

WINDING A BOW GRIP FROM SILVER AND SILK

MATT WEHLING reveals his technique for applying a French-style lapping to a bow



Bow maker Matt Wehling trained in the US, with Bill Salchow, and in France with Benoit Rolland. He works in Northfield, Minnesota, US

When looking at bows in typical violin shops, you will notice that the most common material currently used for the grip is solid silver wire. However, this was not always the case.

From the work of Tourte until at least the time of Sartory a more common grip was composed of silver strands spun around a core of silk. This is often referred to as 'tinsel', although many connoisseurs dislike that particular name because it has connotations of cheapness or artificiality. I refer to it as 'spun silver' or 'silver over silk'.

In England, makers historically tended to use a single piece of spun silver, giving a monochrome look. French makers often made a fancier grip by using combinations of spun silver and coloured silk thread to form interesting patterns. Today, many independent bow makers have returned to making grips in this French style.

The English term for the grip is the lapping or wrapping, but I prefer the French term 'garniture', because I feel a beautiful grip can be a lovely garnish that complements and sets off the beauty of the bow.

Applying a garniture in the old French style is not a very difficult process, but it does take practice. I found it helpful to try it out first with ordinary thread before using the somewhat expensive spun silver (or very expensive gold) thread.



The tools required for creating this French type of garniture

[1] In the photograph (from left to right) there is a knife, a ruler, a sample garniture to copy, superglue, a vice, a 'tree' mounted with spools of coloured silk thread and spun silver, old business cards or paper on which to mix superglue, masking tape and toothpicks. The only item that's not standard issue is the tree, which is simply a board with seven to ten evenly spaced holes drilled into the side, used to mount the spools of thread and spun silver wire while wrapping the garniture. The spools can be mounted on tapered dowels or on pieces of pernambuco from bows that have broken during the making process. It is important that the dowel doesn't turn as you pull on the thread coming off the spool.

I find it useful to wear an apron to catch things when I drop them or to rest the spools when switching them. I also ensure that the answering machine is on, because someone is sure to call while I'm in the middle of a job such as this, where I can't put down either hand to answer the phone.



The garniture is planned out on the bare stick with a permanent marker

[2] Before starting, I plan out the pattern I want to achieve. Garnitures of this type are typically symmetrical (if a particular one isn't, it may mean that it was conceived and executed for a different length of thumb leather than is currently on the bow). Here, the top stick is the garniture I'm copying, though I'll be using spun silver where the model has green, and maroon where the model has black. From the left, I will have 4.5mm of spun silver, 5mm (five revolutions) of maroon silk alternating with spun silver, and 4.5mm of spun silver. I will then run a middle section of alternating spun silver and silk for approximately 22mm, before repeating the 4.5mm of spun silver, five revolutions of silk alternating with spun silver, and 4.5mm of spun silver. I say 'approximately' because my major concern is not the length of the section with silver and silk, but that the overall grip is the proper length and symmetrical.

Using a permanent marker, on the bare bow I mark where I'll be starting and ending the garniture, as well as the length of the thumb leather.



[3] The silver and silk are held down by masking tape and glue

[3] I put a big blob of superglue on to a business card so that I have an easy source available to apply with a toothpick as I wrap the garniture. I put a small amount (about 3mm long) of this glue on the bottom facet of the stick, just to the right of the pen mark closest to the tip of the bow. I then tape down the silver and silk, with the puddle of glue about halfway between the two pieces of tape. The glue holds down the silver and silk while I get the garniture started. I wait a couple of minutes to make sure the thread is well attached to the stick before starting.

While waiting for the glue to dry, I prepare a small loop of nylon rehair thread, about 2 to 3 inches long, to be used in the final step of creating the garniture.

Once the glue has dried, I use a knife to cut the maroon silk on the left side, leaving it glued down and leading off to the right. I remove the piece of tape on the left.



[5] The spun silver and maroon silk are threaded simultaneously

[5] To wrap the silver and silk at the same time I have both spools attached to the tree. In order to be able to do this for the first time I unravel the maroon thread from around the stick (the first ten revolutions of silver have made the silk also wrap around the stick ten times, and if I'm not careful it can become a mess) and tightly roll it back on to its spool. I can then place the spool on the tree and have the same length of thread coming from each spool so that the silk and the silver can be stretched equally tightly.



[4] The first three revolutions of spun silver are made

[4] I start the garniture by holding down the spun silver with my right thumb and turning the stick one revolution towards me. It doubles over the thread that was glued down, trapping it in place. It is important to start the wrap on one of the bottom facets, and any changes from single colour to double colour (and back) must occur on that same facet in order for the grip to look as neat as possible.

By the fifth or sixth revolution the original piece of spun silver has been well trapped and I can cut the excess silver that goes off to the piece of tape to the right. I continue to wrap the spun silver until I reach the length I want, in this case 4.5mm, which is about ten revolutions.



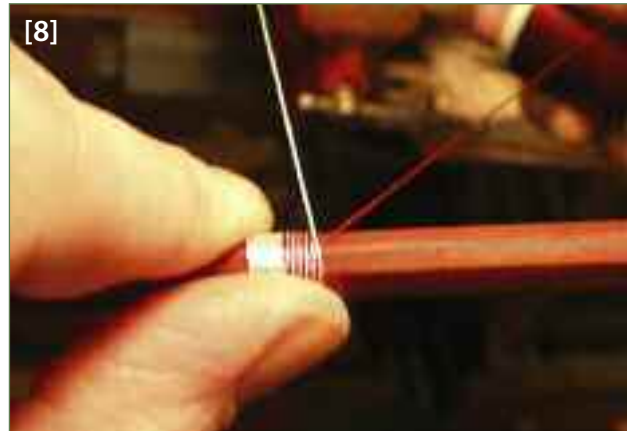
[6] Starting the first section that alternates maroon and silver

[6] To create the first section that alternates maroon and silver I rotate the stick five revolutions, changing the height of the stick relative to the two spools of thread to keep the tension on the two strands equal. Notice that I have put the spun silver strand to the right of the silk strand: this is because I intend to exit the alternating section to a section of solid spun silver. Whichever colour you want to exit to should be on the right, so that you can easily trap the other colour under the wrap as you exit the alternating section.



[7] A toothpick is used to apply some glue to the stick

[7] After a couple of revolutions, I use a toothpick to put a flat coat of superglue on the bottom facet of the stick and then wrap the garniture over it. Many makers wait until the end of the job and then touch the outside of the wrapping with glue, but by putting a little bit under I won't have nearly the mess, and it will look much cleaner. You can do this every five or ten revolutions once you've done a few completed garnitures and are quite confident of what you're doing.



[8] Finishing off the first alternating section

[8] After I've wrapped five revolutions of alternating silver and silk, I'm ready to return to a solid colour. I remove the spool of silk from the tree and pull the silk thread off to the right so that it gets trapped under the spun silver as I continue to rotate the stick with my left hand. I can now continue with my pattern as described in step 2.



[9] The cut silver is threaded through the trapped rehair thread



[10] The loop of rehair thread is pulled tightly to the garniture

[9] As I finish the garniture with the last 4.5mm, I cut the maroon silk. I then trap the loop of rehair thread (which I prepared earlier) under the spun silver and turn it for a few more revolutions. I cut the silver from the spool, and then thread it through the loop of rehair thread.

[10] I pull the loop tightly to the garniture, then continue pulling so that the spun silver is pulled under itself. I can then put superglue on the revolutions of silver that will be covered by the leather grip.

[11] The garniture is now complete, and ready for a leather thumb grip to be put on.



[11] The completed symmetrical garniture

NEXT MONTH >> Peter Goodfellow describes his technique for preparing a cello fingerboard