

# Point Of Departure

A singular force in the realm of spontaneously created music, *Keith Jarrett* turned 70 on 8 May with an unmatched body of work that straddles both jazz and classical worlds. This is reflected in the release of a new improvised solo live album, *Creation*, and a previously unreleased double classical album from 1984-85, *Samuel Barber/Béla Bartók*. With the shock news that Jarrett's acclaimed 30-year old Standards Trio has now disbanded, **Stuart Nicholson** spoke to the pianist about how he discovered his own voice between these two musical worlds and what he plans for the future

He's been called 'the enfant terrible of jazz', 'the Elvis Presley of High Art' and 'one of the greatest improvisers in the history of jazz'. His performances on the great concert hall stages of the world have yielded some of the finest jazz recordings in contemporary times; he's been the subject of a biography and a major television documentary and he's been lauded as a legend in his lifetime. So it comes as a bit of a shock to realise that on 8 May, pianist Keith Jarrett turned 70. But as G. K. Chesterton, that grand old man of letters, wrote almost a century ago: "The first fact about the celebration of a birthday is that it is a way of affirming defiantly, and even flamboyantly, that it is a good thing to be alive." Which is exactly the way Jarrett is playing it, with the release of *Creation* (ECM), a solo piano album of nine concert recordings from Japan, Canada and Europe from 2014, plus a pairing of Barber's Piano Concerto with Bartók's Piano Concerto No. 3 (plus an encore) from 1984 and 1985 respectively on the ECM New Series label.

*Creation* offers something quite new in Jarrett's discography, since it breaks with earlier live performances such as *The Köln Concert*, *Vienna Concert* and *Rio*, which comprise entire concerts, by taking the best individual tracks from concerts in Tokyo, Paris, Rome and Toronto sequenced to create a new concert that never happened in real-time. "What I noticed when I did the sequencing was how the disparity and the similarity between these pieces enhanced each other," says Jarrett. "But in a way I could never do live, I couldn't play *Creation* for an audience because there would be no let up in a certain kind of intensity. But with a chance to do it this way, I had a whole other universe opening up [because] it does have a story to tell, as a whole, it has a story to tell that a concert cannot

tell. It all grew out of something that was already happening in front of an audience, [so] it's a live performance but for no 'single' audience – [it's a concert for] the CD purchaser."

In all, Jarrett had material from nine concerts in his 2014 concert tour to select from, 18 performances in all when you take the first half and second half of the concert into consideration, "This was the most labour intensive thing I have ever released," he reflects, "I was able to pull these things out of these 18 hours of music that represented what I was trying to do. So it's in some very real way more personal than anything else [I have done]." In fact, the concert tour from

**"Creation... is so radically different, as radical as the very first solo concert I played as it doesn't follow any of my own rules in the past."**

which *Creation* emerged was the result of quite unique circumstances – after 30 years together, Jarrett's critically acclaimed Standards Trio reached the point where they felt they had said all they could say together. "There were lots of reasons for the trio to break-up but absolutely no hard feelings of any kind, we're just as much friends as we always were," confirms Jarrett. "So I had to fill a little hole where we used to do our major tour in the summer in Europe, and I had a couple of concerts in Japan and a couple of concerts in Canada, altogether nine concerts in a – for me anyway – fairly short period of time."

For Jarrett, audiences create a very particular kind of tension that provides the creative spur that make his live concerts the event they are in jazz. It is a relationship that is always in fine balance since when it works, his unique improvisational gift is allowed to blossom. When it doesn't – when the audience cough, whisper among themselves or find some other way of intruding into his creative space – the result is not creation but frustration. This happened at the Paris concert at the Salle Pleyel, yet it paradoxically yielded one fine track for *Creation* that gives no hint of the stress between audience and artist. In fact, I put it to Jarrett that audiences might be quite surprised at the positive role they can play in a Keith Jarrett concert, "I think you're right," he says, referring to the creative tension they can create, "It wouldn't happen in a studio. As much as I love the audience it's also a pressure." Yet despite this love but never-quite-hate-them relationship, Jarrett does point out there is one cough from the audience in *Creation*, but observes, "In the entire nine tracks, I did not think of that until I chose the music but it follows perfect logic that if in any of the playing there was a cough it might throw me into a different place, but it just didn't happen on this occasion!"

On *Samuel Barber/Béla Bartók* the enormous breadth of Jarrett's talent stands revealed with two superior performances that seem destined to become – this is their first ever release, despite the 1984/85 provenance – the benchmark by which other recordings of these piano concertos will be judged. They come from an interesting period in Jarrett's life, when he was pushing the boundaries of his creativity, in both jazz and classical music, to its limits. The performance of the Bartók Piano Concerto No. 3 took place at the Kan-i-Hoken Hall in Tokyo on 30 January 1985. Enthusiastically received by the press, Jarrett had a few days off and was then joined by