

**“Benoit Rolland: Der Bogen vereint Bewegung und Klang” published in *IMPRESSIONEN*, Newsletter of The Anne-Sophie Mutter Foundation, Nr.14, July 2005**

## **Benoit Rolland: The bow unites movement and sound** **English translation by Oliver Radke**

### **Inside the atelier of one of the world’s best bowmakers**

Across the side streets lined with trees and gas lanterns a cobblestone path leads to the house in which Benoit Rolland lives and works. This picture reminds of the narrow streets of Paris, a place the bowmaker left three years ago. The wood and the gas-lights put the visitor into the mood for the century-old process happening in this studio, a work without plastics or electricity.

Here you will find handmade tools worn to a beautiful shine, next to the alcohol-lamp that is used to give the bow its camber. It is calm and quiet so Benoit Rolland can listen to the sound of the wood.

Here an old tradition is being kept - and developed further.

In this studio in Charlestown (Boston) one of the world’s best bowmakers is working 10 to 12 hours every day for two weeks until out of a three feet long piece of pernambuco wood an instrument emerges that a musician feels like an extension of his arm and hand.

“ I want the musician to forget the bow in his hand – it should connect him directly with his instrument,” Rolland says.

### **Connection of emotion and movement**

It is indeed a small miracle when a levitating arm balances a stick of 58 grams on a string and fills a concert hall with marvelous sounds. The finest nuances become increasingly crucial: an excellent musician can feel differences of less than half a gram in weight and less than one millimeter in the length in a bow. The balance is of ultimate importance. It provides security, speed and precision on the strings – and supports the ergonomic flow of motion. Guiding the bow is a real physical challenge and this is why a bad bow can ruin a musician’s shoulder within a few months. “But if the harmony is correct”, Rolland says, “a sensuous momentum is created, the musician can dedicate himself completely to the music, and bow and instrument are melting together into one unit”. Unmistakably all the bows from his workshop have the Rolland character but still each single one is a unique specimen. “I prefer to have a chance to watch my clients performing on stage. Then they come to my studio and we can select and adjust the perfectly matching bow,” Rolland says.

### **Two types**

Rolland works in the tradition of the famous French bowmakers whose bows combine pliancy and pure force. A more rigid bow reacts faster to Sautille and Spiccato and it can make a dark sounding instrument brighter. With a more flexible bow however the instrument sounds warmer, which often allows a wider spectrum of expression but requires more refined playing skills from

the musician. Most musicians prefer one of these two types depending on their playing style and technique.

The bowmaker works with three variables: the wood, the shape and the camber. The pieces of wood used for the bow are as different as the carving techniques that individual bowmakers employ. Exceptional master bows have been studied to develop scientific rules and processes to create the perfect bow – without success.

That is why every good bow bears the individual signature of its maker. Experts can recognize the maker just by looking at how the bow tip is carved.

## **Adjustment**

In medieval times the bow was bent to the outside. This round bow was still in use at the time of Bach. Around 1755 the concave camber came up that allowed a more even balance between the tip and the frog of the bow and met the desire for more expression and flexibility.

This concave cambering of the bow, which gives the stick its dynamics, is in fact the critical moment in the making process. Mr. Rolland is working according to the traditional method: bending over a flame. The bow is heated inch by inch, then put over the edge of the workbench and bent by the pressure of his hands. This is how a perfect, even and smooth curve is created. Up to this moment a lot of work has already been put into the work piece; Rolland's focus is at its peak. Sometimes the valuable wood is very sensitive and the heated stick splinters like glass. Once the wood has passed the procedure of bending it is very unlikely that the bow will ever break.

The development of the frog's shape started in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. At this time the adjustability of the frog was achieved with a metal ring that could be fastened in small grooves on the outside of the stick. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the ring got replaced by a gear rack, the "Cremaillere". Around 1730 the modern frog appeared. It can be adjusted with a screw and it is still in use today.

## **Awards**

Famous musicians are connected to Rolland's works of art: among those for example Stephan Grapelli, Arthur Grumiaux, Yehudi Menuhin, Mstislav Rostropovitch, Joseph Suk, Henrik Szering or Jean-Luc Ponty. In 1979 the French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing awarded him the title "Meilleur Ouvrier de France", in 1983 the award of "Archetier d'Art" followed. Aside from restoration and the making of classical bows Rolland also entered new terrain: in 1993, after ten years of development his "Spiccato"-bow made from carbon composite material was patented.

## **For the Freundeskreis**

Contact to the Freundeskreis was initiated by our artistic advisory board member Lynn Harrell. Meanwhile Arabella Steinbacher plays a bow by Benoit Rolland and currently a bow for Leonhard Elschenbroich is being created in Charlestown.

Anne-Sophie Mutter placed an order with Rolland. "I understand well what she wants to have: a Maserati with the comfort of a Cadillac! This won't be easy," Rolland says. The challenge is not so much in giving the bow a fast response, but in giving it the potential for a wide spectrum of sound colors at the same time. To achieve this he will use some of his oldest wood.