

Profile - Boris Fritsch, the bowmaker of Montmartre

Sarah Ziaï – 24th January 2020

When you enter this workshop, you won't notice at first the big trunks of wood in the corner. Neither the smell of the freshly varnish bows. Nor the feeling of the tiny wood dust that slowly infiltrate your clothes. No, the first thing you will see is the face of a passionate craftsman.



Boris Fritsch is a bowmaker in Montmartre (Paris). (Photo : Sarah Ziaï)

Boris Fritsch is a bowmaker for cellists and doublebassists. He has worked in his workshop in Montmartre, Paris since 2000.

Bowmaker is a very rare job. Boris discovered it when he was in highschool, during an internship. His parents are no musicians, but they did listen to a lot of music. He wanted to be a musician, a doublebass player. But he soon noticed something: "I realized that I have a really good ear. I could have become a good musician. But I am way better with the items. I have an anomaly good perception of the space around me, and I can picture really well a bow in my head before creating it."

Boris first started as a luthier, an instrument maker. But he then got convinced that, for him, making a bow was way funnier than the instrument.

This very passionate bowmaker has his very own way to describe his profession. “I think that what I really love about making bows is a certain diversity: I start by working on the wood, more like a cabinetmaker. Then I’m slowly becoming a jeweler and finally a watchmaker. So I start by cutting big parts of wood, and end with a very meticulous work on the materials”, he says.

Horsehair, shells, mammoth ivory, lizard and fish skin

In his small workshop, just in the center of Montmartre, Boris works alone, surrounded by wood, horsehair, shells, mammoth ivory, and even lizard and fish skin. Today, he is glad because he received some new equipment, which he recycled from an old engineer school that had to close. That will help him for the holes he has to craft in the wood, one of his principal materials. The two materials he needs the most are pernambucco wood and horse hair. The pernambucco, just like elephant ivory, is controversial. Nowadays, there is a strict regulation of pernambucco wood by the CITES (Washington Convention on the trade of endangered species). Due to massive deforestation, the CITES wants to stop the trade of this wood, just like elephant ivory has been banned from the market. Boris has never used elephant ivory, and he bought at the beginning of his career 1000 trunks of pernambucco wood. So, this situation is not a problem for him. But he is still concerned, especially for the new generation of bowmakers. “I am an ecologist myself, but I really think it’s hard to say that 300 bowmakers on the planet are the cause of the pernambucco wood deforestation in Brasil. The CITES is a good way for all governments to point the responsibility somewhere else than their environmental politics”, he explains.



Boris uses a lot of shells to craft his bows. (Photo : Sarah Ziai)

Indeed, there isn’t a lot of bowmakers in the world. They are only 50 in all of France.

It's a very niche activity. But, for Boris, it is a comfortable position: "We all know each other, we all get along well and there is almost no rivalry like they can be in some other commercial activity."

Even if he needs customer, Boris doesn't really consider himself as a business person. He has a special connection with each of his client. "A customer is not just someone asking for a new bow. He or she can't just give me orders. I have to feel that I can improve the way they play music, otherwise I'm useless. I spend a lot of time talking with a customer, that's why any bow is taking me a long time", he explains. Today, two customers are visiting his workshop.

"His own style"

Léo Genet is a French doublebassist. He plays at the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam. He came from Holland this weekend just for an appointment with Boris. He needs some new hair for his bow. Boris made one bow for him, but with two different heads: one brown and one white.



The two heads of Léo's bow. (Photo : Sarah Ziaï)

Léo has been seduced by the work of Boris since the very beginning of his career. "He has a real will to do some good work, which is very important for me. I use my bow everyday on stage and I need it to be perfect for me. Boris is a really good listener. I have sometimes spent more than six hours at his workshop just talking and playing for him." Indeed, there is always a big doublebass hidden somewhere in this tiny workshop. Boris always says it: the moment when a customer really shows himself is when he plays his instrument.

“A thousand words couldn’t give me more information than when I see them playing”, he added.

“He also has his own style, which is a great mix between tradition and modernity. I really can’t wait to work on a new project with him!”, Léo concludes in a spark of joy while watching his fresh haired bow. He calls this collaboration a “project”, because making a bow is not like any other object. It takes a lot of time. The whole process, from the first appointment to the finale work, can take months. Boris’ waiting list is currently at one year.

Lucas Faucher is also a customer of Boris. He is doublebassist at the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra in Stockholm. He asked Boris to build him a new bow, and he is super excited to receive it today. He has heard a lot of Boris before coming to his workshop. Lucas has tried some of the bows Boris made for other doublebassists, and he was really seduced. He also really like Boris’ way of working: “I love how he takes a lot of time to talk with, but what I love more is his special style. His bows are just so beautiful and efficient”, he says. Boris has created, indeed, a new style for doublebass bows. He takes a lot of his inspiration from the bowmakers of the 19th century, and uses these ideas to create his own personal way of making a bow.

“I have invented some esthetics, like the flat head of the bow. I created a doublebass bow that looks like a violin one. Because I felt that the balance of the bow was better with a flat head, even for a big heavy bow like the doublebass one.”

So, craftman? yes. Creator? yes. Inventor? maybe. But be careful, don’t call Boris an artist. His answer will for sure be : “I consider myself more at the service of the art, which is music, than a real complete artist”.