“The Köln Concert”--Keith Jarrett (1975)

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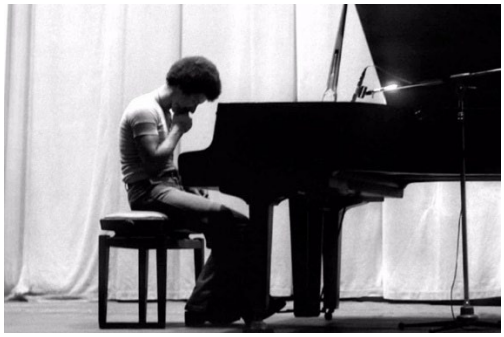
Essay by Peter Elsdon (guest post)*



“The Köln Concert” was recorded in the German city of Cologne in January 1975 by jazz musician Keith Jarrett, documenting a single improvised performance. The record’s subsequent fame and popularity are in no small measure due to the sense that it captures a single moment in time, in which a performer, instrument, audience, all interact.

In January 1975, Jarrett was a 29-year-old American jazz musician embarking on a short solo tour of Europe with Manfred Eicher, the owner of one of the record labels he was recording for, ECM (Editions of Contemporary Music). Eicher founded ECM in 1969 and began making recordings of both American and European musicians, especially those associated with progressive or avant-garde approaches to jazz. Jarrett had recorded several albums for ECM before 1975, most notably 1972’s “Facing You” in a studio in Oslo, a record now widely regarded as a milestone in the jazz piano canon. In 1973, ECM had released “Solo Concerts,” a double album documenting two Jarrett solo performances recorded in Germany and Switzerland. These were completely improvised performances where Jarrett would go on stage without any pre-prepared material. ECM and Eicher were instrumental in establishing this approach as a vehicle for Jarrett, including helping to organise his European tours. At the same time, Jarrett was recording for the American label Impulse!, but his contract allowed him the freedom to undertake projects for ECM. Later in his career, from 1978 onwards, he would record exclusively for ECM, marking one of the most extensive and important relationships between an artist and a record label in the history of jazz.

The performance in Cologne took place in challenging circumstances, and countless versions of the same story have been told by the different participants. Jarrett had travelled overnight with Eicher from Switzerland by car. Usually, his tour schedule allowed for a performance every other day, but on this occasion the Cologne performance came the day after a concert in Lausanne, Switzerland. On arriving in Cologne, they discovered the wrong piano was on the stage of the Opera House, and there was no way to move the right piano into place. A local piano tuner did what he could, but the instrument was still problematic with a tonal balance not to Jarrett’s satisfaction. Despite being extremely tired, Jarrett was persuaded to go ahead with the concert by Vera Brandes, the 18-year-old promoter, with recording engineer Martin Wieland on hand to document proceedings. Perhaps a clue as to what happened during the performance is given by the fact that Brandes recalls running to Wieland after the concert, asking simply, “Did you get that?” Eicher and Jarrett apparently listened to the tape in the car on the way to the next concert, and became convinced that despite the problematic conditions, something about the performance demanded that it be released.

On its original LP release, the record contained four tracks: "Part I", "Part IIa", "Part IIb", and "Part IIc." "Part IIa" and "Part IIb" were a single improvisation split for the purposes of sequencing across the sides of the double LP. "Part IIc" was an encore at the end of the concert, a version of a Jarrett composition which would later appear in printed form entitled "Memories of Tomorrow."

"The Köln Concert" presents a highly individual approach to the piano Jarrett had been developing over a number of years. His playing nods to a broad range of styles, including blues, gospel, folk, funk, as well the jazz piano language. Partly for this reason, he was considered by parts of the music press as a musician who transcended conventional categories and could not straightforwardly be categorized as a jazz musician, a status from which he benefitted considerably.

The opening of "Part I" is based on a musical language that strips away the extensions and alterations that jazz musicians were apt to add to chords. The harmonies feel open and luminous, with a sound evocative of what might now be called "Americana." Jarrett gradually extends this approach into a passage where his right hand improvises long lines across the full range of the piano whilst his left hand outlines the bare sonority of the harmony. As the minutes progress it is possible to hear more and more of a jazz influence through the use of the chromatic notes and alterations typical of the jazz piano language. In other places, such as the closing of both "Part I" and "Part IIb," the music reiterates a single chord, drawing that out into an ecstatic elongation of a single sound. Meanwhile, the opening of "Part IIb" presents a kind of playing most typical of Jarrett: a highly-charged groove-based texture where Jarrett uses left-hand octaves to generate a rhythmic propulsion that powers the music along. Throughout the record, long spans of music lead the listener through these waypoints, following a path which has its own inexorable sense of direction.

In the years after its release, the record went on to become a huge seller for ECM, reportedly bankrolling the label for a number of years. This was not because of a substantial promotional campaign; indeed, at the time of its release, ECM was still a relatively new label for the American record-buying public. But something about the record's presentation of an improvised acoustic performance in a German opera house gained a deep resonance. Perhaps that was because it tapped into broader cultural ideals, including the stripping away of technology, and a spontaneous kind of self-expression. Whatever the reasons, "The Köln Concert" resonated with a range of record buyers.

Jarrett has often expressed his dislike of the record's popularity, perhaps because some of his more challenging and thoroughly developed solo piano recordings seemed to be lost in its shadow. The record also came to be linked to the emerging idea of New Age music in America during the 1970s, suggesting its use for purposes such as relaxation or meditation, far from the view of music that Jarrett espoused. Yet it remains a highly significant recording for several reasons. It helped to establish ECM as a major force in jazz, as well demonstrating Manfred Eicher's complete faith in Jarrett's abilities. And it established that in a decade when so much jazz was associated with the trappings of amplified and electric instruments, it was possible for acoustic improvised music to connect deeply with an audience, an audience who would not necessarily have considered themselves jazz fans.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.