

How to Choose a Bow

Ready for an upgrade or backup?

A bow must connect the player to the instrument. An unsuitable bow can hamper your ability to maximize the potential of developing a solid technique or exploiting sound production. If you want to sound your best, equipment is a big part of the picture. Consider the following shopping advice:

1. Prepare several musical fragments or phrases. Make it easy! Don't blame your technical inadequacies as an instrumentalist on the bow.

2. Start with a legato, sustained forte melody. Use the bow on every string trying to feel for a weak spot. Is the bow strong at the tip?

3. Pay attention to weight. Is the bow comfortable maneuvering through string crossings? Do you have to work too hard to play a sustained ff? Or does it seem to play by remote control?

4. Feel for balance. If the balance point is toward the head, the bow will feel heavy; closer to the frog it will seem lighter. Weight at the tip may give you wrist problems; at the frog the bow will feel like it is coming out of the string rather than sinking into it. Look for a balance point that makes you feel in control.

5. Test for strength and flexibility. Dig in! The bow shouldn't bottom out or wobble. Listen for a lush tone. If the stick is too stiff it may produce a harsh tone.

6. Compare one bow to another. Limit your trial to 3-4 bows. Trying too many can become confusing. Play one then the next – pick the better bow.

7. Work through all the bow strokes. Try string crossings, chords, ricochet arpeggios, martelé and détaché. If the bow feels uncomfortable, reject it.

Note on composite/carbon fiber vs. wood/Pernambuco. Because manmade materials are a less complex structure than wood, many musicians find that composite or carbon fiber bows favor the upper partials of the sound spectrum and have a real “zing” to their tone. Wood tends to have a more complex tone. Pernambuco is the traditional material that has been used for over 100 years and is very precious now because of its scarcity. Carbon fiber is also great if breakage might be an issue.