

AN ARTIST AND A BOW MAKER REVEAL A SHARED LOVE OF SCULPTURE, SILENCE AND THE SEA



I FIRST MET BENOÎT IN 1998 AT A BUS STOP IN SALT LAKE CITY

while we were both in Utah for a Violin Society of America (VSA) convention. It struck me at first as nothing more than a superficial encounter. But I was intrigued by a note that he left at the hotel desk before he flew back to France. It was written elegantly in ink and revealed that, beneath his laid-back exterior, he had a refined understanding of language – a real intellectual depth. I was delighted when two years later he contacted me about his work – or so I thought. He asked me to arrange an event to celebrate his 1000th wooden bow. But perhaps this was just a pretext to meet me again?

Before I met Benoît, I had only paid attention to the violin – I knew nothing about bows or bow making. The first time he visited me he brought a bow to show me. He held it in front of the window and the beauty of this line in space struck me strongly. It reminded me of the sculptures of Brancusi, whose Paris studio I know like the back of my hand. Benoît later told me that Brancusi was essential to his work.

We have much in common. Whenever I visited him in Utah, we would spend time in the desert. Benoît is always searching for silence and I'm in search of intense colours and feelings, so the desert suited us both. These days we find the same level of beauty in the sea and take a boat out sailing when we can. Although I am very obstinate, Benoît is very patient, so we've never argued. He has a calm, Zen-like attitude to life – entirely non-aggressive. When he was 21, he was called up for military service in the French army. As a young pacifist he registered himself as having an inactive brain and an under-active heart. For a month the army medical team scrutinised his condition. By focusing his mind – as you can when doing yoga – he minimised his brain activity and slowed his heart rate. They dismissed him as unfit.

Benoît gives me confidence and the feeling of not being isolated. We share the same attitude to work and life, and the same sense of humour: we sometimes amuse each other by dreaming up fake and ridiculous art projects. He also likes to wind me up. Recently, he described in perfect detail how he had ridden his bike along the hard shoulder of Route 93, fooling me into believing he had cycled along one of the most dangerous highways in Boston.

We both work seven days a week. Even recently, when Benoît required surgery, he continued to work. Despite difficulties, these have also been great times because of the people we've met, the love we've discovered and the way in which we've been able to share what's fundamentally important to both of us in life. Lately I've been trying to record Benoît's work systematically, collating his writings and photos. We both want to publish a book: Benoît's will be about bow making; mine will be about him.

CHRISTINE WAS LECTURING ON VARNISH AND CHINESE LACQUER

at the VSA convention in 1998 and I was an adjudicator in the bow making competition. We soon discovered that since we were both from France, we knew the same people and had been to many of the same concerts and exhibitions over the previous 20 years. The meeting felt special because Christine was so intense; I couldn't say anything superficial without feeling as though it would be discarded.

At the time, I was working on making traditional wood bows and developing my Spiccato carbon fibre bow in Vannes, Brittany. Soon after meeting Christine, I decided to move to Salt Lake City and enter into a partnership with a company there to manufacture my bows.

Christine challenges me intellectually, and she has a tremendous imagination. After a year-and-a-half in Utah, I packed up my tools and left my workshop behind to join her at her studio in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I began to find peace of mind. We are on a similar wavelength – we're social idealists who share a common view of art and society. We also share the same sense of humour, laughing at the contradictions we find around us – such as the time we stopped off at the town of Havre de Grace, Maryland, only to find ourselves in an Italian restaurant where the local Italians were going wild over an Italian football match, televised via satellite.

One of the reasons we chose to live in Boston is because it's not too far from Europe, where we both have grown-up children. We had

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nothing when, in 2001, we packed everything we owned into one car and moved here. It was difficult to adapt: I work with natural light and each time I move my shop I have to re-adapt to the feel of my environment. Socially, too, you feel you have to prove yourself in Boston, but being with Christine has made it easier.

Besides being a painter, Christine has written a novel and around 50 short stories. She's knowledgeable not only about 18th-century varnishing techniques, but also about many painting techniques, from watercolours and calligraphy to medieval illuminations. I trust her opinion on what I am doing. Since I've known her I've changed my methods, making them simpler, more focused on sound and more fluent. As with Chinese abstract calligraphy, everything is in harmony when making the bow. Christine reminds me of this: she helps me get back to the meaning of a bow.

Interviews by Nick Shave