

Continued from Page 5

Paris before word came that his beloved uncle back in Armenia was terminally ill. He returned just before his uncle passed away, leaving Tigran's grandmother on her own, and stayed.

"I'd already been planning to go back for a few months to give masterclasses, which I did in four different regions, one a week here and there." His motivation, he says, was to redress an imbalance: "Every day I get loads of emails from young musicians from all over the world but never from Armenia, which is sad. So I thought I'd go to their doors and knock and say, 'Hey, I have something for you.'"

It's tough, he says, trying to make a living as an artist in Armenia. Most professional musicians turn to churning out wedding music, which Hamasyan considers a slippery slope. "It's cheesy and terrible and once you get into that, it's over, there's no coming back, it is just about making money."

"The venues are there in Yerevan," he says, "but the music isn't at the right level. There are only a handful of musicians in Armenia right now that I'd consider world-class arrangers as well as musicians. Everyone leaves."

He mentions the blind composer and pianist Nikoghayos Tigranyan, an "incredible" arranger of Armenian folk songs and Persian classical music, and writes his name down on my pad so I don't misspell it. There are folk musicians in the regions, he continues, who are carrying on traditions that have existed for centuries. "Back in the day everyone was a musician; everything you did, even churning butter, was accompanied by music. You go out to parts of rural Armenia and you see people singing and harmonising spontaneously, and it's like watching the birth of music itself."

## EVEN IF I DON'T WANT IT, SOME PEOPLE MAKE MY WORK POLITICAL, BUT THAT IS NOT MY AGENDA

TIGRAN HAMASYAN

Hamasyan hopes to stem Armenia's creative exodus, even encourage some of those who have left to return. "Recently some school-teachers 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 like 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 Britain, Norway and Estonia, and takes in Moscow and Japan before arriving in Australia.

You're like a modern-day *ashough*, 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 musician named Sayat Nova, a staple in the court of the king of Georgia before being exiled for falling in love with the queen.

"An *ashough*? I guess I am." Hamasyan sits back, pleased. "Except that I don't write poetry; the *ashoughs* did poetry set to music. Back then the king used to organise these jams called *mej-lums* where *ashoughs* would come from all over the Middle East and Arabic countries ... to see who could perform the most beautiful verses for the queen. Sayat Nova won the competition with his incredible melodies and lyrical poetry improvised at a super-high level."

A genius improviser he may be, but while the titles of Hamasyan's compositions provoke



Carla Bley, far left, Patti Austin, left, and Dianne Reeves, below

## Trio atop a festival feast of talent



JERRIS MADISON

Three formidable women — Carla Bley, Dianne Reeves and Patti Austin — stand atop an embarrassment of riches on offer at the Melbourne International Jazz Festival this year. Each to their own, of course, but the pick of those three may well be Bley: the pianist performs at the Melbourne Recital Centre on June 8 with a trio made up of Andy Sheppard (saxophone) and Steve Swallow (bass). If that's not enough, her support will be a fine quintet led by Melbourne trumpeter Paul Williamson.

The festival was opened last night by Bill Frisell, the innovative, genre-bending American guitarist who also happens to be the subject of a new documentary by Australian filmmaker Emma Franz. Both Frisell and Franz will introduce the Australian premiere of that film tomorrow.

Also among the international guests, veteran American pianist Kenny Barron will be playing with Kiyoshi Kitagawa on bass and

Jonathan Blake on drums. Fans of Armenian pianist Tigran Hamasyan will be keen to see what he brings to Melbourne: the nuanced magic of his ECM recordings, perhaps, or the more, well, modish approach of his new solo album? It's always exciting to

see the Necks in town, and here the improvising trio performs over four nights at The Jazzlab, a new venue in Brunswick. Other notable acts at that venue include Perth-raised, Miami-based pianist Tal Cohen (with American saxophonist Greg Osby, no less); the premiere of a piece by Hue Blanes based on famous speeches in history; and *Moons of Jupiter*, a new project from Paul Grabowsky with an ensemble featuring trumpeter Scott Tinkler and Peter Knight on laptop. Plenty of other talented Australians will be seen throughout the festival, among them Stephen Magnusson, Scott Tinkler, Sam Keever and Andrea Keller.

Artistic director Michael Tortoni has put together an impressively strong line-up across multiple venues. His festival, now in its 20th year, safely can be described as the nation's most prestigious jazz festival. That honour used to belong to the Wangaratta jazz festival, but its future is now less clear after the ousting of Adrian Jackson as artistic director after 26 years. He has since been replaced by a four-member programming team.

Speaking of jazz politics, none of the festival events will be seen at Bird's Basement, a newish Melbourne venue operated by Albert Dadon. Far from falling silent, though, that club is presenting its own parallel event this month: the Bird's Basement International Jazz Festival.

Ashleigh Wilson

thought, he is never overtly political, especially not when offstage. He refuses to be drawn, for example, on his country's infamously 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 provoke. 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



Hamasyan hopes to stem Armenia's creative exodus

AMY T. ZIELINS

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 is a spiritual man with an interest in Buddhism. Oh, and a mission to elevate his audience.

"Success, to me, is based on audience reaction," he says. "Being an artist is about constantly developing, always bringing something new and something positive at the same time, sort of spiritually elevating the audience to somewhere else."

"When I'm in this special mindset of not thinking too much, instead of worrying whether the audience might not like something, I try and lift them, challenge them, bring them somewhere."

To Mount Ararat?

Hamasyan flashes a grin.

"Yeah, maybe," he says. "To Mount Ararat."

**Tigran Hamasyan** performs in Sydney tomorrow, and at Melbourne International Jazz festival on Monday and Tuesday.