

FRIDAY 20 JANUARY 2012

French connection leads to Scotland

rob adAMS

TIGRAN Hamasyan is describing how, as an Armenian experiencing the culture shock of being transplanted to Los Angeles, he managed to make connections that took him out of the house and on to the stage.

Not knowing anyone and feeling isolated as he confined himself to lonely piano practice, he suddenly noticed that a familiar name was playing in town and decided to go down to the club.

"It's going to sound weird but there I was in Los Angeles, where there's any number of great musicians," he says. "But I actually had to use a connection I'd made in France to start meeting people in America. Of course once I'd met and heard some people, I started getting out to play and life became easier but in the beginning, it was hard. I spent my first year in the US just playing and writing music by myself."

The French connection is a good place to start with this remarkably talented musician who makes his first visit to Scotland for Celtic Connections next week. During his second appearance at the Yerevan International Jazz Festival in 2000, Tigran (he's since dropped his surname for simplicity's sake) had come to the attention of French jazz pianist and promoter Stephane Kochoyan. This is hardly surprising. Everyone listening would have been struck by Tigran's ability: he was playing extraordinarily fluent piano for a 12-year-old.

Despite this prodigy's youth, Kochoyan determined that he would invite him to tour France and the following year he made good on his promise. Tigran played a series of jazz festivals and entered the Martial Solal International Jazz Competition, named after the great French piano master. He didn't win but his performance impressed the judges. The competition's "house band", leading French bass and drums team François and Louis Mouton, also took note and when François Mouton was playing in Los Angeles a couple of years later he was happy to introduce Tigran to his fellow band members, pianist Jean Michel Pilc and leading New York drummer, mover and shaker Ari Hoenig. Tigran, for his part, was blown away by Pilc and Hoenig.

"They both changed the way I played but I listened to Ari especially and thought, I've got to play with this guy," he says. So he did and the career that has seen Tigran feted by Herbie Hancock, play duets with the aforementioned Solal – "every note carried 80 years of depth," says now the 24-year-old – and make a series of increasingly enthusiastically-received albums for Universal Records was off and running.

Growing up in Armenia, Tigran was never going to be anything other than a musician. His parents both play piano, although they're not professionals, and by the age of three Tigran was picking out tunes on the family's instrument. He was apparently also singing accurate versions of Beatles, Led Zeppelin and Queen songs, although Louis Armstrong's repertoire was his preference. By all accounts, while Tigran went on to study piano formally from the age of five, he was quite a jazz singer by the time he turned 10 – he sang with the local big band until his voice broke – and was matching this with a mastery of bebop.

HE says: "My uncle played in a jazz band so although I was studying classical music, I grew up listening to jazz and at the same time was enjoying my father's heavy rock album collection," he says. "So I was a real Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell and Art Tatum fan who also loved Black Sabbath, Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin."

At the age of 13 he made a discovery that would have as big an impact on his own music-making as did his jazz heroes: Armenian folk music.

"I don't know why I hadn't listened to it before but it kind of shocks me now to think that I'd ignored it until then because it feels like it's in my blood, that it's part of me," he says. "It's quite common for people to get closer to their roots when they move away from home and when my family emigrated to America at first, I probably used Armenian music as a comforter but it was a real inspiration to me before that and it remains a major influence, just as Armenian poetry has also influenced some of my compositions."

Tigran was 16 when his parents, looking for more artistic opportunities for both of their children (his sister is a painter and sculptor), decided that Los Angeles offered a better future. He enrolled at high school but was only there for two months when he won a place at the University of Southern California. After his initial solitary spare-time existence he began to make an impression on the local music scene. In 2006 he won the Thelonious Monk Institute competition, which resulted in a trip to the White House to receive his \$10,000 prize from Madeleine Albright and Colin Powell. His first album, *World Passion*, featuring Ari Hoenig, followed soon afterwards.

A Fable, his latest album, finds Tigran in the solo piano mode that he'll present at Celtic Connections. Featuring original compositions and pieces based on ancient Armenian folk songs, 19th-century poetry and hymns by the mystic G I Gurdjieff, who also inspired fellow pianist Keith Jarrett, it's a quietly powerful, immensely soulful work that conveys the warm intimacy he strives for in solo performance.

"I love playing with other musicians," he says. "But I also enjoy the freedom of playing alone, the simplicity and the challenge involved when you turn up at the concert hall and there's just a piano onstage and it's up to you to communicate with and hopefully move the people who are there. The songs on *A Fable* have changed quite a bit since I recorded them but to me that's one of the interesting things about music. Every time you play it, you take it somewhere slightly different."

Tigran plays Glasgow Royal Concert Hall's Strathclyde Suite on Monday, January 23.