Some Remarks on the Bow

BY ERNEST N. DORING

PART V

An interesting little book (small of size, but inclusive of over 300 pages of close print) was published in Scotland; entitled "The Violin," and written by Peter Davidson, the work saw four editions, the first in 1871, and the last (fourth edition) in 1881. The author stated in his preface: "I write not for fame, and am therefore in a measure regardless of criticism.... The mediocre information I possess on the subjects of which it [his book] treats, has been derived chiefly from my own practical experience, corroborated by the communications and opinions of many others of such standing as to give high value to their authority. I feel, therefore, that I am justified in placing it, with modest confidence, before those who are in a condition to require it, without any hazard of leading them astray, and with an earnest desire that it may prove useful."

The Scotch people have ever been fond lovers of music. The stirring strains of the bag-pipes never fail to evoke enthusiasm and although immediately identifying the nationality of their players, Scotland claims many votaries of the violin. Not given to rash statements and canny of thought, the words of Davidson, as presented in the preface to his work, picture the Scotch man, cautious, lest he overrate, yet willing to be heard.

Although not directly connected with our subject nor to Davidson's remarks about the Bow (which will follow), it is of interest to quote from Heron-Allen's book:— .

"Mr. Davidson, besides being the author of the above little work *[The Violin, a Concise Exposition of the General Principles of Construction theoretically and practically treated],* which is not without merit, is also the author of [naming several other books], and also of the following advertisement which I saw in *The London and Provincial Music Trades Review,* June 15, 1883, and which . . . I simply transcribe for the instruction and amusement of my readers:—

" 'Very important to all Musicians. A Ten Guinea Violin Given Away Gratis ! To every Subscriber to The Caledonian Collection of Strathspey's Reels, Jigs, Slow Airs, Songs, Hornpipes, Waltzes, Polkas, etc., composed and arranged for the Pianoforte, or Violin and Violoncello, by PETER DAVIDSON, Author of 'The Violin' etc., and Honorary Member of the Bengal Academy of Music, Calcutta Honorary Member of the Poonah 'Gayan Samaj Musical Soiety,' etc., etc. The Author will issue a beautiful Photograph of Burgie Castle, Morayshire—taken by him expressly for this purpose—upon which a Number will be imprinted, this serving as a Coupon, which will entitle each subscriber to a participation in the Drawing of the above Prize, viz.: An Old Tyrolese (Oil Varnish) Violin, a copy of a Joseph Guarnerius, fecit Cremonae Anno 1720, I.H.S., being of magnificent Wood, Workmanship, Tone, and Brilliancy, and unanimously valued by Judges at Ten Guineas. The Violin will be delivered Gratis to the Holder of the Winning Number. The Drawing for such to take place within the year by a Committee selected by the Subscribers, etc."' Inasmuch as Heron-Allen reprinted advertisements of his own English countrymen, equally inane, for the edification of his readers, he should not be censured for poking fun at his Northern contemporary, especially in view of the fact that he so graciously labeled the latter's book "The Violin" etc., as "not without merit."

Chapter IX of that work is devoted to "The Bow, the Rosin, and the Strings." Eight pages are devoted to the Bow, all of which are highly interesting but, being in some parts of similar purport to what has been quoted from other writers, will not be presented here in their entirety; excerpts include:—

" The Bow, that apparently simple and trifling rod, which many doubtless consider as unworthy of devoting time and space to, will be found nevertheless, to possess certain claims upon the amateur's attention, which will be well worthy of his earnest notice. In a treatise in which the construction of the Violin is initially delineated, it would be considered quite unpardonable to omit all notice of its appendage—the bow—that mysterious assistant, by the combined use of which the artist excites us at one time to bestir ourselves to the lively Strathspey or Reel, and at another to place us, as it were, in an ethereal and harmonious world of delights, forgetting our existence for a time upon this sublunary sphere, and fascinated by the swift chords of enchantingly sonorous pearls which melodiously emanate upon our ears with a sweetness indescribable. The earliest bows as can be imagined, were of the rudest and most primitive form, being, strictly speaking, veritable *'bows,'* or arcs of bent cane having a number or hairs attached to both ends, to keep them in the requisite position. The first improvement which we find, representations of such being obtained from monumental drawings, is in the bow being formed or cut quite straight from the wood, having both projections on the ends of equal depth with the hair fixed permanently therein, whilst a century or two afterwards the movable nut was formed, and at a still later period a loop was made on the nut, which fitted into a notched

metallic plate, by which the player was enabled to graduate the tension. At a period subsequent to this, these primitive methods gave place to other improvements, viz., the substitution of a screw for regulating the tension, whilst the outline approached more closely in form to our modern bow. In the eighteenth century the bow arrived at great perfection through the scrupulous care and attention of that celebrated French maker, Francois Tourte, who has left a lasting fame throughout Europe. The bows of this maker, from their excellent quality, were high in price, and now it is almost impossible to obtain them, from their having been anxiously sought after by many of our finest professional Violinists and collectors of such worthy mementoes *(sic):* but excellent bows are now to be had by several other distinguished makers, and, what is of the utmost importance, at a reasonable price."

This introductory paragraph includes the naming of various makers, together with some information regarding certain details of construction. As more' closely related to our topic, Davidson continues:—

"The woods principally used in the manufacture of bows are Brazil or Pernambuco wood, snakewood, logwood, ironwood, horsewood, mahogany, beech, &c., whilst the nut is formed of ebony or ivory. Amongst the preceding woods none is found to give the required results equal to Brazilwood, from which all our finest bows are now formed. There are several varieties of this wood, named after the places of their growth, viz., Pernambuco, Sapan, Santa-Martha, Lamon, Japan &c. By some it is affirmed that this wood gave the name to the country in which it principally grows—Brazil; and the Portuguese made it a source of vast and royal revenue, hence it was at one time termed Queenwood. It commonly grows in dry, barren, and rocky places, and the trunk of the tree is of large dimensions, crooked, knotty, and full of cracks. The flowers of this tree are of a beautiful red colour, and possess an agreeable aromatic smell, which stimulates the brain, and the branches are slender and full of many prickles. The bark is exceedingly thick, whilst none of this species of wood contains pith, except the Japan variety. The wood is hard, and, when newly cut, of a yellowish colour, which becomes red on exposure to the air. It may be distinguished from logwood by its paler colour, and for surety the inexperienced amateur may apply the following tests:—Boil a small quantity of the chips in water, filter, and when cold add a few drops of a solution of acetate of lead, protochloride of tin, or lime-water, when if the precipitate is crimson, it is Brazilwood—and if violet, then it is logwood.

"Brazilwood is extensively used in dyeing, and is generally exported in bundles, from which the finest pieces are selected by the bowmaker, but these, like angels' visits, are 'few and far between,' as the wood naturally possessing so many blemishes and inequalities, few faultless pieces are to be found, hence this alone tends to augment the prices of such bows...."

This excerpt indicates that Davidson gave more than passing thought to his subject, and, as related to ours, presented the most detailed account of wood used in bow making remarked upon up to this point in our narrative.

After further comments on the sums which Tourte obtained for his bows, the process of bending the wood by heat, etc., Davidson writes about various patents:—". . . a simple and ingenious method of bow-hairing invented by Mr. Walker, late of Castle Newe, Aberdeenshire, now of Williamstown, U. S., a gentleman who possesses a large collection of Violins, and who is also author of a Collection of Strathspeys and Reels." Then, after explaining the method employed the paragraph continues: "Ironwood bows are generally too heavy, and lack the necessary elasticity. Steel is now used in the formation of bows, but wood will always have the preference over metals in the construction of such an article as a Violin-bow."

"A recent invention is that of Johnson, of Cincinnati. This violin-bow is filled with fine metal strands, and is calculated to obviate the necessity of either having the bow to refill every few months, or to play with but little hair in it, which is always an inconvenience, and gives a poor and squeaky tone. Johnson's Metallic Patent Bow is filled with metallic threads about the size of horsehair, having the strands fastened solid, in such a manner that none can work loose, and will last as long as the stick, or any other part of the bow, which is not usually the case with other bows. The sticks are of Brazilwood of good quality, of medium and heavy grade, are well recommended, and furnished at a price suitable for all Violinists. They take rosin freely, and vibrate the strings with force and certainty.

"Space will not permit of herein including a practical description of bow-making, but the amateur will, at the present day [that was some seventy years ago—would that his words applied to our generation!] be enabled to readily purchase excellent bows at a medium price, as he cannot do better than supply himself with one made either by Vuillaume, Dodd, or Johnson. The price of Vuillaume's bows, made either of wood or steel, with movable hair, and mounted in silver, are 30s each [about $6.00 at current rate of exchange]; and without movable hair, plain wood, 10s 6d. [about $2.10 today]. Dodd's bows are sold at prices varying from 12s. to 30s., according to quality and finish [$2.40 to $6.00]. Johnson's Metallic Bows are sold at 12s. 6d.

each. Tourte's bows are now commanding fabulous prices, 15, 20 and 25 guineas are occasionally given."

Davidson, nor any of his contemporaries, could not have visualized a future which would see the very bows he mentioned, commanding sums greater by fifty times and more. Imagine $2.10 for a Vuillaume bow! Or, at his topmost valuation, $125.00 for a fine Tourte ! And that, in his day, was considered a fabulous price! A thousand dollars is considered a low price today !

To continue our quotation from his book:

"The essential qualities found in a good bow, are, its perfect balance and levity, strength and stability possessing the necessary flexibility, and straight as an arrow from heel to point, as observed by looking along its right side."

The last mentioned qualification described as a definite requisite of a fine bow, is subject to modification, as a very slight curvature towards the *left* in a violin or viola bow, or towards the *right* in a violoncello bow, is no detriment, in fact, serves as a slight counter to the natural tendency of the bow to bend in the opposite direction when in use.

The conclusion of Davidson's chapter advises:—". . . let the young and inexperienced amateur beware of buying any of the detestable rubbish so often palmed upon the unwary by disreputable dealers, at a favourite price of 7s. 6d [about $1.50 at this time], when, for the difference of a few shillings, he would have been enabled to purchase one by an eminent maker, from a respectable house, and which would have proved serviceable to him, instead of the former foreign and worthless toy, which was made for the mere purpose of finding its way into the market, or mart of the cheat, there to be sold at a price exceeding six times its original cost."

Should this article come before the eyes of future generations of violinists, it is well to include some remarks which will recall a time when the acquisition of a violin bow of medium or low cost was practically a forlorn hope. Such of our American dealers who are still fortunate in having a meager stock of fiddle bows suited to the modest purpose of the beginner, in other words, low priced bows, have found it essential to refuse to part with them excepting to the purchaser of an instrument; otherwise the paradoxical situation of having instruments to sell (and moderately priced violins, violas, and violoncellos also approach a point of nonexistence on dealers' shelves) but no bows with which to play upon them would be an early actuality ! It is true that American made steel bows and also a move towards the manufacture of wood bows, would seem to offer a solution—but—priority rulings in the matter of steel, and effecting the making of parts such as frogs, etc., have curtailed even that attempt to fill a gap occasioned by the absence of those very "foreign and worthless toy" fiddle bows we have learned the better to appreciate!

(To be continued)

This bow is 154 cm long, made from a trunk of an Elm tree, that have been split down the middle. The weapon has a 2.6 cm wide grip, which part possibly didnâ€™t bend. Its limbs have a maximum width of 4.5 cms. The belly of the bow has a flattened shape.Â This wasnâ€™t the only bow that was discovered in Holmegaard Moor, four other very similar objects were also found, all of them are made from elm.3 One of the other bows was larger, originally around 162 cm long. The grip is 2.1 cm wide, the maximum width of the limbs of this bow is 6 cm. These bows are considered as wide-limbed bows.