



# BAROQUE PRACTICE

## The Edge of the Precipice:

### Marc Destrubé on Baroque and Modern Violin

by Miriam Scholz-Carlson

*Internationally known violinist Marc Destrubé will be in Minnesota twice in the coming year as part of the Lyra Baroque Orchestra's 25th anniversary season. A native of Victoria, B.C., Marc Destrubé was a founding member of the renowned Tafelmusik Orchestra and has been guest concertmaster with both the Hanover Band and the Academy of Ancient Music under Christopher Hogwood. Other orchestras with which he has performed and recorded include the London Classical Players, the Taverner Consort, the English Concert, the Leonhardt Consort, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and the Chamber Orchestra of Europe under Claudio Abbado and Sir Georg Solti. He took the time to answer some questions about his varied career, playing the baroque violin, and playing baroque music on the modern violin.*

**Q:** What interests led you to develop the varied musical career that you have?

**A:** I've been extremely lucky to be able to do so many different things in my musical life. Someone asked me not long ago what was my primary motivator, and I realized it was a fear of standing still, of not making progress in some form. So I have always been driven to look for new challenges and to push myself to be always developing as a musician and as a player. Aside from that, I had the good fortune to be in the middle of the burst of interest in period performance practice in the late '70s/early '80s; the attraction for me was less the repertoire than the atmosphere of active and intense engagement with the music and with music-making that existed in that world at the time. At that time, baroque violin was just beginning to be taught in a few conservatories; mostly people were teaching themselves, reading the old treatises, particularly those by Leopold Mozart, J.J. Quantz, and C.P.E. Bach, Corrette, L'Abbé le Fils, Muffatt and Geminiani, and figuring out what worked and what didn't, and also realizing how much the instruments teach us about how the music should go. Ultimately though, playing a baroque

violin is for me simply a question of using the best tool for the job, an important step in the direction of getting as close as possible to the composers' intentions. Which



is also why I have never abandoned the modern violin and later music; I try to play all music as though it is new music, and I play quite a bit of new music, and I don't always find living composers any more willing to reveal how to play their music than the dead composers of the past! Which of course gives one a lot of freedom!

**Q:** How has playing baroque violin influenced the way you approach modern violin, both technically and in terms of how you think about music?

**A:** One of my principal violin teachers, Sandor Végh, used a vocabulary about playing that was very close to what we now associate with historical performance practice. He spoke a great deal about variety of articulation with the bow, playing in a speaking manner, swinging with the bow, using vibrato judiciously, being relaxed and free, breathing with the music, musical gesture. He was a pupil of Hubay, who was a

pupil of Joachim, and he had a strong sense of carrying on an old tradition of playing and music-making which he felt was being lost. And ironically this old tradition was much closer to what we are doing with old music nowadays, if not in actual execution then certainly in point of departure. He also spoke about being true to the composer: "Don't you make the music; let the music make you!" he would say.

Playing the baroque violin is so much closer to the edge of the precipice; if the playing is not in good order, in perfect balance, and both well-controlled and totally relaxed, then the instrument barks back at you much more quickly. So one returns to the modern instrument more relaxed, better controlled, and more aware of controlling sound judiciously.

**Q:** Any thoughts about how to approach baroque music on a modern violin?

Starting with a negative, I would say that trying to replicate the playing style one uses on the baroque violin (e.g. re-taking dotted figures) *is not* the right approach. I also feel that using a baroque bow on a modern violin is not a good solution as they are incompatible tools, although the exercise is a useful one for giving one a feeling for what a baroque bow can and can't do (e.g. can articulate very naturally; can't sustain an intense sound). So the aim should be to replicate or respect the kinds of sounds that a baroque violin and bow naturally produce, whatever the means. And be aware of the very important shift in musical thinking and expression that happened from baroque/classical style to romantic style, a shift that can best be described as going from thinking vertically (beat hierarchy, articulation, harmonic intonation) to horizontally (spun-out sound, linear intonation). A modern violin can get very near to what a baroque violin can (and can't!) do; the difference is that one has to "contrive" the sounds on the modern violin that baroque instruments produce naturally. Like imitation crabmeat—take another fish

and make it look and taste like crab.

Q: What are some easily accessible resources for teachers interested in educating themselves about teaching baroque music (books, recordings, websites)?

A: I would suggest reading Leopold Mozart's book, which contains a great deal of useful information and is also very entertaining for its flavor and atmosphere and insight into the man who taught his famous son. A very useful resource is the book *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners* by Judy Tarling. She separately covers each subject related to playing and interpretation and quotes from all the available historical sources to provide an

overview of appropriate performance practice for that heading.

Q: You are playing a concert with Lyra's Artistic Director Jacques Ogg this fall. What is on the program?

A: We will play two of the wonderful sonatas by Bach for violin and obbligato harpsichord. Aside from being incredible music, they were an important step to the sonatas by Mozart, in that Bach essentially converted the baroque trio sonata form into a duo form by giving the second part to the right hand of the keyboard player.

On the second half we will play the not-so-well-known Suite in A Major BWV 1025, which is in fact a transcription by

Bach of a sonata for lute by Silvis Leopold Weiss, who was the pre-eminent lute player in Bach's time, and a friend of W.F. Bach. (It is said that he and Bach competed at improvising, on the occasion of Weiss visiting Bach's house.) Bach has given the lute part virtually unchanged to the harpsichord and added a rather improvisatory violin part, as well as adding an opening Fantasia.

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