



# BAROQUE PRACTICE

## An Interview with Baroque Cellist Jaap ter Linden

by Ginna Watson

“Rubato.”

That’s what distinguishes historically-informed performance from the “modern” style of playing Baroque music, according to internationally acclaimed Dutch cellist Jaap ter Linden.

Rubato? Freedom of rhythm and tempo? Isn’t that associated with Romantic music, with Brahms and Chopin, rather than with Baroque composers like Bach and Telemann?

Not so—rubato has always existed in music, even before the Baroque period, said ter Linden. The Baroque cellist, who has performed with every major period-instrument ensemble in Europe and toured extensively around the world, visited St. Paul last season to serve as guest director and soloist with the Lyra Baroque Orchestra. Rubato comes naturally from the music, he explained: it has its roots in language, and is the language or speech of music.

String players often assume that Baroque music must have a steady, “machine-like” tempo, and that all the notes must be played the same way in order to achieve that unvarying, repetitive sound. “But that’s not how we speak,” said ter Linden. “Some of our words are longer than others; sometimes we pause, sometimes we speed up to get to the point of what we’re saying; sometimes we slow down for emphasis.”

What this means is that period-instrument players often end up performing Baroque music with greater freedom (although with a steady underlying pulse) than their modern counterparts, according to ter Linden. “Modern players say [we] have so many rules” in Baroque performance practice, “but ironically, they’re the ones with rules—‘every note must have vibrato,’ ‘all bow strokes must be the same length,’ etc.” Instead, ter Linden advocates playing music—all music, not just Baroque—as if we’re speaking, with all the variety our

language contains. That way, we’re communicating what we really mean to say.

And how do we know what we mean to say? Looking to what the composer wrote to give us the meaning of the music and how to play it is the other distinguishing characteristic of historically-informed performance, according to ter Linden.

“The composer started out with nothing—a blank slate. There were no notes, no rhythms, no intervals. Why did he or she write what they did? Why major instead of minor? Why upward intervals instead of downward ones?”

Looking at the choices the composer made in creating a piece of music can help us make choices about how to perform or teach it, said ter Linden. He gave an example from the *St. John Passion*, where Bach begins the aria about Jesus’ death with a descending 5<sup>th</sup>. The following aria, where Jesus is resurrected, begins with an ascending 4<sup>th</sup>. “The audience knows what that means; how could you not play it any way but triumphantly?”

Discerning the feeling of a piece can also help performers figure out how to play it technically. “I let the composer’s music show me how to speak and to feel, and that translates into what kind and length of bows to use, etc.,” said ter Linden. He added that it’s important to start with the composer’s “musical language” when teaching students a piece, and not just jump into

teaching the notes and bowings. “I ask my students, why did the composer write those notes? Those rhythms? I let my students tell me; it makes them think about what they’re playing.”

This approach works well with younger students, he noted: “Children don’t have preconceived notions about how a piece is supposed to sound, and that’s good.”

“Does it make a difference? I think it must,” he mused. “We must use our minds and hearts both [when playing music]. It’s hard work to think about what the composer meant when writing the music; but the audience doesn’t know that—they know how it feels, so the player must communicate that feeling to them.”

When you see and hear Jaap ter Linden play his cello, it’s clear that it does make a difference. His body adds words to the music he’s playing, and his bow speaks the language of the rhythm and phrases that the composer created.

*The Lyra Baroque Orchestra, Jacques Ogg, Artistic Director, is the period-instrument orchestra of the Twin Cities. Lyra opens its 26<sup>th</sup> season September 17 and 18 with a concert of 17<sup>th</sup>-century programmatic music by Schmelzer, Biber and Charpentier, featuring guest artist Marc Destrube, Baroque violin. For more information go to [www.lyrabaroque.org](http://www.lyrabaroque.org) or call 651-321-2214. Ginna Watson is a member of the orchestra. †*



Photo: Marco Borggreve