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Research Abstract

This presentation provides a theoretical analysis of Ron Carter's performance of J.S. Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, recorded in 1995. I am currently working directly with Carter to construct my analysis, which draws from Carter's explanation of his influences, his approach, and salient technical aspects of his performance. Additionally, I will discuss how Carter, an American jazz bassist, expands on the historical practice of improvisation in the Brandenburg Concerto by providing new and innovative interpretive possibilities, drawing from Black American improvised traditions. I will contextualize Carter's performance by examining the historical practice and decline of improvisation in the European canonic music tradition as discussed by Moore,¹ demonstrating how Carter's progressive performance contradicts "museum culture," or the tendency to preserve past works rather than create new ones.² From a theoretical perspective, Carter's performance can be analyzed by classifying sections of the performance into four distinct categories. 1) Scripted sections are performed with a traditional interpretation, or performed "as written." 2) Embellished sections feature slight changes and variations to written material. 3) Improvised sections feature freely improvised melodies based the chord progression derived (and expanded upon) from the accompaniment. 4) Transitions seamlessly connect improvised sections to emulative sections. Carter interweaves these various sections together cohesively into a performance that displays technical virtuosity, creative invention, and organic musicality. Furthermore, this presentation examines the sections in detail, analyzing how they connect with Carter's personal style and idiomatic jazz vocabulary, and how each element contributes to the effect of the performance. Bassist Christian McBride notes, "I don't think that anyone has significantly added to the innovations that Ron made on his instrument harmonically as far as creating bass lines."³ Carter's tenure with the experimental Miles Davis Quintet from 1963–1968 cemented his position as one of the most influential bassists in jazz history. Since his work with Davis, Carter has become the most recorded bassist in the jazz field, collaborating with artists including Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Eric Dolphy, Bobby Hutcherson, McCoy Tyner, and many more.⁴ Carter's recordings as a leader have explored the piccolo bass, and an interest in fusing jazz and classical music, as demonstrated in his recording of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 and his 2006 album, *Play Bach*.

¹ Robin Moore, "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 23, no. 1 (June 1992): 61–84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/836956>.

² Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Nineteenth Century: The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press Incorporated, 2009), 675–682.

³ Mark Stryker, "Jazz from Detroit (University of Michigan Press, 2019), 118–126.

⁴ Ibid.