Regina Carter

Violinist Regina Carter combines dazzling technical proficiency and profound compositional and improvisational gifts with a fresh, aggressive approach to her instrument and a multicultural perspective - and she challenges our preconceptions regarding the instrument. "People are only used to hearing violin in European classical music or country music," says the Detroit-born violinist, "and so we get stuck in this idea that this is what a violin is supposed to do. And it's such a precious instrument and such a delicate instrument... That's what people think: it's such a small, delicate little thing. Even sometimes I play with classical players in a quartet and part of the piece might call to use the back of the bow, the wood, to hit on the string to get a percussive effect or to get a different sound, and they'll say, 'I'm not going to bang on my instrument like that. This violin cost way too much money.'They don't think of it as another way of playing the instrument. They don't really want to go beyond what we think of; so even the musicians themselves sometimes are stuck into those old ways of thinking."

In Carter's hands, the violin reveals both its melodic side and its potential for percussive expression. Perhaps more significantly, Regina Carter demonstrates the violinist's eagerness to explore musical combinations and contexts both familiar and unexpected.

The ease with which Carter is able to switch musical idioms derives from a lifetime spent immersed in music. She began playing the piano at the age of two, then switched to violin at four. Carter considers the Suzuki method of instruction - which emphasizes learning by doing, to play by ear rather than by sight - to be a significant factor in her subsequent ability to improvise since, as she says, "it freed us up from the paper - from reading a lot."

At first, she listened to classical music. Then, as she got older she discovered R&B. "There was just a lot of different music going on there [in Detroit]," she observes, "because we had Motown happening and Parliament and Funkadelic, and the Symphony, so there was some of everything. When I went to school I took a class in East Indian music and the history of India, and then African music." Her original goal was to become a soloist with a major orchestra, and in her youth she studied and performed with the Detroit Civic Symphony. Jazz wasn't a big part of her life until she heard Jean Luc Ponty as a high school student. "I just immediately fell in love with it and started studying jazz a little bit in high school," she recalls. As a college student at the New England Conservatory, she studied both classical and jazz before deciding to pursue jazz fulltime. After two years at the Conservatory, Carter transferred to Oakland University in Michigan, and gigged constantly around Detroit with many of the local musicians, including trumpeter Marcus Belgrave. In 1987, she joined the all-female jazz quintet Straight Ahead and recorded two albums with them before deciding to step out on her own. Now based in New York, she has worked with the likes of Oliver Lake, Max Roach, and the Uptown String Quartet, and she also records with the String Trio of New York.