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For sure, he swings

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Gareth Smyth

You could hardly say he has exploded onto the scene. In the two years since he came to Beirut to play in a piano bar, Artur Satian has attracted interest gradually.

At 25, he is an unassuming relaxed man, slightly ungainly when away from the keyboards and very natural when his nimble fingers traverse the white and black keys. Artur is currently playing in a jazz quartet in downtown on Friday evenings yet anyone hearing him might have little idea that he is a product of the old Soviet school of classical music.

Growing up in Yerevan, Armenia, his talent was recognised at an early age and music has been the daily mainstay of his life ever since. The rubbery feel of his fingers comes from thousands of hours practising.

“Yes, he’s technically very good,” says Beirut’s resident American bassist Jack Gregg who has played with Artur round the city, “but what surprised me was how much he has the feeling for jazz.”

For sure. Artur Satian swings. Jazz is his biggest love and it is temporarily taking him away from Lebanon, at least for now.

On September 23, Artur travels to Paris for the second Martial Solal competition for jazz piano the prestigious contest in honour of the giant of French jazz.

“It’s a mixed programme,” says Artur. “There’s a first-round choice of playing Jerome Kern’s All the Things You Are, John Green’s Body and Soul or Duke Ellington’s Satin Doll. I’ll play All the Things You Are if they accept my version otherwise I’ll play Body and Soul. Then there’s playing with a duo, playing original compositions, and improvising things like that.”

Satian’s matter-of-fact approach and apparent lack of nerves does not mean he underestimates what lies ahead. This is no competition for part-timers: in the first competition, back in 1989, bassist Gary Peacock, from Keith Jarrett’s Standards trio, was among the

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accompanists. And the prizes are considerable along with a cheque come bookings for festivals including the 1999 Banlieues Blues festival and the Snow and Symphony festival at St Moritz.

Artur's musical training has given him a good preparation for dealing with pressure. He's taken part, and won, classical composition competitions in Armenia, Moscow and Georgia. It helps to start young.

Artur's father Edward, an official on the Soviet railways in Armenia and a keen amateur violinist, introduced him to the piano when he was four. "At first I didn't want to play," says Artur, "but I always liked jazz. When we had guests my father pushed us to perform. I remember playing Blue Moon."

By the age of seven, Artur was attending musical school between 2pm and 7pm after finishing normal school earlier in the day. At 16 he went on to music college, taking courses in polyphony and harmonics in the jazz department. At 20 he joined the Yerevan Conservatory and graduated a year ago, taking the last stage by correspondence.

When in Armenia, he went occasionally to Moscow very much the former Soviet Union's cultural capital for courses, but travel became more difficult.

"Before you could go to Moscow without problems," he explains. "Now being Armenian is a problem they ask always for your documents."

Artur had both musical and financial reasons to leave Armenia for Beirut. "Every musician has to move, to play with different people and to play different music," he says. "I came here because an Armenian guy offered me work in a hotel."

This was the piano bar at the Bristol Hotel, where he met and played with Jack Gregg. He then joined a quartet with the American guitarist Eric Shultz at the Casino, and has since played with a variety of musicians on the local scene.

Artur, then, has witnessed the growth of interest in jazz over the past two years. "When I came here there was nothing. Now, people are listening to jazz and we're getting more gigs. It's partly because of the festivals Baalbek and Beiteddine."

At the same time Artur is teaching classical piano at the Conservatory. His grounding stays with him. He sometimes spends Sunday at home playing all day on his Ensoniq synthesiser and he brings a meticulous approach to jazz. Now, for example, he is keen to study the chord changes Herbie Hancock used in his Baalbek rendition of Cole Porter's I Love You.

"Sure, I have a classical approach," says Artur, "but jazz is about freedom. You write the tune, the melody, maybe some good phrases and then ..." He smiles.

Although he is mainly playing standards, he does want to play his own jazz compositions in concert and has, he says, a stack of tunes stashed away. Perhaps he's just waiting for the right promoter.

Part of his training at Yerevan Conservatory was writing symphonies and he also wrote arrangements for the Armenian state TV and

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radio band. Such opportunities do not, as yet anyway, exist in Beirut. "If I write for vibraphone it's hard to find one. It's even difficult to get a good trumpeter," he said.

Satian's apartment in Jdeideh has the feel of work in progress. Hidden away behind drawn curtains are his synthesiser, a pile of scores, a small library of books on music (including Miles Davis' autobiography) and an assortment of tapes and CDs.

Most of his classical albums are on vinyl and left behind in Yerevan but since being in Beirut he's accumulated an array of CDs. Among those he picks out as extra special are Bill Evans' Conversations with Myself, the re-issued Lenny Tristano/The New Tristano, McCoy Tyner's Infinity, a selection of choral/orchestral works from the Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki, and Weather Report's Mr Gone.

Artur's father liked Oscar Peterson and Count Basie. "I always preferred modern jazz, especially modal jazz," says Artur. "I liked very much the Miles Davis quintet of the 1960s." Which was, of course, the acoustic quintet in which Herbie Hancock played piano. Hancock and Bill Evans are Artur's greatest influences within jazz. He recalls with boyish enthusiasm bumping into Hancock in Zinc a couple of months ago. "I went up to him and just said, 'Thank you ... just for being'."

Artur Satian currently plays Friday evenings at Solidere Jazz and Blues; he will play with Virus at the Madina Theatre, Hamra, on Sunday

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