

INTRODUCTION

A plucked violin (*pizzicato*) has a very different sound than a bowed violin. Bowing gives the violin its characteristic sound, and yet the bow is usually considered only an adjunct to the violin. The origin of the bow may never be authoritatively determined. However, it is probable that Central Asia is the birthplace of bowed instruments.

According to a legend (recorded by the French traveller Pierre Sonnerat in 1782), the bow was invented around 3000 BC by King Ravanastron of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). King Ravanastron used a stick strung with horsehair and coated with rosin to play an instrument consisting of a neck set onto a gourd body covered with skin. This instrument was given his name, and the *ravanastron* exists today on the Indian subcontinent. It has up to four strings, and a straight or only slightly arched bridge, so that the bow hits more than one string at a time.

Despite its early invention, the use of the bow was not widespread. Although people in India were already using the bow, only plucked instruments are recorded in use by the highly cultivated Persians when their culture was at its peak. The use of the bow emerged in Europe and East Asia as the various peoples of West- and Central Asia mingled and expanded into political units (the Byzantine-Arabic-Islamic Empire, and Moorish Spain). It is difficult to identify the contributions of individual peoples to the general cultural development. Clues, however, can be inferred from early sculpture, painting, manuscripts, and illustrations, and by the so-called “primitive” instruments still extant among people who live in areas isolated from mainstream Western civilization (Indochina, SE Asia, etc.)

In Europe, the use of a haired bow prior to the year 1000 seems to have been limited to the area occupied by the Byzantine-Arabic-Islamic Empire, and Moorish Spain. Isolated exceptions may have occurred, such as the 6th century *crwth*, but these claims cannot be documented. The bow strung with horsehair is unequivocally depicted and mentioned in European literature for the first time about 920 AD. Prior to that time, strings were either plucked or a rosined rubbing stick was used to produce sustained notes.

Very early illustrated manuscripts show an instrument plucked with a nail or plectrum; later illustrations show the same instrument being played with a rubbing stick or bow.

Around 1000 AD, depictions of bows show a plethora of differing forms.



Plucked – Spanish 1188



Bowed – Spanish -1260

EARLY MATERIALS

Wood: Medieval sources mention that wood of great firmness and flexibility is required to withstand the necessary tension. Many different woods were tried, according to what was available, such as yew, maple, red beech, and various fruit woods were used. In Spain, depictions of bamboo can be found.¹ As trade expanded, tropical hardwoods were tried, and bows were made of snakewood, ironwood, logwood, ebony, brazilwood, and finally pernambucco.

Horse Hair: According to the documentation, horsehair has been used almost exclusively since the 13th century. Considerably less hair was used than on modern bows, so that the bowhair adhered to the strings less. A Turkish treatise, written by Ahmedoglu Sükrüllah around 1400, notes:

The horse hairs should be fastened to the bow like bowstrings. The number of such horsehairs shall be 9, and if it is not 9, that is all right. Not more than 40 should be used.

The number of horse hairs at that time was much less than is customary today (120 - 180), which leads to the conclusion that Medieval bowed instruments produced relatively lower volume of sound.² Also, the horse hair bundle was round, not flat as in our time.

Rosin: Attempts to increase the effectiveness of the bow by the use of resin rubbed into the horse hairs can be documented in the Middle Ages. It corresponded to our rosin, and, according to a Middle High German description of the 14th century³, was made of the resin of the incense tree and pine pitch. At

¹ see also *Wood* chapter

² Research by Norman Pickering indicates that using less hair produces more sound.

³*Meisterlieder der Kolmarer Handschrift*, Ed. K. Bartsch, Stuttgart 1862, song cxx, verse 17ff.