

# Getting in Tune

by Alistair Edwards



jazz violinist Regina Carter

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Every Wednesday afternoon, music resonated through the second-floor halls of Bear Creek Middle School, and this Wednesday was no exception. Inside the band room, a group of 40 middle schoolers were hard at work with their conductor Mr. Green, practicing an adaptation of "Jupiter" from Gustav Holst's "The Planets."

On this day, all the students were working together to create a beautiful harmony of sounds. All, that is, except Jordan Robinson, who sat squarely in the middle of the first violin section. While his classmates seemed to be traveling to the stars as they played this symphony, Jordan felt earthbound... and uninspired.

*Screeeeeeeeech!* Oh, no... Jordan, distracted, had played a very important note very out of tune. Mr. Green immediately waved his hands to silence the orchestra, his eyes trained on the first violins. Jordan held his breath, embarrassed at his mistake... but just then, the bell rang, signaling the end of class.

Jordan tried to exit the room quickly and quietly, but Mr. Green approached him.

"Jordan," he asked calmly, "do you have a few minutes to talk?"

"Sure," Jordan said. "What's up, Mr. Green?" He followed Mr. Green into his office, then waited nervously to see if his teacher was going to berate him.

Mr. Green sat down at his desk, took a sip out of his black coffee mug, then asked, "Jordan, how are you feeling? You seem... distant."

Jordan avoided his teacher's eyes and responded, "I'm not really sure."

"You're one the best violinists in this class, but you haven't been playing well lately," Mr. Green noted, "and I know that it's not about your practicing, because you're a hard worker."

"I do practice every day," Jordan replied, "but something just isn't right. I don't feel...connected to what we're playing."

"I see..." said Mr. Green. "Well, our spring recital is in a few weeks. Have you decided what you'll play?"

"Not yet," Jordan admitted.

"Did you look at the Mendelssohn piece that I sent you?"

"Yeah, but I didn't really like it. It's like you said-my heart isn't feeling it."

Jordan looked at his teacher despondently, unsure of what to do next. He felt very close to backing out of the recital-or even giving up on music altogether-but Mr. Green spoke first.

"All right, Jordan, take a few more days to try and find a piece you connect with," Mr. Green said sympathetically. "But since the recital is coming up, if you don't discover anything soon, perhaps we give Mr. Mendelssohn another shot, hmm?"

"Okay," Jordan said half-heartedly, "thanks, Mr. Green."

"Dinner's ready!"

The smell of jambalaya and shrimp wafted through Jordan's house. Upstairs in his room, he'd been practicing for hours, but now he put down his violin and let out a soft cry of frustration. The Mendelssohn sheet music was sitting on his music stand, not a page turned.

"Something needs to change," Jordan thought as he hung his bow in its case. Just then, his grandma knocked at his door and poked her head in.

"You're sounding lovely, and I hate to bother you," she said, "but dinner is on the table."

Jordan smiled at the compliment, but still felt dejected. Grandma, noticing Jordan's frustration, placed a supportive hand on his shoulder and added, "Jordan, I've been wondering-have you ever heard of Regina Carter?"

Jordan shook his head.

"She's an outstanding jazz violinist, and I bet you'd like her music. I also suspect you might learn a thing or two from her." Grandma paused. "In fact, let me show you something," she added, turning to walk out the door and motioning for Jordan to follow.

When they arrived at her bedroom, Grandma pulled a CD player out from underneath her bed. She dug through a stack of discs beside her desk, picked one, put it into the machine, and pressed 'play.'

Jordan was immediately captivated. A gorgeous piece of music, "Soul Eyes," began with a lone violin intro, followed by a slow ballad supported by piano, bass, and drums. As he listened, Jordan realized: This was what he'd been looking for. He'd spent the past few weeks digging through classical works, but nothing connected. But *this* music... it transported him through time and space.

"Wow, Grandma," he said, giving her a big hug, "thank you so much. You don't know how much you've helped me!"

"Don't mention it," she replied, smiling. "Now get downstairs before your dinner gets cold."

Jordan must have eaten his dinner, but he barely noticed. As soon as he had scarfed down the meal, he raced back up to his room and, instead of picking up his bow, plopped down at the computer. He started searching for different jazz charts, considering Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, then coming back to that Regina Carter piece. Hearing that number had flipped a switch in Jordan's mind. He had his spark back and he knew what he was going to play.

After class the next day, Jordan eagerly approached Mr. Green, Regina Carter CD in hand.

"I've figured out what I want to play in the concert, Mr. G," he said, beaming with excitement. "Have you heard of Regina Carter?"

Mr. Green nodded his head. "Yes, I have; what is it about her sound that excites you?"

Jordan paused for a long moment, trying to describe precisely how he felt yesterday when he heard her music for the first time.

"It feels very...free," Jordan finally replied. "It's like she's making things up as she's going along, and it sounds *great*. The music is so well put-together, and less rigid than what we've been playing. It's so... surprising, and playful! I guess that's how it is with improvising?"

"That certainly sounds like improvisation! It's not something that happens when playing Mendelssohn, but jazz musicians do it a lot." Mr. Green seemed lost in thought for a minute, then said, "You know, we've never had anyone perform jazz at our recitals, or try to improvise... but maybe it's time to change that." He stood up and walked over to a nearby piano. "Okay, grab your violin and let's see what comes out!"

Jordan retrieved his violin, and within moments the two of them were having an impromptu jam session. Jordan was cutting loose-creating melodies on the fly and feeling fully engaged. " *This* just flows out of me," Jordan thought. "*This* is the kind of music I want to make forever!"

Finally, Jordan was back in tune.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How does Jordan feel while his classmates practice an adaptation of "Jupiter" from Gustav Holst's "The Planets"?
  - A. uninspired
  - B. powerful
  - C. hesitant
  - D. comfortable
  
2. How is Jordan feeling as he practices the Mendelssohn piece that Mr. Green sent him at home?
  - A. He connects to it and feels transported through time and space.
  - B. He is frustrated and knows that something needs to change.
  - C. He is upset that Mr. Green told him that he has to play that piece.
  - D. He is relieved because he is able to connect to the music after he eats.
  
3. After struggling to connect with music for weeks, it doesn't take Jordan any time to recognize a song that he does connect to. What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?
  - A. "As he listened, Jordan realized: This was what he'd been looking for. He'd spent the past few weeks digging through classical works, but nothing connected. But *this* music... it transported him through time and space."
  - B. "*Screeeeeeeeeeech!* Oh, no... Jordan, distracted, had played a very important note *very* out of tune. Mr. Green immediately waved his hands to silence the orchestra, his eyes trained on the first violins."
  - C. "When they arrived at her bedroom, Grandma pulled a CD player out from underneath her bed. She dug through a stack of discs beside her desk, picked one, put it into the machine, and pressed 'play.'"
  - D. "All, that is, except Jordan Robinson, who sat squarely in the middle of the first violin section. While his classmates seemed to be traveling the stars as they played this symphony, Jordan felt earthbound... and uninspired."

4. What does Jordan learn about the type of music he connects to?

- A. that he likes slower music that he can feel versus faster music for dancing
- B. that he likes music that makes people dance and create happy memories
- C. that he likes structured music because it has strict rules he can follow
- D. that he likes playful music that allows him make things up as he plays

5. What is the main idea of this text?

- A. When Jordan's classmates are playing an adaptation of "Jupiter" from Gustav Holst's "The Planets," they are so inspired by the music that they seem to be traveling to the stars.
- B. Jordan's grandma shows him Regina Carter's song "Soul Eyes" because she thinks he will like her music and that leads him to look into other jazz musicians like Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, and Duke Ellington.
- C. When Jordan shows Mr. Green the Regina Carter CD, he says that they've never had anyone perform jazz and try to improvise at their school recitals but it might be time to change that.
- D. Jordan is feeling stuck playing music until his grandma shows him Regina Carter's music and he learns that he connects to music that is playful and uses improvisation.