Let’s imagine the introduction to Isfar Sarabski’s debut album *Planet* as scenes in an inspiring concert with dramatic highs and lows. The 31-year-old pianist, composer and arranger has won enough laurels in the last decade to easily fill large concert halls all the way from his Azerbaijani hometown of Baku to Berlin, New York and Los Angeles. The auditorium lights go out and a spotlight shines on the grand piano at the edge of the stage from where Sarabski leads us into the meditative mood of the first scene. He calls this prelude “Deja Vu,” but the illusion of a memory doesn’t last long. Forty seconds later, he pauses for a moment before striking up a highly sophisticated pulsing motif. The curtain is raised to reveal his trio’s two other members – Mark Guiliana on drums and Alan Hampton on double bass. Their swing is so up-tempo that the audience can’t keep their feet still. Just when the music reaches its emotional and cognitive high point, a second curtain falls in a flash, revealing a set of strings which lend a heart-warming dimension to the rhythmic and harmonic energy. But that’s not all: suddenly, the panorama of our senses expands so unexpectedly that suddenly anything seems possible. Clearly, here are three musicians who love to play freely, and, backed by string instruments, are moving towards a form of chamber-music jazz. The complex metre of the music, however, is not an intellectual show of strength.

The fact that this music feeds the imagination so vividly, and that it can be effortlessly imagined in a concert setting even though I am only listening to a studio recording, testifies to its immense vitality. Its source is Isfar Sarabski himself, as his vita vividly illustrates. During his scholarship at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, he impressed fellow students and teachers alike with his voracious, open-minded zigzagging between jazz impressionism, the folk tradition of his homeland and the exploration of electronic soundscapes. The trail Sarabski has blazed for over two decades finds its roots in his childhood. His mother is a violin teacher, his father a great music aficionado who appreciates everything from jazz, rock, soul and funk to Bach, Brahms and Beethoven. And his grandfather, Huseyngulu Sarabski, is revered throughout the Arab world as a music pioneer, opera singer, musician and stage writer. Music is unquestionably in Isfar Sarabski’s genes. *“My father’s vinyl records were literally my toys,”* he recalls. *“I was fascinated by the mechanics of the record player, by the big black discs, and, of course, by the world of tones, harmonies and rhythms that it opened up to me. I can remember exactly how I felt the first time I listened to Dizzy Gillespie’s records or recordings of Bach’s and Chopin’s works. How was music able to create images in my head? I had to find out.”*

And that’s what he did. His first attempts at piano-playing on a simple Casio keyboard at the age of four were followed by his own real piano, admission to the Academy of Music in Baku, learning his country’s traditional mugham form of improvisation and discovering the catalogue albums of Herbie Hancock, Miles Davis and Bill Evans. Born in 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell, it was not easy for Sarabski to get hold of records by American jazz greats that were not already in his parents’ record collection. The gradual opening of the former Soviet Union, however, made it easier to access Western music in Azerbaijan. By 2005, Isfar Sarabski had discovered his own musical expression. Arabic scales meet mugham, powerful rhythms and a rich foundation of jazz and classical chords.

The immediate sincerity of his music and its meaningful, emotional content is combined with elegant, intellectual delights that stimulate the mind and enrich the heart. In the ballad “Limping Stranger”, Sarabski has a solo spot after Hampton’s deeply harmonious double bass passage, which perfectly showcases his ability at improvisation and all its panoramic cinematic qualities, marked by a burning desire for melody. “Swan Lake”, the only composition on *Planet* that is not Sarabski’s own, brings Tchaikovsky’s ballet music closer to the actual state of jazz with a radically new arrangement. *“I am a big fan of classical music and have been going to theatre performances, operas and orchestral concerts since I was a child. In my opinion, classical music is the foundation of all other forms of music,”* says Sarabski. *“The idea for arranging the fragment of ‘Swan Lake’ is the logical consequence of my ongoing search for parallels between modern and classical music.”* In the solo passage of the two-part title piece, he finds a new depth to this approach, as if he secretly wants to play jazz in the style of Rachmaninov. Free passages meet hidden cadenzas that are not immediately obvious on a first listening. *“The album is called* Planet *because it sums up my feelings and views on our universe,”* Sarabski explains. *“I reflect on the people and events in recent years that have affected us all, and the new situations we have to deal with, as a way of entering into dialogue with my listeners.”*

Perhaps this is why, as the album progresses, the listener increasingly feels as if the compositions are songs without lyrics. On the one hand, Sarabski’s pieces have a logical structure. On the other, he adds a melodic crown that is singable. This feat is so successful that it is tempting to try and decipher the unwritten lyrics of the track. In the epic “The Edge”, the tar, a traditional Azerbaijani stringed instrument, tells an almost mystical story about the culture of Sarabski’s homeland. In the downright happy-go-funky “G-Man”, Sarabski offers the listener an alternative form of dialogue to our modern means of communication – something that also applies to the whole album. *“For me, music is a dialogue between souls. The awakening of deep, human feelings is the most important reason for me to create music. My favourite form of this concept of dialogue is the metric, melodic freedom of jazz. Jazz is really helpful in finding the deeper, smaller but important details of the soul. It is a kind of code that cannot always be deciphered but that has a unique form. That’s why I really wanted to label my record debut* Planet *a jazz album.”*