

## Pilc, an artist of the unpredictable

By VERENA DOBNIK  
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Each performance is the first and last of his life.

So says jazz pianist Jean-Michel Pilc about the here-and-now feeling that accompanies his every encounter with a keyboard. But he doesn't just sit and play.

At 12:30 a.m. one recent night at the Iridium club on Broadway, the 43-year-old French musician pokes his hand into the crevasse of the Steinway grand. Out comes music, hand-plucked from the piano strings — barely audible, riding on the sounds of a bass and drum that form Pilc's trio.

"Each time I play, I'm reborn," says Pilc. "These days, I hear too much music that's on autopilot. For me, it's different emotions, feelings, sensations. Every concert is the first and last concert of my life."

Guests filling the tiny Manhattan club are riveted by the jazz of the one-time rocket scientist. He left his job at a French satellite company decades ago, but what's left of that career are the precision and almost mad brilliance he breathes into his improvisations.

The "jam" session that started with improvisation on a John Coltrane tune stretches on till 4 a.m., exploring ever more exotic rhythms and sounds.

Behind the intimate stage is a tiny dressing room strewn with instruments, clothing and Pilc's small suitcase, which is neatly packed with personal belongings plus *The New Real Book* — a tome of jazz standards, lyrics and commonly used harmonies.

For Pilc, these are just musical blueprints from which he strays regularly.

He's been drawn to jazz since he was an 8-year-old boy in Paris, studying classical piano.

"My uncles, who were great fans of traditional jazz, made me listen to their favorite musicians: Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, Fats Waller, Django Reinhardt," Pilc remembers. "I fell instantly in love with this music, started imitating on the piano what I heard, and it all developed from there."

Largely self-taught in jazz, the pianist has a technique as disciplined and deft as just about any classical artist.

The musical models he describes as "miraculous" include Coltrane, Miles Davis and Duke Ellington. Pilc looks to the late classical virtuoso Vladimir Horowitz for the kind of technical mastery that results in a rich "orchestral" sound on the piano.

But the jazz pianist insists he's incapable of performing the classics in public. "I couldn't remember two bars!" he jokes. "I caught some kind of classical technique, but thank God for improvisation."

Still, when he goes home to his wife, a flutist and composer, Pilc plays the classics for himself, from Bach, Mozart, Chopin to 20th century music by the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin.

The styles and harmonies of these composers sneak into Pilc's jazz.

"Don't forget that Bach and Mozart were also improvisers," he says before stepping onto the stage to wow the early morning crowd with his wild, transcendent imagination.

As pianist, composer and arranger, Pilc has toured more than 40 countries and recorded about a dozen albums while creating film scores. He has also taught master classes at Harvard and Northwestern universities.

With his playing, he earns a living he describes as "between decent and comfortable," but Pilc is hardly a household name in the United States — the home of jazz where he's determined to make a bigger mark.

Eight years after moving to New York from France, he is most often heard with his trio, featuring French-born bassist Francois Moutin and drummer Ari Hoenig, a Philadelphia native.

The two play on Pilc's latest CD, *Cardinal Points*, which also includes percussionist Abdou M'Boup and the soprano sax of Sam Newsome. The album's highlight is what Jazz Times called "the deconstruction of *Mood Indigo*," a rendition of Ellington's 1930 standard the magazine said "should be studied in every music school in the galaxy."

Among Pilc's admirers is Harry Belafonte, who hired the Frenchman to be his pianist and musical director in the 1980s.

Jazz greats, says Belafonte, are as varied as Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton and Thelonious Monk, but "the one ingredient most common to their greatness is the unpredictability of their art."



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Pianist Jean-Michel Pilc demonstrates plucking piano strings to obtain a different sound, Jan. 22, at the Iridium Jazz Club in New York.