

# Chick Corea "Jazz and the Brandenburg Concertos"

Interview by Dan Ouellette

July 16, 2019

- **Dan Ouellette** - This class on the Brandenburg Concerto, focusing on Bach. And you were telling me before that Bach wasn't something that you really spent a lot of time with.
- **Chick Corea** - No, I appreciate Johann Sebastian Bach as a genius and one of the great composers of all time. And I looked enough into his work to see what a magician he was. And he was one of the--I could tell that he was one of these kind of musicians and composers that--he spent his life doing it. In those days, there wasn't a lot of facilities, no electricity. One thing I read about him that impressed me was, as a young man, he . . . had a gig as a . . . kappelmeister, or an assistant kappelmeister, at a church. But, the way he studied other musicians works because there's no recordings, and there's no . . . copy machines--.
- **Dan Ouellette** - --Quills--.
- **Chick Corea** - --Yeah. What he used to do was, at night time, he used to take candles and go to . . . wherever this library was in the church that had scores of other composers that he was interested in, and he would spend the night copying the score to making a . . . copy of it in order to study and to learn. So, you can tell that he was intensely into what he did and, for the short time that he lived, wrote an incredible amount of music.

And he must have been like Mozart, the kind of guy who just--he wrote. He didn't ponder. He couldn't have pondered over a thing or sat there trying to figure out what to write next. It just poured out of him. I think reading a little bit about him, that he also must have been a great improviser. And my sense of that era, you could say Bach, Scarlatti, and then up into Mozart and Beethoven, is that--maybe not Beethoven so much--but up through Mozart, they had to earn their living working for the court. There weren't any street gigs, no clubs -- the concerts were all in the court.

- **Dan Ouellette** - --Or the church, yeah--?
- **Chick Corea** - --Yeah. And the church--well, that's a part of the court.
- **Dan Ouellette** - --Oh, okay--.
- **Chick Corea** - --Yeah, I think the king owned everything, or the church did. I don't know one way or the other. But they had to comply with the . . . [knock on door] . . . Oh, oh, come on in, Carlo. Come on in.
- **Carlo Pagnotta** - Just, how was the piano?

- **Chick Corea** - Oh, the piano was magnificent, man. It was really, really good. I enjoyed the instrument, and I enjoyed the touch very much. So, if I play--if I play around here again--.
- **Carlo Pagnotta** - --Okay. And the same tuner--.
- **Chick Corea** - --Yeah, same tuner and maybe, you know, you choose the piano. You can't-- the pianos change over the years. But, that particular instrument is wonderful tonight. I enjoyed it.
- **Carlo Pagnotta** - Thank you. Sorry.
- **Chick Corea** - It had a good sound.
- **Dan Ouellette** - No, no, no, no, no. You stay.
- **Chick Corea** - Did you listen? Did you listen?
- **Unknown Speaker** - Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- **Chick Corea** - It had a good sound. Did you listen (cross talking).
- **Carlo Pagnotta** - It was near Bernie. Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- **Chick Corea** - You were near Bernie? How did it sound.
- **Carlo Pagnotta** - Yeah, yeah, yeah. Great, great sound.
- **Chick Corea** - Bernie's good.
- **Carlo Pagnotta** - He's fantastic. He's the best. All perfect.
- **Chick Corea** - Everything sounded very good. Yeah, Bernie's great. Bernie is great. So, thank you.
- **Carlo Pagnotta** - No, it's a pleasure.
- **Chick Corea** - Carlo Pagnotta, you're a wild man, man?
- **Unknown Speaker** - What?
- **Chick Corea** - You never grow old. You stay the same all the time. You look--.
- **Dan Ouellette** - --And he's an old timer too--.
- **Chick Corea** - --You look like a young kid.

- **Dan Ouellette** - I know.
- **Chick Corea** - And I like your scarf too. Very nice.
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- **Carlo [sp?]** - It's from Brazil.
- **Dan Ouellette** - He used to have a suit shop. He used to have a shop in Perugia, a fashion shop.
- **Chick Corea** - Look at those shoes. Oh yeah (cross talking). No problem. Okay. Alright.
- **Dan Ouellette** - Adios.
- **Chick Corea** - Yeah. So, they worked for the court, and--but, the amazing thing was that the music kind of poured out of them because then, I think, Bach--if I'm not mistaken, weren't the Brandenburg Concertos written not for the court? I think the Brandenburg Concertos were written for a group of musicians outside the church. Isn't that correct? [They were written for the Court of the Marquise of Brandenburg, but not for the Church]
- **Unknown Speaker** - I'm not sure (cross talking). I'm not the expert on it.
- **Chick Corea** - Anyway--.
- **Dan Ouellette** - Well, what about your personal experience with Bach? Did you--?
- **Chick Corea** - --Well, that was it. You mean playing the music--?
- **Dan Ouellette** - --Yeah, yeah.
- **Chick Corea** - I didn't study Bach as a pianist. I played a little bit of two part inventions, I played the--I played some of the Goldberg variations, which I like. That's a beautiful piece of music. There's one movement in the Goldberg, which is in minor key, G minor, that I took and I was playing in my solo concerts. It's a beautiful piece of music. But, it's interesting that Bach wrote the way he wrote. But, he was--if only we could see him improvise and see what he did. It would have been very interesting.
- **Dan Ouellette** - You know your buddy Christian McBride told us that--or said that he saw Bach as being kind of like the father of bebop.
- **Chick Corea** - Okay.
- **Dan Ouellette** - Agree? Disagree?
- **Chick Corea** - I don't know. That's a poetic way to say something.

- **Dan Ouellette** - Yeah. Well, he's a bass player too. So, he's listening to all the bass stuff that Bach was doing there, like deep.
- **Chick Corea** - Yeah, yeah.
- **Dan Ouellette** - He went deep into it.
- **Chick Corea** - Brilliant, brilliant stuff.
- **Dan Ouellette** - Yeah.
- **Chick Corea** - I see what he means with--Bach maybe was one of the first composers that started writing in a way of changing tonalities and changing keys. He'd be modulating to different keys and was beginning to be free with his harmony. Same as Mozart. Mozart and Beethoven too--they used--they didn't stay in one mode or one key. They changed a lot, and the way they made their transitions is very harmonic -- it set the sort of harmonic tone of western music, really, because, before that, it was more or less modal and one kind of tonal sound.

Then, Bach began to modulate and change. He had the Well-Tempered Clavier. Before that it was hard to play in different keys. But, Bach had the Well-Tempered Clavier. But, that's something maybe the class should look into technically. It's an interesting thing. But, like the difference between a tempered scale and a non-tempered scale. Bach was the first with a tempered scale. That's why he could write in different keys.

- **Dan Ouellette** - Cool. Herbie told me that you always play a lot of classical music. Is that true? That was Herbie's take.
- **Chick Corea** - --I always used classical music as a study reference because so much great music was notated. Right? When you notate music like that--I mean, for instance, the music of jazz, the music of Bossa Nova in Brazil, the music of Africa, a lot of cultural music, Indian music--most of that music is not written down. It's improvised and, you know, then it's beautiful. So, the culture hands it down that way. But, when the western and the European composers began to notate their music, then you have a body of work where you can--actually studying a score--like if I pick up a Bach score or Mozart score, that's what I like to study. I don't listen to the records. I do--of course, I listen to the records. But, my basic reference point is the score because when you read the notes on the score, especially if you know that they're not messed around with by editors--because a lot of the times, the editor will put in pianissimo, forte, all of these expression marks. And the original composers put very, very little expression marks, even tempo marks. They didn't put any tempo marks. So, if you read the original scores, you connect directly with the composer. So, like almost talking to him because that's what he wrote down, you see? So, that's the way I study classical music more from a point of view as a composer rather than a pianist. It was never my goal to play--perform classical music. It was also more my goal to study it as a composer because, in my life, being a composer is my primary hat. That's my primary focus. I'm a pianist too. To play and to

realize my own compositions and to play for the audience. But, really, it's--the composer in me is number one. Without that, the pianist couldn't exist.

- **Dan Ouellette** - Yeah. Well, I've got to say that I've seen you perform a lot, a couple time with Herbie, which is special beyond belief. But, I mean, my top three are you, Herbie, and Chucho Valdes. Those are my top three pianists. And I--so, it's always great to see you. It's great to see you play the piano, to give voice to (unintelligible). You started off with Stravinsky too, right?
- **Chick Corea** - Yeah. That's a piece from one of my favorite Stravinsky suites. He wrote a ballet called "The Fairies' Kiss." And the music of it is inspired by themes of Tchaikovsky. Tchaikovsky was one of Stravinsky's mentors, not as a teacher more, but Tchaikovsky was already an established, imposing, incredible composer, of ballet and everything else when Stravinsky was a young man. So, Stravinsky remembered seeing Tchaikovsky in Russia. So, he took, later on--Stravinsky took that homage to Tchaikovsky that he wrote. He used those themes to write "The Fairies' Kiss." So, that movement is Pas De Deux--is the part of the suite where the man and woman do their solo dance together, their duet dance. And it captured me. So, I transcribed it for the piano.
- **Dan Ouellette** - Is that going to be on the record?
- **Chick Corea** - It's on the record, yeah. It's on the record because it--and in the original piece, it goes (SINGING) and it doesn't resolve. It goes to the next movement. So, I resolved it to the next sound onto one of my pieces. So, I put it--I used it as an intro to a piece of mine that I wrote.
- **Dan Ouellette** - Yeah, yeah. Well, listen, I know you're going on tour and getting a tour bus. Let me see how long it took me to do this. I asked for ten--ten minutes, and you gave me (cross talking).
- **Dan Ouellette** - --I co-produce stuff with this friend of mine out in Monterey. And we co-produce videos that show at the Monterey Jazz Festival together. I said I'm going to be out here.
- **Chick Corea** - Well, it was nice to talk to you again.
- **Dan Ouellette** - It's very nice to talk with you too.

**Following is a transcript of comments made by Chick Corea at the Monterey Jazz Festival. He was performing with Bela Fleck. (2015)**

Whew . . . Good evening. Welcome to the Monterey Jazz Festival. We'd like to try a little bit of an experiment. For the past months I've been delving into a little bit of the music of a great composer from the time of Bach. Not as well known as Bach, but I like him just as well. His

name is Domenico Scarlatti. . . . He wrote a lot of keyboard music and it's a lot of fun to play. And it's really different messing around with it with Bela [Fleck]. And if you happen to know the score, don't worry - we don't stick to all the notes.