

Interview with Thomas Enhco

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PLAYING THE KÖLN CONCERT (FOR KEITH JARRETT)

For diehard fans it is almost a blasphemy to reproduce a masterful improvisation like The Köln Concert. Yet that conservative opinion sits uneasily with jazz itself. Jarrett's music inspires; pianists want to play it — to learn, to test themselves, to get closer to his approach. And, simply, it's a thrill to perform such a beautiful piece.

This debate exists only because the concert was transcribed in the 1990s. Had that not happened, the famous performance would live solely in the memories and hearts of those who attended. Early attempts to put The Köln Concert on paper faltered because Jarrett refused to cooperate. Eventually an approved edition emerged - a substantial 88 pages - though Jarrett makes clear in the foreword that he still prefers the original recording as the "final-word-reference."

This argument may sound more at home in classical music, where scores are fixed, but even there tempo, style and interpretation allow wide latitude. Besides, improvisation was commonplace in the eras of Bach and Mozart: cadenzas in piano concertos, for instance, gave soloists ample space to display their skill.

It has been 51 years since jazz pianist Keith Jarrett delivered his iconic performance at Cologne Opera. The recording, The Köln Concert, remains the best-selling solo album in jazz history. But can - and should - a one-off, fully improvised concert be recreated?

Philharmonie de Paris thought so, and in 2023 invited pianists Maki Namekawa and Thomas Enhco to take on the challenge, with Jarrett's blessing. Coming months, the duo have further performances scheduled in April, June and July. In this article, Thomas Enhco shares more about how he approached this special project.



Tribute

Keith Jarrett will never perform the concert himself again. After suffering two strokes in 2018, he lost the use of his left hand. As a tribute to the great pianist, the Philharmonie de Paris organised a run of performances of The Köln Concert in 2023. With Jarrett's permission, Maki Namekawa and Thomas Enhco presented the legendary concert on four consecutive nights. The announcement sparked the debate described above - yet despite, or perhaps because of, the controversy, all four nights sold out almost immediately.

“People come to hear The Köln Concert. I play with respect for the narrative arc, the main themes and Jarrett’s musical motifs”

For Thomas Enhco, who grew up between jazz and classical music and rejects strict genre labels, being asked to take part was a huge honour: The Köln Concert had long been an iconic record for him. “Keith Jarrett played the whole piece from the heart, in the moment. He’s a truly brilliant improviser, the best of his kind. The Köln Concert is a musical work, a complete composition created on the spot, with powerful themes that stand on their own. It’s hard to pin a label on it; jazz, classical, blues... it’s all of those things, but that doesn’t really matter. It’s impossible to reproduce such an improvisation exactly; that feels counterintuitive to me.” Enhco told the Philharmonie he would accept the commission only if he could approach it in his own way - a condition Jarrett fortunately approved.

Division of labour

The Köln Concert is effectively two concerts, though the album divides it into four parts. Maki Namekawa plays the opening and the finale - the encore - while Thomas Enhco takes the middle sections, 2a and 2b, the passages richest in groove and improvisation. Namekawa adheres closely to the written score; Enhco allows himself room to improvise. He sees it as a sensible split. “Maki is a classical pianist. She plays every note from the sheet music, which suits the opening and the finale; people expect to hear those exactly. My sections contain a lot of improvisation and that’s appropriate too.”

Groove

Enhco delved into the piece. The score was his reference. “But apart from errors in the transcription, the notation obviously doesn’t capture everything Jarrett does. His music is complex; it contains countless small, organic details you can’t fix on paper. It’s like trying to write movement. I wanted to stay as close as possible to his phrasing, style and feel. In Jarrett’s playing you hear gospel and soul, he lays down a huge groove over simple harmonies with astonishingly intricate rhythms and phrases. It’s more about the groove than anything else. In some passages he improvises for more than ten minutes on a single chord, with a fantastic sense of rhythm, timing and swing. It’s incredible how he constructs those long narrative lines while improvising. I play my own improvisations, but in his style.”

He is careful, he adds. “People come to hear The Köln Concert. I play with respect for the narrative arc, the main themes and Jarrett’s

musical motifs. Phrases I believe are inseparable from this iconic album I leave intact. But where I feel there's room, I play my own music - as long as it doesn't damage the heart of the concert."



Maki Namekawa, Thomas Enhco (credits_dr)

Obsessive

Enhco had never immersed himself so deeply in a single work. "It was a huge challenge and incredibly compelling. You have to understand someone's music, digest it, make it part of your own system. I went to bed with it, dreamed about it, woke up with it. I was obsessed, partly because the music itself is obsessive. It contains repeating elements that slowly evolve into something else. It only works if you let yourself fall into that trance. There's an obsessive side to my character; otherwise I couldn't have done it. It changed the way I play, how I touch the keys. That makes sense, music is a language. If you spend a lot of time with someone who has an accent, you pick it up."

Those first concerts in 2023 remains a cherished memory for Enhco. "I felt how deeply loved the album is, during and after the performances. People of all generations came up to me in tears. They told me The Köln Concert was the soundtrack of their lives, that they fell in love to it or were even born to it. It was moving. I was very glad I hadn't disappointed them, and that I'd managed to bring my own voice to it."

Playing for Keith Jarrett

Namekawa and Enhco are the only pianists performing The Köln Concert with Jarrett's official approval. A few weeks after the Paris run the pair travelled to New York to play the piece for the man himself. "That was incredibly nerve-wracking," Enhco says. "It helped that Maki knew Jarrett, she'd visited him several times. Still... we were in his studio, playing his piano while he sat almost next to me. It felt like playing a Beethoven sonata for Beethoven. I was very nervous, but it went well. Jarrett was genuinely pleased. He liked our two very different approaches. He found it curious and interesting to hear how we brought his music back to life, and he appreciated that we'd come to see him. He also said it was nice to have his piano played well again."

The story suits Thomas Enhco.

"Improvisation is the red thread of my musical career. I bring elements of jazz into classical projects and vice versa. And the deeper I go into both worlds the more connections I see. One night I'll improvise on Mozart and Schubert; the next I'll play jazz, but it's always my music. All these

strands influence what I do. But the path doesn't lead to a midpoint between classical and jazz, but to my own music."

In spring and summer 2026 Namekawa and Enhco will tour their version of The Köln Concert across several European halls.

Enhco: "I told myself I need a month to get back into the piece, but it remains a

challenge. I don't want to repeat what I did in 2023, I want to do it better: stay closer to Jarrett's style while at the same time playing more freely. I want to stretch it both ways. After the 2023 concerts I was a different pianist, a different improviser. Now I want to dive even deeper. I hope it will be different and better, and that I can get even closer to the original."

The Köln Concert, Maki Namekawa and Thomas Enhco

13 April National Concert Hall, Dublin **15 April** Bozar, Brussels

17 June Filharmonie Brno, Czechia **19 July** Nuits de Fourvière, Lyon, France.

Thomas Enhco (b. 1988) began violin at age three and took up piano a few years later. A typical Enhco concert blends classical, jazz, popular repertoire and his own work. Pieces he plays with his jazz trio may also appear as an encore after a Mozart programme. Even when he turns to classical repertoire, a jazz approach to the notes is never far away. Alongside The Köln Concert, Enhco will tour solo with his Mozart Paradox programme across European concert halls in the coming months. Also on the programme are engagements with marimbaist Vassilena Serafimova, with his brother and jazz trumpeter David Enhco, and performances of Ravel's Piano Concerto in G and a tribute to the life and music of George Gershwin (Gershwin, La Vida En Azul).



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