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Hair today, gone tomorrow

Everything from Covid-19 to the ongoing situation in Russia has created a perfect storm for suppliers of good violin bow hair – and stocks are beginning to suffer

By Peter Somerford



Suppliers in China bind up bow hair for transportation

From delayed deliveries and increased prices to limited access to top-quality Mongolian and Siberian horsehair, bow hair suppliers in Europe and North America are feeling the impact of the pandemic on exports from China, where virtually all the bow hair used in the stringed instrument trade is processed. Bow makers, luthiers and violin shops have, in turn, seen prices rise, with some having to resort to using lower-grade hair, or spending precious time at the bench sorting the hair that they receive.

When *The Strad* contacted a number of leading bow hair companies in August, one major supplier in the US was completely out of hair, and did not know how much product would be arriving in their next shipment from China. A hair trader in Europe said he was still waiting for a bow hair delivery that should have arrived in February. Another European supplier has been rationing the size of client orders since 2021 to ensure uninterrupted supply, and is having to turn down enquiries from new customers.

Michael T. Sowden, an expert bow hair dresser in the UK who has been in the trade for over 50 years and founded the family bow hair business now run by his son, says that the market has experienced an unprecedented tightening. 'It's very difficult to get high-quality bow hair now,' he says. 'And my agent in China says it's increasingly hard to get hold of the

raw hair. Chinese suppliers put the price up when there's a shortage, and so the price is the highest it's ever been, and it will only go up more.'

Suppliers say that the bow hair trade, like many industries linked to Chinese production, has been affected by China's zero-Covid policy, the country's strict border controls, and comprehensive lockdowns in parts of the country. Yanbing Chen, owner of Las Vegas-based Desert Strings, recently returned from Shanghai, where he was caught up in the two-month city-wide lockdown that effectively closed down the commercial hub in April and May. He says: 'The sporadic lockdowns in different parts of the country in 2021 and early 2022 affected hair supply, but then when those areas were opened up, the lockdown in Shanghai meant all the express services were stopped, and nothing was going in and out of Shanghai. When the lockdowns happen, the bow hair factory workers can't get to work to process the hair, and the bow hair traders can't go out of their immediate area to buy hair or do whatever they need to do. Sometimes they have hair but they can't ship it out because of the lockdowns.'

For Canisa Shi, of Madrid-based supplier SieLam, the early part of the pandemic did not create any major issues, but the Covid-related price surge and the shortage of raw materials began to bite in 2021. 'When China enforced strict border controls to try

COURTESY SIELAM

'Russia has control over the Siberian bow hair and isn't moving much out to China for processing' – Bow maker Michael Vann

to minimise imported Covid cases, the inflow of bow hair raw materials started to shrink,' says Shi. 'Customs inspections of incoming goods could take as long as one or two months. Traders began to ask higher prices, and some dressing workshops had no choice but to pay to secure supply. The lead time on orders from China could be as long as seven or eight months, with some orders placed in early 2021 not delivered until autumn or even winter of that year. With such a supply situation, prices inevitably shoot up.'

A well-established relationship with a reliable dealer in China has been crucial to international suppliers such as Shi for ensuring continued access to high-quality hair during the pandemic. But some suppliers have also seen a drop in the quality of hair being shipped, which they put down to a slackening of standards in the processing workshops. Hamburg-based hair trader Peter-Michael Freudenblum says: 'It's almost impossible to work with Chinese hair without re-sorting it here. If any of my clients has a complaint, it's usually that they had to sort out ten per cent more hair than they had to before.' Chen points out that 'the quality of hair will always fluctuate a little because it's an organic product. In my experience, when the processing companies in China get lots of orders, they can get slack in their standards because they want to fill those orders but they only have a set amount of top-quality hair to work with.'

Some Chinese dealers have been able to shield international suppliers from big price hikes, although the price of bow hair has been creeping up over the last decade with general inflation. 'Every year there's an increase in the price,' says Chen, 'but I haven't yet experienced an immediate price increase because of the recent Covid-related difficulties. I'm sure it will come soon, however.' Bow maker Michael Vann, who runs bow hair specialists Vann Bowed Instruments near Vancouver, Canada, says: 'The price isn't going up for us. It's more that we can't get the quantities in our regular orders that we're used to. We've had a steady supply this past two years, but the problem now is that China has control over the Mongolian hair and isn't shipping much out. Russia has control over the Siberian hair and isn't moving much out to China for processing.'

Shi is concerned that the quality of the hair she can source could start to decrease if the situation doesn't improve by spring 2023. 'I have already started to tell our bow maker clients to be a bit less picky in this extraordinary period,' she says. 'Hair is precious, so don't throw away too much even if it's not perfect. It's better to have some hair to use than to run out completely.'

DAMIÁN POSE PHOTOGRAPHY

NEWS IN BRIEF

Alexandra Tirsu loaned Ida Haendel's Stradivari bit.ly/3wnMj3T



Moldovan violinist Alexandra Tirsu (left) has been granted the use of a 1699 Stradivari violin formerly played by Polish-born violinist Ida Haendel. The loan was facilitated by Beare's International Violin Society. A laureate of the 2021 ARD Competition, Tirsu will play the instrument for her debut recording with the London Symphony Orchestra.

Harlem Quartet named Kaufman Music Center's artists-in-residence bit.ly/3QKSDuw

The Harlem Quartet has been named one of three artists-in-residence at the Kaufman Music Center in New York. The players join US pianist and composer Aaron Diehl and British vocal ensemble VOCES8 for the 2022–23 season. The quartet also has residencies at London's Royal College of Music and the John J. Cali School of Music in New York. Founded by the Sphinx Organization in 2006, the Harlem Quartet has strived for diversity in classical music by engaging young and new audiences with varied repertoire.

New violist and management deal for Borromeo Quartet bit.ly/3K9JObb

The Borromeo Quartet has appointed Melissa Reardon as its new violist, following the departure of Mai Motobuchi. The news coincides with the quartet's signing with Dinin Arts Management and Consulting. Reardon is the artistic director of the Portland Chamber Music Festival, artist in residence at Bard College and Conservatory and a founding member and the executive director of the East Coast Chamber Orchestra.



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