

# MY SONG

by Zaza Burchuladze

fragments

*God Bless the Child*. I first heard this piece, performed by Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette, by chance forty years ago.

The three musicians first came together in a New York studio in 1977 to record Peacock's album *Tales of Another*, which, by the way, is a very good album indeed. Jarrett and DeJohnette were already well-acquainted, having played together for Charles Lloyd and Miles Davis, but it turned out they needed Peacock to complete the picture. The three of them got along so well during the recording of the album that as soon as they finished, they decided right there in the studio to form a trio.

Despite their initial enthusiasm, it took them five years to produce their next recording. *Standards Vol. 1* was released in 1983, and it is no exaggeration to say that this marked the beginning of a whole new era, for the trio who recorded it have been playing on the world's most famous stages ever since.

While waiting for Peacock to join them, DeJohnette and Jarrett developed such a strong rapport, first in Lloyd's band and then in Davis's, that when one of them decided to move on, the other would quickly follow. As for Peacock, it is inconceivable that anyone could take his place in the trio. Of all the most brilliant bassists in the history of jazz, none could have brought the sound that Peacock did to the group.

There are just five tracks on the record. Five well-worn jazz standards. None of them were written by Jarrett—the names of the original composers are clearly printed alongside the titles—but Jarrett makes all of them his own. Of course, all three band members—Jarrett, Peacock, and DeJohnette—contributed to their creation, but if we're being completely honest, they belong more to Jarrett than the other two.

The album, which remains resolutely in minor keys from beginning to end, opens with *Meaning of the Blues*, which, despite its title, is not the blues at all, but a ballad that makes you feel as sad as if you were attending your own funeral. It closes with *God Bless the Child*, a piece that ends in a mock celebration, like dawn heralding the approach of dusk. I've often noticed that the more something brims with life, the closer it pulls you towards death, although I'm fully aware that this is a fear that is embedded deep within me, something I will never be able to shake off, and entirely unrelated to music.

I was born in a country that was wiped off the map at the end of the last century, and yet still today I can't open the mailbox without a slight quickening of my heartbeat. I'm always expecting to find a letter bringing terrible news. If you think about it, this is perfectly understandable: the more orderly your environment, the greater the chaos that stirs within you. I remember feeling something similar the first time I went to the circus and, ensconced in my plush velvet chair, watched a female acrobat balancing on the tightrope. She was wearing a white costume covered in sequins that dazzled under the ceiling lights. Apart from her, everything was dark. As her lithe, muscular body completed a series of choreographed etudes along the rope suspended high in the air, I felt fascinated and terrified at the same time. All the while she was accompanied only by the ominous beat of a lone drum; the orchestra remained silent throughout.

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Nowadays we are surrounded by so much music we don't know what to listen to anymore. Not so long ago, just finding something good to listen to was a whole adventure in itself. There were several music stores in Tbilisi in those days, but they only stocked records approved by the Soviet censors, and in many cases not even those. Such were the times. In general, listeners listened to anything they could get their hands on, and readers read anything they could get their hands on, and there was never enough of either. Our ears and eyes longed for more material to listen to and read. These days we are drowning in both, with the result that they don't mean as much to us anymore. It makes me wonder which is better: to want something you can't have or to have something but not want it?

As for me, I was always listening to music that wasn't available anywhere else, especially when I was at home alone. This wasn't something I set out to do—it just happened that way. And nothing made a greater impression on me than the first time I heard Jarrett play. "Impression" doesn't even begin to cover it. It was more like a sacrament. Maybe even deeper, like a devout believer witnessing the descent of the Holy Fire. For me, Jarrett fully deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as fire. I would even go so far as to say that I find it hard to picture him without fire. And by "fire", I don't just mean creative fire, or fire as a synonym of knowledge, or fire as an elemental force, or the fire without which life would freeze, not even the fire that Prometheus stole from Olympus in the form of a spark, but all of them combined. The fire that is worshipped. The fire that burns.

I remember a boiling hot August afternoon in Tbilisi, a few days before the beginning of the new school year. Outside in the courtyard my pals were waiting for me in short trousers with grazed knees. We had decided to play soldiers so I ran back indoors to fetch my water

pistol. I remember that the transparent red casing was big enough to fit a whole glass of water, and if you squeezed the trigger hard enough, the water would come shooting out to a distance of almost five metres. It wasn't long before the pistol broke, however, and instead of ejecting a powerful stream like a fire engine hose, it began emitting a gentle mist like a can of deodorant. After that my mum started using it to dampen the bedlinen while she did the ironing.

Anyway, I had just filled my pistol with water in the bathroom and was about to run back out into the courtyard when someone switched on the stereo in the next room and an unfamiliar melody stopped me in my tracks. I had never experienced anything like it. Before then, music had only ever been the background to my life, but on that day, something happened to me and I completely forgot about my pals in the courtyard. I stood motionless in the open door, holding my wet gun, water dripping down from the barrel as if from a broken tap. My spine tingled with pleasure, and that prickly feeling you get when you're having your hair cut swirled around my head.

It wasn't just pleasure I was feeling. Roland Barthes, for example, might have divided it into two elements: pleasure ("plaisir"), and bliss ("jouissance", which in French also means "orgasm"). For Franz Kafka, that most sensitive of men, it may well have felt like an entire metamorphosis. To me, it felt like that was the day I was born, or at least reborn, and as I stood in the open door, a ten-year-old toy fireman, something changed in and around me. My life would never be the same.

Until then I had been a carefree, cheerful child, but on that day my cheerfulness suddenly abandoned me. Something had launched me out of my comfort zone like a catapult. It was a whole Exodus, my personal Exodus, guided by music. Maybe I was simply an overly

sensitive child? No matter how strange it may sound, I always say now that I was born in 1983, at the age of ten, and that my personal chronology begins from the first time I ever heard *God Bless the Child*.

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Most children of the Soviet Union would say that the eighties began with the Moscow Olympics in 1980 and ended with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, which was also the year Miles Davis died. There was clearly a lot going on at the time, but for me personally, the decade is associated with different milestones. My personal history of the decade stretches from 1983, when I first heard Keith Jarrett's *Standards*, to 1989 and the tragic events that occurred on Rustaveli Avenue.

Information from the outside enters us in a constant stream, both positive and negative. Even if you were an ascetic living in the desert under a vow of silence, wrapped up in your own spiritual world like a baker engrossed in his oven, you would still have a relationship with the outside world. In other words, simply the fact that you exist means you have a relationship with the outside world. And that outside world keeps coming in, sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly. Two things came crashing into my existence in the eighties: first music, and then death, although in the end, the music itself turned out to be an anthem of death. Those two phenomena shook me to my core and changed me profoundly. Whenever I remember the terrible events of April 9<sup>1</sup>, everything suddenly turns upside-down. Before that, though, came 1983. Sometimes I think that entire scenes from my future life must

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<sup>1</sup> On this day in 1989, an anti-Soviet demonstration by Georgian separatists was crushed by the Soviet Army, resulting in 21 deaths.

have been flashing before my eyes as I stood there holding my water pistol and listening to the music.

You might say that was the day my ears were opened, but in actual fact it happened a little differently. More accurately, it was as if a man called Keith Jarrett grabbed hold of my ears and dragged me into his world. To tell the truth, I sometimes wish it had been something else, something cooler. I wish I could say proudly that it was something by Mozart, for example, or Jim Morrison that changed my life. That's not to say Keith Jarrett is unoriginal—he has recorded hundreds of original pieces over his career—and yet in the beginning it was just an old Billie Holiday song, filled with Jarrett's grunts and groans but still Holiday's by name.

All the old jazz pianists used to grunt while they played, from Erroll Garner to Thelonius Monk by way of Bud Powell, but it was not until Keith Jarrett made his stage debut that the loudest grunts in the history of piano jazz were heard. If nothing else, those grunts will remain his legacy.

One way or another, this man and I have walked the same path for forty years. No one has given me more happiness. Without Keith Jarrett, my life would have been quite different. My own private *Bildungsromance* began in 1983 and continues today, forty years on. After forty years of marriage, couples celebrate their ruby wedding anniversary. The Israelites spent forty years wandering the wilderness. For me, the period marks forty years since my birth. That is, my rebirth.

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As you listen you realise that Jarrett lives inside the music and its live performance. I play therefore I am. Therefore I die. He doesn't actually live in death—that would be taking it

too far—but when he dies, he lives. For him the process is more important than the result. As he loses himself in the grand piano, he is constantly muttering something or other, grunting and straining while rattling the keys. And those grunts of his never replicate the melodic line he happens to be playing at the time. His music is one thing, his grunts another. Sometimes they burst out of him so suddenly it seems like his soul might follow.

He is often very loud, as if he is searching through the music for more music, in which he hopes to find yet more music. On and on he goes, raking endlessly through the music, trying to latch on to the theme. He starts cautiously, as if defusing a bomb, and after a while he thinks he's getting close, but just when he thinks he's grasped it, it slips through his fingers like sand. It's like he is trying to disappear, leaving only the music behind, to meld with the music, be reborn in it, become it. At these times he suffers, and he makes you suffer with him, and as he suffers, sighs and moans burst out of him into the space around him, splitting him in two, but his torment alone makes everything worthwhile.

In ancient times, orators and tribunes were known to circle around the main argument until their tongue found exactly the right words, bringing forth admiration and applause. Jarrett sometimes builds such a complex labyrinth for himself you think he will never find his way out, but then, out of the chaos, he will carve a phrase of such brilliance it will take your breath away. Sometimes he starts up a new melody and it seems so familiar you think he has created it just for you, as if your own personal tragedy is being born from the soul of the music. For what are you without tragedy? Sometimes he howls so loudly you can't even hear the piano anymore, and you wonder if maybe he's trying to tell you that he's drowning or suffocating. At other times you are left feeling that he has beaten your subconscious out of you, bringing up thoughts you would rather not have. Occasionally he seems to be taking such

pleasure in the music that you feel embarrassed for him. And he has played a lot of music: his own and others', jazz and classical, from Handel to Shostakovich, with plenty of Bach inbetween. There's no escaping Bach, that's just a simple fact, and the bewigged German can pop out of Jarrett's fingers unexpectedly at any time during a concert. The sharper-eared among us can easily pick up on such moments in his improvisations.

Some of his classical recordings have been called masterpieces by the critics, but this is an exaggeration. He played well, the reviews were published, and that was that. There is nothing masterful about these recordings. Jarrett's element is jazz, and the pinnacle of his art is improvisation.

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Keith Jarrett is an introvert, and this is reflected in his music, despite the frenzy he whips his audiences into at his concerts. What's more, when you listen to Jarrett you think he is playing just for you. You feel like he's sharing a secret with you.

Whether you like it or not, when played by this man, the piano sounds different. How can he make a single note sound like an entire chord? How can a simple scale tell you more than a whole orchestra would in another time and place? How is it that he can knead all the words in your heart with his bare hands, like a baker kneading dough? And I don't think it makes any difference what he plays on. You could place a toy piano in front of him and the sounds he made from it would wring tears from an elephant. A toy elephant, no less. Besides, his small hands would probably fit comfortably on a toy instrument. He often plays as if it is the last time he will ever play. As if he will strike the final note and then die. This is Keith Jarrett. There is much more to him, of course, but these abstractions best outline the silhouette of his soul.



Being stuck in a wheelchair is a curse for anyone. It must be hell. Can there be any greater injustice than for a man who never stood still to face death ossified like a doll? There is something antiquated in such a cruel punishment, like the penalties the gods would dish out for disobedience. He is a restless spirit imprisoned in stone. How could something like that happen to him? It's perverse. He is being forced to witness his own death, stuck in his chair like flowers in a vase, observing the final beats of a heart no one has ever seen at rest.

I had always pictured the end differently. I thought his heart would explode from too much emotion, that one day it would simply burn out like a lightbulb connected to an excessively high voltage, or that he would let out a final grunt while playing and fall dead on the piano, his deep compassion and empathy having run down his brain like a battery. I wonder if he still grunts from his wheelchair.

I'm sure everyone must have laid eyes at least once on one of Francis Bacon's popes. Among them is a canvas called "Head VI", showing a man trapped in a glass cage, screaming into a vacuum. I've always thought that Jarrett must scream—or at least grunt—like that in his studio at night, trapped in his wheelchair.

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Jarrett's trio occupies a special place in the history of music. The three of them—Jarett, Peacock, and DeJohnette—play like gods on stage, or more specifically like one god, so attuned to each other you'd think they must rehearse to the point of wanting to kill each other. On the contrary, they hardly ever develop themes together; the music is born right there on stage.

In an interview Jarrett once said, "We show up, we have dinner backstage, we chat about... whatever. It could be about the universe, it could be about garage doors not working.

And then we go. And we play". None of them ever knew what was going to happen when they played, but this is what having complete trust in your partners means. A shared sense of something bigger than yourself. Without this, how can you converge on a specific rhythmic pattern from the endless spontaneous options available to you? How can you turn disparate musical phrases into a common harmonic flow? There simply isn't enough time for your brain to send signals to your hands—everything happens in milliseconds. Jarrett himself refers to it as the neurons firing fast, and this is also what he meant when he talked about the Danish pianist and comedian Victor Borge, who was able to jump from one place to the next in a flash as he played. Improvisation is knowing how to do this intuitively. While playing, you might hear something and think, "What might come next?" But what comes next may be something completely different from what you have been preparing for.

Solo improvisation is hard enough, so just imagine how hard it must be to improvise with others. It's easy enough to put into words—we could call it, say, "harmonic spontaneity"—but phenomenally difficult for a group to achieve. It's almost unheard of for the members of a group to be so attuned to each other. How much trust do you have to have in your partners to go in front of the public and perform rough drafts of pieces that have never existed before? It is no exaggeration (but maybe also an exaggeration) to say that what is happening on the stage at that time is a kind of alchemy, three disparate elements combining to become one, right in front of your eyes.

When listening to the three of them improvise, you realise that none of them knows what the other two want at any given moment, and yet they constantly supply each other with the best musical phrases possible. It's almost as if they form a shared nervous system, a

model of ideal interaction. You can even hear the blood circulating between them in the form of the music, as if through a single organism.

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He also earned my respect by using some of Kafka's sketches on the cover of one of his albums. It's only logical that he would use them—after all, those sketches are portraits of Jarrett himself. It's a deceptive cover, showing three figures which, you naturally assume, represent the three members of the trio: Jarrett, Peacock, and DeJohnette. But only Jarrett would adopt such poses. It's as if Kafka, in his day, observed Jarrett twisting and bending and sketched him like that in his notebook. From what we know of Kafka, this is entirely possible: if this gigantic insect<sup>2</sup> could see the entire twenty-first century from its viewpoint in the twentieth, it would surely have spotted a solitary man hunched over his grand piano. Perhaps not, though. After all, it is often more difficult to see a single man than an entire century.

The colour of the album cover isn't accidental either: *Standards Live* is grey, like Kafka's shadow. The album contains maybe the greatest performance of a jazz standard in history, *Too Young to Go Steady*. Let's also recall here the total genius of *Whisper Not*, which I mentioned above, from the album of the same name. This Benny Golson number has been played and sung by everyone, from Golson himself to Ella Fitzgerald. It's always been a melancholy piece, sure to send shivers down your spine, but when Jarrett plays it, it really brings a lump to your throat. And then there's *What is this Thing Called Love?*, which is worth the price of the album alone.

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<sup>2</sup> So begins *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka's 1915 novella: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect."

This Cole Porter classic begins with Jarrett's magical solo introduction. Peacock enters with the lightest of touches at 1:07, and ten or so seconds later, DeJohnette joins the duet. For the next seven minutes, the three of them play what we love them for—jazz of the highest quality—and then, suddenly, at 8:34, they transform the music into something utterly enchanting, something you will never hear from anyone else. Even now, twenty-three years after I first heard it, that moment makes my heart beat so fast it feels like it's going to leap out of my chest. The ending is also worth memorising: it's impossible not to be moved by that little squeak the piano makes at 10:20, and just when you think there can't possibly be any more to come, something happens right at the eleven-minute mark that sees you through to the finale with sparks going off in your heart.

I first heard this album at the end of 1999. As the whole world waited with bated breath for the end of civilisation, I waited for the end of *What is this Thing Called Love?*, with equally bated breath. One of my friends brought the double album back for me from Paris at the end of November, and for the whole of December I listened to almost nothing else. There are several jewels on the album, but *What is this Thing Called Love* is a standout track even for the trio. By the end of the month I had memorised pretty much every single one of Keith's grunts and groans, and yet every subsequent listen felt like the first. I listened and I didn't want it to end, just like the world never wants history to end. So what is it, this thing called love?

Even if you know nothing about Jarrett, you can tell from his album covers that he is a little bit different from other people, a mixture of Rumi's poetry, his own (he's a pretty good poet, and yet I am grateful that we have never heard him recite his poetry on stage, unlike, say, Cecil Taylor), and certain lines from Rainer Maria Rilke. During interviews, he sometimes

starts quoting Thomas Pynchon, or suggesting that the applause at his concerts sounds like choral music from a non-existent Kubrick movie, or comparing jazz to a subatomic particle that changes its behaviour upon being observed. It seems to me that the Kafka sketches on his album cover come from the same place.

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Miles Davis once said that you can tell the history of jazz in four words: "Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker". My definition of jazz is a little different, and it doesn't include Jarrett. If I were to characterise jazz in four words, I would say, "Miles Davis, John Coltrane", and then I would switch the order to "John Coltrane, Miles Davis", which will no doubt please the Coltrane fans, although I do so simply under the logic that the sum is not changed by the order of its parts. This logic doesn't always work for jazz, however, and others would use four completely different words. From Ornette Coleman to Thelonius Monk, Bill Evans to Eric Dolphy, everyone shrieks that their version is the right one. Jarrett does not define jazz, nor even represent jazz, no matter how much of it he plays. Keith Jarrett stands a little to the side. You could say about any of the artists I've listed above that they *are* jazz. Miles *is* jazz. Coltrane *is* jazz. You couldn't say that about Jarrett, and especially not about his improvising. And yet you can't say he isn't jazz, either. When he plays jazz, he is incomparable, but when he improvises, his jazz is refracted like a ray of light. At these times, his music is quasi-jazz, a bifurcation of jazz. A mode of jazz, and not only in terms of *modus operandi* or *modus vivendi*, but in the wider sense of the term. It is Jarrett's jazz, or to put it another way, "Jazzett". And at those times when he starts to resemble a twisted, gurning hunchback dancing a tango with the piano, he becomes the Quasimodo of jazz. Jazzimodo, if you will.

Nevertheless, it is through jazz that Jarrett has earned his place in history. He is without doubt a great jazzman. And yet his improvisation is greater still. It is this, his Jazzett, that makes him a unique phenomenon among all the great jazzmen we have seen.

It is one thing to give a name to this undefined genre of improvisation, and another thing altogether to describe its effect. In my opinion, the miracle lies here in the absence of a miracle. During his solos, Jarrett creates such a heightened sense of expectation, stirs your emotions so deeply, that you end up waiting for some kind of miracle to happen. But then the music stops, and you realise a miracle hasn't happened after all. And yet, instead of feeling disappointed, you're left surprised that what you thought was about to happen—what seemed so real to you just a moment ago—didn't happen. This, I think, is the miracle of Jarrett's music: a miracle that turns out not to be a miracle.

Jazzett is something exotic, like a jazz-based drink. Like a glass of champagne (or more accurately, lemonade) with the fizz taken out. It is music with the jazz taken out. Music that isn't jazz anymore but still tastes of jazz. Miles was full of jazz, and Coltrane was a whole gas cylinder of jazz, whereas Jarrett is a glass of lemonade with the jazz taken out. His fans are different, too: loyal, not fickle. Wasps are still attracted to lemonade even after it has lost its fizz. The wasps know where the sugar is. And so does God. For what would God be without sugar?<sup>3</sup> Or wasps? We still call it jazz, but not because we can't come up with a better name; it's just that jazz has become such a wide-ranging concept that pretty much everything can now be called jazz, including Jarrett's improvisations—his Jazzetts.

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<sup>3</sup> It isn't necessary here to picture God as a well-trained poodle that performs tricks for lumps of sugar. And yet ever since God created man as a symbol of his own greatness and man created God to justify his own weakness, they have been trying to tame each other. Which is why sweet things will always be necessary. Everyone and everything, from man to God, can be trained with a lump of sugar.

In a way they resemble motets. If a motet (from the Italian *Motetto*) is a polyphonic liturgical choral work, a Jazzett (from the English *Jazzett*) is a multilayered secular instrumental improvisation. Vocal-instrumental, if we include his grunts.

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As we all know, there is size S and size L, and between them you have size M. After that we get XS and XL, then XXS and XXL, and so on and so forth. The only one that never changes is M. M is the eternal size, a kind of absolute measurement. Now imagine that M has variations like the other sizes, and there exists, let's say, a size XM. That would be Jarrett. Extra medium. Medium, but extra.

Jarrett is not a genius. He shows flashes of genius by the ton, both during his solo improvisations and when performing others' work, both alone and with others. I don't know how one man can create so many moments of genius, but the fact is that Jarrett has been creating them ever since he started playing. And not just one or two here and there, like an ordinary mortal or even an extraordinary immortal, but consistently, systematically. Some might say that this is the very definition of genius, but they would be wrong. Jarrett's brilliance is the result of hard work. This is not intended by any means to diminish him—on the contrary, it might be an even greater compliment. I'm simply reluctant to categorise him as just another genius, even if he is one. Calling him a genius means dismissing all his hard toil. How many geniuses can you name who were also perfectionists? If you know Jarrett, you will also know that he truly believes that the ideal is something achievable, that an imperfect result has no right to exist. Genius, by contrast, is a kind of shirking of responsibility—talent bestowed undeservedly, which removes the beneficiary from the list of mortals and enrolls them on a different, higher register. This creates a huge chasm between the members of the list and us

ordinary mortals, and that's why we're always being told that God created man in His own image—to break down the boundary, to fill the gap between God and man. In Jarrett's case, there is no lack of responsibility, no unscrupulousness. He fully deserves every millimetre of his success. And his failures.

Jarrett has lit up whole albums with his skill, although he is not the only one who shines. Take *Changeless*, for example, which is one long, unending gleam of light. Here again we have the trio: Jarrett, Peacock and DeJohnette. As they play, all three of them seem to disappear, leaving only the music behind. This is music that has never existed as notes on manuscript paper and never been practiced in the studio. From start to finish it is born on stage. This album made such a deep impression on me when I first listened to it on CD at the beginning of the nineties, a very dark period for Georgia, that I felt like carrying the disc around with me in my mouth, like the plates members of the Mursi tribe wear in their pierced lips.

If there are such adjectives as “Kafkaesque” (from the German *Kafkaesk*), meaning “mysterious, nightmarish, menacing”, “Lynchian” (from the English *Lynchian*), meaning “mysterious, macabre, gloomy”, and so on, which define the unique style of a specific artist, a style that could never be mistaken for another's, what's stopping us from coming up with a new word that would be connected only to this man? And so we return to “Jazzett” (from the English *Jazzett*), meaning “twisted, grunting, righteous”, “righteous” being the most definitive of the three. All that jazzett.

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I once met a woman at a friend's birthday party. She had a gap between her front teeth that made her look like a young Vanessa Paradis, so that's what I decided to call her. She would have been a little bit taller than Vanessa. Her outfit—an enormous jumper tucked into baggy



jeans and a black knitted hat—made it impossible to determine her body shape. The fashions of the day, especially winter fashions, made it difficult to distinguish men from women. There was something untamed about her. She spoke little and smelled of oil paint. She was an artist. I could sense there was something between us.

I gave her a copy of *Paris Concert*. I presented her with the compact disc, safely housed in its elegant wine-red cover, so triumphantly you'd think I was handing over one of my lungs. It was a pirate, but of the highest quality. I had a copy of the original, too, but I couldn't bring myself to part with it, and besides, I thought it was pleasingly alliterative: Pirate—Paris—Paradis. At least, that's how it seemed in my fantasies. I didn't say anything, hoping the album would speak for itself. And so it did, only not in the way I hoped. I never saw her again. I tried calling her a few times, but she said she didn't want to talk to me. It wasn't the first time I'd been rejected, of course, nor would it be the last, but it was the most painful. I'm not sure why it hit me so hard. Perhaps because I put the blame for my personal fiasco on the music. It never occurred to me that the music could be wrong. On the contrary, I had assumed that the music would open her up, exposing things that normally remain unexposed, intimate, highly private things. Secret things she could never share with anyone, not even herself.

Maybe I'm exaggerating and it was simply that she wasn't interested in me. Maybe it was me personally she was rejecting and the music had nothing to do with it. But that's what I find bewildering—how can music have nothing to do with it? Nothing tells you more about a person than their favourite music. Whilst you should always be wary of someone who doesn't like music, with a music lover, no matter who they are, from the lowest barbarian to the highest intellectual, it's easy to figure out what makes them tick, to unlock the secrets to their heart. There are no exceptions to the rule. If you have a problem with a music lover, you

must realise that it is in fact you who have the problem because it was you who couldn't make the key fit. Otherwise our hearts will all remain locked, even those of the most openhearted.

What I regret most in this story, even more than the unrequited love, is the fact that I gave her a pirated compact disc which, in many ways, was superior to the original. In the original there was nothing but a single sheet of the thinnest paper folded in two. It couldn't have looked any cheaper. The pirate, on the other hand, came with a whole booklet that was so thick it made it difficult to close the case. It had clearly been produced with the greatest of care and was filled with monochrome photographs (I still wonder who on earth it was who managed to get hold of those photographs; there was no Internet then, and very few pictures of Jarrett doing the rounds) and several pages of English text by an uncredited author. This anonymous fan had analysed Jarrett's work with great passion and warmth. It was one of those rare cases where the pirate improves on the original. If only I'd bought two copies and given away the extra one. There's no way I'll ever find it again, so now I am stuck with just the official version, with its pathetic sheet of paper that looks like it was printed out in an Internet café and stuffed carelessly into a plastic CD case.

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Jarrett's music has brought me into contact with so many people, often those I would never have met otherwise, but *The Köln Concert* is a different matter altogether. I was once held captive. Only for a little while, but still. I was living on Tskneti Street in Tbilisi when a rumour started to spread that they were selling morphine on the border between Georgia and South Ossetia. And not just any old morphine, but the pink type. No one remembered where the rumour came from or who started it, but it kept on spreading—Ossetian women were bringing pink morphine over the border in powder form. The time was confirmed:

around noon. And for a minimal price, too, although you don't care about the price when you have a heavenly image in your mind of Ossetian women carrying trays of pink morphine. If you've ever seen pink morphine with your own eyes, you'll know what I'm talking about. What brain could have conjured such a fantasy?

So one day, three of us—Akaki (yep, good old Koka), Amirani (yep, good old Miriani), and me (yep, good old me)—set out for the border in Miriani's red Niva, with Koka in the driving seat. Koka was the best driver of the three of us—he could drive any car, from an all-terrain Soviet Niva to a Japanese number, from a sports car to a diesel. We were still young lads at the time, and the car wasn't actually Miriani's but his mother's. He used to borrow or steal it from her sometimes. She would never have let us use it if she'd known we were off to the border to buy morphine. And not just any old morphine, but the pink type. We somehow managed to reach the border dead on twelve noon. Perfect timing.

From the main road out of Tbilisi, Gori is on the left and Samachablo<sup>4</sup> is on the right, so we turned right, roared up the incline, and after driving along the empty road for a while, winding through columns of plane trees, we suddenly came out onto a barren plain with a Georgian border checkpoint and a rusty barrier in the middle of it. Sandbags were stacked on top of each other on both sides of the road, and it occurred to me that if something happened, I could dive into them as if into a well. On the other side of the checkpoint the descent began, and down below we could see the outskirts of a village, which looked like the edge of heaven. It was late spring and everything was blooming and green. In all the greenery our red Niva glowed like a piece of live coal. It's highly unlikely that you would ever find yourself at the Ossetian border in a car with a Tbilisi numberplate by accident during a trip to the countryside

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<sup>4</sup> The preferred Georgian term for what is usually referred to in the West as South Ossetia.

to pick wildflowers or something like that. You would be spotted first by the people and animals that are sure to be found hiding in the grass and bushes.

Miriani stepped out of the car confidently, with a certain aplomb, confidence and aplomb playing important roles in those days, as they do today. He struck up a conversation with the border guard standing at the checkpoint and offered him a cigarette. Things were not looking good: the barren plane was completely empty except for us and the Georgian soldiers, and we hadn't worked out a strategy for this particular scenario. Just what were we waiting for anyway? Did we really think that the moment they laid eyes on us, a harem of beautiful Ossetian women would come flooding across the border doing the traditional Simd dance, the barrier having been raised specially for them, with freshly baked *korovai* in their arms and salt cellars filled with pink morphine sitting on top of the *korovai*, and that they would take pinches of the morphine and rub them on our gums like an anti-inflammatory, or massage them into our ass cheeks like soothing baby powder for irritated skin? The place we found ourselves didn't feel anything like heaven—it stank of lead and burning—and yet the outskirts of the village at the bottom of the hill really did look at least a bit heavenly.

Then, just as Miriani was saying something dumb to the border guards, two men dressed in black suddenly appeared from the woods. They had broad shoulders and were wearing short jackets with machine gun barrels poking out from underneath. The machine gun barrels were black too. They came walking up to us, slowly but steadily. No one could ever have mistaken them for beautiful Ossetian women. They passed through the Georgian checkpoint without breaking their stride. The border guards didn't even notice them—they were like ghosts passing right through them. They approached the car and one of them jumped in without asking permission. He sat down next to me on the back seat, slid his right

hand out of his sleeve, and placed his short-barrelled Kalashnikov on his knees without even attempting to hide it, as if it were a continuation of his body.

He was tall and skinny but his movements were graceful. The black hair on his forehead glistened like a raven's feathers. His cheeks were as smooth as a baby's, and it was difficult to tell whether he had just shaved that morning or was unable to grow a beard. He was wearing a black roll-neck sweater, and with his thin skin, crooked nose, prominent jawline and sunken cheeks he looked a bit like Anna Akhmatova. He smelled unwashed. You might have called him good-looking if it hadn't been for his dead, unblinking eyes. Along with the smell of sweat, he brought the coolness of the forest into the car with him. He sat next to me without saying a word, staring at a point somewhere ahead of him. His black hair was tamped down somewhat by the thick, nickel-plated band across his head, which was connected the earphones he was wearing. It was impossible to guess what he was listening to from the expression on his face. He looked like a pretty girl wearing a silver hair band.

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To get into the back of a Niva, first you have to lift up the front seat. When the man got in and sat down next to me, he left the seat up. A moment later Miriani, whose pointless conversation with the border guards had come to an abrupt end, also squeezed his way into the back. It was obvious whom the front seat had been left empty for: the other man in black, who was nowhere to be seen but I assumed was waiting outside behind the car. The one sitting next to me shuffled over to make room for Miriani, ending up between us along with his automatic. If anything happened, he would be able to use us as a kind of bulletproof vest, albeit one made of flesh and blood. Miriani did what any well-mannered person would have done in the situation, returning the front seat to its original position for the man waiting

outside, and the man took his seat like a captain boarding his ship, if a Niva could ever be considered a ship. He closed the door quietly and in strongly accented Russian said, “Poyekhali”, the same word Gagarin uttered before jetting off into outer space. To the Georgian border guards it was as if we had evaporated, become invisible like the ghosts that had passed through them a few minutes earlier. The two men in black turned out to be Chechens. They hardly said a word on the way, no “Hey lads, you’re our prisoners now” or anything like that. They didn’t have to. They both stank of sweat, and I realised that what I’d thought was the coolness of the forest was in fact the chill of death.

We only stopped once along the road, beside a garden with a latticed fence. The guy sitting in front got out and opened the gate, while from inside the small house another man dressed in black came out. He was also tall and skinny, and he had a short beard. They started chatting in low voices, all the while staring up at the sky and the mountains like poets. Meanwhile, the one sitting between me and Miriani grabbed the handle of his machine gun resting on his knees, tested the trigger with his index finger, carefully removed his headphones with his other hand, and placed them next to him between my legs and his own. I could feel his fingers touching my leg for a second through my jeans. The men standing outside had evidently finished their tête-à-tête and were looking up at the mountains again. Or was it the sky? Then, without saying goodbye, they parted ways, like long-term enemies or lovers. After driving for a while we reached the outskirts of Gori, where the ghosts got out. I don’t know Gori very well at all, but I could tell it was the outskirts. They didn’t say goodbye to us either. They clearly had little use for words. They had their own business to attend to. We had just happened to encounter them along the path of life—to them we had been nothing more than a form of public transport.

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Instead of saying goodbye, one of the ghosts placed something in Koka's hand as if paying a taxi driver for the ride. It was a disposable syringe containing one milligram of Promedol, for use in the field. I had never seen such a thing. The tiny little plastic instrument lay in Koka's palm like the body of a dead bee. What's more, it was pure white, like a bee's soul. As we stared at the syringe, the two ghosts entered a passageway between two apartment blocks and disappeared.

While Koka and Miriani argued over who was going to get the Promedol (there was no point in sharing a single milligram), I picked up the portable tape recorder the ghost had left on the back seat of the car and turned it over in my hand. I wondered whether he had forgotten it or left it there on purpose. It was still warm with his residual body heat, and the flimsy earphone covers stank of smoke. I kept looking out of the window, imagining that at any minute he was going to reappear and ask for his machine back.

I only switched it on once we had passed through Gori and were on the central highway leading to Tbilisi, and even then I couldn't stop thinking he was going to catch up with us in another car and demand his Walkman back. In the end, though, no one caught up with us and the worn-out old Panasonic became mine. As we climbed the Saguramo Hills on the edge of Tbilisi, I put the earphones, whose flimsy covers were still impregnated with smoke and sweat but had cooled down a bit on the way, into my ears and discovered that the ghost had been listening to *The Köln Concert*. He was already most of the way through "Part II b". There was just some applause and the five-minute "Part II c" left to go. Applause, applause, always applause... Without applause Jarrett doesn't even exist. It follows him everywhere he goes. The entire concert had been recorded on an AGFA C90, and I've often wondered how it came

to be in the ghost's possession: did he really love Keith Jarrett? Or had he stolen the Walkman and its headphones from some dead body he came across, and the machine just so happened to have a cassette of *The Köln Concert* in it?

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The roots of fascism may lie in German classical music, but there is nothing in Jarrett's music that would ever impel anyone to do something evil. It's inconceivable that after listening to him you would ever want to do anyone, including yourself, any harm. A typical feature of his Jazzetts is that the theme becomes muddied in the middle. They usually start by testing the bottom, but then they gradually become more muddled—muddied and cloudy like choppy waters—and it is only after they reach the climax that they begin to settle, becoming sluggish again, similarly to how they started out, and at the end burbling along gently like a quiet stream. There is always some poison, but it is instantly followed by the antidote. He is sometimes accused of playing too many notes at the same time, but his simpler, more modest pieces are often more complex than those too-many-noted compositions. In itself, simplicity doesn't mean anything: the right hands can mould something seemingly simple into something that leaves an indelible mark on you. It is always possible to mix the magical and beautiful with fear and alarm, and Jarrett's music often straddles this duality.

In each of us there is a wild beast that music can't extinguish but can awaken or put to bed. Therein lies the power of music. Jarrett's music is pure in spirit. It is specific, simultaneously pretentious and naïve, but also deeply honest and free of harmful impurities. Once it has opened its doors for you and let you peep inside, to where the hot winds blow tumbleweed across the desert floor, it is impossible to forget.

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I would even go so far as to say that Jarrett saved my life. Once, back in the dark days when there was no electricity, no water, no gas, no rule of law, no money, and no hope for the future, the Vake police stopped me and a friend of mine in the garden surrounding the statue of Gamsakhurdia on Paliashvili Street. My friend was Nika Gelashvili, the same Nika Gelashvili who died a few years later in the ruins of the collapsed Rustavi-2 building. When he died, something hugely important in me died with him—he was my greatest advocate and defender, even though I caused him terrible hurt at the end of our friendship. That’s just the way I’ve always been. Many of those who have had dealings with me have been left hurt. Some have even died as a result. In my relationship with Nika there was something childlike and innocent, despite us having met at the end of the nineties, when we were already fully grown, and it was this that made our relationship special. He was the only man I have ever met who never, over the entire course of our friendship, tried to get ahead of me. I have never met anyone like that before or since. Everyone tries to get ahead of you, or at least to keep up with you, whereas Nika was always happy to stand one step behind. No matter what we talked about, be it literature, cinema or music, he always bowed down to my opinions. He was somehow able to guide me to victory in every argument. So how can you hurt someone who is never offended by anything you do?

Basically, what happened is the police stopped us one night on Paliashvili Street. A group of podgy plainclothes detectives jumped out of their car, puffing and wheezing, and surrounded us to stop us from escaping. Then it started, all the usual inanities. Who are you? Where do you live? Show us your hands. In those days they were always very keen to see your hands—they would study the lines like fortune-tellers. No one ever asked you to confirm your identity because no one had anything to confirm their identity with. The fact that you were there confirmed it. Although not always.

Because there were no street lights, they checked our hands under the headlamps of the car. Our lines apparently didn't give them any grounds for suspicion. In my coat pocket I had a Discman with a set of earphones wrapped around it. "What's this then?" they asked, their eyes wide with the smell of booty.

At this point, a process of police cryptanalysis—cryptanalysis using truncheons on the soles of the feet, for example, or cryptanalysis using gas masks—could have easily begun, and although I hoped it wouldn't come to that, I knew that if they took us down to the station under some pretext, or under no pretext at all, it would be difficult to get out again. I knew of guys who, after undergoing a thorough police analysis, all the way from the soles of their feet to their kidneys, had pissed red for several days, as if they were on their period. Have you ever pissed blood?

In cryptanalysis using a gas mask, they place a Soviet-made gas mask over your face and, after tying you to a chair, repeatedly block and unblock the mask's breathing hole. Once the hole has been blocked a couple of times, the face shield fogs up, so you're suffocating, you can't see anything, and before long you feel like you're floating away somewhere. At least, I felt like I was floating away when it happened to me. And how do you prove that the Discman is rightfully yours? If they demand money and you don't know anyone who would be willing to step in and mediate, you have no choice but to pay up.

Figuring I might as well try to explain, I told them it was a portable CD player. "Put something on then," said the sergeant, so I switched it on. The disc I had in there that day was Jarrett's *My Song*, and it had a big scratch in it that caused it to jump straight to track two without playing track one. In other words, it started with "My Song", the album's main track. The sergeant from the Vake Police Department listened to the entire six-minute composition

from beginning to end while his colleagues, who looked more like small-time gangsters with their jeans tucked into their lace-up boots and their Makarovs stuck in their belts, smoked Marlboros and chatted quietly to each other in words and about things we couldn't understand.

I really wanted to see the expression on the sergeant's face so I could tell what effect the music was having on him, but in the dark it was impossible to make out. If he had been smoking a cigarette, it would have lit up his face when he inhaled, but he was the only one of them who wasn't. He stood there motionlessly, like a statue. The car's headlights shone down on an uncovered manhole, and the heat of the engine rose up from the bonnet and hovered in the air. Why were there never covers on the manholes in those days? Where did they all disappear to? Eventually the sergeant plucked the earphones out of his ears, handed the Discman back to me, and said "We're done. Let's go". Without another word, they drove away in their beige Zhiguli, leaving behind them only the pungent smell of exhaust fumes and cheap petrol as a souvenir.

*translated by Philip Price*