



Big Bow Workshop!

Aid for Trying and Buying Bows –David Sanzone

Let the bow do the work

Try to be as relaxed as possible with your bowing action. With this approach you will be able to feel what the bow can do relatively quickly. Adding muscle or tension will layer too many variables, so relax and play easy stuff that you know you play well!

The Skate test

At every part of the bow, the hairs should grab/stick to the string in order for it to have an excellent distribution of weight through the bow. If it skates away or collapses to one side easily, it might be too light or too flexible.

Springiness

The bow should spring. If it is easy for your bowing arm to connect with the springiness of the bow at all areas of the bow then it should work well for you. If it is too springy, it might be too flexible or too light. If it is difficult to spring in and out, it might be too dense and require excessive force.

Frog to tip

Two tests here: First, relax at the frog and draw the bow quickly to the tip. Then try the same but slowly. If the stick tends to shake/rattle a little bit during the bow-stroke then the weight distribution is incorrect, (this also depends on your technique!) Light and flimsy often collapse, but be aware of any tension in your bow-hand as a tight hand will produce a similar result. Secondly, try to jump from frog to tip paying close attention to feeling the balance of the bow in your hand. If it feels like hard work, it is probably too heavy for you.

Sensitivity

Wood and carbon-fibre bows should vibrate, which you should be able to feel under your fingers. Make a full sound and see if the vibration transmits at all areas of the bow.

Test the Strokes...

When trying a bow, give each of these fundamental strokes a yes/no and finally a mark out of 7. Mark this on the bow tag, put aside and try another bow...

Detache –listen for the fullness of sound, feel for how easy it is to make smooth bow changes.

Martele –release the sound, does the bow shake/rattle? Does it ‘re-grab’ the string after?

Staccato –similar to martele: Check for ease, clarity and grab for the whole length of the bow.

Spiccato ‘-on/off test’: all bows will bounce. Check how easy it is for the bow to go from spiccato back to detache and back again. Try slow spiccato strokes and analyse your control.

Ricochet –let the bow do the work. Some will bounce way too much while others are more controllable. Test by doing 2 up to 8 note ricochets, or more!

Sautille –try the on/off test and check for ease and clarity. Note where it works best.

Arpeggio and Chordal playing –this will help you assess the quality of the bow’s grab and how well you can manoeuvre the bow without stress. Try at 4 different areas of the bow.

Checking the quality of the bow

Closely scan over all of the bow. Look down the bow from the screw to the tip checking the straightness. A violin/viola bow can sometimes give a little bit to the right, while cello bows can sometimes give to the left. This is not bad for cello bows but is for violin bows. A bow that has been repaired should generally be avoided. A good repair often looks like a thin, pale scar on the wood. Sometimes involves a metal pin. Unscrew the frog, check for any damage or roughness.