

Live review: Tigran Hamasyan

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John Field Room, National Concert Hall, Dublin

Tigran Hamasyan cuts a slight figure on stage, looking barely his 24 years, but from the moment he first touches the keyboard, it's clear he is built for bigger stages than this.

I last saw Hamasyan play at the NattJazz Festival in Norway last year, and although he brought stunning fluency and technical ability to bear, it was a little lacking in lyricism. Perhaps the poetic aspects of his latest album *A Fable* are having more of an influence, or perhaps it's playing to a more general audience than that of a jazz festival, but here, he rarely lets technical virtuosity drown out the beauty of his songwriting in a performance of rare intensity and effectiveness.

There is a colour and a depth to Hamasyan's playing that comes to the fore when he's playing live. This concert was dedicated to his uncle, who died 10 days ago. His uncle was the person who introduced him to jazz and set him on his stellar career, and it is easy to imagine that Hamasyan is pouring his own grief into the songs here.

His playing can be bombastic, and he's not above deploying some fat, rolling low-end chords that stumble about the tracks like a drunken character villain, lending humour and guile to a song. But there is subtlety too, in the way he toys with notes, dampens strings and, at one point, creates extraordinarily slim sounds from the top end of the keyboard, a ghostly musical effect that sounds as if it is filtering from a music box.



Tigran Hamasyan. He'll easily beat your box

Hamasyan, like many musicians, has a tendency to sing the lines he is playing, and it carries through on the mics around his piano, but what he is often singing is the underlying rhythmic groove, the beat he's playing along to in his head. This, and the propulsion in his low-end playing, make a nonsense of his claim, in an interview with this newspaper, that he knew nothing about rhythm until he started working with the drummer Ari Hoenig.

He left no one in any doubt about his ability in this regard with a show-stopping performance of his track *Rain Shadow*. Opening with blistering sheets of notes, he reduced the track down to a relatively straight forward four or five chord figure with his left hand, and began beatboxing over it, varying the rhythm, bouncing it off the track, adding and dropping elements, throwing in accents and shifting time signatures in a epic display that had the audience in the palm of his hand.

This was a virtuosic tour de force, the wealth of ideas matched by genuine craft in his songwriting. Hamasyan is one of the best technical players of his generation; now he is becoming one of the most artistic.