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***Avoir de l’archet: The 1795 Conservatoire de Paris and the Institutionalizing of a Playing Style***

Inspectors’ written evaluations for violin exams in early years of the Conservatoire (recorded in de La Grandville, 2014) comment upon bowing using the expression “avoir de l’archet”: literally “to have bow”. A young student could be said, for example, to have good sound, bow, and intonation. "Va bien, du son, de l’archet, de la justesse." The distinction made between sound and bow is in fact typical of these comments, and it immediately alludes to a visual aspect of the bow-in-motion as well as an elegance (or lack thereof) of movement. In other words, the bow and its use was not only to be heard by jury members—it was also something to be seen. What did it mean for a student “to have bow”? In the school’s violin method book (Baillot et al., 1803) we read about bow movement under the “Mechanics” of playing, where we are reminded that the bow is the only part of the violinist that should move at all. But bow movement is ever-present in book’s second part, “Expression”, revealing a more complex relationship between bowing and sound, style, even taste. I will argue that the inspectors’ visual evaluation of bowing reveals the school’s attempt to harness the individual arco magno style of Viotti, the foreign violinist and mentor of first-generation conservatoire teachers Baillot, Kreutzer, and Rode. Sameness and cohesion of bowing is too easily associated with France’s national affinity for choreographic gesture (Chassain 1999) as well as the conservatoire’s competitive atmosphere and inclination to compare. Just as the Méthode instructs violinists not to be too preoccupied with (up-down) bowing direction, I will argue that a closer look reveals its aim to capture the freeness of Viotti’s movement rather than to regulate. Through video examples of my own playing of repertoire by Viotti and from the Méthode, shown without sound, I will demonstrate the conservatoire’s esteem of Viotti’s style through the movement of the bow, considering the bow-object itself—the new model by François Xavier Tourte, known as "L’archet de Viotti" (Woldemar, 1800).

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