



Tigran Hamasyan

BORN TO IMPROVISE

Armenian pianist and composer Tigran Hamasyan is bringing his eclectic blend of jazz and traditional folk songs to Australia, writes **Jane Cornwell**

Geneva is a four-hour flight from Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, where the celebrated pianist and composer Tigran Hamasyan lives. While the two cities couldn't be more different — Geneva is as pretty and pristine as Yerevan is sprawling and feisty — both happen to be overlooked by mighty snow-capped mountain peaks. Here in Geneva, where Hamasyan is performing in a sold-out 1000-seat venue as part of a world tour that brings him to Australia this week, it's the Swiss Alps, which from time to time I view over the musician's shoulder as we sit in a grand hotel on Lake Geneva, drinking tea.

In Yerevan, where Hamasyan lives after relocating from Los Angeles four years ago, it is Mount Ararat, the majestic dormant volcano that is the national symbol of Armenia, a landlocked nation wedged inside the mountainous Caucasus region between Asia and Europe (even if Mount Ararat looms just across the border in the extreme east of Turkey).

"Every morning I rise to that spectacular view," says Hamasyan, 30, an impish, dark-eyed talent who has released eight albums, amassed a clutch of important awards and won accolades from the musical giants — including jazzmen Chick Corea, Brad Mehldau and Herbie Hancock (who told him, "Tigran, you are my teacher

now!") — he grew up admiring. "People in Yerevan have been observing that same mountain for tens of thousands of years."

His voice is soft; his manner, like his playing, is quietly confident.

"They saw the same trees and rivers and valleys that I see today, except that my view also has electrical towers with wires, satellite dishes melted on to old and modern houses, and the occasional aeroplane trail in the sky. This interaction of God-given nature with our human achievements is a dialogue," he says.

Hamasyan's latest album is *An Ancient Observer*, a wildly acclaimed solo piano project that is his second release on the prestigious Nonesuch label. It's a continuation of a sound that synthesises and internalises influences ranging from classical music, 1970s rock and Swedish death metal to funk, hip hop and Indian Carnatic traditions, while keeping the pianist's own blend of modern jazz and Armenian folk music in the foreground. It's laced with minor, melancholy chords and imbued with a fierce beauty; you won't find anything else like it.

Each of the album's songs, some of them instrumentals, some of them accompanied by Hamasyan's wordless singing or beatboxing, has a story behind it. All are inspired by the ancient and modern contrasts he noted on returning home to Armenia after a decade away. "These

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