



## HARRY GRABENSTEIN STICK MAN

Since 1987 he has spent long hours making Renaissance, Baroque and modern bows for violins, cellos, violas and six other stringed instruments.







**BY WILLIAM CORBETT**

The bow maker Harry Grabenstein's "sawdust studio" is a red bungalow at the end of a dirt driveway in Jericho, Vermont, not far from Interstate 89. Grabenstein, whose bows power a variety of stringed instruments, shares it with Warren Ellison, a violin maker. When he is at work alone, Grabenstein likes the overhead lights off so that he can "just see what I'm looking at." At his messy workbench he focuses intently, comforted by the chaos surrounding him. It is the sort of environment in which demanding and precise physical labor comes first, where everything vital is at hand and everything else has been left lying where it last was used.

The studio is divided into two main spaces. Behind the workbench area is a wood shop with all the machines, table saws, drill press, sanders, etc. necessary to work wood. What he roughs out in the shop he finishes at the corner of his workbench. Since 1987 he has spent long hours here making bows for violins, cellos, violas and six other stringed instruments. Grabenstein calls these strong, limber and sleek yet delicate-appearing bows "sticks." By this prosaic word he may be suggesting that what he does is a craft; the art comes later, when his stick is put to use.

A compact man who moves with grace and economy like the dancer he once was, Grabenstein speaks naturally in sentences and has a firm grasp of process. He sees with unusual clarity the beginning, middle and end of what he does. By his account he came to his craft in a straight line. In 1973 the 26-year-old Temple University graduate was a VISTA volunteer in St. Mary's County, Maryland. Like many of his generation, he wanted to play guitar—not rock, but classical guitar. Unlike most, he decided to build his own instrument. To accomplish this he took a how-to book out of the library. Knowing nothing about woodworking and not particularly handy, Grabenstein followed the directions and made himself a guitar. Because of his ignorance of guitars and of how to work wood, it is a heavy instrument yet one that he was able to play. He had no idea that this guitar would serve as his qualifying credential for the next step in his evolution as a craftsman.

This took place after Grabenstein and his former wife moved to the Burlington, Vermont, area because they wanted to live somewhere rural and beautiful. She found a job at once and sometime later he became the first employee of Alan Stack's Time Guitars. "I was pretty much an apprentice," Grabenstein remembers. "He knew what he was doing and I didn't." The job introduced Grabenstein to the Burlington music scene where, after Stack's business closed, he eventually met the guitarist and cellist Peter Tourin. Grabenstein wanted to get back into instrument making and Tourin had a shop called the Tourin Musica, specializing in reproductions of "English viols, German Baroque viols and early Italian models." The shop had a three-year waiting list for violas de gamba and Grabenstein, finding his hand skills transferable, went to work. As the business developed, he began to make bows because, as he says in his

Baroque-style double bass bow, first made in 1998 after an original owned by M. Willens, curly maple, walnut, 29<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches long, photo/Sanders Milen. OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT AND RIGHT: Harry Grabenstein planes a stick; in performance at the International Baroque Institute, Longy School of Music, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Grabenstein's Baroque snakewood bow with mastodon tusk ivory frog drives a cello by Warren Ellison. Photos/Ben E. Watkins.



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typically straightforward manner, "Working with Peter I was second banana in a two-banana shop, and I wanted something a little more my own." By 1990, Tourin had left the business and Grabenstein, having evolved into a full-time bow maker, had his own shop.

He is thus self-taught, or nearly so. In 1982 and 1983 he attended summer workshops at the University of New Hampshire's Violin Craftsmanship Institute, where he studied with William Salchow, a bow maker from New York City. He credits Salchow with launching him, after which he learned by doing, training his hands and eyes in the process of making a few bows—three in his first year—at a time. Grabenstein now completes between 35 and 50 bows a year, maybe half a dozen of them modern. Most of his bows are designed to play Early, Baroque and Renaissance music. He numbers each bow—he designated his only guitar #1, not knowing if he would reach #2 in anything—and today has reached beyond 980. He has begun to think of the kind of party that he will throw when he hits 1,000, but achievements that can be measured by numbers or awards hold little interest for this maker.

Grabenstein enjoys every step about bow making, from raw wood to polished, haired stick ready for the instrumentalist's hand. He begins with tropical hardwoods that are "heavy, dense and strong." "Pretty much nothing I use floats," he says, although for Medieval bows he does use curly maple. The preferred wood for Baroque bows is snakewood, which he has been buying from a supplier in Guyana, South America, for over 20 years. It is a dark brown wood sometimes banded with black. Classical music, meaning music after 1800, requires pernambuco, a Brazilian hardwood that is stiffer and lighter than snakewood. It allows for a bow that will hold the increased curve, or camber, necessary to drive—Grabenstein's word—an instrument whose sound must fill big concert halls.

Each bow begins as a two to two-and-a-half-foot stick of wood. These blanks are cut square, then planed to octagon and either left in that shape or planed and carved to the desired roundness. Grabenstein lays the blank across the corner of his workbench so that both ends jut into space, and works with hand planes milled for him in a local machine shop and a home-made tool resembling a common utility knife, at least in its triangular blade. His current favorite has a bamboo handle. As wood shavings pile up on the floor







like hair curls in a barbershop, he works by feel, adjusting his stick by sight. When the stick is where he wants it, he attaches the frog at the end held by the user. This looks ornamental but serves to keep the horsehair from the bow, as does the sensuous curve of wood at the stick's other end. Grabenstein holds the stick throughout, constantly testing it for the feel he wants. The last step is to stretch and fasten the horsehair, which he buys by the pound from northern Asia, where there is a centuries-old trade in the product. If he makes the frog out of ivory, it is from mastodon tusks easily unearthed in Siberia or other areas with cold climates.

Grabenstein knows by this time if the stick satisfies him, but he learns if it is right for the player who will use it only when that person, whom he thinks of as a test driver, draws it across the strings of his instrument. "I tend to let the customer play the stick and get their opinions," Grabenstein says, "and if there are adjustments needed to make the stick heavier or lighter or adjustments to its camber or balance I make these after the stick has been played and before the bow is finished." By now customers find Grabenstein by word of mouth, through the Burlington Violin Shop where he repairs and re-hairs his sticks (his advertising consists of a business card and two postcards), and at various music festivals, where he displays his sticks and takes orders. His customers tend to be working pros, players and teachers and their students. Several clients, including those who perform in the Baltimore Consort, the King's Noyse and the English viol group Fretwork, credit Grabenstein's sticks in the album notes for their CDs.

At this stage of his career, Harry Grabenstein has become interested in the sculptural qualities of modern bows. He doesn't yet know how to name these qualities, but their forms become apparent as he works on modern sticks. Regardless of what comes next, he will continue to think of himself as a toolmaker seeking to "make something more than just a bow that works on an instrument." "I have to watch myself," he continues, "when I talk to furniture makers. I can't do that sort of work because I want more from what I do and sticks give me that. Why? It may have to do with the work not being over when they leave my shop. I know that people sit in chairs at tables, but the bows make music. That has something to do with the more I need to get out of what I make, that and the beauty of the stick for its own sake." ■

*William Corbett, a poet who writes frequently on art, lives in Boston and teaches writing at MIT. His selected essays, All Prose (Zoland Books), were published in 2001.*

TOP: Classical double bass bow, first made in 2002, German grip, pernambuco, boxwood, 28 inches long. BOTTOM: Classical violin bow, first made in 1994 after an original owned by Peter Kupfer, cacique, mastodon tusk, 28¼ inches long. Photos/Peter Wolf.