



The Broken Piano In 1975, by Marti Leimbach

My favourite piece of music is Keith Jarrett's Kô In Concert, an hour-long piece improvised, as all of Jarrett's concerts are, on a solo piano in front of a live audience. You know the story, right?

For the concert, he'd requested a particular piano, a Bösendorfer. The Bösendorfer originated in Vienna early in the nineteenth century. It is said to be the first concert piano able to stand up to the playing technique of the young virtuoso, Franz Liszt, whose tough, unforgiving treatment of the pianos he played destroyed them in short order. Perhaps the Bösendorfer's durability was the reason Jarrett requested one for the concert. The 29-year old jazz musician was known for his eccentric stagecraft, his improvisations played with enormous athleticism and physicality. It's fair to say he is tough on an instrument, that he plays unconventionally, even wildly, racing over the keys, standing up, sitting, leaning, panting, moaning. His performances move him and anyone listening through the disorder and miracle of creative endeavour. Watching him is watching genius itself, that raw work that is cleaned up only by its imitators.

In short, he needs a good piano.

January 24, 1975. Jarrett arrives to the venue the afternoon of the concert. He is presented with his Bösendorfer. He stands with Manfred Eicher, the man who will one day found ECM Records and who arranged Jarrett's sell-out concert tour. The piano he has been given for the concert is a Bösendorfer, all right, but it is puny, ancient, totally unsuitable.

Jarrett taps a few keys and finds it is not only the wrong size, incapable of producing enough volume for a concert performance, but also completely out of tune. The black keys don't all work. The high notes are tinny; the bass notes barely sound and the pedals stick.

Eicher tells the organizer, a teenaged girl named Vera Brandes, that the piano is unsuitable. Either they get a new piano for Jarrett, or there will be no concert.

In a panic, the girl does everything she can to get another piano, but she can't find one in time. She manages to convince a local piano tuner to attend to the Bösendorfer, but there isn't much they can do about the overall condition of the instrument.

In the end, Jarrett agrees to play. Not because the piano was fixed up to the extent that he felt comfortable performing, but because he took pity on poor, young Vera Brandes, just seventeen years old and not

able to shoulder so great a failure as losing the only performer on a sold-out night.

So he performs on the dreadful instrument. He does what he has to do, not because he thinks it will be good, but because he feels he has no choice.

Tim Harford [described it best], "The substandard instrument forced Jarrett away from the tinny high notes and into the middle register. His left hand produced rumbling, repetitive bass riffs as a way of conveying up the piano's lack of resonance. Both of these elements gave the performance an almost trance-like quality."

Jarrett overcame the lack of volume by standing up and playing the piano very hard. He stood, sat, moaned, writhed, and pounded the piano keys. You can hear him on the recording, the agony of the music, his effort at creating any sound at all. He sweated out what must have been an excruciating hour, and he triumphed. The *K&J In Concert* has sold 3.5 million copies and is perhaps the most beautiful, transformative piece of music I've ever heard. It makes me cry to hear it, especially if I recall the courage it took for him to perform in front of a live audience on an unplayable piano with that desperate girl in the wings, wringing her hands, hoping beyond hope that he didn't rise from the stool and walk out. Hoping nobody noticed her great failure to produce the right piano for this most important occasion. [...]

Keith Jarrett later said, "What happened with this piano was that I was forced to play in what was "at the time" a new way. Somehow I felt I had to bring out whatever qualities this instrument had. And that was it. My sense was, "I have to do this. I'm doing it. I don't care what the piano sounds like. I'm doing it." And I did."