Music Review: The Melody At Night, With You by Keith Jarrett (ECM 1675)

Piano variations from the American songbook

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In contemporary jazz it is sometimes difficult, at least for novices, to recognise the difference between a technically proficient musician and a truly great one. *The Melody At Night, With You*, a collection of rich piano solos released on CD late last year by jazz pianist Keith Jarrett, is an unambiguous demonstration of great jazz musicianship and further proof that he is one of the more significant jazz pianists to emerge since the 1960s.

Recorded in Jarrett's own studio, the album consists of improvisations on standards written by Duke Ellington, George and Ira Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein and Jerome Kern—some of the 20th century's greatest composers of American popular music—and one Jarrett original. It includes “I Loves You Porgy”, “I Got It Bad And That Ain't Good”, “Don't Ever Leave Me”, “Someone To Watch Over Me”, “Blame It On My Youth/Meditation”, “Something To Remember You By”, “Be My Love”, “Shenandoah” and “I'm Through With Love”.

The album, which was recorded in 1997 when Jarrett was fighting a protracted battle with the debilitating Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), has none of the extraordinary technical wizardry characteristic of his early career. And while the effects of CFS may explain the occasional melancholic tone on some tracks, the CD demonstrates Jarrett's complete mastery of the instrument, reaching emotional depths rarely achieved by most contemporary jazz pianists.

The most memorable tracks for me are Jarrett's version of the traditional sea shanty “Shenandoah” and George and Ira Gershwin's standard “I Loves You Porgy”. Despite the obvious emotional richness of these songs—I must admit that when I heard a few bars of “I Loves You Porgy” it almost reduced me to tears—Jarrett's playing never lapses into sentimentality.

In the 1980s when Jarrett first began to explore the Popular American Songbook, he commented on the challenges posed when playing these classic tunes: “The problem is not that one [song] is easier or harder. To enter the door is the problem... When a standard tune is well written it provides the door, but you don't just enter and sit there. You have to keep making the space vital.”[1]

The Melody At Night With You, adopts this approach and extends it to traditional songs such as “Shenandoah”. This song, more commonly associated with the Southern army during the American Civil War, was originally a simple sea shanty. Dating from the sailing ship era such tunes were work songs used to synchronise the activities of crews manipulating heavy sails or hoisting anchor. They also reflected the hardship and isolation of the sailors' lives. In Jarrett's hands “Shenandoah” is transformed into a hauntingly beautiful ballad.

The American novel “Porgy” written by DuBose Heyward provided George Gershwin with the inspiration for the opera “Porgy and Bess”. This in turn inspired many jazz improvisations, including Miles Davis' complete rendition of the opera in 1958. The song “I Loves You Porgy” is a statement of love by the beautiful Bess for the crippled beggar Porgy. Although Davis' recording is a fine piece of music, Jarrett's version is a far more complex and personal work.

The Melody At Night, With You is the latest production in Jarrett's long and critically acclaimed career. Born May 8 1945, in Allentown Pennsylvania, an industrial town in the east of the state near the New

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Jersey border, Jarrett's musical career began at a very early age. The unusually gifted child could play the piano at the age of three and at seven played a two hour solo recital of music by Mozart, Bach, Beethoven and a number of his own compositions. He also learnt to play the vibraphone, saxophone and percussion instruments.

Recalling his early musical training Jarrett once explained: “I grew up with the piano, I learned its language while I learned to speak.”[2]

At 18 Jarrett began studies at the Berkley College of Music in Boston, but was expelled after a year for supposedly playing on the strings inside the piano, a musical technique he further developed and used in performance later in his career. But this loss of an extended formal musical education was not a hindrance to Jarrett who was already an accomplished pianist and performer.

By the early 1960s the young musician had formed his own jazz group as well as frequenting Monday night jam sessions at New York's Village Vanguard, waiting to be asked to sit in. One night Jarrett, who was playing with some other less well-known musicians at the Vanguard, was spotted by drummer Art Blakey. The famed percussionist was impressed by Jarrett's musicianship and invited him to join his New Jazz Messengers. This was Jarrett's first job in a major group and although it only lasted four months it significantly raised his profile in the American jazz scene. Jarrett went on to gain international recognition touring Europe, the Soviet Union and the Far East as a member of the Charles Lloyd Quartet, one of the hottest jazz groups of that time.

In the late 1960s Jarrett replaced Chick Corea in the Miles Davis group and became one of the many great pianists, including Horace Silver, Red Garland, Bill Evans, Wynton Kelly and Herbie Hancock, who had played with Davis. This was a vitally important experience for Jarrett and had a major impact on his musical development. Not only was Davis a great and innovative musician who explored many musical forms and constantly developed fresh musical ideas, he was also a living link with, and contemporary of, the greatest innovators of modern jazz—Charlie Parker and John Coltrane.

Jarrett, like Miles Davis never felt confined to one particular style and has always attempted to expand and develop his musical technique. His search for new forms, however, led him back to classical music and in the course of his 30-year career he has recorded several albums of classical piano music. This includes Bach's *Das Wohltempietre Klavier* (Volume 1 on piano and Volume 2 on harpsichord) and the demanding *Goldberg Variations*, also played on harpsichord. Jarrett recorded as well *Preludes and Fugues*, a collection of 24 piano pieces by Dmitri Shostakovich.

Jarrett's latest CD is the by-product of work by the Standards Trio, his musical collaboration with bass player Gary Peacock and drummer Jack DeJohnette, which first began in 1983. Whether playing classical music or jazz, Jarrett is a major figure in contemporary music and an inspiration to other musicians. Hailed as one of the best improvising talents in jazz music today, he often performs in concert for hours, improvising on one or two pieces of music. His body of recorded work is testimony to his versatility.

In an age where many music producers and musicians are mainly preoccupied with how to make a quick buck, *The Melody At Night, With You*, is a refreshing change. It deserves attention by all serious music lovers.

Other recommended albums recorded by Keith Jarrett:

The Köln Concert--Solo Piano, recorded live 1975 (ECM 1064)

Live At The Blue Note —Standards Trio, recorded live 1994 (ECM 1575)

La Scala —Solo Piano, recorded live 1995 (ECM 1640)

Tokyo ‘96—Standards Trio, recorded live 1996 (ECM 1666)

Notes:

1. ECM biography
2. Sleeve notes to *Concerto* (Bregenz/Munich, 1981) ECM 1227/8/9

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