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# AZERBAIJAN'S JOURNEY THROUGH JAZZ

- ANOTHER SARABSKI MILESTONE -



**H**istory, geography and character have Azerbaijani people ideally placed to enrich their own culture with the best of the many others that pass this way. Cultural exchange was a feature of the ancient Silk Road and is likely to continue as the current Belt and Road Initiative progresses. This has been no one-way process; spot the carpets from this region that found their way into Renaissance paintings. And over the last hundred years or so, Azerbaijan has made remarkable contributions to cross-cultural exchanges of music.

#### **Musical pioneer**

On 12 January 1908, an opera was staged in a Baku theatre. Composed by the 22-year-old Uzeyir Hajibeyov, it was the first opera in the Muslim East; the first to feature traditional Azerbaijani folk instruments alongside those of the classical symphony orchestra; and the first to incorporate native mugham music. The opera was *Leyli and Majnun*, and was based on a long poem written in Azerbaijani by the 16<sup>th</sup> century poet Fuzuli.

Azerbaijani women were not yet allowed to perform on stage - a situation that Hajibeyov challenged, at some risk, four years later. In the meantime, the story goes that a talented (male) teahouse waiter, Abdulrahim Farajev,

was finally persuaded to take on the role of Leyli. As for *Majnun*, the role proved to be the springboard for the long and distinguished career of Huseyngulu Sarabski. An operatic tenor, Sarabski was equally proficient at singing mugham and in 1926 was a soloist with the *Eastern Orchestra* entrancing Moscow audiences with traditional songs and music<sup>1</sup>. Remember that family name, its reappearance 83 years later forms the second part of this story.

As if Uzeyir bey did not do enough in introducing opera, promoting local culture and women's emancipation among other more liberal social values in his theatrical works, he was also instrumental in the founding of the Azerbaijan State Conservatoire in 1920 (since 1991 the Baku Academy of Music). Remember, too, the names of these alumni of the Conservatoire, as they will also return: Gara Garayev, Tofig Guliyev, Vagif Mustafazade. Later students were lucky enough to be taught by Garayev and Guliyev when they returned from successful careers to pass on the skills they had learned and practised there.

We will return to the Conservatoire alumni as the story of jazz in Azerbaijan develops.

*Prominent Azerbaijani actor and singer  
Huseyngulu Sarabski*

Yes, jazz in Azerbaijan. Western histories of the Soviet Union rarely portray a population interested in, or even allowed to be interested in such music, and it's true that the twists and turns in Soviet policy often made life difficult for such people, but.... Baku was known early on as the city for jazz.

**Students and teachers**

An early promoter of the movement was pianist and composer Tofiq Guliyev, whose interest in the music was sharpened when, aged 19, he was sent to Moscow for further study - on the recommendation of Uzeyir Hajibeyov. There he joined Alexander Tsfasman's Estrada orchestra. The term *Estrada* covers a range of music from pop to jazz, and was often applied to jazz groups as a safe cover. Guliyev returned to Baku in 1939 and, with classical conductor and composer Niyazi, formed a similar orchestra, which was attached to the army during World War II and entertained troops near the front lines. Tofiq Guliyev was soon to become one of the country's most prolific song writers, using his knowledge of folk, classical music and jazz to popular effect.

At this point we need to add a cautionary tale about the dangers of being associated with jazz. One of the younger members of Tofiq Guliyev's orchestra was saxophonist Parviz Rustambeyov (born 1922). A precocious talent he was later invited into the Eddie Rosner Jazz Band that toured the USSR with official backing. With a greatly enhanced reputation, Rustambeyov returned to Baku in 1946 and formed his own band to play in the city's cinemas, which were regular venues for jazz music. However, the tide turned and in January 1949 he was sacked for playing 'decadent' western music. In May, he was arrested and charged with being pro-American. In December, he was sentenced to 15 years in jail. By 25<sup>th</sup> December he had died in still unexplained circumstances in a Ministry of State Security<sup>2</sup> prison. For playing the saxophone....

By the same year, Gara Garayev had studied in Moscow with Dmitri Shostakovich, was already a celebrated composer of classical music and had been awarded the Stalin Prize twice. In that year, he took over as rector of the Azerbaijan State Conservatoire, following the death in the previous November of Uzeyir Hajibeyov. Garayev continued to ensure the teaching of both folk and classical instruments and that students were also exposed to traditional mugham music, as well as to jazz. His interest in jazz influenced his own work and produced his *Three Nocturnes for Voice and Jazz Orchestra* (1958).



**Jazz-Mugham**

Some easing of the many restrictions imposed on Soviet life followed Stalin's death in 1953, but jazz was still too closely identified with the culture of the enemy in the West and access to developments there was still not approved. However, where there's a will, there's a way and secret gatherings of friends huddled around any vinyl disc that was somehow smuggled in. The poet Vagif Samadoghlu recalled how he and pianist Vagif Mustafazade would have their ears pinned to the radio for short wave broadcasts from the BBC, and then try to imitate the music they heard<sup>3</sup>. And Willis Conover, presenter of *Voice of America's Jazz Hour* from 1955, became quite a legend in the land - a secret one at first - and eventually came to appreciate the magic of Mustafazade at first hand. At a 1966 festival in Tallinn, he declared, "*Vagif Mustafazade is an extraordinary pianist.... the most lyrical pianist I have ever known*<sup>4</sup>."

Born in 1940 at Baku's medieval heart - *Icheri Sheher*, the walled inner city - Vagif Mustafazade is an enduring



influence on music in Azerbaijan. As Uzeyir Hajibeyov took classical western traditions of opera and theatre and reframed them within his native culture, so Vagif took jazz and developed a new local form. Like the western music, traditional mugham combines strict form with scope for improvisation. As Vagif felt the need to go beyond the frames of jazz standards, he turned to the music of his homeland for the inspiration to express himself fully; the result was jazz-mugham.

Rafiq Babayev, a near contemporary of Vagif and yet another beneficiary of a Conservatoire education, helped spread the word within the wider circles that he moved in. He worked with the popular singer Rashid Behbudov at the Song Theatre, wrote film music, managed an Estrada Symphony orchestra, and played concerts and festivals with his own jazz and folk groups. His groups were almost nurseries for a generation of young musicians, many of whom are today's 'seniors'. He also explored the possibilities of the sounds of emerging electronic technology.

Vagif Mustafazade and Rafiq Babayev came up with a jazz that is still the impetus driving many of today's musicians to take up and develop their own responses to local and international traditions. From the 60s and 70s onwards, the music enjoyed greater freedom and popularity and Baku became a centre of jazz. 1969 saw the first *Golden Autumn Music Festival* in Baku; it was competitive in format and Vagif and Rafiq were among the judges.

Despite the more relaxed post-Stalin regime, we still have to record that the vagaries of official policy continued to pressure these less conventional artists. It is likely that the uncertainty and sometime hostility contributed to Vagif's early death - at 39, of a heart attack after a concert in Tashkent. Rafiq outlived the USSR, but not the war with Armenia over Karabakh. In 1994 a terrorist bomb took his life on Baku's Metro as he made his way to his studio.

### **Independence**

The war over Karabakh, the collapse of the USSR and the struggle to firmly establish the independence declared in 1991, meant that political and economic survival, rather than culture, took priority. But the cultural legacy was strong and, with stability restored, it regained its place in Azerbaijani life. The older generation of jazz musicians ensured that the paths developed by the likes of Garayev, Guliyev, Mustafazade and Babayev were continued; annual jazz festivals were restored and a new generation of musicians emerged. Especially interesting are those who ply a keyboard for the pleasure of growing audiences: Emil Afrasiyab, Elchin Shirinov, Shahin Novrasli and Isfar Sarabski have already won plaudits on the international scene. A major breakthrough came in 2007, when Novrasli became the first Azerbaijani to apply to the solo piano competition of the prestigious Montreux Jazz Festival. He fully justified his acceptance into the competition by taking second

*Tofiq Guliyev and jazz composer and pianist Vagif Mustafazadeh*



place and making sure that Azerbaijan became associated with jazz beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. He has since won the admiration and support of legendary American pianist Ahmad Jamal for his tours and concerts.

**Sarabski, 83 years on**

You may remember our advice earlier in the article to note the name Sarabski, and so, 83 years after Huseyngulu Sarabski's performance with the *Eastern Orchestra*, his great-grandson, the 19-year-old Isfar Sarabski, followed Shahin Novrasli to Switzerland and went one better, winning the 2009 piano competition in Montreux.

Baku-born, Isfar's parents had a fine collection of jazz on vinyl and started him off with a Casio keyboard; this led to the Bulbul Music School and then to what is now the Baku Academy of Music - the institution initiated by Uzeyir Hajibeyov. Sarabski has particularly fond memories of an 'open' and positive style of musical education, with more time spent at the piano than on academic studies and plenty of keen accompanying musicians at hand. Two weeks in Moscow with Russian father and son jazz pianists Mikhail and Yakov Okun, gave him a grounding in jazz standards and harmony, and a programme to work on back in Baku.

# BAKU JAZZ FESTIVAL 2006

*Al Jarreau is just one of the many famous names to have graced Baku's jazz festivals*



Naturally enough, the thorough grounding in classical, folk (including mugham) and jazz music means that elements of all three traditions feature to exhilarating effect in Isfar's concerts. Having listened over the years to his interpretations of music by Vaqif Mustafazade, Tchaikovsky, jazz standards and even a Russian cartoon theme, as well as his own compositions, we were interested to catch up with recent developments, and met him at a time that provided a revealing snapshot of the breadth of that development.

We had been stirred by the release of a short video, *Human Capital* in June 2019. The music is electro, another string to Isfar's bow, with vocals by Alim Gasimov, the country's most prominent singer of mugham. By the time our schedules coincided, in December, Isfar had just revealed that he had signed a contract with the Warner Music Group to release two albums in 2020: one jazz, one electro music. But when we finally met up he was in Baku for an extended period and was using the break to work on classical music playing with his long-time teacher Nilufer khanim Tabasaranksaya.

### **Mugham, electro**

*Human Capital* was a very pleasant change from the usual popular music video, in both form and content. The idea arose during a session in Isfar's studio as he

experimented with bringing mugham into an electro style music. On that day, things clicked and a complete idea formed. As normal, he talked the music over with manager Davud Gambarzade and as usual described the images that had occurred to him as the music developed. It emerged that the story was of the progress of Azerbaijan, its people and their culture; from ancient times through medieval Baku, to the present; the development of music from Gobustan's *Qaval Dash*<sup>5</sup>, through traditional mugham, Uzeyir Hajibeyov and Vagif Mustafazade to today....

The search for a film director prepared to work with Isfar's vision was tricky, but culminated in Ukrainian Dmitry Oloyev joining the project, immersing himself in the culture and working with a cast consisting entirely of volunteer friends and acquaintances. The use of local people in different guises through the ages encapsulates an idea that while outward appearances may change (and sometimes not so much), there is an internal consistency in people; this, in turn, encourages connection with those who made the country's history in previous ages.

Although Isfar had a clear idea for the theme of the film, he was quick to acknowledge that the music was not more important than the image: "*this project was not*



only about the track.... the music is not written to be listened to without the video, it supports the video, and it's one [whole] thing. I love that; when someone gives something, but leaves some space for someone to add something new."

To see and hear the result, go online to <https://is.gd/1K5QJe>

The 'give and take' between musician and audience is much more immediate, of course, in live performance. Electro music generally brings a younger, more energetic audience, and this was an attraction for Isfar to do a live streamed 'Boiler Room' set from a Baku club. The audience dancing right behind him gave, he says, a real connection and a feeling of being with them, of creating the music together.

This willingness to experiment, explore and collaborate is a regular feature of Sarabski's work that makes one think back to the adventures of his musical predecessors: the Hajibeyovs, Huseyngulus....

### Horses of Garabagh

And so back to jazz. In fact, the day before meeting Isfar, we had come across a work new to us, *Horses of Garabagh*. The title intrigued, as we had previously followed the dramatic story of the rescue of the Garabagh

(aka Karabakh) horse stud from Armenian fire during the war, without which the horses might not have been with us today. It turns out that this piece had a part to play in the offer of the Warner contract....

Isfar was playing in Moscow while also preparing for his Showcase performance at the Jazzahead Festival in Bremen, a music trade fair attended by talent-hunting record labels and so a top priority. The timing of the set was strictly enforced and he was short of one piece. Two of the compositions included the tar - the long-necked, waisted string instrument played in the traditional music of Iran and the Caucasus countries. They needed a third piece with tar to balance the set.

What followed gives, perhaps, a hint of Isfar's composition process. While his manager is on the phone to Bremen, he notices Isfar striding back and forth in a corner of the hotel room; he starts slapping and tapping on a table. Davud's call ends and Isfar tells him to record the slaps and taps on his phone. The bemused manager duly obeys and Isfar runs off in search of his iPad. He transfers the rhythm to his pad, notes some ideas for further progress, and comes up with a melody; the basic composition work done on hotel-room





table, phone and iPad, rather than the more traditional piano keyboard.

And the title? Back we go to *Human Capital*, for it was during the filming of the video that Isfar first came close to the gloriously golden Garabagh horse - some had been part of the volunteer cast - and heard of their prowess and stamina from their trainer. The rhythms he had come up with for the drum part of his new composition had given him ideas of prancing, running, energy, like horses. Thoughts went back to the video shoot, and the new composition became *Horses of Garabagh*.

#### **Jazzahead, contract**

So, the gap in the programme was filled, but there were further bumps to come on the road to Jazzahead - literally. A bike ride on the day before the concert might have provided some diversion from the pressure - if it hadn't been over rough ground that demanded all his strength to steer and stay upright. The arm muscles protested with a sharp pain as Isfar walked out onto the stage - would the muscles hold out? Added to this was the fact that a rehearsal had timed the set at 48 minutes. The organisers had warned that if it went over the strictly allocated 45 minutes, then the band's electricity would be cut and the lights switched off. There was a countdown display on stage 'to help' the

musicians - more pressure. A hurriedly devised Plan B was for Isfar to judge how it was going and drop the third piece if necessary.

The new *Horses of Garabagh* opened the set, with Isfar's former music schoolmate Behruz Zeynal setting the theme and rhythm on tar. The controlled gallop with a gently pastoral piano interlude drew cheers and enthusiastic applause - a great start. See <https://is.gd/gBTedD>

But manager Davud confesses to sweating in the audience when the intro to piece three began.... Was there time?... The arms held out and the last chord of last track *G-Man* sounded seconds before cut-off time. The standing ovation and applause did go into overtime, but what can you do about that?

Record label agents in the audience were not slow to react, either; backstage filled and proposals flowed. Isfar had met Warner representatives by chance at a festival some six or seven years previously and at other concerts since then. They also knew his work in electro and were happy to support that too. So Isfar Sarabski became the first Azerbaijani jazz musician to be signed up by a major music label.

These are by no means the limits of Isfar's musical world. He has toured with Tunisian oud player, sing-



*Photo by Xalid Zeynalov*

er and composer Dhafer Youssef, and worked with Azerbaijani rapper Uran and Eurovision singers Elnur Huseynov and Dihaj. He is firmly within the Azerbaijani tradition of multicultural collaboration that has seen musicians incorporating traditional music into classical formats (Hajibeyov, Huseyngulu) and into jazz (Guliyev, Garayev, Mustafazade). Look out for Isfar Sarabski's concerts and the release of his jazz album in June 2020 for a rewarding insight into that tradition. 🌟

#### References:

1. Bir aktyorun xatirələri [An Actor's Recollections], Hüseynqulu Sarabski, 1926 in *Köhnə Bakı*, Hüseynqulu Sarabski, Qanun nəşriyyatı, Bakı, 2019, p.65.
2. Ministry of State Security - MGB, forerunner of the KGB.
3. Azerbaijani International magazine, Winter 1997, p.72-75 <https://is.gd/s75tBN>.
4. Ibid.
5. Qaval Dash - 'Tambourine Stone' - a natural rock that produces different notes and tones when struck by a small, hand-held stone.



*Photo by Vasil Churikov*