

## Keith Jarrett: The Creative Process, Gurdjieff and “Ritooria”

The creative process in art has always been an abstract subject for artists and their audiences. Artists frequently explain this elusive phenomenon, which takes place in the moment of creation, with mystical and esoteric language; it is often described as “tapping into a greater reality,” being visited by their “muse,” or “channeling the divine.”<sup>1</sup> Pianist and improviser Keith Jarrett explains the creative process as something beyond “conventional language”<sup>2</sup> that often hints at a state of extreme vulnerability.<sup>3</sup> These puzzling statements, expressed in interviews and album liner notes, along with his strange aura of mystery and idiosyncratic behavior during concerts, are rooted in strong philosophical and spiritual beliefs that are often misunderstood because of a lack of context. However, Jarrett’s spiritual beliefs with respect to the creative process, combined with his incredible improvisatory capabilities and various other key elements, have created a distinctive style. They also speak philosophical beliefs relevant to this study, along with the importance of the diverse facets of jazz vocabulary and the world of classical music.

This paper will analyze Jarrett’s improvisation style in the composition “Ritooria” from the album *Facing You* by exploring some of his devices, his style, and how the extended scale of his performances is related to his creative aesthetic. I will consider the philosophical and spiritual beliefs of the Armenian-Greek spiritual teacher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, which helped Jarrett to articulate his concepts and experiences of improvisation. This reading allows for a distinct understanding of Jarrett’s statements and concepts. Jarrett’s attraction to Gurdjieff’s teachings resulted in a great deal of influence on Jarrett’s relationship to the creative process, becoming an important tool for his development as an improviser. For example, Gurdjieff’s views on integrating

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<sup>1</sup> Johanna Petsche. “Channelling the Creative: Keith Jarrett’s Spiritual Beliefs Through a Gurdjieffian Lens,” *Literature and Aesthetics* 19, no. 2 (2009): 138.

<sup>2</sup> Petsche, 138.

<sup>3</sup> Petsche, 138.

the intellect, feelings and body influenced Jarrett's solo concerts, where he is simultaneously intellectual, emotional and physical while performing.

### **Keith Jarrett's Life and Work**

Jarrett was born in Allentown, Pennsylvania in 1945, and by the age of three he was already displaying remarkable musical talent, playing along with melodies on the radio. By the age of 18, he had developed a strong interest in jazz and started jazz piano studies at the Berklee College of Music after having been discovered by a faculty member, Ray Santisi, in a band camp organized by composer Stan Kenton.<sup>4</sup> However, Jarrett quickly lost interest in the teaching method and left the school after a year. He had an offer to study classical composition in Paris with pianist Nadia Boulanger, but he was already leaning towards jazz and turned it down. Instead, he moved to New York in 1966, where he was hired by drummer and band leader Art Blakey as the pianist for his long-running band Jazz Messengers. Keith toured for four months with Art Blakey and recorded an album, *Buttercorn Lady*, in 1966. In 1967, saxophonist Charles Lloyd hired Jarrett to join his quartet, one of the most popular of the 1960s. During this period, Jarrett began to attract an audience for his idiosyncratic flights of improvisation.<sup>5</sup> This quartet, which avoided conventional classification, infused its music with a range of influences, from free jazz to blues to world music, all of which became a vehicle to explore new and unconventional forms of improvisation, and which strongly shaped Jarrett's own identity and music. It was during this period that Jarrett discovered Gurdjieff's philosophies.

In 1969, Jarrett joined Miles Davis in pioneering a controversial electric jazz-rock band called The Fillmore Group, where he played electric keyboard alongside pianist Chick Corea. After recording seven albums with the group, Jarrett left in 1971 to pursue a career as a soloist. Jarrett

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<sup>4</sup> Ian Carr, *Keith Jarrett: The Man and His Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Mikal Gilmore, "Keith Jarrett's Keys to the Cosmos" in *Night Beat: A Shadow History of Rock & Roll* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 144

began a highly productive and longstanding recording collaboration with the then-obscure German record label Editions of Contemporary Music (ECM) and its founder and producer, Manfred Eicher. Since his first release with ECM, Jarrett has produced over 70 recordings with the label.<sup>6</sup>

### “Rittoria”

Jarrett emerged as one of the major new voices on the jazz scene during the late 1960s and in 1972 began performing piano solo. However, Jarrett was not the only jazz artist pursuing this career trajectory: saxophonist Anthony Braxton had already released *For Alto* in 1969, pianist Paul Bley recorded *Open to Love* in 1972, and Chick Corea released *Piano Improvisations Vol.1* in 1972. Jarrett’s first solo album, *Facing You*,<sup>7</sup> according to jazz reviewer Michael Nastos, is “one of the most important recordings in contemporary jazz,” a “hallmark recording of solo piano in any discipline,” and “a signature piece in the early ECM label discography.”<sup>8</sup> The album, recorded in Oslo the day after Jarrett appeared in concert with the Miles Davis Septet, is an eight-song solo project featuring original compositions, and marks an introduction to the elaborate and complex piano language of Keith Jarrett.

*Facing You*, also described as “often meditative, richly melodic, inventive, and beyond compare,”<sup>9</sup> reflects a high level of compositional craft and individuality that incorporates not only diverse characteristics of the jazz vocabulary (improvisation over chord progressions, syncopation, striding, etc.), but also unique devices that were not commonly heard during this time, such as a blend of quasi-Romantic rhapsodies, diatonic folk passages, free counterpoint and angular atonality. Focusing on the composition “Rittoria,” Jarrett incorporates styles from other music genres beyond

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<sup>6</sup> Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Keith Jarrett, *Facing You*. ECM 1017, 1971, compact disc.

<sup>8</sup> Michael G. Nastos, “Keith Jarrett, *Facing You*.” *AllMusic.com*. <https://www.allmusic.com/album/facing-you-mw0000192031>. Nov 14, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Eldson, *Jazz Perspectives, Vol.2 No.1 Jazz Perspectives*, p.13

jazz, and I would like to consider some of the rhythmic, melodic and expressive aspects of this piece. “Ritooria,” which sounds spontaneously improvised, is performed at a relaxed tempo and in an intimate style; melodicism plays a particular role in creating textures, moods and atmospheres.

The first phrase of the piece comprises a melodic line played by the right hand, with left-hand accompaniment. Jarrett introduces a thoughtful and introspective atmosphere in a rubato style, disregarding the tempo to allow an expressive quickening. His devices are simple: he uses two melodic lines a minor tenth apart (C# to E). The right hand plays two repeated notes immediately followed by an interval leap of a ninth, resembling the sound of church bells, while the left hand plays mainly single notes. As shown in Figure 1, the notes spell out an Aeolian modal sonority answered in the next measure by a descending fourth interval, which is supported on the left hand by playing the interval of a minor sixth (F# to D).

Figure 1

The image shows a musical score for piano, labeled "Piano" on the left. The score is in 4/4 time and marked "Rubato" with a tempo indication of a quarter note equal to 35 (♩ = 35). The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The right hand (treble clef) starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The first measure contains two repeated notes (C# and E) followed by a descending line of notes (D, C#, B, A, G, F#). The second measure contains a descending fourth interval (F# to D). The left hand (bass clef) plays single notes: F# in the first measure and D in the second measure. The score is marked with "Ped." (pedal) and includes a fingering "5" for the right hand.

The above phrase reflects not only the thoughtful character of the piece, but also its harmonic framework, which remains constant throughout the work, generally fluctuating between two main chords (C# minor and F# minor) and two main modes (Aeolian and Dorian). From this point, the direction of the composition is created by the left hand, which provides the harmonic base at the beginning of every measure. It also forms the basis of tempo, while the right hand “plays along” with rhythmically vivacious phrases.

One of the most immediate distinctive features in this piece is the notation, reflecting Jarrett's flexible approach to time and meter, as well as a very mature sense of timing and control over the choice of notes and rhythms. Although the meter is uneven—(tempo often fluctuates and beats are often extended or cut short)—both hands are rhythmically independent and metrical segmentation occurs naturally because of the return to the root of the chord at the beginning of each bar. The left hand settles into figurative patterns, functioning as the provider of the tempo, thus controlling and influencing the piece not only rhythmically, but also harmonically; the flow of the phrases, in contrast, is displayed by the right hand. A subtle change of notes, suggesting any alteration in the harmony, is immediately reflected in the right hand. As shown in Figure 2, this style prevails throughout most of the piece.

Figure 2

The image displays two systems of piano music, measures 10 through 17. The score is written for piano (Pno.) and features a complex, uneven meter. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 60. The first system (measures 10-11) shows a right-hand melodic line with a 11-measure phrase and a left-hand accompaniment with a 10-measure phrase. Dynamics range from piano (p) to forte (f). The second system (measures 12-17) continues the melodic and accompaniment lines, with a 9-measure phrase in the right hand and a 16-measure phrase in the left hand. Dynamics include piano (p) and forte (f). The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

This static and contemplative section disintegrates in measure 53, introducing a contrasting section. The change becomes obvious as the left-hand pattern fragments into a dotted eighth note-sixteenth note pattern, followed by quarter notes and eighth notes, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3:



The artistic purpose of these choices appears to be to avoid the predictable and encourage the listener to remain alert to the fact that anything can happen. This relates to the risks Jarrett takes when performing in this context. After the brief transitional segment in measures 53 to 56, the direction of the piece seems uncertain. This transitional passage (measures 53 to 56), which has the effect of a folk rumbling guitar, functions as a connection to a new section. The rhythm settles into a steadier beat and, starting from measure 59, Jarrett introduces a new, polyphonic texture (see Figure 4). However, the harmonic progression still alternates between the previous C# minor and F# minor chords. By using this polyphonic device, Jarrett displays another of his improvisational patterns that has important expressive implications: a contrapuntal quality through the use of three, sometimes four, independent melodic lines. The element of unpredictability and uncertainty is always present in Jarrett's music, and by using these different compositional devices, he creates an expressive effect that conveys a sense of risk taking.

Figure 4:

The image displays a musical score for piano, consisting of five systems of staves. The first system (measures 57-61) features a tempo of  $\text{♩} = 100$  and includes markings for *rit.*, *f*, and *pp*. The second system (measures 59-62) has a tempo of  $\text{♩} = 85$  and includes markings for *accel.*, *rit.*, and *sim.*. The third system (measures 63-66) includes markings for *accel.*, *rit.*, and *sim.*. The fourth system (measures 67-70) includes markings for *accel.*, *rit.*, and *sim.*. The fifth system (measures 71-73) has a tempo of  $\text{♩} = 60$  and includes markings for *accel.*, *rit.*, and *sim.*. The score is written for piano (Pno.) and includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Although this section (measures 59 to 73) is rhythmically more stable, harmonically it becomes denser and more dramatic because of its polyphonic texture. The soprano line displays a lyrical quality and reinforces the harmonic center by playing the root of the chord at the beginning of every bar, while the alto melody provides the harmonic content, and the bass serves as a counterpoint to

the motion in the soprano line. From measures 57 to 61 the harmony is in a C# Phrygian mode, which is retained until measure 61. The Phrygian modes come from the use of D ♮ and A ♮ in the alto melody and the B ♮ in the right hand. From measures 62 to 64, the use of the B# and the D# and A ♮ spell a C# harmonic scale. From measures 63 to 65, the harmonic texture thickens as a fourth voice appears. There is a general use of contrasting notes that appear to create dissonance (the use of D ♮, E#, and C ♮). However, the melodic direction of each melody creates a strong forward momentum that balances the sound. The left hand works within the groups of root, thirds, fifths, octaves, ninths, and tenths, sustained throughout the end of the piece, creating a complex aural result.

As shown in this analysis, the composition “Ritooria” combines a free-flowing elemental structure, containing two main sections of contrasting texture, and a short transitional segment. Even though each of these sections lacks contrast in tonality (the harmonic progression gravitates between two main chords), they are rich melodically, rhythmically and harmonically, displaying Jarrett’s wide variety of textures. Within each section, Jarrett introduces subtle temporal nuances, suggesting different moods, inflections, compositional devices, textures, and even includes a strumming folk-guitar interlude that integrates the different sections.

### **Gurdjieff’s Teachings and Its Influence on Keith Jarrett**

According to Jarrett, during the mid-1960s while he was touring with the Charles Lloyd Quartet, he found a book by the Greek-Armenian mystic philosopher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff called *All and Everything*.<sup>10</sup> This book is a trilogy that was intended to be the main study of Gurdjieff’s teachings. In one of the chapters, which is devoted to art, Gurdjieff expresses some ideas on scales, octaves and harmonics, which are elements relevant to jazz musicians’ creativity.

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<sup>10</sup> Carr, *Keith Jarrett*, 41.

Jarrett recalls: “What it said about octaves was so simply, exactly, what was true about the octave is so basic, yet I had been alive for twenty years and no one had ever mentioned this thing.”<sup>11</sup> Ian Carr writes that Jarrett read virtually all Gurdjieff’s Work over a period of ten years.<sup>12</sup> The influence of these teachings is reflected in some of his statements in articles and interviews. However, the most obvious evidence of his influence is in Jarrett’s 1980 album recorded for ECM, *Sacred Hymns*. The album includes a collection of fifteen compositions for piano. Jarrett says about *Sacred Hymns*:

It was the most appropriate thing for me to record at the time, given that I knew more about it than just the music, and also given that I was asked by [a member of] the London group whether or not I would do it. That was enough for me. But it was also an exercise in disappearing personality. In the so-called Gurdjieff world, personality is not a positive thing...So I used that recording as an exercise in not inflicting that music with my personality.<sup>13</sup>

Gurdjieff was a philosopher, spiritual teacher, and composer who claimed to have traveled to Egypt, Tibet, Afghanistan, and other countries in Central Asia collecting esoteric knowledge and studying ancient dance and folk music traditions which he believed preserved hidden truths. His books and teachings express his fundamental vision of self-development that collectively represents “the intellect, emotions and body, the three faculties of ‘centers’ of the individual that Gurdjieff taught must be brought into alignment.”<sup>14</sup> For Gurdjieff, music functioned as a significant aid to self-development as it represented a “being food” or an “impression.” Music, for him, was a type of auditory impression that, unlike any other senses—such as the visual, which is linked only to the first “center”—has the power to create sensations in the three centers of the individual

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<sup>11</sup> Carr, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Carr, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Carr, 129.

<sup>14</sup> Petsche, “Channeling the Creative”p.129

simultaneously.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Gurdjieff considered music to be an especially significant tool for facilitating self-awareness and self-development, as it involves and affects one's entire being.<sup>16</sup>

After attending a Keith Jarrett solo concert in 1973, music critic Bob Palmer wrote in *Rolling Stone* magazine: "When he plays alone, Jarrett pushes creativity to its limits, it's almost scary to hear someone who apparently relies so on the spirited, following almost effusive directions of his muse, yet the muse never seems to let him down."<sup>17</sup> Jarrett's creative process is intimately linked to spiritual ideals, but it is a process in which he must remain alert to the fact that anything can happen at any moment, so as to realize the potential of every instant.<sup>18</sup> This might relate to what Gurdjieff refers to as the "awakening," in which improvisation has the potential to awaken an artist from an automatic or unconscious process to become "even more conscious."<sup>19</sup> As Jarrett explained in a 1979 *New York Times* article, the process of being in the moment required him to: "empty myself of self-consciousness and preconceptions." He continued, "I try to turn off the thought process, I'd like to forget I even have hands. I'd like to sit down as I'd never played the piano before."<sup>20</sup>

Even though the creative process remains an elusive and abstract topic, in Jarrett's music there are mechanisms that point us to an understanding of his creative aesthetic. As demonstrated by "Ritooria," Jarrett shows a deep understanding of the idiomatic delineations and characteristics of different types of music, which he then communicates within a recognizable conceptual framework.

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<sup>15</sup> G.I. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson: All And Everything, First Series*, 763-764.

<sup>16</sup> Petsche, "Channeling the Creative," 147.

<sup>17</sup> Bob Palmer, "Keith Jarrett, Facing You," *Rolling Stone* (December 1972): 48.

<sup>18</sup> Petsche, "Channeling the Creative," 144.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Solomon, "The Jazz Martyr," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 9, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> James L. Collier, "Jazz in Jarrett Mode," *New York Times Magazine*, January 7, 1979, 17.

There are also the spiritual beliefs and ideals, in which he places a great deal of faith, especially Gurdjieff's teachings, which have facilitated the articulation of his concepts into improvisation.