

# Jazz and the Brandenburg Concertos

## COMING THIS FALL

### **Christian McBride on Bach and the Brandenburg Concerto**

His taste in music, however, is not bound by category. “I have a reputation for acoustic, straight-ahead jazz,” he says, “but what I listen to at home is fusion, funk, classical. The music I like participating in is open, heady. You listen to the bass parts in Bach, the Brandenburg concerto, they’re like bebop lines.” [Hot Fusion; by Peter McElhinney; Style Weekly, 2011](#)

### **John Clayton**

I emailed John Clayton. told him about “Jazz and the Brandenburg Concerto” and he responded by email:

What a fascinating class. Your course title makes me want to fire up some Bach!

...And I just paused to do exactly that.

I’ve been playing Bach since my teens. His counterpoint and bass lines have

always been remarkable, infectious and approachable. It's like eating the richest, most sinful food you can imagine, yet it's easily digestible and has no calories. Something like that allows you to consume and desire more and more! The bass lines alone are hip and melodic. Everything he does is the best and is recognized as such. Bach is German Bebop that the world, like jazz, can enjoy forever.

## **Abdullah Ibrahim (interview by Dan Ouellette)**

Q. You studied the Bach Brandenburg Concertos?

A. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Q. Tell me about it. So, and what did it bring? What did it bring to your playing?

A. It still does it. But you first have to talk about the regime in South Africa. The bedrock of that policy was that we do not have the mental capacity to deal with such intricate things.

But a lot of that trickles down into the communities or to individuals because when I started playing things on that level—not the Brandenburg in general—but at that level, I mean I was booed off the stage. You know, what the hell are you doing?

Across from a cinema there was Mr. Martin's cafe and there was an old broken, a grand piano. But the gangsters were always having holiday there, but they were really friends.

So I used to compose there maybe go into that room and you'd get completely stone, even if you don't smoke because they were. They liked the music because they could see pictures. So I didn't know it wasn't because they were enjoying the

music or their joints.

Well the Brandenburg Concertos, I listened to everything. We had a gramophone and then the string breaks and we don't have money to fix it. So you spin the disc with your finger. I was 14, 15. I played one 78 over and over but the label was so old I didn't know what the music was. But I played it over and over again. And years afterwards I discovered it was the Debussy's Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun. So I think looking back that my ears were open to this, and I transcended the instruction that they were trying to place us. Then it was The rite of spring. And Brandenburg Concertos was part of all that.

I realized that it was serial music and there's this formula. Yeah. And also why you don't you crack the formula unless you know what are doing. Uh, and I said, okay, so all of this music was composed by other people, but so you bow to it of course. [I studied with Hal Overton in New York later] and he gave me Bach preludes and fugues to study. Then he said, okay, play it to me. Because Bach was not recorded it had to be my interpretation of it. So then I realized, you know, wait a minute. Okay. I believe in Brandenburg Concerto, that's Bach. Do you know how he phrases that's how he breathes, but that's not my breathing. I had to find my own voice.

I can appreciate the formula of the concertos. Yeah, absolutely. [inaudible] and music. Yeah, but it wasn't your voice, but it wasn't your voice. Why would I want to, why would I want to play it?

## **Wynton Marsalis**

“I like for the music to be hard,” Marsalis said. “As a trumpet player, why do I

want to play the Brandenburg Concerto? Because it's hard. I want to play the pieces that challenge me the most. I don't just mean velocity. Some music is emotionally complex, too. But a degree of complexity, balanced with a certain spiritual substance and emotional weight, ensures that your music will remain."

– <https://wyntonmarsalis.org/news/entry/a-2006-downbeat-feature-on-wynton-marsalis-who-turned-50-yesterday>

## **Mark Twain**

"Johann Sebastian Bachs music is better than it sounds."

## **Carl Sagan**

Carl Sagan lead the selection of music on the Golden Record that is on the Voyager spacecrafts – the only human objects to leave our solar system. He was the one who selected Karl Richter and the Munich Bach Orchestra version of the 1st movement of the 2nd Brandenburg Concerto to be the first music on the record. When asked why he didn't include more Bach he said, "That would be bragging."

## **Charlie Parker**

According to Al McKibben Charlie Parker used to call other musicians at 3 or 4 in the morning with the Brandenburg Concerto playing in the background and Charlie Parker improvising over it.

## **Jon Batiste On what he loves about Bach**

I think that Bach is really the mysticism of music, spirituality of music, the depth of how he's able to be so systematic and logical, symmetrical at times, super symmetrical, to the point of it almost being a musical game of sorts, yet it harboring such a depth of human feeling, the range of human emotions and asking questions about the afterlife.

The *St. Matthew Passion*, I was listening to that maybe yesterday, a couple days ago. It's about three hours long and just listening to that makes you realize what's possible. He's arguably the best at a thing that anyone has ever been in the history of doing a thing.

**[Bach is] arguably the best at a thing that anyone has ever been in the history of doing a thing.**

*Amy Salit and Thea Chaloner produced and edited the audio of this interview. Bridget Bentz, Molly Seavy-Nesper and Sidney Madden adapted it for the Web.*

<https://www.npr.org/2018/09/26/651768562/in-the-moment-you-just-fly-jon-batiste-lets-loose-at-the-piano>

## **Bobby McFerrin**

- [Bobby McFerrin interview from the Bach and Friends Film](#)

**I gotta tell you a story about the Bach Violin Concerto in A Minor.**

**I sang the entire concerto with members of the San Francisco Symphony standing behind me in a semi-circle. And in the second movement, I got**

completely turned around and lost. And the musicians were playing and you could see in their eyes, are we gonna stop, are we gonna stop, are we gonna start over again, and they were wondering what I was going to do. And so I improvised my way to a spot that I recognized and then took it from there. Anyway, we finished the piece, intermission comes, and I'm very embarrassed and sorry that I had put them through this experience, and I'm apologizing profusely to the players, I was a brand new conductor and I had messed up and all that kind of stuff. But one of the women in the orchestra was this older woman and she came up to me and she looked at me and said, "Bach would have loved it!" And it was because I was improvising, I was just sort of making something up. I'll never forget that, I'll never forget that. •

## **Art Farmer**

In June 1994, Farmer was awarded the Austrian Gold Medal of Merit, and in August 1994 was honored for lifetime achievement at a concert at Lincoln Center in New York. The same momentous year brought the debut of the Academy Award-nominated documentary "A Great Day in Harlem," inspired by a day in 1958 when 60 jazz greats, including Farmer, gathered for a photo. Also in 1994, Farmer recorded the "Brandenburg" Concertos with the New York Jazz Orchestra and performed Haydn's First Trumpet Concerto with the Austrian-Hungarian Haydn Philharmonic Orchestra.

## **Bill Evans**

"You can never play enough Bach." • The Surprising Influence of J.S. Bach on Jazz Great Bill Evans By [DEBRA LEW HARDER](#) • MAR 18, 2018

## **Dave Brubeck**

SS: Dave, you often identify Bach as your favorite composer. What influence has Bach had on your musical career in terms of both composition, and your improvisations?

DB: Well, I love the Brandenburg Concertos, and I think they're so rhythmic, and so full of life, and so related in a way to jazz. Or, jazz is related to it (laughter).

The fact that many people at his time knew how he could improvise, and he liked to improvise on Sunday in church, and the minister would usually not like it at all that he was improvising because the audience, the congregation would get so wrapped up in his improvisation that they wouldn't listen to his homily.

And so, he would ask Bach not to improvise so much, and would say, "The congregation doesn't like it when you change the harmonies," which probably he didn't like it — the minister. But, the similarity between the figured bass that Bach used with the choir, and the chord progressions that a jazz musician uses are kind of a similarity that you improvise in these progressions.

And, that again relates it to jazz. And, he must have been a tremendous improviser. There are certain organists to this day that improvise so great, that in classical music, it's been the organists that have kept alive the old tradition of improvisation, while most symphonic music has let it die out. That, again, I credit to Bach's great legacy of improvisation. It carried over into Mozart and into Beethoven.

<https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/bohp/22/>

**John Steinbeck**

"The detailed lives of clerks don't interest me much unless, of course, the clerk

breaks into heroism. But I have no intention of trying to explain my book. It has to do that for itself. I would be sure of its effect if it could be stipulated that the reader read an obligato of Bach.”

## **Robert Louis Stevenson**

RLS put his poetry to Bach’s music and said, ““Bach is adorable; so singularly unspewy. I wish I could get the Pentecost air with more than one finger; but ... the attempt to introduce the other notes knocks the time to old Harry ...”

- Links and Bibliography
- The True Life of J.S. Bach; by Klaus Eidam (recommended by David Gordon, Dramaturge, Carmel Bach Festival)

## **Eddie Palmieri**

•I like to read. I’ll read a little philosophy, and about the great composers. My favorite is Johann Sebastian Bach — he was really the first jazz player, with his inventions and what he did for the keyboard in the 1600s and 1700s. He’s a genius! (Why a legendary pianist says Bach was the first jazz great By [Raquel Laneri](#))