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Interview with Harry Grabenstein

Harry Grabenstein's excellent bows are used by members of Fretwork, the King's Noyse, and top classical ensembles and players around the world. You'll also find them in the hands of many Bay Area professionals and not-so-professionals. Harry generously took time to answer a few questions about his career and the art of bowmaking.

A little about you. What drew you to bow making? How did you hone your skills?

I started out as a guitar maker in 1973. I got hooked up with an excellent builder (Alan Stack - Time Guitars) here in Vermont. I actually met Peter Tourin when we were making an instrument for him in exchange for an overhead router. The guitar shop went under and we never finished Peter's instrument, but I wound up building violas da gamba with Peter for eleven years.

About three years into that I heard about Karl Roy's Violin Craftsmanship Institute at the University of New Hampshire. 1982 was the first year that they offered a bow section. It was taught by William Salchow. I wanted to do something that was a little more my own, so I applied to UNH to see if I could do it and if I liked it. I attended that year and the next and got launched as a bow maker.

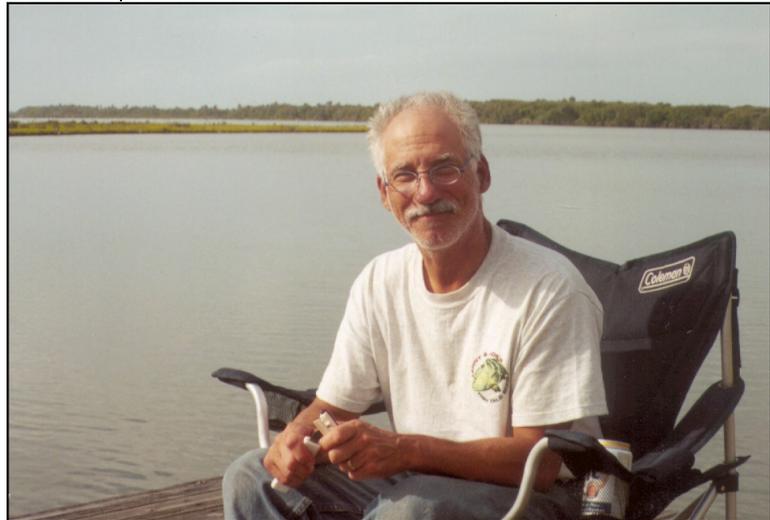
Salchow was the perfect grumpy master. Never over-solicitous but still supportive. In the years that followed he was very encouraging when I would stop by his shop in NY. I've also done a handful of valuable workshops over the years. And beyond the skills offered by good teachers, the bows, the players, research and experience have honed the craft.

How long does it take to make a bow?

My simplest bows are about two-day efforts. Most are more like five to seven days depending on whether they are fluted or have decoratively carved frogs. Modern bows, because of all the silver and pearl fitting on the frog are two weeks plus.

Do you work from historical models?

Yes. Some more closely than others. Two of my most successful models, the Hill #19 violin bow and the Hill #20 for bass viol are bows that I measured and drew on a trip to Oxford in 1992. All of my bows for classical violin and cello are copies of actual bows. Others, like my "Marais" model, the Oberlin violin bow and Elfenbein/Dunham classical double bass bow, are combinations of the better characteristics of several bows, or are extrapolations



from paintings and such. However, I build all of my models over a range of weights and stiffnesses rather than holding only to the original specs.

Are there certain traits or characteristics that make a viol bow unique from other bows?

Yes and no. The underhand grip creates different answers to questions of playability and performance. But the questions are the same.

You work in snakewood, pernambuco, and ebony as well as other hardwoods – what makes those woods suitable for bows?

They are all sinkers - i.e., heavier than water. This is important because when you drag a bow across a string, you want the string to wiggle, not the other way around. People think of maple and oak as heavy strong woods,

but they can get pretty whippy when you get them down to 5 mm, which is what many bows are just behind the tip.

How is the bow cut along the grain of the wood so that it has strength and flexibility?

The bow is cut out of the plank so that the grain runs continuously along the stick with no run out. Usually this is done by selecting planks that have straight continuous grain. Sometimes the grain in the plank will show a gentle curve, in which case you can cut along that curve and get straight grain and a bit of camber right from the beginning.

What are the main factors that effect how a bow will perform? What is the inner art of bow making?

Strength and stability, flex and expressiveness. These qualities must all be present, but they exist in opposition to each other. Too much strength comes at a price of less flexibility. The bow will feel secure but lack expressiveness. A very flexible stick may be quite expressive, but too nervous and unstable in the hand. The bowmaker's job is to find the highest expression of all these qualities for each piece of wood by manipulating the thickness of the bow and its resting curve. Oh yeah, there's weight and balance too.

As you work with the wood, how can you tell that it will perform well?

If you've ever watched a bowmaker at work, you've seen them take a few passes with the plane, then pick up the stick and flex it. Then plane some more, look, and flex

again. It's what we do. We are continuously checking those strength/flex ratios and keeping them in balance as we work towards the final dimensions of the bow. But we can feel that the balance is there quite early in the process.

Bows seem so personal – a bow that doesn't feel right for one person may be perfect for another. Why is that?

The bow, the instrument and the player are a triangle. Each corner has its own characteristics, and they must all work in support of each other. Some instruments speak really quickly and fully, others need more prodding. A slow speaking instrument will want a stronger bow to get it going. But that

same bow might crush a faster speaking instrument, especially in the hands of a strong player. They must all fit together.



Visit Harry Grabenstein's website at www.hfgbowmaker.com

