

The Boston Globe, Sunday January 9, 2005 - page 1 and 7- by **Ron Fletcher**

“LORD OF THE STRINGS”

Beyond the gas lamps and the tree-lined sidewalks, a cobblestone path leads to the home where Benoit Rolland lives and works. Evocative of the Parisian lanes the master bow maker left behind three years ago, the wood and flame foreshadow the centuries-old process that takes place in his studio with use of neither plastics nor electricity.

Here, handmade tools burnished by decades of use repose next to the candle that provides the heat for curving – or cambering – a bow. Here, a length of fishing line fastened to a metal rod spins a drill bit, preserving the silence that allows Rolland to hear and hone the song of the wood he works. Here a tradition is preserved – and evolving.

In the Charlestown studio, one of the world’s greatest bow makers spends spends two weeks of 10- to 12-hour days transforming a 3-foot block of Pernambuco wood into an instrument whose artistry rivals the timeless symphonies that sing through the strings it sounds.

Although the path that preceded Rolland’s arrival her owes more to improvisation than to deliberate score, Boston held particular lures for him. He has followed his passion for making bows from obvious to unlikely places: from the cradle of bow making in Mirecourt, France, to Bréhat, an island off the coast of Brittany inhabited by a few dozens fishermen and their families.

Practicality and whim, circumstance and a sense of adventure entered into Rolland’s decision to set up shop in Boston. He sees the city as attractive as well as accessible to his international clientele. He had glimpsed in his initial meetings with Boston Symphony Orchestra musicians potential friendships. And Rolland, 50, wished to be an easy plane ride away from family and friends back home in France. He thought of Boston as a place where tradition and innovation coexist, a place conducive to his inclination to work against the grain.

“Leave it to Benoit to turn the cultural exchange on its head,” said Johannes Leuthold, a Swiss violin maker and bow dealer. “I imagine that American musicians will appreciate the paradox he presents: a commitment to tradition that is not limited to tradition. I imagine they will embrace him the way France first embraced jazz.”

Leuthold cited Rolland’s “Spiccato”, a carbon fiber bow that had many European purists turning up their noses at the woodless wonder.

“That bow was made with the preservation of the Brazilian forest in mind”, said Leuthold, “and it was made to the excellent standards of any Rolland bow. The United States appreciated that bow more than Europe. Their mind and spirit were more open. It makes sense that Benoit lives there now.”

Leuthold was quick to insert a “for” before the now, adding that one cannot always predict Rolland’s next move.

“Enjoy it”, said Leuthold. “France’s loss is your gain.”

“You don’t think of bow makers being in your own backyard,” said Nathaniel Farny, a violonist and violist. Eyeing the bows on display after a recent talk by Rolland at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Farny, 30, of Somerville, said he showed up to learn more about what he called the “mysterious process of bow making.

“I wanted to find out how much scientific knowledge goes into the construction of a bow and how much is an art,” said Farny, who was well acquainted with Rolland’s

name but had never played with one of his bows. “There’s no clear line between form and function, between the art and the craft.”

“It’s sculpture that moves” says Pieranna Cavalchini, curator of contemporary art at the Gardner, site of Rolland’s first public lecture. “The maker in this case is as much an artist as any player or composer. We are so fortunate to have such an artist living here in Boston.”

Arriving in Charlestown, which Rolland chose for its European feel, a month before Sept. 11 attacks, plunged him into the paradoxes and passions of America. A pacifist, he often stepped away from his homeland’s anxiety for the solace of the sea, one motif of his peripatetic life.

He describes the blue expanse as “full of symbols,” a place where he finds perspective and possibility. Walks along the harbor in the Charlestown Navy Yard punctuate days in his workshop. Trips to Marblehead often follow the completion of a bow, where he finds the space to reflect on what has been done and what lies ahead.

“There’s a particular rock I always visit when I go to Marblehead,” said Rolland, from the living room that abuts his studio. “I love the silence and solitude there.”

At home, however, solitude gives way to company and kinship. The paintings that line the living room walls are the work of Christine Arveil, Rolland’s wife. Suspending hand-ground pigments in layers of varnish, Arveil has created images of boldness and nuance, luster and shadow. Her novel approach to painting grew out of mastering the technique of varnishing used on violins during the 17th and 18th centuries. During a conference on violin making in Utah in the mid-1990s, time when she was living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, she met the bow maker visiting from her homeland.

“We both grew up in and around Paris,” said Arveil, sounding a note of incredulity. “We moved in similar circles of music and the arts during the 1970s. Then we finally met –in Utah. Utah, a ...” She pauses for the word. “A strange place.”

Eloquent about her husband’s work and a measure more fluent in English, Arveil occasionally slips into the role of translator. Though she helped Rolland phrase some of the more intricate ideas presented in his Gardner lecture, Arveil is quick to acknowledge Rolland as the original author of them.

“The idea of bow making as ‘a hyphen between the emotion of the musician and the instrument –that is all Benoit’s,” she said. Rolland smiled his appreciation.

“We are working together on a book,” Arveil continued, “ a book for musicians who want to understand how a bow is made.”

Talk to musicians about what distinguishes a Rolland bow and they all agree on one point: It has the feel of an instrument made by a fellow musician.

The grandson of Germaine Thyssens-Valentin, a concert pianist famous throughout Europe, Rolland was 5 when he learned to read and write music. He spent most of his childhood practicing piano and violin eight hours a day, before graduating from the Conservatoire de Paris.

Today, Rolland speaks of his training as a violinist as a *sine qua non* for the bows he makes. He aims for that point where bow and body become one. He attempts, to borrow a phrase from his lecture, to harmonize contradictions.

“A great bow has to possess power and strength, and at the same time to allow for subtlety and a softness of touch,” said Jonathan Miller, a cellist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra who calls his Rolland bow his favorite.

“One moment you’re playing with the weight of your whole body behind each stroke and the next you’re playing with a lightness and delicacy. Benoit understands this range as only a musician can. He knows that with a well-made bow, technique and feeling take over: You don’t have to make the bow make the music.”

Says Leuthold, the Swiss violin maker: “What Benoit is doing now – making a bow based on listening to a musician play – is absolutely revolutionary. It’s a new step forward in a centuries-old tradition.”

Leuthold catches himself, though. He wants people to know that the youngest recipient of France’s national award for master craftsman has one hell of a sense of humor.

“He had me laughing tears last time we met for beers,” said Leuthold. “He is a great mimic.”

Arveil too, prizes her husband’s sense of humor. She recalled the time she told him that she had had it with long days in the studios and wanted to go on a trip. He asked her where she wanted to go.

Texas, she said.

OK, he said.

They hopped in their car and headed north on Route 1. Rolland asked his wife to close her eyes as they approached the destination.

Pulling into the parking lot of the Hilltop Steak House, with its three-story cactus and plastic cows, he instructed Arveil to open her eyes and announced their arrival in the Lone Star State.

That the neon of Route 1 seems a world away from the remote French Island on which Rolland spent a decade-plus working on a synthetic bow doesn’t faze him. He glimpses in the arc of his 50 years the graceful curve he has cambered more than a thousand times.

“I like Boston –the music, the arts, the people we’ve met,” said Rolland. “I would not be here if I didn’t.”

Having arrived in Boston with little more than the tools of his trade, Rolland has tried to live simply. He has forgone the lucrative road of collecting and selling rare bows to concentrate on making one bow at a time.

Island days spent on perfecting a synthetic bow have receded. In their wake, Rolland has found a place to finesse wonder out of wood, not carbon.

A sailor who hopes to have a boat in Boston harbor sometimes soon, Rolland draws a parallel between boats and bows.

“I can admire a fiberglass boat, but I can’t fall in love with one,” he said. “It’s the same way with a bow.” **Ron Fletcher**

FOR BSO PLAYER, A MARRIAGE MADE IN CHARLESTOWN

The bow caught Michael Zaretsky’s eye and ear.

The Russian-born Boston University faculty member and veteran viola player with the Boston Symphony Orchestra delighted to the sound and sight of what he soon learned was a Benoit Rolland bow:

“Rare, rare craftsmanship,” said Zaretsky. Impeccable, beautiful, resonant and most important, very well balanced.”

He struck up conversation with the owner of the bow – his student – and learned that the man who had made the bow lived just a short ride away.

“Fifteen minutes, take Storrow Drive to Charlestown,” said Zaretsky, who visited this past fall in hope that Rolland would repair a favorite bow. He was unaware that after 20,000-plus repairs, Rolland wished only to create his own work, not fix another’s.

The bow maker, nonetheless, made an exception and the two fell into conversation about the nuances of bows. Zaretsky’s interest in adding another bow to his collection led to his trying a couple that Rolland had in his shop.

“They were good bows, beautiful bows, but not for me, not for the way I play,” recalled Zaretsky, who left the shop thrilled that his old bow had been retored to playing condition.

But the visit had a coda.

Moments after Zaretsky’s departure, Rolland heard on WGBH-FM a live recording of his visitor playing Bach at Symphony Hall. In an instant, the bow maker knew the type of bow that belonged in his client’s hand. He called Zaretsky and told him to check back in a week. He did. The marriage was perfect and the honeymoon continues.

“I have been playing the bow all the time,” said Zaretsky, “with the orchestra, as a soloist and on my latest recording of Bach. It is truly the work of an artist – and a musician. It’s impossible to make a bow that good without a feel for the instrument”.

Ron Fletcher