

Abdullah Ibrahim (interview by Dan Ouellette, July 2019)

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 [under Apartheid]. The bedrock of that policy was that we do not have the mental capacity to deal with such intricate things as the Brandenburg Concertos. They wanted us to play pennywhistles. . . .

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 Concerto—but at that level, I mean I was booed off the stage. You know, what the hell are you doing?

In the [Capetown, South Africa] Township, across from the cinema there was Mr. Martin's cafe and there was an old broken grand piano there. But this was where the gangsters have holiday, but they were my friends.

So when I used to compose I'd go there to play my premiere, I'd play for them. Maybe you go into that room and you stay for 1/2 hour you'd be completely stoned, even if you don't smoke because they were. Even though I was there to play this heavy music they didn't want to listen to it - the gangsters. 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.

The Brandenburg Concertos, I listened to everything. We had a gramophone and then the spring 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 couldn't read 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. I know when I first heard The Rite of Spring I said 'Wow - that's it.' And Brandenburg Concertos was part of all that.

I realized that it was serial music and there's this formula. Yeah. And also once you crack the formula you know what they are doing. 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 for me. And then he said to me, "Don't use any jazz phrasing." I said, "well how do you know how Bach played this?"

Because Bach was not recorded it had to be my interpretation of it. So then I realized, you know, wait a minute. Okay. I can play the Brandenburg Concerto, that's Bach. You know how he phrases - that's how he breathes, but that's not how I breath. That's not my rhythm. So I had to find my own rhythm and my own voice.

I can appreciate the formula of the concertos. Yeah, absolutely. Incredible music. Yeah, but it wasn't my voice, it wasn't my voice. Why would I want to, why would I want to play it?