

#43

**Zeszyty Artystyczne**

Misteria – rytuały – performanse.  
Wymiar estetyczny

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# **The Song of Transcendence.**

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## **Keith Jarrett's**

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## **Musical Mysteries**

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*Einzig das Lied überm Land  
heiligt und feiert.*

*(Only the song through the land  
hallows and heals)*

R.M. Rilke, *Sonnet XIX from The Sonnets to Orpheus*  
(transl. S. Mitchell)<sup>1</sup>

Keith Jarrett is a well-known figure in the world of piano music, both jazz and classical. This is due not only to his recognizable style, but also to the many controversies his art has generated in both these musical genres. Performing actively from the early 1960s until 2018, when he suffered two strokes that left his left arm paralyzed, making it impossible for him to continue his musical career, he acquired both numerous devoted listeners and a considerable circle of critics. While his interpretations of Baroque music are often criticised on artistic grounds, his jazz music is usually attacked not for its quality but for extra-musical issues.

» 1 Rainer M. Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Transl. S. Mitchell, in Keith Jarrett, "Spirits" [note appended to the Spirits album, 1986 ECM Records],

An excellent, albeit infamous, illustration of this type of opinion is provided by excerpts from the third volume of Andrzej Schmidt's *History of Jazz*, published in 1997, in which the historian, lamenting that Jarrett's music is not "an interesting version of Ornette Coleman", accuses him of being "extremely egocentric", which "prevents him from developing his own style, which would come from a synthesis of other patterns. Jarrett, straying into Schuman, Ravel, Evans, and rhythm-and-blues, always played a hymn of self-indulgence. Hence the marked unevenness of his solo recordings in particular"<sup>2</sup>. It is interesting that a jazz expert makes the argument of a lack of similarity to one of his predecessors, which, in a field where improvisation is the very core, should be a virtue, while underestimating his ability to combine such different styles, which he himself mentions. The allegations made below, seemingly purely musical, also seem to lack substance: "Jarrett's improvisations are not always top-notch: verbose, rhetorical, old-fashioned, often resorting to clichés"<sup>3</sup>. For someone at least slightly familiar with this musician's improvised solo concerts, the above arguments may seem absurd. First, they are too subjective and general to be argued with, and second, they attack the form for which this musician is most appreciated. Significantly, Schmidt concludes his reflections with the words: "An artist in love with himself is sometimes on the verge of ridiculousness when the music pales in comparison to his facial expressions and gestures"<sup>4</sup>. Leaving aside the groundless and unfounded insinuations, which unfortunately betray the author's lack of professionalism, these latter opinions are particularly noteworthy, as they suggest that the artist makes up for his musical shortcomings with eccentric stage behaviour.

These are not isolated opinions. On the one hand, Jarrett "enjoys the fame of a soulful artist, bridging two centuries with his music"<sup>5</sup>, while on the other, he is considered eccentric and odd, above all for his conduct on stage. As John Rockwell observed: "Jarrett has often been perceived as an egomaniac, but an equally likely interpretation is that he is a genuinely romantic artist"<sup>6</sup>. Authoritative statements, often critical of the jazz mainstream or contemporary trends in the music industry, do not make the sit-

» 2 Andrzej Schmidt, *Historia jazzu 1945–1990*, vol. 3: *Zgiełk i furia* (Warszawa: Lemat „Srebrna-Media” 1997), 143.

» 3 Schmidt, *Historia jazzu...*, 144.

» 4 Schmidt, *Historia jazzu...*, 144.

» 5 Schmidt, *Historia jazzu...*, 145.

» 6 John Rockwell, *Mystical Romanticism, Popularity and the Varied Forms of Fusion, All-American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century* (Vintage: New York, 1983/R1997), 182, quoted after: Jason C. McCool, *A Deep Joy inside It: The Musical Aesthetics of Keith Jarrett*, [Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts 2005] [pdf], <https://drum.lib.umd.edu/handle/1903/2868> (20.10.2022), 56. All the excerpts in English were translated by the author.

uation any easier. However, his extraordinary activity, his 1,344 concerts<sup>7</sup> (several hundred of which are solo performances<sup>8</sup>) and more than 100 original, very diverse recordings, rank him among the most interesting music figures at the turn of the 21st century. Although several books have been devoted to him, the author of a 2005 study of Jarrett's aesthetics concludes: "Keith Jarrett is a fascinating thinker and an important American musician, but surprisingly, there has been little discussion of him in academic circles"<sup>9</sup>. While a number of new texts have been penned since then about him, his art continues to pose a cognitive challenge, which the author of this article will try to meet after close to three decades of contact with this music<sup>10</sup>. My consideration here, however, will not focus on the music itself, but rather on what constitutes the essence of the controversy surrounding it, i.e. performance, particularly a solo one. I mean here not only the aforementioned "eccentricities", but also the "notoriously brusque concert demeanour"<sup>11</sup>. It seems that to fully grasp Jarrett's concerts one cannot rely solely on the theatrical or even performance. The most adequate term is that of a mystery, while the conduct, which is so controversial, seems not so much a manner or a theatrical employ, but an inherent and indispensable element of the concert, influencing the character of the live music performed.

### Jarrett's solo concerts v. his entire oeuvre

Several books have already been devoted to Jarrett's biography and so we can focus here only on the most significant facts. He was born in 1945 in Allentown, Pennsylvania, to a family with European roots<sup>12</sup> cultivating musical traditions. He studied classical piano from the age of three, but was also able to play other instruments, including soprano saxophone and

» 7 A full list: An unofficial website about jazz pianist Keith Jarrett, <https://www.keithjarrett.org/> (19.11.2022).

» 8 As early as 1995, *New York Times* wrote about 600 solo improvisations since 1970: Neil Strauss, "A Maverick Pianist Answers Back" [an interview with K. Jarrett], *New York Times*, 9.03.1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/09/arts/the-pop-life-a-maverick-pianist-answers-back.html> (15.11.2022).

» 9 McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 2.

» 10 The only texts on Jarrett's music that I have published so far are of reviews and essays: Jakub Żmizdiński, "Wzgórza błękitnych nut – nuty błękitnych gór", *Prace Pienińskie* 27, 2017, 221-225; "Wzgórza błękitnych nut – nuty błękitnych gór. Recenzja, na którą muzyka czekała 12 lat...", 19.04.2018 [reprint with an introduction by Tomasz Trzciniński]. <http://pressmania.pl/wzgorza-blekitnych-nut-nuty-blekitnych-gor-recenzja-na-ktora-muzyka-czekala-12-lat/> (10.11.2022); J. Żmizdiński, "Białe światło w muzyce końca wieku – o ostatnich nagraniach K. Jarretta i A. Pärta", *Czas Kultury* 2-3, 2000, 90-91.

» 11 McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 96.

» 12 Ian Carr indicates the French-Scottish origin and Austrian-Hungarian, including Hungarian Roma, See I. Carr, *Keith Jarrett. The Man and His Music* (New York: Da Capo Press 1992), 1-2. The English version of Wikipedia offers the Slovene-German origin.

ethnic wind and percussion instruments. He played his first concert in 1951, at the age of six, and presented his own compositions just two years later<sup>13</sup>. Although gifted with absolute pitch, he abandoned his classical education in favour of jazz and played in drummer Art Blakey's well-known band The New Jazz Messengers as early as 1965. A year later, he joined the then extremely popular quartet of saxophonist Charles Lloyd, where he met percussionist Jack DeJohnette, with whom he worked together almost until the end of his career, with only minor breaks. As early as 1967, he formed his first band. Initially a trio, it later grew into a quartet defined as "American", touring and recording until 1976<sup>14</sup>. In 1969, he and DeJohnette joined the band of Miles Davis, with whom he toured for several years, playing mainly electric piano<sup>15</sup>. Even then, he was seen as a unique personality in jazz piano music. Davis recalls in his autobiography: "In a band with Keith Jarrett and Jack DeJohnette, it was Keith and Jack, and what they played, the rhythms they offered, showed the direction the music was going. They were the ones who would twist the music, and then the music would push itself into something else. No one else can play that kind of music because there's no Keith and Jack"<sup>16</sup>. Jarrett recorded his first solo album of self-composed songs with a backing track on which he used ten instruments himself in 1968<sup>17</sup>. Throughout his career, he recorded solo studio albums with various instruments several times. A new chapter in his artistic path was started when he met German record company founder Manfred Eicher in 1971. This resulted in his first solo piano studio album, *Facing You*<sup>18</sup>. It opened a highly prolific collaboration between the artist and the studio, which continues to this day: Jarrett co-created the recognizable ECM sound, while Eicher initiated the development of his most original works, i.e. improvised solo concerts, many of which began to be released on records; the last one was released in September 2022<sup>19</sup>. For ECM, Jarrett also recorded albums with his "European" quartet, featuring saxophonist Jan Garbarek<sup>20</sup>. In the second half of the 1980s, Eicher began

» 13 Keith Jarrett, unofficial website <https://www-keithjarrett-org> (27.10.2022).

» 14 The core of the band consisted, apart from the leader: Charlie Haden – bass, Paul Motian – drums and Dewey Redman – tenor saxophone.

» 15 This was the only period when Jarrett, persuaded by Davis, played an electric instrument. Later he was a fierce opponent of electric instruments.

» 16 Miles Davis (collaboration Quincy Troupe), *Ja, Miles*, transl. Tomasz Tłuczkiewicz (Łódź: Wyd. Łódzkie 1993), 433.

» 17 Keith Jarrett, *Restoration Ruin, Vortex* 1968.

» 18 Keith Jarrett, *Facing You*, ECM Records 1972.

» 19 The recording in question is of a 2016 concert from Bordeaux. To date, ECM has released nearly a hundred recordings featuring Jarrett, [ECM official website] <https://www.ecmrecords.com/shop/1652880769/bordeaux-concert-keith-jarrett> (23.11.2022).

» 20 The quartet toured from 1974 to 1979 and the group was co-founded by: Palle Danielsson on bass and Jon Christensen on drums.

recording Jarrett's interpretations of both contemporary and early classical music. Prior to this, he had occasionally composed symphony music. This led to a number of releases with music by Johann Sebastian Bach, Johann Friedrich Handel, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and 20th-century composers. Interestingly, Jarrett uses the harpsichord on some recordings<sup>21</sup>. His longest-running ensemble, from 1983 until 2014, was the trio formed with the aforementioned DeJohnette and bassist Gary Peacock. This trio became famous above all for their improvisations on jazz standards, immortalised on many, mainly concert recordings.

The above detailed portrait was needed to show Jarrett as one of the most versatile contemporary pianists, functioning successfully in two musical worlds simultaneously, which, however, raises a number of controversies other than those mentioned at the outset. It seems that without the solo concerts his position in jazz history would still be firmly established<sup>22</sup>, but it is the solo improvisations that have become the most recognizable area of Jarrett's art, especially since 1975, when the recording of *The Köln Concert* was released. This recording not only gained the status of the best-selling album in jazz history<sup>23</sup>, but also the best-selling piano recording in general, and the artist found admirers in many other areas of music<sup>24</sup>.

### **Transcendent nature of improvisation – Jarrett's theoretical statements of his own music**

Jarrett is the author of numerous concise written statements and equally numerous interviews. However, he does not write treatises; they are usually short notes accompanying his own recordings, sometimes accompanied by quotations from other authors. The longest press statement was a reaction to the death of Miles Davis and came out in "The New York Times" in 1992<sup>25</sup>. The author of the aforementioned study on Jarrett's esthetics indicates his "deep intellectual curiosity" and calls him on the one hand

» 21 Interestingly, some of the author's recordings feature him playing the clavichord or the organ.

» 22 As early as 1973, J.E. Berendt observed: "Jarrett's trio with bassist Charlie Haden and drummer Paul Motian can be considered one of the best-balanced piano trios in jazz history. The ensemble plays jazz chamber music that evokes Bartók's string quartets, yet is completely steeped in jazz", in: Joachim E. Berendt, *Od raga do rocka. Wszystko o jazzie*, transl. Stanisław Haraschin, Irena and Waclaw Pankowie (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Muzyczne 1979), 484.

» 23 See entry: "Keith Jarrett", in: *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keith\\_Jarrett](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keith_Jarrett) (25.11.2022); McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 7.

» 24 Apart from many jazz pianists (B. Mehldau, J. Kühn, G. Allen, M. Miller, T. Rosenthal, L. Mays, E. Svensson, and M. Petrucciani), J.C. McCool mentions B. McFerrin, D. Matthews, and M. Jagger a, in: McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 7-8, 10.

» 25 See Keith Jarrett, "Categories Aplenty, But Where's The Music?", *New York Times*, 6.08.1992, Sec.H:19, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/16/archives/pop-view-categories-aplenty-but-wheres-the-music.html> (24.11.2022).



an “elder statesman/aesthetician” and a “quasi-celebrity” characterised by “all-knowing absolutism”, and on the other hand regards him as an “outsider” on “an anti-electric music crusade”<sup>26</sup>. He considers both characteristics to be intrinsic aspects of American individualism. The artist has repeatedly made it clear that he feels misunderstood, and yet he considers himself as the harshest critic of his own music<sup>27</sup>.

In order to summarise his system of values with regard to music, it is necessary to draw attention to several fundamental, distinguishing circumstances: first of all, Jarrett received a classical musical education, which he always valued highly. As a result, he had a profound respect for the musical tradition, not only European music. Throughout his entire career, he never parted with classical music, both as a composer and as a pianist-interpreter. At the same time, it is worth emphasising that he clearly separated the two areas of his activity, jazz and classical<sup>28</sup>. It is interesting to note, however, that when playing classical music, he reduced his emotions as much as possible, so that no critic found any jazz influences in his interpretations, while in his improvisations, classical piano influences were repeatedly pointed out<sup>29</sup>. His intellectual formation, on the other hand, is fundamentally American, also in the sense of counter-cultural explorations in Eastern spiritual systems. In both of these areas, therefore, one should point to the eclecticism that is characteristic of American culture. In a recent interview, Nate Chinen calls Jarrett an “avid reader”<sup>30</sup>. In the same interview the pianist makes the following confession: “I think I’m always in dialogue with something other than what I’ve just played” and adds: “That’s the essence of improvisation”<sup>31</sup>. Jarrett himself, then, points to his key inspirations outside of music. He openly admits that philosophy has a more powerful impact on his music than other music<sup>32</sup>. As McCool observes, the major intellectual current that impacts the artist is the philosophy of transcendentalism, in particular authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau or Walt Whitman, who was influenced by both. By reading texts by these founders of modern American thought, we can see how keenly intellectuals from overseas were interested in Eastern thought as early as the mid-19th century. Follow-

» 26 McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 2, 7, 28, 3, 11, 73, 58.

» 27 Strauss, “A Maverick Pianist...”

» 28 See McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 38.

» 29 Wojciech Olszewski calls these interpretations classicist – see W. Olszewski, *Sztuka pianistycznej improwizacji jazzowej w kontekście twórczości Keitha Jarretta, Chicka Corei i Herbiego Hancocka* (Poznań: Akademia Muzyczna im. I.J. Paderewskiego 2016), 23-29.

» 30 Nate Chinen, “Keith Jarrett’s eternal balancing act” [interview], npr music, <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/04/1115444808/keith-jarrett-eternal-balancing-act> (20.11.2022).

» 31 Chinen, “Keith Jarrett’s eternal...”

» 32 Keith Jarrett. *The Art of Improvisation*, documentary, Warner Music Group 2005.

ing them, but also on the wave of countercultural interest, Jarrett read, among others, the Lebanese writer and artist Khalil Gibran, but above all the Armenian artist and thinker Georgi Gurdjieff, whose compositions he recorded on a separate album<sup>33</sup>. A scholarly article has been published in which the author reads Jarrett's statements about his own music through the prism of Gurdjieff's writings. Although he mentions that he intends to "demystify" Jarrett's spiritual views, he concludes only, and quite aptly, that "Gurdjieff's teachings greatly facilitated Jarrett's conceptualization of his mysterious improvisational experience"<sup>34</sup>. Gurdjieff may have been the thinker who most influenced Jarrett's views, but to reduce the latter's intellectual pursuits to a single source would be an oversimplification; even when drawing on the East he remains thoroughly American. He describes himself as having been brought up in the tradition of the Christian Science Association, a church founded in the United States in 1879, whose strongly eclectic doctrine encompassed idealism and pantheism<sup>35</sup>. However, one searches in vain for explicit declarations of religious affiliation in the pianist's statements.

The artist's statements form a coherent, albeit enigmatic, philosophical and spiritual system, built around improvisation, a creative act which was mysterious to Jarrett himself<sup>36</sup>. To order the array of concepts the pianist uses, they can be divided into three spheres: 1. extra-musical, relating to life, philosophy, intellect, culture and civilization, art, nature, or psyche; 2. relating directly to music, jazz, improvisation, the piano, performing, and listening; and 3. touching on the "strange place" out of which music springs, most of which are spiritual or even mystical in nature. Of course, this is a somewhat artificial division, helping only to outline the essential aspects of the artist's innermost experiences and ideas.

A reconstruction of Jarrett's views can begin with an understanding of life as a process. It therefore requires an active approach, participation, a "waking state of consciousness". This enables the externalisation of the "primal need to create", something the artist has "in his blood". What is required of the creator in particular is individual work on "their own voice". This work is in fact a "spiritual practice" (Emerson), strongly linked to the contemplation of the beauty of nature. However, the artist should not expose his or her ego. On the contrary: they had better renounce the

» 33 Gurdjieff, *Sacred Hymns*, K. Jarrett – piano, ECM Records 1980.

» 34 Johanna Petsche, "Channelling the Creative: Keith Jarrett's Spiritual Beliefs Through a Gurdjieffian Lens", *Literature & Aesthetics* 19, (2) 12.2009, 138-158 [pdf] [https://www.academia.edu/5838343/Channelling\\_the\\_Creative\\_Keith\\_Jarretts\\_Spiritual\\_Beliefs\\_Through\\_a\\_Gurdjieffian\\_Lens](https://www.academia.edu/5838343/Channelling_the_Creative_Keith_Jarretts_Spiritual_Beliefs_Through_a_Gurdjieffian_Lens) (28.12.2022).

» 35 See *Stowarzyszenie Chrześcijańskiej Nauki* [entry:] *wikipedia*, [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stowarzyszenie\\_Chrze%C5%9Bcija%C5%84skiej\\_Nauki](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stowarzyszenie_Chrze%C5%9Bcija%C5%84skiej_Nauki) (26.11.2022).

» 36 See McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 85.

“I” and do not identify with what is being done. The artist should strive to become a perfect, co-creative medium. For this to happen, he or she must learn to “listen” - to be “absolutely involved” and to be present. They must participate and plunge into the flow/process/flux they experience during the creative act, particularly during musical improvisation. This refers to any improvisation, but especially jazz improvisation, although Jarrett also mentions improvisation in ethnic music and even the memory of improvisation in the compositions of Bach or Beethoven. It is improvisation that has a special place in the act of creating music, as it enables music to be created “organically”. There is no division here between composer and performer as its nature is holistic. A true improviser is required to start playing music “without preparation”. This aspect, contrary to what jazz textbooks claim<sup>37</sup>, has been repeatedly emphasised by Jarrett as a precondition for his solo concerts in particular. Even in his last interview he points out: “The something I succeed at is to not prepare”<sup>38</sup>, which indicates that this is a precondition for him. When asked by a journalist how it happens that he plays without preparation, he replied: “my hands do it on their own”<sup>39</sup>, and on another occasion he stated that “my left hand knows more than me”. The process of improvisation ultimately leads to a state of ecstasy - a word that appears repeatedly, not only in Jarrett’s statements but also in those of other improvisers<sup>40</sup>. And here we enter a sphere that is inexplicable, mysterious even to the artist himself, who often refers to concepts from the realm of religion and especially mysticism, for which he is also often criticised, because it is difficult to find any polemic here. This ecstasy, i.e. the act of creation itself, is in fact, in the artist’s understanding, a participation in the harmony of the universe, a sense of having no boundaries, of unity. Ultimately, it is a miracle. On the other hand, the “strange” yet “familiar” place from which the music flows is described by the artist in various terms: silence, source, beginning, fullness, meaning, and spirit. Furthermore, he often uses terms of a spiritual nature in relation to the music he plays: prayer, hymn, and song. This is because the creative act is sacred. During this act the artist is merely a “conduit”, as he wrote in a note to *Solo Concerts*: “I don’t believe that I can create, but that I can be a channel for the Creative. I do believe in the Creator, and

» 37 “Let your musical ideas be in your head before you play them” – Wojciech K. Olszewski, *Sztuka improwizacji jazzowej* (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne 2016), 244.

» 38 Chinen, “Keith Jarrett’s eternal...”

» 39 Keith Jarrett. *The Art of Improvisation*.

» 40 “Ecstasy – a state of perception in which we seem to be ‘outside ourselves’ or in several places at once – is an essential element of free improvisation” – Frederic Rzewski, “Kameralne eksplozje: nihilistyczna teoria improwizacji”, transl. Michał Mendyk, in: *Kultura dźwięku. Teksty o muzyce nowoczesnej*, sel. and ed. Christoph Cox, Daniel Warner (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria 2010), 342.

so in reality the album is His album"<sup>41</sup>. Investigating Jarrett's inspirations by Gurdjieff, Johanna Petsche goes as far as to say that "Jarrett understands improvisation as a mystical process where he aims to connect with an ultimate cosmic principle"<sup>42</sup>. He ultimately concludes that music has nutritional value, which we all need. Its uniqueness arises from the fact that it makes its impact even "against one's beliefs".

In this context, it is not difficult to understand his passionate assault on the music industry, his criticism of the excessive focus on the technical aspects of playing, his distrust of the fascination with technological progress, electric instruments, and the Internet.

It is interesting to note that perhaps his most important "manifesto" was attached to an album that is completely atypical when compared to his entire oeuvre, considered by many to be misguided and marginal, yet extremely important to the artist himself. I refer here to the double album *Spirits*, recorded in 1985. With this music, created in his own recording studio without any preconceptions on a dozen ethnic instruments from various parts of the world, Jarrett was to overcome the problems he was experiencing at the time in his relationship with the piano. The motto for the text is *Sonnet XIX* from Rainer Maria Rilke's cycle of *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Because this important text, a manifesto of sorts, is not commonly found in publications about jazz or music, I will quote it in extenso:

All true art is a reminder of forgotten, or soon-to-be-forgotten, relationships, whether it be God and man, man and woman, earth and humanity, colour and form [...].

Silence is the potential form, which music can arise. Music is the „activity-of-meaning“ that is able to be actualized only because of silence. [...]

Musicians can and do fool themselves every day when they say they are „making music“. They mean they are playing their instrument very well. This can be done by computers. What computers cannot deal with is value: meaning.

Thus: Spirits.

[...] We must be open to the spaces (silence) in order to fill them just right. We must see the spaces, inhabit them, live them. Then, the next note, the next move, becomes apparent because it is *needed*. Until it is apparent, nothing should be played. Until it is known, nothing should be anticipated. Until the whole appears, the parts should not be criticised. Until you are participating in this, you can-

» 41 Keith Jarrett, *Solo Concerts Bremen/Lausanne*, ECM 1973, quoted after: Petsche, "Channelling the Creative...", 155.

» 42 Petsche, "Channelling the...", 157.

not hear. Until you hear, you cannot play. Until you listen, you cannot make music. Music is part of life. It is not a separate, controlled event where a musician presents something to a passive audience. It is in the blood. A musician should be able to reveal this. Music should not remind us of the control we seem to have over our lives. It should remind us of the necessity of surrender, the capacity in man for understanding the reason for this surrender, the conditions that are necessary for it, the Being necessary for it.

[...] What if there is only one channel left for remembering this since religion has condoned it in order to survive (healthily and organizable)? What if this channel is “art”, because in its deepest sense, its moral sense, it is participation, not separation. What if art is the only way left to penetrate the armour we’ve built up to eliminate seeing our true nature. [...]

I can talk about it in this way because I do not feel that I „created” this music as much as allowed it to „emerge”. It is this emergence that is inexplicable and incapable of being made solid, and I feel (or felt) as though not only do you never step in the same river twice, but you are never the same when stepping in the river. The river has always been there, despite our polluting it. This is a miracle, and in this day and age we need it. At least I do<sup>43</sup>.

The above statement calls for some additional comments from another manifesto, which is even more outspoken in its critique of the current situation in jazz and, more broadly, in culture. I mean here a “New York Times” article from 1992, where Jarrett pays homage to the recently deceased Miles Davis as one of few representatives of true jazz:

Try to imagine the first musician. He was not playing for an audience, or a market, or working on his next recording, or touring with his *show*, or working on his image. He was playing out of need, out of his need for the music. Every year the number of musicians who remember why they play music in the first place gets smaller, and the greatest loss from this handful was Miles Davis [...]

More recordings are being made than ever before (nowadays a musician has to record to be taken seriously), but there is less meaningful music. We have substituted quantity for quality, and to make up for the lack of real “voices” on these recordings and to keep people thinking there are alternatives, new categories are constantly being invented.

[...] This is a good place to mention that “Do your own thing” came

» 43 Keith Jarrett, “Spirits” [note appended to the *Spirits* album, 1986 ECM Records].

from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who actually said, “Do your thing, and I shall know you.” In other words, you reveal yourself to others through what you do. Emerson’s statement was not meant to be a kind of *carte blanche* to follow our shallowest whims: it’s not about lifestyle or fashion or technique or casual choices. His statement contains a warning: I will only recognize you if you have your voice; I will not recognize you otherwise.

[...] where is that voice, that original voice, that individual, primal need? Where is Miles? Where is the music?

Whatever clothes Miles wore, it was always Miles in those clothes. Whatever noise was around him, Miles still played from that need, his sound coming from that silence, the vast, liquid, edgeless silence that existed before the first musician played the first note. We need this silence, because that’s where the music is<sup>44</sup>.

It is not difficult to understand why Jarrett, for whom a concert is a celebration, places equally high demands on his audience, saying: „I almost play the audience”, because improvisation is interaction. Equally relevant here are the concert venue, its atmosphere and, above all, the quality of the instrument.

### “The inside of the piano”

The pianist’s relationship with his instrument is very interesting. Jarrett is known to attach importance to the quality of the instrument he performs on<sup>45</sup>. He even once stated that some pianos have more personality than some people<sup>46</sup>. He would be openly critical of the piano as such; I mean here statements like: “it’s a relatively, [...] boring instrument!”<sup>47</sup>. He has tried to overcome such limitations of the instrument in a host of different ways. In jazz, he was more inspired by the saxophone; he pointed to John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman. Anecdotes are told about his bizarre love and hate “romance” with the instrument, which began nearly at the beginning of his life: “I grew up with the piano [...] I learned its language while I learned to speak”<sup>48</sup>. At the age of six, when he got his first instrument, he liked to sleep under it. In 1964, he was to be relegated from Boston’s

» 44 Jarrett, “Categories Aplenty, But...”

» 45 He had an instrument brought from Berlin for his 2003 concert in Warsaw. See Marek Dusza, “Z miłości do melodii”, *Rzeczpospolita*, 2–4.05.2003, A15.

» 46 See McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 41.

» 47 McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 41.

» 48 [ECM official website].

Berklee College of Music for “playing on the inside of the piano”<sup>49</sup>. His long-standing band partner Jack DeJohnette describes this nearly physical relation as follows:

The one thing that struck me about Keith, that made him stand out from other players, was that he really had a love affair with the piano, it's a relationship with that instrument... Keith's hands are actually quite small but because of that he can do things that a person like myself, or other pianists with normal hand spans, can't do... it enables him to overlap certain chord sequences and do rhythmic things and contrapuntal lines and get these effects of like, four people playing the piano... But I've never seen anybody just have such a rapport with their instrument and know its limitations but also push them to the limits, transcend the instrument<sup>50</sup>.

Jarrett had at least two major crises in his relationship with the piano: one in the mid-1980s, when, feeling too dependent on the instrument, he recorded the aforementioned *Spirits* album, where the piano appears infrequently. At the same time, he recorded highly original, improvised music played on the clavichord<sup>51</sup>, and performed some Bach compositions on the harpsichord. His second crisis came after nearly 10 years, when he succumbed to chronic fatigue syndrome. For a whole year he could not even look at the piano, and lifting the lid of the keyboard was beyond his power<sup>52</sup>. He overcame this crisis by playing simple melodies for his wife for a few minutes each day, which he wanted to impart with the sound of singing, to turn illness into song<sup>53</sup>. The result of these efforts is the album *The Melody at Night, with You*<sup>54</sup>. On another occasion he observed: “I always wanted the piano to sound like a voice”<sup>55</sup>. Commentators of his performance draw attention to his unique way of striking<sup>56</sup>, his impeccable touch, his legendary technique, and even his devout reverence and respect for the instrument, which he treats in a thoroughly classical manner<sup>57</sup>. As the artist himself confessed, he arrived at this technique thanks to his classical training and the immense self-imposed discipline.

» 49 McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 72.

» 50 Carr, *Keith Jarrett...*, 46-47.

» 51 Keith Jarrett, *Book of Ways*, ECM Records 1986.

» 52 Keith Jarrett. *The Art of Improvisation*.

» 53 Keith Jarrett. *The Art of Improvisation*.

» 54 Keith Jarrett, *The Melody at Night, with You*, ECM Records 1998.

» 55 “Keith Jarrett Interview Conducted By Stuart Nicholson”: February 2009 [pdf] <https://stuartnicholson.uk/keith-jarrett-interview-february-2009-2/> (28.12.2022).

» 56 Berendt, *Od raga do rocka...*, 324.

» 57 Olszewski, *Sztuka pianistycznej improwizacji...*, 29.

This way of treating the instrument, as well as his reputation as an eccentric and mystic evoke comparisons with another giant of the piano, the Canadian Glen Gould, whom Jarrett himself mentions in his performances of Bach's works<sup>58</sup>. It would be interesting to carry out a comparative study of the two pianists' approach to music and the instrument. Suffice it to mention here that they clearly differ, apart from Gould's fascination with modern technology, in their attitude to performance. Gould treated the stage in terms of competition and, as time went on, increasingly shunned live performance because, as he wrote: "Interpretation is not a struggle, but an act of love"<sup>59</sup>. Jarrett would certainly subscribe to the latter part of this opinion, as he would to many other views of the Canadian. In particular, both share an ecstatic attitude to music<sup>60</sup>. However, since Gould disliked public performances and hated jazz<sup>61</sup>, the gulf between them was unbridgeable.

### Performances at the keyboard

From what has already been written, Jarrett's performances are clearly unique events, if only because of the importance attached to the acoustic realm and the high bar set for audience reaction. However, they have also gained notoriety through the pianist's recognizable behaviour: his physical activity, his facial expressions, and his additional sound effects. Of course, Jarrett is not the only one who sings while playing, as Gould does it too. Jarrett is not the only one who moves spontaneously at the keyboard, as many other jazzmen do it. He is not the only one with whom facial expressions are extremely evocative during a performance, but he is the only one who is so remarkably constant and consistent in this. Unfortunately, there are precious few video recordings available in relation to the number of concerts he has played, but the ones posted on YouTube demonstrate that, at least since 1972, the date of the oldest available video recording of a solo concert<sup>62</sup>, his repertoire of behaviours, gestures or noises has been fundamentally constant. This is true regardless of whether he is playing in an ensemble or solo. The exceptions are interpretations of classical music by other composers, when the pianist sits before the keyboard in complete concentration and silence.

» 58 See McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 42.

» 59 Glenn Gould, quoted after: Stefan Rieger, *Glenn Gould, czyli sztuka fugi* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria 2007), 21.

» 60 See Rieger, *Glenn Gould, czyli...*, 10, 54.

» 61 See Rieger, *Glenn Gould, czyli...*, 48.

» 62 Keith Jarrett *Live in Molde, Norway, 2 August 1972* [video], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxiP6K56bHo> (17.11.2022); a complete list of video recordings of full solo concerts to be found in the bibliography.



Because his solo concerts most fully reflect the views he proclaims<sup>63</sup>, I will continue to deal primarily with them. If one wanted to describe his behaviour without knowing the underlying ideas, one would have to treat it as a one-man theatre accompanying the performance of music, which may irritate some and force others to concentrate on the artist himself. The fixed repertoire of this performer, who also improvises with his body, includes deep breathing, dynamic movement of the arms, shoulder blades and the entire body, standing up, bending on his feet, rubbing his hips against the wood of the instrument, stomping, squatting again and constantly moving on the stool, deep bends up to the keyboard and often standing, bent, for a long time, then again almost attacking the keyboard with his whole body, sometimes even playing directly on the strings with his fingers. Many times, one gets the impression that the instrumentalist actually helps the music resound with his body movements. All this time, the head, which the artist often turns sideways or lifts upwards, is at work. The facial expression does not stop either: pulling the whole face down, tightening the eyes, arranging the mouth in various shapes and making the most varied noises or vocalisations, the most characteristic of which can be described as sing-groans. Depending on the nature of the music played, after extremely dynamic, atonal passages, the artist can move on to lyrical and very calm sounds. Then he sits down again in concentration and calms down, or, stamping his foot, he goes into a rocking blues rhythm.

Such a performance can last continuously for more than half an hour, then there is usually a break, the audience applauds, the artist bows towards the listeners, and leaves the stage only to come back to it a moment later and improvise for another hour or so. Sometimes, however, especially in the later period, concerts are composed of shorter passages. These may have been the artist's own improvisations or improvisations based on jazz standards, but in both these variants the behaviour is not particularly different.

I have already mentioned the relationship with the audience, to whom the artist recommends "hard" listening<sup>64</sup>. Performances often begin with a lecture by the artist on the "risky" nature of improvisation, hence the requirement to remain in absolute silence during the concert, which for Johanna Petsche is another element intended to emphasise the uniqueness of these performances, adding drama and immediacy<sup>65</sup>. Anecdotes about Jarrett's low threshold for accepting inappropriate audience behaviour are well-known<sup>66</sup>: the artist can admonish listeners for taking

» 63 See McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 95.

» 64 Strauss, "A Maverick Pianist..."

» 65 See Petsche, "Channelling the...", 142.

» 66 Brian Zimmerman, "Jarrett's Profoundly Emotional Excursion at Carnegie Hall", *Down Beat*, 16.02.2017, <https://downbeat.com/?/news/detail/jarretts-emotional-excursion-at-carnegie-hall> (13.11.2022); "No one commented on the absolute ban on photography (including off-stage)

a picture with a flash, making noise or coughing; his commentary on inappropriate audience behaviour during a concert can be harsh, indeed; during a 2016 concert in Vienna he said: "Isn't this supposed to be the centre of the European classical tradition?"<sup>67</sup>. But he also knows how to relate to the listeners. During a concert in 2017, he repeatedly stepped up to the microphone to lash out at President Donald Trump's administration, and after two encores, such a dialogue ensued: "We love you, dude!" [...] "I love you, too," [...] "You are," [...] "the first audience that made me cry"<sup>68</sup>.

In between pieces, comic situations might occur. For instance, during a 1987 concert in Tokyo entitled *Solo Tribute*, after the eighth piece, the pianist stood up during the applause, smiled, stroked his head, wiped his face with a blue towel, which he then folded, threw carelessly towards the piano, smiled again, refolded the towel with a smile and placed it on the edge of the instrument, and received thunderous applause for this unforced performance<sup>69</sup>.

This playfulness, a consistent feature of his concerts, may seem like an overly intrusive, disruptive mannerism, but in light of what we already know about Jarrett's views, it seems not so much an unnecessary addition as something inherent in the very act of improvisation.

### Improvised solo concert as a musical mystery

There has already been mention of the ecstatic aspects present in music, particularly in jazz improvisation. One of the two types of ecstasy, in addition to static, is that associated with movement, that is, motoric, during which movement is preceded by a phase of "raising the level of sensitivity (quieting, concentration)" until it strives for a trance-like climax, induced consciously and intentionally<sup>70</sup>. Very often trance takes on the character of a dance to rhythmic music and is an element of many rituals in which religion, medicine and art melt into one, as is the case of e.g. shamanic

under threat of the concert being cancelled as a whim. No one was surprised by the demands of the artist, for whom a piano worthy of his talent was brought from Germany especially for this one concert. Because this is not a quirk, but an expression of respect for the music, for the listeners" – Olaf Szewczyk, "Ostatni, który tak gra jazz", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2–4.05.2003, 13.

» 67 Chinen, "Keith Jarrett's eternal..."

» 68 Zimmerman, "Jarrett's Profoundly..."

» 69 Keith Jarrett, *Solo Tribute* [Tokyo 1987] [video], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itBfg-DADAc&t=3603s> (20.09.2022).

» 70 *Ekstaza* [entry:] *Leksykon mistyki*, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher, transl. Bogusław Widła (Warszawa: Verbinum – Wydawnictwo Księży Werbistów 2002), 70-71.

séances. Their purpose is precisely to help achieve mystical states, for example, to invite the spirit<sup>71</sup>.

A sceptic will probably say that Jarrett is being mystical and does all this to focus attention on himself, to be recognized. Some might say that he is unnecessarily exposing his ego, or finally covering the shallowness of his art. There are also those who regard the mystical nature of these concerts as a “great marketing triumph”<sup>72</sup>. These arguments, however, are contradicted not only by the widespread appreciation of the quality of this music, which the author of this article shares, but also by the aforementioned small number of available video recordings, compared to the mass of audio recordings. The vast majority of people listen to Jarrett’s improvisations from audio recordings without observing his “wild” body work, at most hearing quiet moans, sighs or vocalisations time and again. We have no reason to believe that Jarrett fakes what he experiences while improvising, especially since improvisers from other musical traditions also speak in similar terms, borrowed from religion. However, we can be almost certain that if the artist had not allowed his body to work freely and partially without control, he would not have been able to improvise the way he did for years. By his own admission, this happens “out of necessity... it’s the only way I can get the piano to do what I want it to do”<sup>73</sup>. This paradoxical state was succinctly explained by one of Jarrett’s masters, the free jazz composer Ornette Coleman: “I’m just so busy and concentrated on my performance that I’m not really aware of what exactly I’m doing”<sup>74</sup>. Live music as a stream of transcendence demands that one enter and immerse oneself in it, surrendering oneself wholly to its effect; excessive body control could stifle it.

Thanks to his classical education, Jarrett mastered his piano technique to perfection, while his fascination with free jazz allowed him a kind of partial liberation from control in order to engage holistically in the creative act. The improviser then becomes a medium, a channel through which this “stream” flows. After all, the artist himself said: “I play exactly what I hear”<sup>75</sup>. Everything happens in front of a live audience, and therefore requires great concentration and responsibility. The artist often emphasises

- » 71 Eric Bourguignon, “Trans a taniec ekstacyzny”, in: *Świadomość ruchu. Teksty o tańcu współczesnym*, ed. Jadwiga Majewska, transl. Anna W. Brzezińska [et al.] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art 2013), 535-544.
- » 72 Andrew Solomon, “The Jazz Martyr”, *New York Times*, 9.02.1997, 3, quoted after: Petsche, “Channelling the...”, 143.
- » 73 Len Lyons, *The Great Jazz Pianists Speaking of Their Lives and Music* (New York: Quill 1983), 298, quoted after: Petsche, “Channelling the...”, 143.
- » 74 Ornette Coleman, “Change of the Century”, transl. Michał Mendyk, in: *Kultura dźwięku. Teksty o muzyce nowoczesnej*, sel. and ed. Christoph Cox, Daniel Warner (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria 2010), 325.
- » 75 Strauss, “A Maverick Pianist...” (15.11.2022).

this responsibility and the seriousness of this work: “that’s the most serious thing I do in terms of focus and craziness”<sup>76</sup>.

As Manfred Eicher observed: “Keith Jarrett is a musician with the soul of a singer”<sup>77</sup>. We must also add that his body is sensitive to “the visceral influence of musical performance”<sup>78</sup>.

A mystery means a secret. We know that for the improvising musician the process he is part of is full of mystery, as it is for the other participants who listen to the sounds. ●

## Abstract

The article reflects on the phenomenon of Keith Jarrett’s piano improvisation. The author defends this renowned jazz pianist, offering a fuller view of his controversial “theatrical” stage behaviour. The essential thesis of the article is the recognition of these “performances” as a necessary, integral part of the improvised creative process. This involves the partial loss of control over the body in order to ecstatically “sink” into the musical “flow”. From the pianist’s numerous statements on the aesthetics of jazz improvisation, it is clear that it has the character of a spiritual process for him, and its source is mysterious to the musician himself. This spirituality, similarly to Jarrett’s music, is eclectic in nature: elements of the European tradition mix with Eastern ones, but the American tradition, in particular that of the Transcendentalists, remains most important. In his analysis, in addition to the literature, the author refers to the rich output recorded on audio and video, primarily solo concerts, of which only a few video recordings are available on the YouTube platform.

### Keywords:

Keith Jarrett, improvisation, solo concerts, piano, jazz, ecstasy

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» 76 “Keith Jarrett Interview...” (28.12.2022).

» 77 Keith Jarrett. *The Art of Improvisation*.

» 78 See McCool, *A Deep Joy...*, 83.

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