



BAROQUE PRACTICE

An Interview with Luis Otávio Santos

by Mary Sorlie

Born in Brazil, baroque violinist Luis Otávio Santos has performed throughout the world. His love and passion for baroque violin came at an early age. He comes from a family of musicians, and grew up listening to early music played by his older brothers and sisters. He started violin when he was five years old. When he was about twelve, he began to play medieval and renaissance music with his older siblings. He continued his studies on modern violin at that time, but began to play and study baroque music on his own. "I always liked early music, so I think it was a question of love. At that time, there were no baroque violin teachers in Brazil." At the urging of Jacques Ogg, he went to the Netherlands to study baroque violin at the Royal Conservatory of the Hague. He was 17 when he went to study violin with Sigiswald Kuijken and harpsichord with Jacques Ogg. He never went back to modern violin. "I found my life in early music."

As a soloist, he is regarded as a baroque violin virtuoso. He has made numerous solo recordings, most notably the Bach sonatas for violin and harpsichord, and the Leclair violin sonatas. His concept of sound in baroque playing is "loud and healthy and beautiful and pretentious and ambitious. Baroque music should have a loud and generous sound, nurtured and good hearted. It should not be a small sound." He would love to study and learn some unknown pieces by Locatelli. "I like to do the difficult and unknown repertoire." When asked how his baroque playing has changed over the last 25 years, with a laugh he says, "I think better! It is only a consequence of studying things like intonation and bowings. I think the music is also more profound the longer you study and play."

As a baroque violin teacher, he meets each student where they are technically and musically. For many students, the change

from modern playing to baroque playing can be very difficult. It can be a long process to reconsider and review one's whole approach to violin playing. "I don't want to traumatize them with this crossover process." Luis believes the master/apprentice relationship is the solution. His doctorate thesis focused on the paradox of the baroque way of teaching and sharing knowledge, and the modern, conservatory style of teaching. The



Luis Otávio Santos captivating 4th grade students in the GTCYS Harmony program at Riverview Elementary School on the West Side of St. Paul

conservatory or method style of teaching came out of the French Revolution, where "you go your first year and do this, second year do that and then have your diploma in the fourth year." The baroque period was a very different approach. "It was learning how to leave the very humanistic process with each musician. There was not a specific method for baroque violin." Ultimately, it is about helping the student to become an artist, no matter what their starting level is.

On his most recent visit to the Twin Cities, Luis performed with the Lyra Baroque Orchestra, held a masterclass, and visited an elementary school. Violinist Lindsey Bordner was one of the participants in the masterclass, as well as a violinist in the Lyra Baroque Orchestra. One of the first things that Luis told her was that she should not be afraid to dig into the sound. Lindsey

says, "He really encouraged me to dig in with the bow and draw out more sound, even if it is a slower more tender sounding piece of music. Don't try too hard to finesse the sound." In performing with Luis in the Lyra performances, Luis would not dictate every note or articulation, but Lindsey says "a lot of it is by inspiration. It encourages us to watch and be engaged and play more together. In our classical training, we are

taught very specifically what to do, because it is usually a part of the music. But in the baroque period, much less of that was written and you just had to know what the style and traditions were. I find there is much more freedom in baroque music."

Conducting for Luis has come about more recently. He is a highly sought-after conductor, leading both modern and baroque orchestras. Early on, he has always led orchestras from the violin/concertmaster position. He prefers to do that as much as he can. Only when necessary, will he conduct without the violin, "an opera

or something really big." He is conducting more and more modern orchestras, in Brazil as well as throughout Europe. He finds that orchestras are "interested in having the information, the crossover between two worlds. It is becoming more and more common in Europe for traditional orchestras to shake it up a little bit." He enjoys these experiences as the new information and attitudes towards the music changes and the orchestras sound different. He approaches modern orchestras differently than baroque orchestras. "I never arrive with the attitude that I am going to teach you. Orchestras hate that. I am always very humble and collegial. I am a violin player and not a conductor. It is always good when you step down and don't tell them how to play. I try to be very generous in giving a lot of images and analogies. It comes very

naturally without imposing the laws and the rules.”

When asked what are the first steps that one should do when wanting to explore the world of baroque performance, Luis said, “You have to have a real affinity for it. You have to like the idea that this is a good path. You shouldn’t be convinced of doing

it because it is more chic, you have to really be searching for it. It really is a search for beauty. Choose well your teacher and your model.” The artistic credo that he lives by is that one should always have open eyes, try to absorb everything and then choose what you want and make the best of it.

Mary Sorlie is an active free-lance violinist in the Twin Cities, playing both modern and baroque instruments. A regular member of the Lyra Baroque orchestra, she has also played with Minnesota Opera, Bach Society and Minnesota Sinfonia. She loves teaching, playing, running and chocolate. ♪