



BAROQUE PRACTICE

Staying (Historically) Informed: Perspectives on Baroque String Playing

by Ginna Watson

Is there any point in teaching students baroque performance practice? Can string teachers who don't play period instruments teach it? And what does "baroque performance practice" mean, anyway?

Most string players today have heard baroque music played on period instruments—instruments made or set up to sound like they did in the eighteenth century. Several ensembles in the Twin Cities, including the Lyra Baroque Orchestra, Bel-ladonna, and The WolfGang, play music on period instruments.

But the instruments are just a means to an end—the end being a playing style that captures the sounds Bach and Handel would have heard in their day. And what sounds did they hear? A lot of dance music, with a strong pulse and clear phrases that dancers could easily feel and move to. And a lot of vocal music, ranging from traditional folk songs to sacred choral music, with melodies that clearly express the sound and meaning of the text.

These two qualities—clear rhythmic phrases and singing melodic lines—give baroque music its characteristic style.

Baroque players using period instruments try to convey that style with melodic "gestures," like singers dramatically expressing a text, that fit into the underlying harmonic and rhythmic pattern.

The instruments help—they're lighter and under less tension; and combined with gut strings, they sound closer to the human voice than today's brighter, louder instruments. Baroque bows are also much lighter than modern ones, with pointed tips that taper the ends of phrases and provide the "heavy-light, heavy-light" dance pulse of much of the music.

But players don't necessarily need this equipment to capture the quintessential baroque sound. Modern players can play with more space between their phrases, and make sure that the bass and cello provide the pulse for the melodic instruments. To make their instruments sound more like the human voice, players can mentally add words to their parts to imitate a vocal line, and can use vibrato more sparingly—more at the high points and less at the beginnings and ends of phrases.

Playing baroque music in this way is

fun—more fun than simply playing horizontal melodic lines that have little connection to the bass or to the dance rhythms of the piece. And it's fun for students, too, to think of "singing" their parts and to learn the dance rhythms of a Bouree or Gavotte. So teaching students baroque performance practice isn't a specialized technique at all—it's really just an effective way of helping them to learn to play and enjoy the many baroque and classical-era pieces they encounter.

Ginna Watson is a Twin Cities string player who specializes in period-instrument performance. She plays baroque violin and viola, medieval vielle and rebec, and medieval harp with the Lyra Baroque Orchestra, the Bach Society, and The Rose Ensemble for Early Music. Ginna teaches violin at Hamline University in St. Paul and violin and viola privately. She also gives masterclasses on medieval and baroque performance practice in the Twin Cities and throughout the country. †