Maggie has recorded some musical excerpts for us on many of the violin bows in the Collection and will guide us through some of the differences in the bows and how they affect the performance of the music.

The style of the bows in the Collection has generally been described as transitional: that is, bows which were made after the Baroque bow and before the modern bow was fully developed. A typical Baroque bow of around 1700 was much shorter than the modern, an average length of around sixty centimetres. It was made from snake-wood, or a similar tropical hardwood, with simpler mechanisms for attaching the hair to the stick. By the early

eighteenth-century, a pike-head design of bow head was common, with a simple wooden frog at the back of the bow, over which the hair was stretched. The hair was secured at both the head and frog by a simple wooden wedge, the frog being clipped into place to produce a taught hair. A later development was the addition of a screw mechanism to tighten the hair. The stick of the bow was carved to form a convex shape.

Maggie, if I could bring you in here, how does my description affect the sound that's made with a baroque bow?

Margaret

Well, you're absolutely right that this business with the stick being convex in shape really starts defining the whole sound production for us, and interestingly, in the Collection, there are very few extremely early examples of violin bows, and it's simply because they weren't saved. What's interesting is that as soon as people started making these transitional bows, which are slightly more familiar in appearance to the modern bow, even though they haven't quite developed that way fully, the Baroque bow really becomes extinct. So, I'm going to use a copy of a Baroque bow which I have from about 1720 and I think I'll just play one or two notes to show you what this convex shape does to the sound.

[Musical example]

What you can hear is that typically there's not a very specific front to the beginning of the sound because the hair isn't held in place at all at the frog, it's just able naturally to respond to my arm movement and to produce what we call a nuanced sound, in other words something that has a basic shape to it: a softness at the beginning, a softness in the end and a focus to the sound in the middle. The sound will naturally deteriorate towards the point because the bow is weighted in favour of the frog and the heel, and it doesn't have a natural tendency to stay on the string.

Martin

And can you detect composers writing specifically for the characteristics of this stronger down and weaker at the tip.

Margaret

Definitely, and all the exponents of Baroque music at the time, both composers, performers, theoreticians, critics, even painters actually, it's clear that the strength of the down-bow is most captivating and it creates fundamentally an un-equal universe of sound production which everybody found much more interesting than the idea that everything was equal. The whole French baroque was particularly based on this idea: they didn't just call it strong and weak bows, but literally 'good' and 'bad', a down bow was good because it had some strength and this overall sound production, this focus to the sound, even though it was nuanced at the start and the finish, and the up-bow was light and reactive and therefore gave a wonderful contrast, particularly, as you can imagine in French music, for dance music.

Martin

So, Maggie could you perhaps demonstrate this in music by giving us an example?

Margaret

Yes, well we're sitting in a very small studio, so I'm going to have a go at improvising eight bars of a French baroque minuet.

[Musical example]

Martin

Yes, I could definitely tell, there were longer, stronger down-bows compared to the lighter up-beats.

Margaret

If this was videoed, of course what you'd also see is what the French in fact did all sorts of funny bowings, so instead of going just down-up-up, down-up-up, they sometimes went down-up-down, with a very tiny, light down, so, of course it gets a little bit more complicated than

that, but the basic idea of there being differences between downs and ups which set off the metre and the whole tactus of the music throughout the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth-century, is absolutely crucial to the whole history of music really, and of string playing.

Martin

So, if we could bring in some of the examples from the Conservatoire's Collection, let's talk about the transitional bow, the bow that came after the typical baroque bow which we've just described. One of the most influential bow makers in the eighteenth-century was Frenchman François Tourte, who is often hailed as the Stradivarius of the violin bow for his innovations and perfections to the bow. Tourte made a number of important changes to the construction of the violin bow: he generally standardised the length of the bow - to around seventy-five centimetres, around sixty-five centimetres of the hair-length; the camber of the wood was now reversed - the concave shape now helped the player to produce a more equal sound-world; Tourte settled on Pernambuco wood for the construction; the stick tapered a little bit towards the head; and the head itself was made bigger and higher, and therefore heavier. To counteract this to a degree the frog was weighted, but even so, the weight distribution was evened out so that the balance point was nearer to the front of the bow; the ribbon of the hair was widened due to a wider frog, and the hair was secured and kept flat by a metal ferule. Maggie, can you talk through some of the differences that I've just described, and how they relate to the music.

Margaret

Well, you've absolutely hit the nail on the head, Martin, and that is these developments in bow making went hand in hand with a great transition also in compositional style from the high Baroque, through the gallant - so, through composers like C.P.E. Bach - into what we know as the Classical era, and the symphonic style of Mozart and Haydn, and then Beethoven, of course, and also fundamentally, these big Classical operas, where the idea of highly articulated text-driven instrumental articulation and sound began to be superseded by the idea of the singing style, and to produce a singing style with a bow meant that rather than the strong differences between down-bows and up-bows and the naturally highly characteristically nuanced shape of the sound-world, that composers needed equipment that would produce slightly longer lines. It was still articulate and people did still talk about text in music very much but nevertheless, there was more sense of line and the beginnings of more sense of legato in playing, and this was achieved primarily by the stick being heated into this concave shape rather than carving it into the convex shape. The heated concave bow-stick will naturally sit on the string so it's the job of the violinist to work out how to take it off the string, if necessary, whereas exactly the reverse is true with my Baroque bow. Here's an example of a typical shape of a long note produced by a Dodd bow built in London in about seventeen eighty.

[Musical example]

I can still produce a softness at beginning and end of the sound but if I want to produce something stronger the bow will naturally sit on the string.

[Musical example]

And what's very important is also that not only for long notes, but there's a lot of discussion as to how all those accompanying figures in Classical music might have been played, and those strings of quaver accompaniments that one was taught as a child to play in a very spiky, spiccato, off the string style of playing, perhaps the singing style applied to those, so that in a lot of symphonic and quartet repertoire the middle voices and indeed the bass line from time to time might also explore this on the string style for faster notes.

[Musical example]

Martin

Yes, you can definitely hear that the down and up bows are more equal than on a Baroque bow.

Margaret

When Haydn came to London in the 1790s, I'm absolutely sure he would have been familiar with bows just like that, and I recorded an extract from his London Symphony number one hundred and four to demonstrate how the bow works perfectly for the sort of music that's written at the time. On this extract I'm using a violin bow which is from the school of John Dodd from about seventeen eighty, and we'll then hear the same musical example on a violin bow by Louis Tourte

[Musical examples]

The recordings of these late eighteenth-century bows are made on my Begonzi school violin. The violin was made in about 1750 and is set up to reflect styles of violin making of that period: the neck is shorter; the angle of the finger-board and neck flatter; the bridge is different; the tail-piece is flatter; and there's no chin-rest or shoulder-rest.

Here are some samples of the sort of sounds that are typically made with violin bows of the period. A violin bow by Dodd of around 1780: a messa di voce using the middle part of the bow; a messa di voce using the upper part of the bow; a slow ascending and descending scale using the middle part of the bow; a slow ascending and descending scale using the upper part of the bow; and fast ascending and descending scale using the lower part of the bow; a fast ascending and descending scale using the upper part of the bow.

[Musical example]

And a violin bow from the school of John Dodd of around 1790: a messa di voce using the middle part of the bow; a messa di voce using the upper part of the bow; a slow ascending and descending scale using the middle part of the bow; a slow ascending and descending scale using the upper part of the bow; a fast ascending and descending scale using the lower part of the bow; and fast ascending and descending scale using the upper part of the bow.

[Musical example]

And playing a violin bow by Louis Tourte, of 1780:

[Musical example]

This late eighteenth-century viola bow by Dodd is heavier than the violin bows:

[Musical example]

Martin

Let's now turn to the later examples in the Collection, those of the early nineteenth-century. Maggie, can you tell us what changes have occurred in bow-making.

Margaret

I think the single biggest innovation for instrumentalists is the invention of the metal ferule, which holds the hair in place at the frog, and it gives a completely different approach to articulation. There can be a natural attack at the beginning of the sound that wasn't previously possible, and these examples will demonstrate that sort of sound world: a violin bow by John Dodd of around 1810, here's the effect of a single long note using the whole bow.

[Musical example]

And another very similar bow by John Dodd, also from the early nineteenth-century, again a simple long note.

[Musical example]

There's another bow by John Dodd of about a decade later, from 1820. Here's another long note.

[Musical example]

And a violin bow by James Dodd, from 1840, a long note using the whole bow.

[Musical example]

And another violin bow by Dodd, again from the second quarter of the nineteenth-century. Here's a long note using the whole bow.

[Musical example]

Martin

Okay, what about hearing the effects of this ferule in context.

Margaret

To demonstrate these early nineteenth-century bows, we chose extracts by Felix Mendelssohn, who had strong associations with Birmingham. To demonstrate this enhanced legato singing style of bowing, here is an extract from 'Elijah': the famous chorus 'Be not afraid'.

[Musical example]

Martin

So what other characteristics can be found with this sort of bow?

Margaret

Well certainly not everything was played in the singing style. Mendelssohn was very clear to his famous violin playing friend and colleague, Joachim, that when necessary, one ought to be able to use a sparking, off-the-string, flying spiccato type effect for scherzo passages, and this is absolutely typified by the overture to 'A midsummer night's dream'.

[Musical example]

Martin

Maggie, would you say that this technique, demonstrated in the previous extract, is harder to do on a modern bow, or easier?

Margaret

It's just actually a very different technique. As soon as the weight of the bow changes and the style of the carving to heating and the absence or presence of the ferule, the truth is it's really like playing a different instrument altogether. So I try not to try and compare them because it can make life more complicated if you imagine you're doing the same thing with every bow. One particularly interesting thing about the whole development of both the violin and bow technology and techniques at the beginning of the nineteenth-century is due to the presence of the new conservatoires throughout Europe, where famous teachers had huge classes of violin students and so composers were able to write for large numbers of professional musicians whose technical abilities had been stretched. We have many books of violin studies from this period where both left hand and right hand technique are pushed to their limits, and I think that both teachers, students and composers responded to these new developments.

Martin

Some of these virtuoso teacher-performers that you talk about, did they have any preference over which type of bow they were using?

Margaret

I think as soon as the new modern bows came into play, they were probably some of the first people to go with the new developments.

Martin

In the Collection there are three late nineteenth-century bows: one example by William Tubbs, and two examples by his son, James Tubbs. At this point the modern violin bow was firmly established. Maggie, can you describe the sound-world that it makes?

Margaret

Well Martin, as you say, there aren't any great physical differences between these three bows and examples from the mid nineteenth-century. I think what we find with bow making from the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, is that bow makers will have developed their own particular style, and I love the warmth associated with these English bows by Tubbs, and then even later examples by Hill. Here you can hear the bow by William Tubbs and its typical sound, using a long note.

[Musical example]

And now a bow by James Tubbs.

[Musical example]

And another violin bow by James Tubbs, again a long note using the whole bow.

[Musical example]

These Elgar extracts are also recorded using a bow by William Tubbs. These examples are recorded using Ruggeri violin, actually a very early instrument of the seventeenth-century, but in a nineteenth-century set up: a central chin-rest but still with plain gut strings for the E, A and D strings, and a covered G.

[Musical examples]

Martin

Well Maggie, it's been very interesting talking to you today about the development of the bow and hearing a few examples of the bows in our Collection. Thank you very much.

And it's been a treat for me to explore such a fascinating collection and be able to play all these wonderful examples of violin bows.

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