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Posted on Mon, Aug. 04, 2003

**PIONEER PRESS**

**From beakers to bows**

BY KAY HARVEY  
Pioneer Press

A woman appeared at the door of the quaint house where Matt Wehling was living in France. She was a little lost.



In imprecise French, she asked: "Can you give me some direction?"

"Quit your day job," Wehling replied.

He had just done it himself.

The former research chemist walked away from a \$35,000-a-year job at a Twin Cities medical device company to move to France and study violin bow-making. He would invest five years learning alongside two masters of the craft.

Now, almost 10 years later, he has his own lab. It sits in the basement of the white frame house in Northfield the 40-year-old bow maker shares with his wife, Christine, and their 3-year-old son, Paul.

In contrast to his old job, where Wehling worked with test tubes on sterile surfaces, today he works at a crude wooden workbench with tools he crafted himself. Some tools hold memories — a tradition among French bow makers. "This knife handle was made from the wood of a boat of the first bow maker I learned from," he explains.

Bundles of gleaming horsehair hang from a ceiling rafter waiting to be plucked as instrument strings. Tall rows of shelves are lined with long, thin strips of Pernambuco, a subspecies of Brazil wood. Each strip is destined to become a bow for a violin, viola or cello. The lone chemical in sight is a can of grain alcohol, used with a flame to render the wood supple for the bow-making process.

Wehling meticulously guides his homemade knife across a piece of wood to shape a bow. He uses no mold or model. The unique character of each piece of wood and the curvature he shapes give each bow its subtly distinct vibration and sound.

"I was taught to do everything by feel," he says. "In France, bow making is a very tactile experience."

Many see bow making as an art. For Wehling, a University of Minnesota graduate, it is also an exercise in precision.

"A bow is a functional tool. The most important thing is its playability. There's not much room for error. But the aesthetic component is also very important. In order to make beautiful music, musicians must relate to their tools."

It's simply easier to relate, he says, if the tools are beautiful.

"I try not to approach it like a research chemist," he adds.

**THE APPRENTICE**

Matt Wehling's life began to change the day his violin broke.

He took it to St. Paul violin repairman John Waddle, who pulled the



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top off the instrument. As Waddle tinkered with its insides, something shifted inside Wehling, too. "I got interested in how it was done and how I could learn it," he remembers.

His passion centered on crafting violin bows. He took classes and began repairing and crafting bows in his leisure time. He cut back his workweek to free up more time. He even turned down a promotion.

The next step was contacting a respected French bow maker to ask if he could learn at his side, the typical way aspiring students study the craft. In 1995, Benoit Rolland invited Wehling to visit his workshop in France's Brittany region.

"I had to show him my work," Wehling says. "I took two bows I had made. I put the bows down in front of him. I was very nervous. He looked at them for about two minutes. Then he said, 'Yes. You are ready to learn.' "

Wehling saved every penny he could. Six months later, he quit his job and moved. He watched and worked alongside Rolland for nine months without pay. A second bow maker took him on for four years as a paid apprentice. While he was there, he met and married his wife and became a father.

### **THE CRAFTSMAN**

Since his return to Minnesota two years ago, Wehling is one of about 30 bow makers across the country who turn out higher-end bows destined for practice rooms and concert stages around the world.

About one in five of his bows stays in Minnesota. He sells to professional musicians, St. Olaf College faculty members, free-lance musicians, students and wholesalers. He repairs bows, too.

A factory-made bow for a beginner — with the violin — starts at about \$250. Accomplished violinists typically buy bows separately from their instruments and choose them meticulously. A handmade violin bow can bring \$4 million. Wehling's bows start at \$3,000. He is close to his goal of turning out 30 bows a year.

When a bow appears finished, it gets a musical test. Wehling pulls his violin out of its case, plays the scales and an Irish jig and listens hard to the sound.

His history with string instruments began in junior high, when he made guitars out of boards and tuning devices in his parents' Cottage Grove garage.

"People are interested in what I'm doing because they don't meet up with it every day," he says of his bow-making work. But some who knew him as a teenager don't see it as surprising.

At a recent Park High School reunion, he recalls, he told a former classmate about his career change.

" 'Oh yeah,' she said. 'I always knew you'd be doing something like that.' "

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