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**Living in the Present:  
Experiencing Temporal Elasticity in  
Keith Jarrett's *Sun Bear* Concerts**

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While I would stop short of characterising my fascination with Keith Jarrett's live solo piano improvisations as a full-blown obsession, I will admit unabashedly that when listening to recordings of his early, extended improvisations, I am drawn into them in ways that I seldom am with other types of music. This music calls on me to engage with it as if I were *myself* the music, unfolding *with* it rather than merely hearing *it* unfold independently of me as a listener. But it is also, perhaps paradoxically, as though Jarrett's extended solo improvisations invite me to experience *time*, time *itself*, as if separate from the music, as if the music were simply the vehicle by which temporality as an independent dimension were accessed and experienced. This, of course, is a problematic notion. Speaking of 'time itself' is like talking about 'red', as if red could exist and be present to us without some 'thing' being red, some 'thing' inhabiting and revealing to us the colour red. So, when I say "it seems as though Jarrett's extended improvisations give me access to time itself," what I *really* mean – what I came to realize – is that while listening to it, I am more actively involved in temporal-perceptual processing than I am with other music.

But for two reasons the situation is even more complicated than that. First, I not only feel compelled to participate in the unfolding of musical time *in general*, but I feel I am prompted, even obligated, to share in the creation and lived experience of the musical *present*. And second, it is not just that I am invited to *experience* – and as I will suggest actually *construct* – the musical present in all of its variation, subtlety, and nuance but, rather, it is also that this music makes me acutely *aware* of my experience of the *perception* of these things. That is, in trying to find the source of this music's effect on me, I found myself experiencing the music (of course), but also experiencing my *awareness* of the *processes* of perception and cognition, not only the *objects* of

perception and cognition. Alva Noë (2000) suggests, “If perceptual experience is in fact a temporally extended process, then to investigate experience we need to turn our gaze . . . to the activity itself in which this temporally extended process consists, to the things we *do* as we explore the world” (128). It is especially this meta-level experience – this experiencing, reflecting, then experiencing the reflecting – that I’m trying to work out in this paper.

In what follows, I consider, among other things, the question of the musical present as a point or a span, the perceptual and cognitive processes listeners undertake in experiencing the present as a span, the span configured as what Lanei Rodemeyer (2003, p. 132) refers to as a ‘zone of actualization’, and the definition of several experiential archetypes of the present emergent in Keith Jarrett’s solo improvisations. These archetypes will be demonstrated in excerpts from his *Sun Bear Concerts*, recorded in Japan from November 5-18, 1976.

We think of improvisation as being created in the moment, and our experience of it being firmly in the present. But what do we mean by this? How long is a moment? Of what does the present consist? On the one hand, the vitality of the musical-listening experience is surely a product of the immediacy of the present, the ‘here-and-now’. In fact, isn’t the present all we’ve *ever* got, whether in music or in life? Daniel Stern (2004) notes “. . . we are subjectively alive and conscious only now. Now is when we directly live our lives. Everything else is once or twice removed. The only time of raw subjective reality, of phenomenal experience, is the present moment (3).” On the other hand, music, more than any other art, is temporal. Its melodic shape, its harmonic progression, its sense of pace, its inner relationships, its patterns of tension and repose, its form, even its content – *especially* its content – all of these are revealed ‘over time’. That is, they cannot occur in an instant and, accordingly, cannot be experienced in an instant; thus, the present cannot logically be said to consist merely of an indistinguishable, infinitesimal moment. Stern qualifies his characterization of the present moment by saying the present “crosses

the mental stage more slowly, taking several seconds to unfold. And during this crossing, the present moment plays out a lived emotional drama. As the drama unfolds it traces a temporal shape like a passing musical phrase (4).” I’ll return to the equation of a musical phrase with the present later.

Stern’s suggestion of the present as something with substance, with breadth or extension, rather than as an indefinably miniscule point, has many historical antecedents, which I will not take time to rehearse here. What I do want to do is move immediately to the work of Edmund Husserl and that of more recent philosophers expanding on his phenomenology of time consciousness, as they define perceptual and cognitive processes associated with the present that we undertake as listeners. The ‘active’ and not merely theoretical nature of these processes is appropriately reflected in Husserl’s term for the present-as-span, which he calls the ‘living present’ (Rodemeyer, 2006, p. 34).

As indicated in **Fig. 1**, Husserl uses the terms ‘retention’ and ‘recollection’ to refer to perceptual acts by which we experience the past, and ‘protention’, ‘anticipation’, and ‘expectation’ to describe future-oriented activities; I have added the concept of ‘awaiting’. It is important to remember that these past- and future-oriented perceptual acts are undertaken from some point of reference. I will return to this, but mention here that in the context of the living present, this so-called reference point is referred to as the ‘now-point’, the ‘primal impression’, or even the ‘present-of-the-present-moment’. Retention is a process that takes place at each new now-point, but which essentially ‘holds on’ to those primal impressions that have already sounded. Husserl refers to these as ‘primary remembrances’, as the ‘*past-of-the-present-moment*’. As Stern (2004) explains it: “This is an immediate past that is still echoing at the present instant . . . This retained past is still within the felt present . . . No recall is needed for the *past-of-the-present-moment* because it is still in the [broader] *present* moment” (27, emphasis mine). Already we can see in

Husserl's *and* Stern's comments that 'moment' *is* in fact being equated with the living present, a present with breadth, rather than a mere indefinable point. While retention is considered 'primary' memory and 'presentative' in nature, 'recollection' is 'secondary' memory and is 're-presentative'. As **Fig. 1** illustrates, unlike retentions, recollections are memories of events that unfolded during a timeframe *before* the living present unfolding when those recollections are invoked, activated, or realized; we might even say that they are accessed *cognitively* rather than perceptually.

Husserl's 'protention' is the future-oriented activity within which I identify three distinct operations. If we have virtually no idea what to expect, protention is restricted to what I call 'awaiting' – a process that is neither dependent upon nor assisted by retention or recollection. Depending on the nature, precision and/or organization of our retentions, however, we may be in a position on the basis of those retentions to 'anticipate' to some degree the immediate future; retentions thus assist with anticipations, which occur when we are more actively engaged in the future and its possibilities. And I differentiate between 'anticipation' and 'expectation' on the basis of the *source* and concomitant *degree* of predictive confidence: thus, expectations come not only from retentions (as do anticipations) but are highly informed by *recollections* – that is, those secondary remembrances of material/events that occurred *prior to*, and thus *not within*, the living present unfolding at the time of recollection. Already we can see that the foregoing perceptual processes do not occur *independently* but rather, in highly interactive and often *interdependent* ways, past affecting – even effecting – the future, and future affecting the past.

These, in a nutshell, are the perceptual operations that phenomenology offers us as we attempt to explain what Lanei Rodemeyer (2006) calls our 'temporalizing consciousness' (12). Let me expand briefly on three important issues with respect to these operations before we turn to the music in question. First, in all of our nuanced talk about the 'past-of-the-present' and 'future-

of-the-present’, the ‘now-point’ – the ‘*present-of-the-present*’ as it were – has been largely left out of the equation. And for reasons discussed earlier this is logical. After all, the *now-point* itself is arguably extremely limited in quantitative and qualitative significance experientially and even Husserl himself amended the notion of a *now-point* to a ‘small *field*’, a now that is “stretched into a phase that extends beyond any notion of a point” (Rodemeyer, 2006, pp. 33-4, 137). Rodemeyer (2006) notes that Husserl often refers to the primal impression – the *now-point* or *present-of-the-present* – to indicate the precise point that some aspect of experience is actualized, but she argues that this tends to “reify the abstraction [of the *now-point*]” (142). She suggests, rather, that the content of experience and the “form of temporalizing consciousness” are better described in terms of the functioning of retention and protention, and that the fulfilment of those operations takes place not in a *point* but over the course of a field, a phase, or what she ultimately calls a ‘zone of actualization’ (142-3). “The ‘moment’ of the zone of actualization, for itself,” she adds, “practically disappears; it exists only in relation to the protentional and retentional flows . . . Protention and retention take precedence over the actual [so-called] ‘moment’ of actualization” (135). While Rodemeyer’s insistence that retentional and protentional flow take place over a *zone* rather than a *point* of actualization is understandable, I do think it is important to attribute significance to the *now-point* – but not as the point within which all of the retentional and protentional *actualization* actually takes place; rather, we might consider the *now-point* as the ‘vantage point’ from which listeners engage in that actualization. As will be demonstrated, the position or vantage of the listener within the broader present may actually be felt to change depending on the circumstances, which brings me to the second issue of importance.

Not only are the perceptual operations activated during the zone of actualization interdependent, as noted above, but the ‘constellation’ of processes – which essentially defines what we might refer to as the ‘shape’ of the present – is constantly changing, depending on

numerous factors: the ease of retention, the trigger to recollect, the confidence in our anticipations, our awareness of the musical genre in question, and of course our familiarity with the piece. And while the *details* of the ever-changing constellation of perceptual activities in any given zone of actualization might be unique, I want to suggest that several broader ‘archetypes’ of the living present surface in much of Jarrett’s improvisations. These archetypal constellations have particular experiential qualities to them that, unbeknownst to me when I started reflecting on this music, are part of the source of my intrigue. I will demonstrate these shortly.

And third, as alluded to in connection with **Fig. 1**, the living present, these so-called zones of actualization, may *not* have clearly articulated starting points and end-points. Perhaps the most obvious example of a living *musical* present that *is* often defined by such boundaries is the stereotypical musical ‘phrase’. Stern alluded to this earlier, but let me cite his more explicit account of this relationship: “A short musical phrase is the basic process unit of the experience of hearing music . . . A musical phrase is intuitively grasped as a global unit with boundaries . . . it is a continuous, analogic, flowing whole occurring during a now” (26). But music is not always parsed by clearly articulated beginnings and endings, even in composed, formalistic Classical music. When those aural cues are absent, the living present may seem to ‘emerge’ rather than start, and/or ‘dissolve’ rather than end. In situations where the zone does *not* begin with a clearly marked starting point for the accumulation of retentions or a clearly defined point of closure signalling completion of a living present, the zone of actualization might be experienced as ‘floating’ or ‘sliding along’, the material within that zone constantly changing and, thus, the processes activated and the contents actualized also changing as the unfolding proceeds. Zones of actualization, then, may be discrete – with clearly marked boundaries – or floating; each has a different experiential effect. Let’s now explore how these perceptual and cognitive processes are activated by our engagement with the music in question.

I will illustrate three archetypes of temporal shape – three different types of zones of actualization – that occur frequently in music of all kinds but that, for me, surface most explicitly and provocatively in Jarrett’s extended solo improvisations. The first archetypal zone of actualization is one that I call a ‘floating, leading-edge present’; it flirts with or hints at ‘expository’ qualities defined by, among other things, tonal or modal centeredness, logic of harmonic progression, textural clarity and consistency, and melodic and motivic relatedness. And this ‘quasi-expository’ quality *does* in fact allow us to engage in retention to *some* degree and indeed it motivates us to *try* to process the immediate future in such a way as to create discrete units. And in this first example, we may have some success engaging in these perceptual operations at the very opening; but before long, things change and the archetype under consideration (which I’ll explain in a moment) kicks in. Without saying too much more, listen to the opening of the *Nagoya* Concert. **[Audio EX.1: Nagoya, Part I, 0:00-1:10]**

As I mentioned, this archetypal zone only ‘flirts with’ the aforementioned expository qualities and one result of this quasi- or near-expository design is that our retentions keep ‘trailing off’. We are unable to identify and then continue to retain a referential starting point of a discrete unit of the present in the making. Moreover, as regards the interdependence of past and future, this quality of ongoing retentional ‘trailing off’ makes it difficult to anticipate (much less expect) anything specific in terms of the immediate future. As a consequence of this ‘through-composed-wandering’, we tend to experience this type of zone of actualization as if it were ‘floating’ rather than as discrete and clearly framed. When I hear this type of passage, I feel as though I am ‘riding the leading edge of the present’, as it were, that I am constantly in the *present-of-the-present*, that I am *myself* the gradually unfolding music (as I suggested at the outset of the paper). This archetypal zone of actualization is somewhat limited in scope, extending only minimally to the continually trailing-off immediate past, and virtually ignoring the future (as there is nothing on

which to base our anticipations); the real focus of our attention, as just mentioned, is on the successively unfolding now-points. With this explanation, listen to another example of this archetype, this one from the opening of the *Tokyo Concert*. (And again, we're listening not only to the music, but also to the positioning of our particular temporal vantage point as listeners, given the design of that music.) **[Audio EX. 2: Tokyo, Part I, 0:00-1:00]** There's an experiential quality about this archetype that is so right for the opening of these extended improvisations: there's enough retention to allow us to construct spans of albeit limited scope, and enough expository quality to prompt us to at least *try to* make melodic gestural sense of what we are hearing. But the absence of clear organization in the various domains mentioned earlier has the added benefit of directing, even forcing, our attention to that leading edge, positioning us right there with the improviser as he unfolds the music.

The second archetypal zone of actualization I'll mention is the 'floating present-as-point'; it is, as the name suggests, not really a zone at all. Notwithstanding all of our earlier discussion defending the present as a span, this type of present really *is* a point or, at most, a span so limited in retentional and protentional scope that the effect is that of a rapid 'succession of (often independent) perceptions' rather than the 'perception of succession' (which requires active retention). The restricted focus on the immediate present – the present-of-the-present, the now-point or primal impression – creates an experiential intensity even greater than in the leading-edge archetype which, as just discussed, also focuses on the immediate present. At least in *that* model, i.e., the first one, successive now-points accumulate to *some* extent and, although the retentional end continually trails off, there *is* a brief, floating, and ever renewing span of attention over which our perceptual energy is spent. Moreover, in the first archetype, we are invited to at least try to anticipate a future and construct a coherent temporal span. In the present-as-point archetype, however, the available span of attention from a listener's vantage point is extremely limited,

limited in fact to each point as it passes. The experiential intensity – felt and created by performers and experienced by listeners – is a product of the concentration of energy and focus on successive, seemingly unrelated now-points without capacity for retention, rather than dispersed over a span of even modest proportion. Passages with this kind of intense and unstable configuration often arise out of a dissolving motion of otherwise stable material and may or may not function in a transitional or bridging capacity. The first minute of this next excerpt, which starts about a third of the way into the *Kyoto* Concert, is arguably that of the *first* archetype – i.e., the ‘wandering’ archetype with retentional trailing off and a strong leading-edge focus; I include it in this excerpt in order to provide a context against which to hear the subsequent dissolving motion to the second archetype – a succession of less stable, transitional, presents-as-points. Here, then, is 2 ½ minutes from the *Kyoto* Concert. **[Audio EX. 3: Kyoto, Part I, 15:30-18:00]**

The third archetype I refer to as a ‘discrete, future-confident present’ and in many respects this one is the *opposite* of the floating present-as-point just discussed: it has breadth (often of considerable scope) and features ease of retentional accumulation; it has a clear beginning and endpoint, defining a discrete unit of the present; and because this archetypal zone of actualization most often occurs multiple times in succession (the perception of that succession facilitated by its discrete status), it boasts the highest degree of protentional activity in the form of expectation based on recollection. That is, as retention of one unfolding span triggers recollection of a similar span already heard, that recollection in turn facilitates confident and accurate expectation of particular details in the future.

Experientially, the ‘future-confident’ nature of this archetypal zone results in a curious sense of being poised at the *back end* of each discrete present – i.e., at the *starting point*. Although somewhat difficult to explain, I found that the high degree of interdependence between recollection of previous iterations and expectation within each subsequent unfolding resulted in

my being able to ‘hover’ at the *start* of each unit and, as it were, ‘listen ahead’. It’s not that my expectations were necessarily rich in musical detail, but they were extremely accurate in the temporal dimension, allowing me to know in advance where each successive unit should end. There are of course numerous contexts for this kind of predictive property generated by some form of precedent, but the important thing here is that in the Jarrett passage I will play for you, the precedent is generated *internally* through repetition and emergent clarity.

The excerpt I’ve chosen to illustrate this comes a few minutes after the transitional succession of perceptions heard in the previous example, from the *Kyoto* Concert. I’ll start this final excerpt from that transitional section so you can hear the shifting temporal shapes and sense of temporal elasticity that eventually take us to the archetype in question. Out of the transitional section just heard a new one-beat pattern emerges, first with ‘jagged’ edges that are systematically smoothed out. The ongoing repetition of that brief pattern establishes a foreground pulse that is otherwise undifferentiated, creating a floating indistinct sense of presence, rather than a discrete unit with articulated boundaries. It takes a while, but gradually that repetitious one-beat pulse is heard to support the 2-measure (8-beat) rhythmic pattern shown in **Fig. 2**. As *that* pattern is more extended temporally, with clearly articulated endpoints, it creates a vamp-like repetition of a discrete zone of actualization. And central to the temporal experience of those repeated zones is the fact that our emerging future-confident vantage allows us to ‘hover over’ the start of that pattern each time, to listen ahead for the unfolding of the right-hand gestures, which may or may not align with the repeated 2-measure present. (And unfortunately I cannot take time to discuss the experiential implications of that counterpoint or tension between the repeated discrete zone of the accompaniment and the more irregular, spontaneous interjections in the right hand.) **[Audio EX. 4: Kyoto, Part I, 18:00-21:10]**

The temporal operations and processes discussed in this paper are standard fare in the

realm of phenomenology, and any music approached phenomenologically will make reference to those activities. Now, one side of me worries that the differences in temporal shape and experience that I've identified in the Jarrett excerpt are too subtle or, alternatively, too obvious to be meaningful. Or maybe in the end, this explanation unnecessarily swaps one familiar set of terms – those associated with standard music-theoretic language – for another unnecessarily complicated one. Perhaps it's all of the above. But although the operations of retention, protention, and so on have a robust history of definition and application, and notwithstanding the subtle nature of their application here, I have tried in this paper to advance the utility of these concepts as they apply to and help us (me) to better understand the musical listening experience by stressing three things. First, the musical living present is neither a point *nor* a span but, rather, is *both* – that while the shape of the present is largely a result of listeners' relationship to the retentional past and protentional future – i.e., those components that create the present-as-*span* – those activities are always and only undertaken from a particular vantage *point*, thereby integrating the notions of point and span within the framework of the present as constructed and experienced.

Second, from any given vantage point within a span of attention, or what Rodemeyer calls a zone of actualization, listeners engage in a different constellation of perceptual and cognitive activities – which may be past- present- or future-focussed – and that any given constellation *shapes* the temporal spectrum at that point. Moreover, these varied constellations not only shape the temporal spectrum of the music, but also our experience of it. Form, in this context, then, becomes a succession of zones of actualization each with potentially different but certainly identifiable temporal-experiential effects.

And third, what these observations suggest is that *listeners* create temporal shape every bit as much as performers. Perceptual and cognitive processes such as retention and recollection, anticipation and expectation are not only activities that we undertake in *experiencing* the shape of

the present; they are the processes by which we *construct* it. Vijay Iyer (2004) flirts with this notion when he suggests that “[music perception and cognition] are actively constructed by the listener, rather than passively transferred from performer to listener” (159) and that “it is, at some level, *through* informed listening that music is constructed” (169). And in connection with improvisation in particular, Iyer states: “Some musical improvisation can foreground its own process, playing the role of experience itself, reminding the listener of one’s own act of experiencing it” (171). This precisely captures my relationship to Jarrett’s improvisations. But I must give the last word to Jarrett himself: “[T]he only thing that separates a good listener from a bad listener,” he claims, “is the sensitivity of the good listener (1999, 2:14) . . . Audiences think I don’t like them. But the truth is I need them more than almost any other performer that comes on stage in front of them. I just need them to do a few simple things. Try to concentrate” (2014, 2:14). This paper is the result of my concentration, the result of my trying to listen sensitively, and the result not only of my experience of his *music*, but of my meta-level experience of those musical encounters.

\* \* \*

**References follow; Figures in separate files**

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**Fig. 1: SCHEMATIC OF THE OPERATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE UNFOLDING LIVING PRESENT**

**(a) Basic model of the unfolding living present:**

$$| \mathbf{R}^T \leftrightarrow \mathbf{P}^T |$$

- + The double-headed arrow represents the interrelationship/interdependence of **RETENTIONS** ( $\mathbf{R}^T$ ) and **PROTENTIONS** ( $\mathbf{P}^T$ ).
- + Not shown (here or below) but implied is the 'now point' or point of 'primal impression' – the constantly changing point *from which* the listener activates/actualizes **RETENTIONS** and **PROTENTIONS** (later to be called the listener's 'vantage point').

**(b) Basic RETENTION and PROTENTION with the various PROTENTIONAL operations, including EXPECTATIONS and their source:**

$$\begin{array}{c}
 | \text{All 3 } \mathbf{within} \text{ the } | \\
 | \text{living present } | \\
 \downarrow \\
 | \mathbf{R}^T (\leftrightarrow) \mathbf{P}^T (\mathbf{A}^W) | \\
 | \mathbf{R}^T \leftrightarrow \mathbf{P}^T (\mathbf{A}^N) | \\
 \mathbf{R}^C \leftrightarrow \mathbf{P}^T (\mathbf{E}^X) |
 \end{array}$$

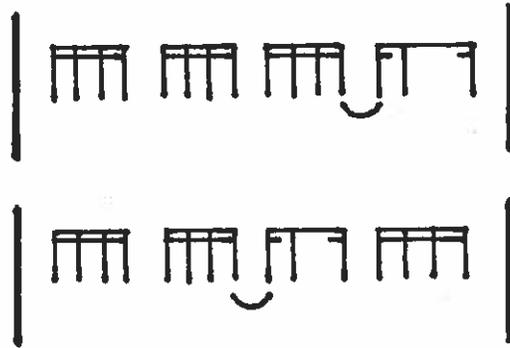
- + As in the basic model above, **RETENTIONS** and **PROTENTIONS** are interdependent.
- + However, the 'AWAITING' ( $\mathbf{A}^W$ ) form of **PROTENTION** is *not* governed by or influenced by **RETENTION** (or virtually anything else); hence, the  $\leftrightarrow$  denoting interdependency is in parentheses.
- + **RETENTIONS** *do* influence the 'ANTICIPATORY' ( $\mathbf{A}^N$ ) form of **PROTENTION** *within* the unfolding living present and thus the two are interdependent and interactive.
- + '**RECOLLECTIONS**' ( $\mathbf{R}^C$ ) – secondary remembrances activated/actualized *within* the unfolding present (i.e. from a particular vantage point), but consisting of memories of events that occurred *prior to* the onset of the unfolding present in progress – influence, trigger, even generate **PROTENTIONAL EXPECTATIONS**, again within the unfolding living present.
- + The particular constellation of processes activated or actualized from any given vantage point defines what I term the 'shape' of the present.

✚ The vertical lines ( | | )framing the present in the above diagram suggest a ‘discrete’ present, with clearly articulated beginning and endpoints; when these boundaries are not clearly marked, the present may be perceived as ‘floating’, as will be discussed.

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**Fig. 2: UNDERLYING 2-MEASURE (8-BEAT) RHYTHMIC PATTERN DEFINING THE  
'DISCRETE FUTURE-CONFIDENT PRESENT' IN PART I OF THE *KYOTO* CONCERT**



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***SUN BEAR* CONCERT RECORDINGS AND TIMINGS REFERENCED**

**Excerpt no. 1: *Nagoya* Concert, Part I: 0:00 – 1:10.**

**Excerpt no. 2: *Tokyo* Concert, Part I: 0:00 – 1:00.**

**Excerpt no. 3: *Kyoto* Concert, Part I: 15:30 – 18:00.**

**Excerpt no. 4: *Kyoto* Concert, Part I: 18:00 – 21:10.**