

days people are too busy on their phones and computers to look at the mountain, to look around them. I'm really interested in archeology and ancient ornaments" — don't ask him why, he offers with a smile — "and there was this moment when I came across a 4000-year-old ceramic bowl from the Ararat Valley with impressions of the birds, trees and flowers the potter saw as he made it. I realised there is an art to observing."

While the album's title track is all spacey vocals and ancient-to-future grooves, the song *Egyptian Poet*, with its changing vocal registers and swerving musical tempos, was inspired by a 4000-year-old book of poetry from Egypt. "I was fascinated by this book because it related so much to what is going on in the world now; back then it was all about love and power and hurt feelings too." Crafted on a raw, ethereal soundscape, *Leninagone* is a multi-layered, Russian-doll of a track that takes its melodic cue from late-19th-century Armenian piano music as it tells of the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, a historical event that had a profound impact on Armenia, a former component of the USSR.

Ambitious, much? Another smile. "This music has a hint of the Russian Revolution [which kickstarted the Soviet Union], and from the way it's arranged it is very much about Armenian folk influences as well as Caucasian melodies and Soviet classical music; creating a hybrid was part of Soviet ideology. Finally you hear the collapse of the Soviet Union [in 1991], which was apocalyptic times for most countries around there." A pause. "But especially Armenia."

Hamasyan was 18 months old when, in December 1988, a devastating earthquake hit northern Armenia, killing 25,000 people and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. The baby Tigran was with his parents, a jeweller and a clothing designer, in Gyumri, 120km from Yerevan and one of the oldest cities in the world, in an apartment building that cracked but mercifully didn't collapse. The next year Armenia went to war with neighbouring Azerbaijan, resulting in a blockade. There were electricity blackouts and early morning queues for poor-quality bread. "My father ended up with a stomach ulcer," he says.

Tigran's mother encouraged him to play the family piano since it was something he could do by candlelight. "They were terrible times," he says. "I remember my [younger] sister crying when the electricity came on, because it was so unusual. But we had some cool moments too."

His earliest musical memory, captured on home movie footage, is listening to Black Sabbath's *Paranoid* and wiggling out on a toy guitar, aged three. "My father loved all the classic English rock bands: Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple," he says; we break off to nerd out on the fact that *Smoke on the Water* was written about the Montreux side of Lake Geneva. "But it was his brother, my Uncle Armen, who really got me into jazz. When I was about four he would come around and pretend that we were going for a drive to shoot some helicopters; we'd go zooming around rural Armenia listening to



AMY T. ZIELINSKI/REDFERNS

Hamasyan performing with the Yerevan State Chamber Choir; Herbie Hancock, below

Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock, him tapping the dashboard, me with my eyes on the sky."

Enamoured of Hancock and the Headhunters' funk-jazz classic *Chameleon*, he transcribed the entire song, from the solos to every single guitar part, while still a child. He got into heavy metal; he still loves Swedish icons Meshuggah ("Their rhythms are insane") as much as he does Beethoven and Bud Powell. Enrolled at classical music school, he struggled through formal lessons while guest singing in a big band — a huge-voiced nine-year-old doing jazz standards, mainly, along with the Beatles' *Oh! Darling* — and improvising on the keys. Improvisation, you sense, is Hamasyan's oxygen. It's what gives his work its force and depth and is where, he says, everything starts.

To watch him play — at Carnegie Hall in New York, say, or as the opening act of the London Jazz Festival — is to watch a maestro tapped into another dimension, directed by an energy that feels almost otherworldly. Eyes closed, hunched so low over the piano that his nose almost touches the ivories, he seems to disappear into music that swerves from delicate impressions of Eastern orthodox hymns to bursts of electronica and hip hop; from dreamy meditations that see him vocalising in the style of Keith Jarrett or Glenn Gould to all-stops-out jazz rock.

"I've always improvised, even before I knew what jazz was," says Hamasyan, who uses snatches of modal Armenian folk melodies where other jazzers might use bebop. "To me, improvising is a special mindset; it is something you either have or you don't. When you go on stage, for example, you have to be in a state of not thinking too much. If you're too tense or emotional it goes into your arms. Gurdjieff



TIGRAN, YOU ARE MY TEACHER NOW!

HERBIE HANCOCK

would say it is all about balancing body, mind and spirit," he adds, name-checking the controversial 20th-century Russian mystic whose hauntingly beautiful track *The Spinners* features on Hamasyan's 2011 album, *The Fable*.

Hamasyan was 11 when his uncle took him to a music teacher who had studied in New York under Bob Harris, one of the great bebop pianists of the 50s and 60s. For a year he immersed himself in improvising with form, laying the foundations for a glittering career that has included recordings with the Yerevan State Chamber Choir (2015's *Luys i Luso*, or *Light of Light*, on the ECM label) and collaborations with the likes of Indian percussionist Trilok Gurtu, Tunisian oud player Dhafer Youssef, dubstep collective LV and fellow American-Armenian Serj Tankian from prog-metal outfit System of a Down.

His first big public outing, at 2000's fledgling Yerevan International Jazz Festival, drew a standing ovation. After relocating to Los Angeles with his parents, who hoped to give their two children better artistic chances ("There are probably more Armenians there than in Armenia, though I've heard Australia comes close," he quips), he went on to win a number of competitions including one at the 2003 Montreux Jazz Festival and another at the Thelonious Monk Institute in Washington. He met musicians such as saxophonist Ben Wendel and drummer and multi-instrumentalist Nate Wood, a pivotal figure in the thriving Los Angeles spiritual jazz scene (which has largely moved to New York), who he continues to work with. Increasingly, reviews were peppered with the word "genius".

Hamasyan lived briefly in New York, then in

Continued on Page 6



VISIT OUR TRAVELLING EXHIBITIONS

A Ticket to Paradise?

Delve into the rich diversity of the nation's migrants and their experiences, through archival film footage, audio recordings, images and personal stories.

Until 5 June 2017
Newcastle Museum
6 Workshop Way
Newcastle NSW 2300

Exhibition tour supported by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection. Exhibition development supported by the Australian Government through Visions of Australia and the National Collecting Institutions Touring and Outreach Program.

A Place to Call Home? Migrant hostel memories

Rekindle memories with vivid photographs of life in Australia's migrant hostels. Unfamiliar sights, sounds and food. Friendships formed, challenges faced. The beginnings of a new life in Australia.

Until 1 October 2017
Qantas Founders Museum
Sir Hudson Fysh Drive
Longreach QLD 4730

Assisted by the Australian Government through Visions of Australia.