

## **CODY'S 10 x 10. INTERVIEW 3, Zela Margossian, pianist and band leader**

Interview with: **Zela Margossian**  
Interview by: **Chris Cody\***



*Pianist Chris Cody... PHOTO CREDIT PAUL FAURE-BRAC*

*This interview appeared in “Loudmouth”, the e-newsletter of the Music Trust, on October 4, 2021, and can be read there at this link <https://musictrust.com.au/loudmouth/chris-codys-10-x-10-chris-interviews-pianist-and-band-leader-zela-margossian/>. It is number 3 in Chris Cody's series of 10 x 10 interviews, in which he puts ten questions to ten Australian musicians.*

**CODY'S 10x10** is a musician to musician interview series outside the usual format that is brief, relevant, informative and colourful. It gives a glimpse into well-known musicians from diverse fields and backgrounds by asking questions about their music making, experience and more.

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*\*Chris Cody is a jazz pianist, composer and band leader. Based in Paris for 25 years, he performed across Europe with Chris Cody Coalition and musicians including Herb Geller and Rick Margitza, and released numerous albums of his own music on international labels. He has written for theatre, dance, and cinema. Since returning to Australia he has released several albums and composed recent larger works “Astrolabe” and “The Outsider”.*

*Born in Beirut, of Armenian heritage, Zela Margossian is a Sydney-based pianist, composer and ARIA nominated musician who fuses the rhythms and harmonies of jazz and the discipline of classical with the beautiful melodies of Armenian and Middle Eastern folk music.*

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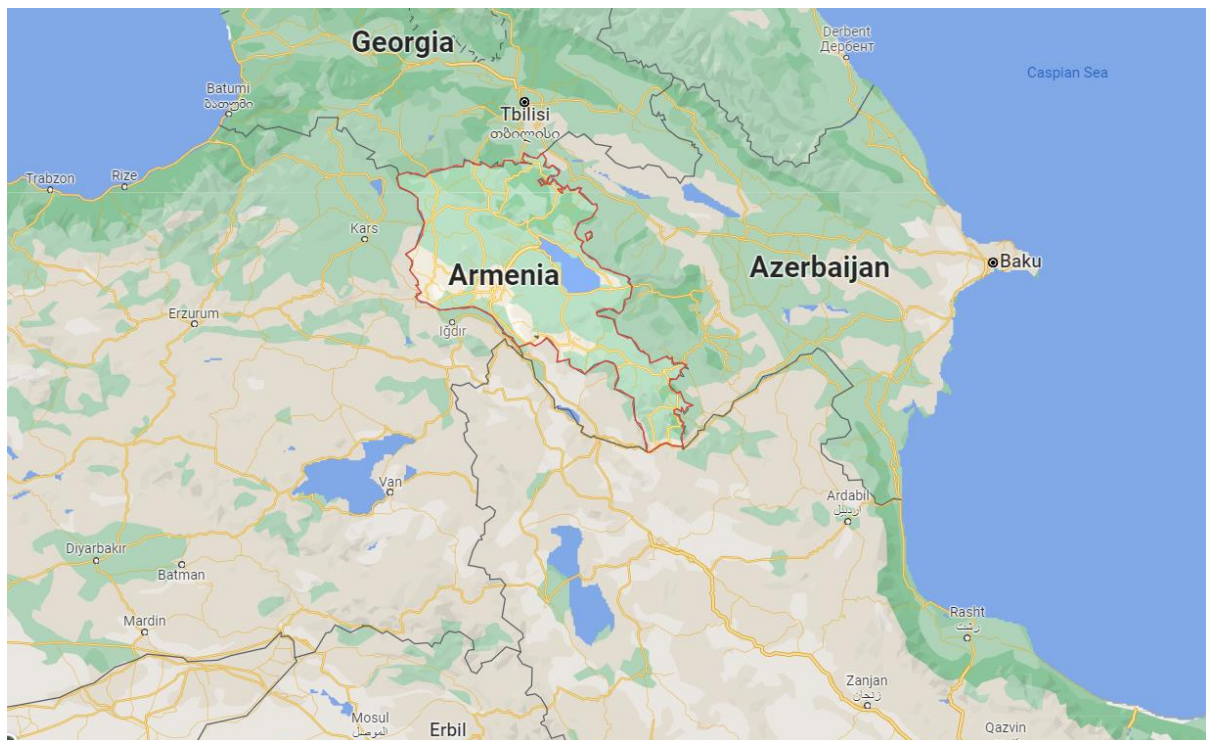


*Zela Margossian: fusing the rhythms and harmonies of jazz and the discipline of classical with the beautiful melodies of Armenian and Middle Eastern folk music...*

**Chris Cody: What do you think of being a musician in Australia, and how does it compare to your experiences elsewhere?**

Zela Margossian: I want to give a bit of a context to the readers before answering this question. I was born in Beirut where I started learning piano at a young age and had my first experiences participating in competitions and giving solo recitals up until I moved to Armenia, to continue my studies in classical performance at the State Conservatory of Music in Yerevan. During my years living and studying in Armenia, I discovered and fell in love with the ethno-jazz/folk fusion music I heard in the local jazz venues. I deeply aspired to learn more about that genre of music, however, a vast repertoire of classical pieces to learn and master for my degree didn't allow me the time to go deeper into it as I would have wanted to. After moving to Australia in 2008, it took me several years to gather the courage to give myself the permission to

start my long-awaited journey of self-discovery in music through learning more about jazz harmony and improvisation. Fast-forward a few years, I found myself in the Sydney music scene doing what I love the most. Therefore, it makes me feel very special being a musician in Australia. It is in Sydney where I had the opportunity to explore, to learn, to receive excellent mentoring and support from a community which embraced my music and me as a musician and allowed me to realise a dream which I thought could only be wishful thinking in past years. Obviously, my previous experiences have played a major role into shaping me into who I am today. Each of the countries mentioned above has given me something special and influenced the way I think about music and create it, yet it is the combination of the old and new experiences, all the mentors that I have had along the way, their valuable advice and my diverse cultural experiences which have made it possible for me to be the current version of myself.



***I'm curious as to your first answer whether it's more the time passed since Beirut and Armenia in your journey to today that's had the main impact or the place change and Sydney allowing you to draw it all together and be the person you are. Or both simply. You later mention Tigran who I know from Paris , and so I wonder about the importance or not of leaving a place to grow and find context for all of us ...?***

That's a very interesting question Chris. Thank you for going deeper into it. Yes, I made new discoveries periodically in my life about my identity as I moved from country to country. When I left Beirut and moved to Armenia, the years spent in Yerevan definitely consolidated my Armenianness. The bond that I developed towards the culture and music made me feel more connected to my roots and heritage. However, when I lived in Armenia I felt a cultural clash and I think two reasons contributed to that; during my time in Armenia, I discovered how strongly Lebanese-Armenian I was in my identity. For instance, when in Beirut, I always

identified mainly with my Armenian heritage, but it wasn't until I reached Armenia that I realised I identified and cherished my Lebanese heritage equally. So, I naturally bore both of the cultures in my identity.



Furthermore, being a descendant of genocide survivors who came from Anatolia (Eastern Turkey), I had a different dialect to locals in Armenia as they spoke the eastern dialect and I, western. So, although there is so much in common between Eastern and Western Armenian cultures, there are also so many significant differences. Music is a strong bond between the two though as many of the folk songs transcribed and preserved in Armenia come from Western Armenia and folk music resonated a lot with me. After leaving Armenia, which was very hard to do, it took me a few years to develop a sense of belonging towards Sydney. Yet, as I started my transitional journey in music (literally a new blank slate in a completely new environment), my experiences and learning adventure rooted me down and gave me a sense of great comfort witnessing the support and nurture I received from the music community. So, the time lapse since I left Beirut and Armenia gave me the

time to reflect and cherish who I am deep within because it is something you can't erase or let go of. On top of that, my positive and productive journey of learning in Sydney, the openness and kindness of the people who supported me and the overall extraordinary vibe I felt living here in Sydney gave me the space to reflect and create works which express my sentiments towards matters that are important to me. Additionally, Sydney gave me the freedom to start afresh. The blank slate state that I mentioned before was possible because I didn't know anyone here in Sydney which meant that I didn't have to let anyone down or impress anyone at first. The blank slate allowed me to drop the constraints I had learnt as a classical pianist to carve my own path in music the way I felt suited me more. Basically, Sydney gave me the freedom to discover freedom in music through jazz.



*The Zela Margossian Quintet, L-R, Jacques Emery (double bass), Stuart Vandegraaff (reeds), Margossian (piano), Adem Yilmaz (percussion), Alexander Inman-Hislop (drums)... PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY INTERNATIONAL CON JAZZ FESTIVAL*

### **What is the main thing that nourishes your music?**

What nourishes my music are my experiences in different periods of my life, my relationships and friendships over the years, my nostalgia towards Beirut and Armenia and the beauty I see in different aspects of life. Last but not least, nature is an immense inspiration, specifically the sea and the ocean.

### **List three things you would introduce to Australia to improve or enhance the music scene here.**

The music sector without a doubt needs more support and funding from the government in order to continue, thrive and give the musicians the necessary impetus to create, produce new work and build bridges with other artists nationally and internationally. Moreover, unfortunately, over the years, we have witnessed a shortage of performance venues, specifically jazz venues in Sydney, the remaining of

which were hit hard after the pandemic and sadly some had to shut their doors. I hope in the future, we will see a change from the government's stance towards the music industry. We currently have many incredible and dedicated people who are in charge of programming festivals and working hard to provide opportunities for musicians to perform and showcase their works. We also know that almost all jazz festivals depend on government funding to be able to continue and secure new and exciting acts and it is not a pleasant feeling to constantly be under stress and apprehensive whether the grant application will be successful or even if the grant is secured, most of the time it wouldn't be enough to cover all costs and many of the musicians performing in the festival perform for an insignificant amount of money in exchange for the numerous hours of work they put in to get the show happening.



*Margossian: The music sector without a doubt needs more support and funding from the government in order to continue, thrive and give the musicians the necessary impetus to create, produce new work and build bridges with other artists nationally and internationally...*

**What are you practising or working on at the moment?**

Since I come from a classical background, I always try to find any opportunity to learn more about jazz theory and make discoveries throughout. I also like uncovering music/incredible solos which would be intriguing to transcribe. I am actually taking the opportunity in the current long Sydney lockdown to achieve that as much as possible, although sometimes it is becoming hard not to procrastinate.

**Would you like to share with us your best and worst musical memory?**

My worst musical memory that comes to mind is the one during a concert in Armenia while I was a student at the Con. I had been working on Scriabin's *Etude in D-sharp*

*minor* for several weeks when my teacher suggested I should participate in an upcoming students' concert. We agreed that it would be a good chance to showcase it to an audience before presenting it in my final exam for that semester. The piece still required a bit of practice and care, however I thought I would be ready for the performance as I was already playing it quite well at that point. On the day, in the middle of my performance, my left hand suddenly lost its command on the constant jumps and consequently, I completely lost control over the piece. I don't remember how the piece reached its final notes. In my head, after it was done, I thought I had destroyed the whole piece. As soon as I took my bow, I ran out of backstage, out of the Con and ran up the 572 famous Cascade steps which are next to the Con building and buried my head in my hands and started crying at the top. I could see the whole centre of Yerevan from the top (although physically I was at the top, internally I had hit rock bottom) and I kept wondering, "Is this why you moved to Yerevan, to embarrass yourself?" It was a horrible feeling but when I think of it now, I start to laugh because over the years that incident (and similar incidents) taught me a lot of things, mainly that it is OK for that to happen and that it is not the end of the world if it does. I am also secretly sort of glad that smart phones didn't exist back then! One of my best musical memories thus far was my experience performing in City Recital Hall for the "Bridge of Dreams" project in Sydney Fest 2019. The wholeness I felt from the experience of participating in a huge beautiful collaborative project like that, was something I had never felt before. The collective energy I felt on stage was uplifting and on another spiritual level for me. The humility and selflessness that I witnessed from the amazing musicians was a strong validation that music becomes more sublime and profound when it is sprinkled with those attributes and I witnessed that from every single musician involved in that project.



*The 572 famous Cascade steps which are next to the Con building...*

## **Can you describe your challenges and how you surmount them?**

I have had many challenges along my journey and still have many more to face in the future. The biggest challenge in my life as a musician was transitioning from being a classical performer to delving into what I currently do in order to find my voice in music and express myself. I still have many challenges, some of which are recurring challenges, but my way to face them has changed a bit. It has become a tiny bit less stressful because of the learning experiences along the way. For me, it is a mindset and a matter of controlling my thoughts. It is having a positive outlook and prioritising what is important in the situation and keeping a calm head.



*Margossian: The biggest challenge in my life as a musician was transitioning from being a classical performer to delving into what I currently do in order to find my voice in music and express myself... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIANJAZZ.NET*

***Also you mentioned recurring challenges and just wondering if you want to go further here and tell us a bit more ? Ok if not! I too came from a classical background so being accepted, finding one's voice and direction, and adapting technique and time feel were all crucial, as well as the importance of staying positive and managing doubts and fear and other negative thoughts and emotions that can creep in. We face all sorts of different challenges in many different areas and it's so uplifting and instructive to reflect upon how to overcome them.***

Yes, of course. My main challenge at the beginning was mainly learning the basic jazz harmony/theory and adapting my 'thinking' approach to achieve a certain sound that I thought was the only way I could pass the test. It was very difficult. What made it even more difficult was the fact that knowing how it is and what it takes to be good at something, it was hard for me to admit that I had a long way to go and it made me



feel embarrassed when I couldn't deliver. It took me some time to realise that I need years of experience to achieve the 'jazz sound' that I am desperately working towards, so I learnt that every day is a learning experience and that building my sound the way it naturally is developing is the best way to go. I also thought that the best way to present myself and express who I am was through my own compositions and not through experimenting with jazz standards as it wasn't and still is not yet in my comfort zone. Improvisation initially wasn't a big problem as it comprises a huge part of Armenian folk music, so I knew I had the ability to improvise, however I didn't like what I did as it didn't sound like the jazz improvisation that I was desperately going after. To this day, even though I know more and feel more comfortable with how my 'sound' is developing, I still feel unsatisfied and usually put a lot of pressure on myself through self-criticism. Most of the time, I feel like I have a lot of catching up to do, which causes apprehension. However, I have learnt to understand that my brain needs time to consolidate all the new information and that patience and persistence are main keys in achieving the goals I have in front of me.



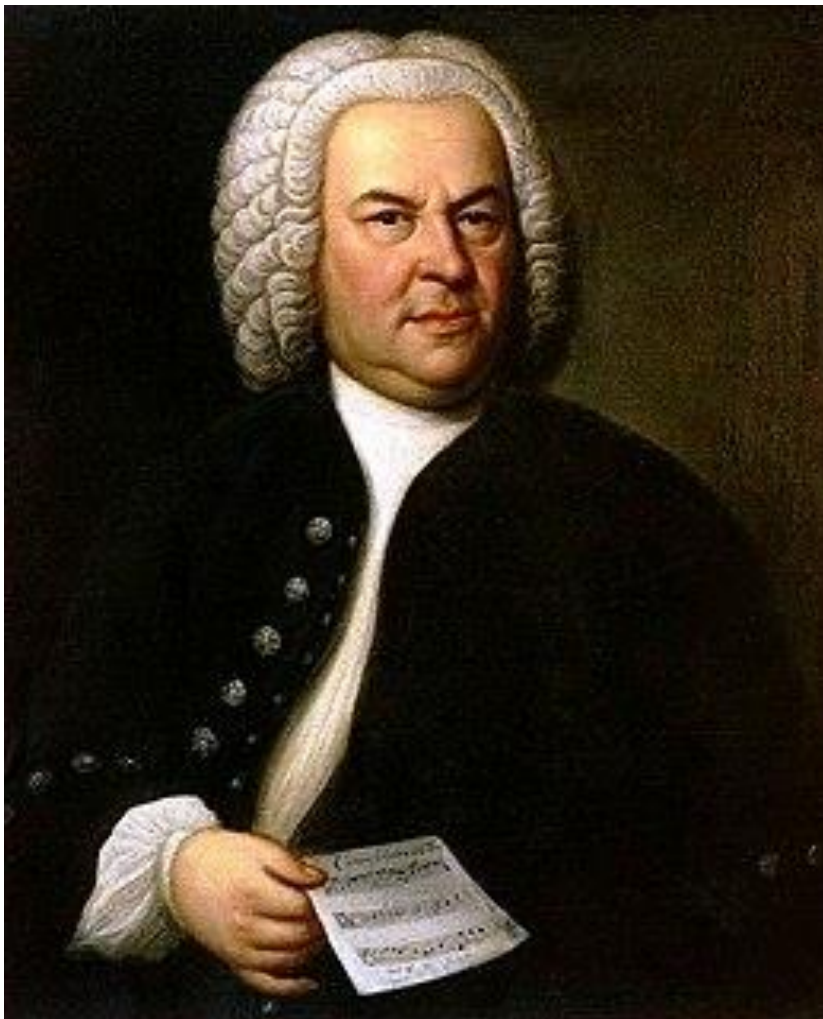
*The album "Transition", released by the Zela Margossian Quintet in early 2019...*

**If you could wave the magic wand over your music making, what would you wish for?**

I would wish for 15 years of experience in jazz music or alternatively, if someone could transfer the knowledge/experience into my brain like into a hard drive, it would be amazing! It would accelerate my process of catching up to all the knowledge I would ideally like to have at the moment.

## **If you weren't a musician what would you do?**

This is a question I have asked myself a lot over the years and I must say I think I would have been into sports, particularly basketball or swimming. Basketball used to be a huge part of my life in my teenage years. (I also remember being obsessed with becoming an archaeologist in high school.) I must mention that I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and American literature, but I never pursued it as a career as music always took first place in my choices. I mainly studied it because of my love towards literature. I think another possibility would have been obtaining a degree in the Arts such as Fine Arts or Visual Arts.



*Johannes Sebastian Bach: recently Zela decided to focus on his works... PHOTO COURTESY WIKIPEDIA*

## **Who or what are you listening to at the moment?**

In lockdown, I have made a habit to go on long walks and my aim is to listen to a jazz album (which I haven't listened to yet) each time I go for a walk. However, recently I have decided to focus on Bach's works and revisit some of my favourite composers in classical music such as Debussy, Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich, and Pärt.

## **What have been your main influences?**

My main influences have been Armenian traditional music and the Armenian ethno-fusion jazz bands which had an enormous influence on me while I was in Armenia. The Katuner Band and The Armenian Navy Band had a huge impact on me in developing my taste in music. I have influences from different composers in classical music such as A Khatchaturian, Rachmaninov, Debussy. Also, a major influence has been Chick Corea and more in recent years, the music of Dhafer Youssef and Tigran Hamasyan.



*Chick Corea (left) has been a major influence on Zela in recent years...  
PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE*

## **What are your other interests?**

In my spare time, I love working with mixed media and creating art collages.

## **Where and what do you see yourself doing in ten years' time?**

To be honest, it has taken me such a long journey to find my path in my life as a musician that I really don't think about what I would be doing in ten years' time. I feel that things started to unfold for me in a very organic manner once I started to focus on the present and started doing what I was passionate for. I have the mindset that today's work and training will bring a more exciting tomorrow and the day after tomorrow will be even more exciting because I will know more! So, I will take each day as it comes and I would like to wish that in the years ahead, creating music, working with people I adore and spreading love and unity through music will still be a huge part of my life.

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**Other 10 x 10 interviews in this series**

*Chris Cody's 10 x 10 interview 1 with Helen Svoboda, can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-102>*

*Chris Cody's 10 x 10 interview 2 with Fabian Hevia, can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-102>*

*Chris Cody's 10 x 10 interview 4 with Nadjé Noordhuis, can be read on this website (link to come).*

*Chris Cody's 10 x 10 interview 5 with Lloyd Swanton, can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-101>*