**ISFAR SARABSKI**

No listener to a concert by **Isfar Sarabski** leaves unmoved, whether physically by the energy and rhythmic drive, or in the head by the stories he plays out, the thought, tension and emotions he draws you to share. Those lucky enough to listen to him grow in his home country do not miss a concert; the pleasure being all the greater when he shows up unannounced at other events, for the joy of playing.

**Isfar’s** studio is perfectly placed on the edge of Baku’s historical Old Town. The cafés, clubs and concert halls in Azerbaijan’s capital on the Caspian Sea thrive on both tradition and modernity in surroundings of both medieval mystery and contemporary charisma. **Sarabski’s** music captures it all and, like his home town - a trading post on the old Silk Road - he takes in, gives out and is truly a fast-developing international influence.

His playing as a 16-year-old at a local youth jazz festival etched his name into memories as one to follow. Three years later he was impressing the jury of the Montreux Jazz Festival’s piano competition. **Isfar’s** phenomenal winning performance of pieces by the likes of Bill Evans also featured his own *Novruz* - a distinctive nod to the jazz-mugham pioneered in Azerbaijan that adds the spice of its traditional musical roots to the international genre.

The exuberance and soul in his playing emerge from deep inside a naturally reserved and thoughtful public persona and from early years of parental encouragement and their eclectic collection of vinyl discs.

**But music also seems to be part of his DNA. He is the grandson of Huseyngulu Sarabski, known, much loved and respected throughout the Arab world as an early musical pioneer, opera singer, musician, actor and playwright.** His time at Baku’s Special Music School and Music Academy gave **Isfar** the rigour of practice in the classical world, still detected as an influence alongside a roll call of jazz greats; his version of *Swan Lake* interprets Tchaikovsky to breathtaking effect. His breadth, touch and control have developed with growing confidence and experimentation in his own directions.

*“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 records or recordings of Bach’s and Chopin’s works. How could it be that music could create images in my head? I had to find out.”*

Later studies at the Berklee College of Music in Boston expanded horizons and experience, and playing New York’s Apollo could hardly fail to further that. Across the pond in Europe, Isfar’s playing had staff at Ronnie Scott’s pausing in their duties, entranced by what they were hearing. **Upon listening to Isfar perform in the famed Miles Davis Hall at the Montreux Jazz Festival, Quincy Jones told him enthusiastically: „Boy, you will play!".** Bremen applauded him at this year’s Jazzahead festival.

Jazz and classical music surely appeal to devoted audiences, but not everyone goes there, and some are proud of the divisions between them and other music. Not so for **Isfar**, **whose natural musical habit is to build bridges anyway - between East and West, Jazz, Classical, Folk and Electronic music.**

*Barriers that one sets oneself as a musician always lead to stagnation – a condition that completely contradicts my understanding of art..*. *In my opinion, jazz in particular has a mandate never to be nostalgic. For me it is always important to build on what has already been played and created in order to create something new. Totally new.*

He added a further dimension to the musical geography of his acoustic work with Tunisian singer and oud player Dhafer Youssef and his fascination with the mechanics of musical production saw him embrace the possibilities offered by hi-tech electronics. **Isfar** has adapted the work of French singer Sophie Hunger (*Le Vent Nous Portera*) as well as linking with leading groups in Baku’s own club scene. Video images have the restlessly searching composer playing keyboards and controls in his darkened studio to produce sounds of ethereal yearning; his video project *Human Capital* is one stunningly appealing result.

This engagingly modest producer of music to touch heart, soul and brain will touch, whether he’s caught playing jazz standards, jazz-mugham, classical, folk or atmospheric electro. A concert or club appearance is not to be missed. Meanwhile, expect two albums in the new year: one jazz, one electronic, and be sure to catch up with the creative journey of **Isfar Sarabski**.