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NEA National Heritage Fellowships
Folk & Traditional Arts
National Endowment of the Arts
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Room 720
Washington, DC 20506-0001

Attention: Advisory Panel of Folk and Traditional Arts

Re: Nomination of John Bilezikjian for a National Heritage Fellowship in the Folk music category

Dear Sirs:

I would like to nominate John Bilezikjian, the foremost oud virtuoso in the United States, to receive the NEA Heritage Fellowship in the Folk and Traditional Arts classification.

My association with John began in 1977, when we were fellow members of a Los Angeles performing arts organization, the Middle Eastern Culture and Dance Association (MECDA). As a long time Governing Board member, I became closely acquainted with John and his work as a musician, performer, educator, archivist, and fascinating individual. Besides his mastery of the art of making music, his generosity and courtesy to audiences, students and fellow musicians have made him the first choice for all manner of performing arts and musical education opportunities.

John was raised in an atmosphere steeped in the Armenian tradition and love of music. He began his musical instruction at age five, learning the intricacies of the violin from his father, Andrew. His curiosity about the various instruments and recordings found at home led him to his grandfather's oud, an ancient stringed, fretless instrument originating in Persia at least 2500 years ago. By age ten he was devoted to the oud and never looked back. Even then he was determined to have a career in music and preserve the traditional music of his ancestry.

Any folk tradition is a fluid entity and is constantly developing. John has been instrumental in insuring that the evolution of this traditional music embraces the future by raising it to a higher level. To this end, he has single handedly kept alive the musical inheritance of the Armenian Diaspora. Without sheet music, he takes the old melodies wherever he finds them, writes them in music notation, enhances them with the relevant harmonies, searches out the words and plays them in a flawless, impeccable style at every opportunity. His CDs of this music (Music from the Armenian Diaspora, Dantz Fever, Armenian Connection) are in constant demand in the Armenian, Middle-Eastern and international communities.

His enthusiasm for music preservation has caused him to adopt the ethnic and folk music of numerous other cultures as well. Many ethnicities, especially from the Mediterranean area and beyond have made the United States their home. To keep their cultural identities alive they most often turn to their music. And, they very often turn to John Bilezikjian to enhance and reinvigorate their religious and lay events with his mastery of these musical traditions. For instance, he has collected the songs of the Sephardim and woven them into a rich tapestry for the enjoyment of all. His encyclopedic knowledge of this music has made him very well loved among the Jewish community. As a consequence of such virtuosity and generosity, he is in high demand for many multi-ethnic endeavors.

To aid him in his studies and preservation efforts, he has amassed a library of books, music and recordings which would make any university proud. The sheet music and recordings of the Mediterranean area alone fill one wall. His books fill another. A culture is exemplified by its music. It encapsulates history, societal mores and customs. These must be understood in order to ably present not only the songs but the instruments on which they are played. John's books and reference materials provide this link. John is always on the lookout for other volumes to include in his library.

In addition to the library, John has acquired an unequalled collection of folk instruments, dominated by more than fifty ouds. For more than fifty years, he has had an unflagging love and respect for the oud, his favorite of the many instruments he plays. His passion for it has led not only to his mastery of it, but also to his search for information about its origins, how it evolved, how it was used and especially how it is made. This led, in turn, to an avid interest in those artists, the luthiers, who create them. Two of the finest modern luthiers lived in Turkey in the early 20th century, Emmanuel Manol and Onnik Karibyan. John's collection includes ten ouds made by Manol and forty made by Karibyan. John has not only preserved the rich history of the oud, but has kept the body of work of these artists from being lost.

John has redefined the use of the oud in the world of music and has raised this instrument far beyond its humble folk origins to the concert stage. He can make the oud adapt itself to any music he wishes to play, folk, traditional, classical, pop, country, western, rock and beyond. He has a unique style, very modern while at the same time completely in keeping with the folk origins of the instrument.

Because of his research and his collections John has helped perpetuate the traditional and historical music of the entire region of Armenia and the Middle East

John's enthusiasm to preserve this music and this instrument has naturally led to a desire to teach others. This wish to share the wealth of knowledge amassed over the years has encouraged many students. He imparts not only the methods of playing the instrument, but the backgrounds of music and instrument combined, to engender an appreciation in the student equal to his own. He creates a need in students, other musicians and laymen to hear more, to learn more, to play more and to be more, in the musical context.

Over the years John has taught hundreds of students, many of whom continue to perform this music. Students are continually referred to him by other students, other musicians or other teachers. Often he will be approached after a performance asking about instruction.

Frequently he is asked to present seminars at universities, music camps and private music schools. Recently he participated in an outreach program of the Los Angeles County Music Center Association, bringing this music and these instruments to elementary schools in the Southern California area. Film and television productions have tapped into his knowledge of ethnic and folk music instruments. He has used this experience in seminars presented to peer musicians on the subjects of writing music for the oud and how to use its sound to provide sound track material to the film and TV industry.

John was the only oudist asked to write an instruction manual by the Hal Leonard Company. Called the "Hal Leonard Oud Method by John Bilezikjian", it is an instruction set teaching the student the easiest way to play this most difficult instrument. It is a step-by-step, very thorough teaching vehicle.

John takes his knowledge far beyond the class environment. He turns small concert situations into opportunities to impart to the audience information about the music they are hearing and instrument he is playing.

His performance and teaching schedules take him from coast to coast and to international venues as well. The J. Paul Getty and Armand Hammer museums frequently include him in their concert seasons. He has appeared as guest artist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, The Pasadena Pops, The Pacific Symphony and at the Hollywood Bowl and Wilshire Ebell Theatre. Often he performs at locations such as the Folk Music Center in Claremont, CA. He is much in demand for ethnic plays and musicals such as 'Zorba the Greek'. His concerts are almost always sold out.

He is the only oudist asked to perform as a featured soloist with the Boston Pops Orchestra earning more than one standing ovation. Anyone attending one of John's concerts or musical evenings will never forget the encounter. They will be anxious for the next opportunity to experience this consummate performer and the intimate ambience he creates.

John's performances and teaching efforts have been made possible by his comprehensive knowledge of music in all its complexity. He often must transpose instantly, frequently in orchestral situations where the music is generally not written for the oud. He does it seamlessly.

John's musical creativity has resulted in fifty years of original musical compositions, enough to fill several file cabinets, each piece dated and signed. These tunes are so much with him that I have seen him write an entire song on whatever is at hand, in one instance, a tablecloth. Now, he carries notation script wherever he goes so that he can jot down these musical thoughts as they occur. These "exercises", as he calls them, have often been the basis for songs he is engaged to write for sound tracks, special concerts and stage plays. John not only wrote the music, but performed it for stage productions including "I Ask You Ladies and Gentlemen", a play by Leon Surlmelian, and produced by the Cornerstone Theatre Group, "The Persians" by Aeschylus at Loyola-Marymount University and "Sheherazade" at UC Irvine.

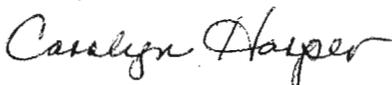
While John is primarily immersed in the traditional and folk styles, he is equally at home in other musical genres and in any setting from concert stage to cabaret to church sanctuaries to picnics, festivals and private gatherings.

For all of his long career, John has always found the time to give generously of his time and talent to many benefit events, especially those for others in the performing arts.

John is the epitome of what any musician aspires to be, knowledgeable, competent, artistic, charismatic, creative, spontaneous, generous and above all, loving his medium and enthusiastic in enabling its continuation.

He represents the true meaning of "treasure" to so many. I believe there is none more worthy of this award and sincerely hope you will give this nomination serious consideration.

Thank you,



Carolyn Harper