



PERFORMER CORNER

Marilyn McDonald

by Mary Sorlie

Marilyn McDonald is currently on the faculty of Oberlin College. She is Professor of Violin at the Oberlin Conservatory and teaches at the Baroque Performance Institute each summer. She has a varied career on both baroque and modern violin. She is an expert in baroque performance practices and is sought out worldwide as teacher, coach and performer.

Her chamber music affiliations include the Smithsonian String Quartet and the Castle Trio. She is also a member of the Axelrod String Quartet, an ensemble that performs on the Smithsonian Stradivarius instruments. Her interests are not solely with early music, as she is also a member of Ensemble Pierrot, a group that specializes in contemporary music.

As a violin teacher, her students are represented in orchestras throughout the world and have been winners of many competitions, including the Naumberg, Locatelli and Berkely Bach competitions. In addition to her professorship at Oberlin Conservatory, she has held visiting professorships at Indiana University, the Eastman School of Music and Boston University.

Recently, she was in the Twin Cities working with a variety of students. She gave some practical tips on performing baroque music. Some of these included:

- There is a hierarchy of beats and note values. Not all beats are created equally. This hierarchy should be based on the harmonic structure of the piece.
- Baroque music should be more lively than music of later time periods. She notes that there really should be

no “wimpy” playing. One way to work on making baroque music very expressive is to practice the lines with no vibrato. One should make the line as expressive as possible with what the bow can do first. Then add the vibrato.

- Performing baroque music is all about being in the right part of the bow. There are no collé attacks. The strongest attack begins with a softness.
- The bow stroke never ends. The rests within and between phrases should be a living space. The focus then becomes the end of the stroke. Instead of stopping the bow, the sound will taper.
- The most valuable ornament to add is the appoggiatura. It is the performers responsibility to make the appoggiatura as beautiful as possible to the audience. She often encourages students to rewrite cadences and to add their own ornaments within a piece.

Marilyn admits there has been a development in how early music practices have

been accepted. She made the switch to baroque performance over 20 years ago. She fondly recalls how when she first began playing on baroque violin, Joseph Gingold from Indiana asked her what she was doing playing in that style, with the gut strings. It wasn't until many years later that he told her that he enjoyed a more recent performance he heard her perform on a baroque violin.

She sees a great similarity between jazz and baroque music, in that one does not play the note for the whole duration of the note. Vibrato tends to diminish in these two areas also. There is great freedom in jazz as well as in baroque playing, especially in regards to ornamentation and cadenzas. As in her performing, she encourages teachers to try new styles and challenge their students with new

ideas and approaches.

Mary Sorlie is an active as a free-lance violinist in the Twin Cities. She is a conductor for the Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies. Mary was on the faculty of Northwestern College for 18 years where she taught violin, string methods and orchestra. ‡

