

Fred Hersch Interview for Jazz and the Brandenburg Concertos, by Dan Ouellette 07/15/19

- **Dan Ouellette** - First of all, great show, by the way. It's great to see you in Perugia.
- **Fred Hersch** - Yes. First tour.
- **Dan Ouellette** - I know. It's so amazing.
- **Fred Hersch** - It's crazy, it took me 45 years to get here.
- **Dan Ouellette** - And I saw Carlo after the first set go up to you and apologize to you, for not having invited you sooner.
- **Fred Hersch** - Well, you know--
- **Dan Ouellette** - --He's a huge Monk fan, you know.
- **Fred Hersch** - Well, you know. These things happen when they happen, right?
- **Dan Ouellette** - Well, it's like your book--
- **Fred Hersch** - --*Good Things Happen Slowly*.
- **Dan Ouellette** - When did Bach show up on your radar screen as a young piano player?
- **Fred Hersch** - Probably age five.
- **Dan Ouellette** - Really? And what were you--what did you hear?
- **Fred Hersch** - Well, I was playing the Anna Magdalena Bach book, which is what most young pianists start on. And I think, was around my sixth birthday possibly, I received the box set of Glenn Gould playing the Partitas and Inventions, and sinfonias, Columbia Records, I still have the discs. And it just blew my mind.
- **Dan Ouellette** - Blew your mind in what way?
- **Fred Hersch** - Just the aliveness of it, the rhythm, the--I've always been interested, even as a small child, in multiple moving parts, and of course Bach is the king. In fact, one of the only books I tell any of my piano students to look at are the Bach harmonized chorales, the four-part chorales, because they're just an absolute bible of voice leading, for four-part voice leading. I listened to the Glenn Gould, and then I got Brandenburg Concertos. And then, I started studying theory and composition when I was eight. And one of the pieces we looked at was the B-minor Mass, which is just, magnificent, and also the Brandenburg Concertos. And as I got older and older, I played more and more Bach. And it's one of those things like, if I

ever have an hour free and I don't really feel like improvising, my book of Bach Partitas is right next to my piano always. I like the Partitas, they're dance suites, because each movement has dance rhythm. And the Well-Tempered Clavier is of course, incredibly important, but some of it, honestly, is a little stodgy, it's a little square. But the Partitas have a great--if you find the underlying rhythm, --they're very joyful and beautiful. I think the Brandenburg Concertos are also Bach at his most joyful, you know, a lot of them. I played one of the Bach double concertos. I know a lot of Bach.

- **Dan Oullette** - --Well, focus in on Brandenburg Concertos, because this is what--my friend Bob, he's kind of an expert on Brandenburg Concertos. In your book, we were both looking through the book, and you know, they weren't mentioned.
- **Fred Hersch** - No, well, I wouldn't mention them.
- **Dan Oullette** - Why?
- **Fred Hersch** - Because I don't play them.
- **Dan Oullette** - Uh-huh.
- **Fred Hersch** - You know, it's not--I mean, I could mention 80 other pieces of music I like, but I wouldn't necessarily say, "Oh, the Brandenburg Concertos were my great inspiration."
- **Dan Oullette** - They weren't?
- **Fred Hersch** - No. But they're beautiful--
- **Dan Oullette** - --Yeah.
- **Fred Hersch** - You know, I think of the first movement of the G major one [3rd Brandenburg], and it's just so joyful, that's the word that I use. And you know, Bach was a complicated guy. There's--a lot of people said, you know, he wrote for the glory of God, which he did. And he had 20 children, and wrote by candlelight with quill pens, and no copy machines. And it's all remarkable, and they say that maybe up to one-third of what he wrote has been lost, which is unbelievable. But, I've heard lately, you know, that he was a more complex character, that he, you know, occasionally had drinking problems and problems with authority. And he was not the kind of the--that image of the--you know, he was not the saint that he was often portrayed to be.
- **Dan Oullette** - And he left--he was employed by the church for the longest time, but then he left that, and his music changed, yeah? [sic]
- **Fred Hersch** - Well, a lot of the instrumental music--and I may be wrong about this, this is--some of it is earlier. I mean, there was really no reason for him to write the Partitas or the French Suites or the English Suites or the Well-Tempered Clavier. I mean, nobody was commissioning him to do that, or the Goldberg variations. But he was commissioned to write

cantatas, of which he wrote 270-something that survived. He was commissioned to write B-Minor Mass and The Saint Matthew Passion, and the orchestral works, but the keyboard music is more intimate. You feel like--most pianists that I know, when they play Bach, they feel like they're talking to him, in a way, you know? That he talks through the music directly to the keyboard player, whether it's harpsichord or piano.

- **Dan Oullette** - Bass players, too.
- **Fred Hersch** - Yes, well I mean, the Bach Cello Suites are played by bass players and cellists. It's just an inexhaustible trove of music that he wrote.
- **Dan Oullette** - Christopher McBride referred to, I believe it was Brandenburg Concertos, as the first jazz bebop.
- **Fred Hersch** - You know, I mean, certainly in Bach there are patterns that are sometimes regular, and sometimes he breaks them. But I think what Chris might be referring to is, you know, Baroque music has a--kind of a motor rhythm, you know? When we got into the Romantics, things kind of--you know, they'd speed up, they'd slow down, there would be different sections. You know, Bach, there's a pulse, and there's a specific term for that, and it's called affekt, A-F-F-E-K-T. And so, it's not just the metronome marking of the tempo, it's, are you feeling it in--to each bar, or are you feeling it, you know, to the half bar? Or if it's a three, are you feeling one, three, one, three, one, or are you feeling one, two, three, one, two three, or one, one, one? So those--that's the affekt. And I lived in Boston in the mid-70s, when I went to the New England Conservatory. And I came across the great Dutch early music players, particularly the harpsichordist and conductor Gustav Leonhardt.

And Boston was a real hub of the early music scene in this country, Amsterdam was the hub of the early music scene in Europe. And in fact, for a period of time, I had a harpsichord. A harpsichord is very difficult to play, and of course you have to tune it every time you sit down to it. But the only way to make anything expressive with a harpsichord is by using rhythm, because basically you pluck the string, that's it, doesn't get louder, or softer, or sustain, that's it. So it's a question of when you do it.

And Gustav Leonhardt and later Tom Cookman, who's actually my all-time favorite, you know, when you hear them play Bach keyboard music, or conduct Brandenburs or whatever, whatever, they're able to make it super expressive by really understanding the rhythm from the inside. And that's something that we jazz players know as groove. When you hear a great Baroque orchestra, you know, which are of course much smaller than our normal orchestras, maybe only a single violin or two on a part, small, intimate orchestras, you can tell that they're really feeling the time together, just as I do with John Eber and Eric McPherson. There's never any doubt about the way that the three of us play rhythm together. You know, what I learned early on in my jazz career as hooking up, you know, just that, here we're playing, it's not just the metronome marking, it's the groove.

And great rhythm sections in history, jazz history, sometimes the bass player is behind the beat, and the drummer's on top of the beat, or it could be reversed, or they both could be in the center of the beat. But the main thing is it works, you know, and you can't really quite say why it works, you know? It just does.

- **Dan Oullette** - --Congratulations, by the way, that Downbeat critics recognized the trio as the Top-rated--
- **Fred Hersch** - --Yeah, Jazz Group of the Year. Yeah, it's very nice.
- **Dan Oullette** - It's a great recognition, and it's like--
- **Fred Hersch** - --Yeah, two years ago--.
- **Dan Oullette** - --It's a recognition of what you're doing, I mean, it's just amazing. Let me ask you a couple more questions, and then I'm going to let you go. You were in a competition at the age of 10, in Cincinnati. You played three tunes, one of them was Bach. Do you remember what Bach tune you played?
- **Fred Hersch** - No, I don't.
- **Dan Oullette** - You played a Mozart, you played an original composition that you improvised on--
- **Fred Hersch** - --Yeah, I played some Bach, probably an Invention, I would imagine. That's where my technique was at, was something like that. .
- **Dan Oullette** - That's fine. In your book, you also talked about Bach being kind of a pleasure, or healing place for you.
- **Fred Hersch** - Yeah. I think, you know--I don't think there's anybody that I know who doesn't like Bach, you know? It's like--I mean, maybe there are people out there somewhere. But certainly every musician that I know, whatever instrument they play, you know, they've listened to Bach. Bach is part of their lives, you know, in some way or another. I mean, who knows, maybe for a trombone player, you tried to play the Bach Cello Suites on the trombone.
- **Dan Oullette** - Maybe J.J. Johnson.
- **Fred Hersch** - Yeah. But you know, it's--and I improvise a lot with multiple voices. I try not to make it sound like, tacky, you know, or clichéd, or here we're doing this cute--I try to take the cuteness out of it, you know. But it's something that's always fascinated me.
- **Dan Oullette** - Mm-hmm.
- **Fred Hersch** - The Brandenburg Concertos, of course, there's multiple lines and--you know, but they are concertos. And you know, there's typically a lead, you know. And there's always

the harpsichord playing the continuo part, which actually adds a lot to the rhythm, and it's hard to do well. Bach's son CPE Bach in 1727 wrote a manual on what you needed to know to be a successful keyboard player in that time. And he described transposing, improvising on themes at sight, reading figured bass, which are sort of like chord symbols, except they're numbers, being able to play in different styles, being able to accompany. He was basically describing the modern jazz pianist.

- **Dan Oullette** - Ah, yeah.
- **Fred Hersch** - And that was 1727, so almost, you know, 300 years ago. So there's--you know, and of course Bach, old Bach, fell out of style, and CPE Bach was actually more famous for awhile--
- **Dan Oullette** - --Really--?
- **Fred Hersch** - --Until the Bach revival, which was led mainly by Felix Mendelssohn, brought back Saint Matthew Passion, I believe, and that was like--people went, holy shit, that's incredibly powerful. So you know, he never wrote opera, but the Mass is--the Mass and the Passions are very operatic, and the cantatas are very operatic as well. Yeah, it's just a wondrous thing. And just you know, there was the book Girdle Escher Bach, and they talk about the golden ratio and how that's so much a part of Bach's music. You know, roughly at the two-thirds point, that's kind of usually the peak of it. And if you look at American popular song, 32-bar, AABA forms, usually the peak of the song is at the end of the bridge, which is roughly at the two-thirds point.
- **Dan Oullette** - Wow.
- **Fred Hersch** - So this is something that is just kind of out in the atmosphere.
- **Dan Oullette** - Big part about music history.
- **Fred Hersch** - Yes.
- **Dan Oullette** - Was there ever--what was the first Bach piece that you heard, where you just said, I've got to learn how to play that?
- **Fred Hersch** - It was the B Flat Major Partita, as played by Glenn Gould. And yeah, that was the--you know, I was little older then, I was probably around like 10 or 11. But that--of course I could never play it like him, I still can't play it like him. But there's something about that particular piece that was just a window for me into the world of kind of more mature Bach, not just the, you know, very easy pieces. That was the first one that I tackled. And it's kind of nice, because partitas usually have six, sometimes seven movements, so you learn all these small pieces and then you have a big piece. It's not like learning some, you know, big 20-minute piece, you learn it in chunks.

- **Dan Oullette** - --Let me ask you--I think I have two more minutes, and then I'm going to let you go because I know that being on tour is go go. I really appreciate you spending this time.
- **Fred Hersch** - Sure.
- **Dan Oullette** - The whole connection between Monk and Bach, and I know how much you love Monk, and you played a Monk so beautifully. That's one of the things with Carlo, you know, he's a huge Monk fan. I think he loved hearing you play Monk. But a Monk-Bach connection?
- **Fred Hersch** - Well, I don't know. I mean--
- **Dan Oullette** - --Just your opinion.
- **Fred Hersch** - Yeah, you know, I've read the books on Monk, the biographies. And you know, there are people who swear that he could sit down and, you know, rattle off a complicated Chopin piece if he felt like it. and there's some practice tapes that I heard, from Rob and Kelly, where he takes a standard and he plays it straight, and then over the course of 40 minutes he makes it sound more Monk-like, by doing various--very considered alterations to the tune, harmonically, and displacing. You know, I don't know, I'm sure he came across some Bach, you know, if he studied classical piano, but I'm not sure I see that as a huge connection. I say, probably more--a little bit more bebop or even people like Lennie Tristano, where there's more of a motor rhythm and more gestures, though I'm not so sure about Monk.
- **Dan Oullette** - Do you see a comparison between the two?
- **Fred Hersch** - Between?
- **Dan Oullette** - Monk and Bach.
- **Fred Hersch** - Honestly I don't find that much overlap.
- **Dan Oullette** - Cool. That's good.
- **Fred Hersch** - Yeah.
- **Dan Oullette** - Cool.
- **Fred Hersch** - I think I'm good with you.
- **Dan Oullette** - Okay.
- **Fred Hersch** - Thank you so much, I really--
- **Dan Oullette** - --Sure--.

- **Fred Hersch** - --I really appreciate it, and I really appreciate you wrestling that microphone.
- **Dan Oullette** - Yes, and hopefully it all worked, so.
- **Fred Hersch** - Well, if it didn't, it didn't. No, at least one of these did.
- **Dan Oullette** - One of those must work, yes.
- **Fred Hersch** - So, many, many, many thanks.
- **Dan Oullette** - Alright. Thanks again.
- **Fred Hersch** - And good luck. You have a couple more dates, right?
- **Dan Oullette** - Yeah. We're playing in Nice, and then Molde.
- **Fred Hersch** - Mm-hmm.
- **Dan Oullette** - And--that's John's--and Nice and Molde. That's what--I played it again to the WDR Big Band, and then I play solo in Brescia. So it's been--and I had a vacation with my partner, which was very nice.
- **Fred Hersch** - Oh good.
- **Dan Oullette** - So yeah, all good.
- **Fred Hersch** - Nineteen minutes, how's that?
- **Dan Oullette** - Beautiful, you nailed it.