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A genius improviser he may be, but while the titles of Hamasyan’s compositions provoke thought, he is never overtly political, especially not when offstage. He refuses to be drawn, for example, on his country’s unfortunately fraught ties with Turkey, over the mass killing of Armenians under the Ottomans in 1915 (considered by some as the 20th century’s first genocide).

“I’m a musician,” he states matter-of-factly. “I don’t like to mix things. I don’t set out to promote my whole family comes from the part of Armenia that is now in Turkey so I have stories tied to those regions, and 90 per cent of the folk songs in Armenia come from places that are near Turkey. Even if I don’t want it, some people make my work political, but that is not my agenda.

It upset him deeply when, in 2015, touring his Yerevan State Chamber Choir project, his concert in the ruined medieval city of Ani, Armenia’s historical capital, in the Turkish border province of Kars, was met with protests by Turkish nationalists.

“It is pretty sad to be threatened in Kars, the region where all my ancestry comes from,” he wrote on Facebook at the time. “I mean all we did is sing and play Armenian sacred hymns and prayers. I say no to any kind of extremism! We came to Kars ... to remind people that hate is not the way to be free and at peace with yourself, and that those who ‘use’ belief for political reasons are often creating hate. Thanks to all those who came out in support.”

Like his musical heroes Hancock and Shorter, Hamasyan hopes to stem Armenia’s creative exodus, even encourage some of those who have left to return. “Recently some schoolteachers in Yerevan contacted me and asked me to do some work with kids’ ensembles, and I thought, ‘Yes, I’d love to do that.’

I’d like to do more, but teaching in Armenia isn’t a paid job.”

Nonetheless, having met and married his wife (“a non-musician but a music lover”) since moving back to Armenia, he is scaling down his demanding tour schedule. Or at least that’s the plan after this world tour, which has already touched down everywhere from Italy, France and Belgium to Mexico, Norway and Estonia, and takes in Moscow and Japan before arriving in Australia.

You’re in a modern-day ashug, I say, referring to the popular troubadours of 17th and 18th-century Armenia who travelled about the countryside carrying news and messages through song. The most famous of these, still widely celebrated today, was a multilingual mu-

nician named Saat Nova, a staple in the court of the king of Georgia before being exiled for falling in love with the queen.

“An ashugh? I guess I am.” Hamasyan sits back, pleased. “Except that I don’t write poetry; the ashughs did poetry set to music. Back then the king used to organise these jams called moj-

Hamasayan hopes to stem Armenia’s creative exodus.