

Gail B. Schwartz

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

Re: Letter of Support and Nomination of John Haig Bilezikjian for the
Bess Lomax Hawes NEA National Heritage Fellowship 2008

To Whom It May Concern:

In 1986, as a graduate student of ethnomusicology at the University of California Los Angeles, my academic advisor, internationally known Middle Eastern scholar and performer Ali Jihad Racy, suggested that I write my master's thesis about an extraordinarily gifted oud virtuoso living and working in Southern California. At the time, I knew of John Bilezikjian only through a belly dance album in my record collection. It was not until I met John and his family and began to interview them that I discovered the scope, impact and capabilities of this remarkable musician, not only as master performer, but also as composer, teacher, author, archivist innovator and musical visionary. Since completing my thesis in 1992, I have remained in contact with John and his family and have followed his career over the past sixteen years. I am convinced that there is no one more deserving or exemplary of the attributes required of a Bess Lomax Hawes National Heritage Fellowship Award recipient than this first-generation Armenian-American artist who has devoted his entire life to the oud and its introduction to the Western concert stage.

Worthiness of national recognition; engagement in preserving the folk and traditional arts by performing and teaching. John is already an artist of national and international renown. He has toured extensively throughout the United States and Europe, has made guest appearances in Africa, Israel and Spain, and has entertained such visiting dignitaries as the king and queen of Spain and Jihan Sadat, wife of former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat. His music can be heard on recordings by Placido Domingo, Ofra Haza, Robert Palmer, Cantor Isaac Behar, Leonard Cohen, and many others. Ethnic communities know him as a skilled performer of both traditional and popular music, including that of Turkey, Armenia, the Arab world, Greece, Eastern Europe, Spain, Russia, Israel, Asia, Iran, Italy, and Latin America. Others have marveled at his ability to perform jazz, pop, rock 'n roll, rhythm and blues, country & western, and flamenco, all performed on the oud and typically embellished with John's own creative elements that I have termed "Bilezikjianisms"--a fusion of diverse techniques, both folk and classical, near eastern and western, that set him apart from other performing artists and typify his unique personal style.

Movie, television, and radio fans have heard John's original compositions in the soundtracks for dozens of films. The Middle Eastern dance community practices to his belly dance recordings, and performs his musical reviews in clubs and dance competitions nationwide. Aspiring oud players travel to Southern California from around the country to study with him in person before continuing their lessons on a distance-learning basis. As a classical artist, John has composed and orchestrated numerous classical

works for oud and orchestra. He has appeared as guest artist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, among others, and has been a soloist for the Los Angeles mandolin orchestra for over thirty-five years.

Artistic excellence and accomplishment within a particular artistic tradition. John began learning the Armenian repertoire at home before he could walk. From age ten to the present, he has been a much sought-after entertainer in the Armenian community, having mastered a vast storehouse of traditional Armenian song and dance, from the lively *kef* music of Turkish Armenia to the mournful and soulful melodies of a people displaced by persecution and genocide. He also plays over fifty instruments including everything in the Western symphony orchestra plus many folk instruments: it is not unusual for him to make a recording by laying down all the instrumental tracks himself.

Significant contributions to living cultural heritage; contributions to the excellence, vitality, and public appreciation of the folk and traditional arts. As a teacher, performer and recording artist, John has dedicated over fifty years to educating the American public about the oud, its beauty as an ethnic folk instrument and its versatility as a vehicle for other forms of musical expression. The list of his ongoing performances at community events, concerts, guest appearances, tours, teaching, recording is far too extensive to include with this nomination. He has produced over thirty CDs. His music is available to music lovers around the world via his website (www.dantzrecords.com): "Creativity and Synthesis in the Music of John Bilezikjian" is available throughout the University of California library system and through interlibrary loan to other academic institutions nationwide.

Benefit to artistic tradition through organizing and preserving important repertoires. In order to preserve his work as a resource for students, musical scholars, performers, and aficionados, John has established a voluminous library to accommodate his sketchbooks, scores for all his original compositions, volumes of part-writing and rescoring of classical pieces for the oud, dictionaries in a dozen languages to aid in the proper pronunciation and understanding of lyrics, musical dictionaries and texts concerning theory and composition, and a vast collection of folk and classical recordings. In 2006, he published a book on oud method with an accompanying CD for the beginning student. The library also houses John's extensive instrument collection. It is this living legacy for which he hopes to be remembered by future generations.

John Haig Bilezikjian is truly "America's Oud Virtuoso." He brings to his musical life an unparalleled passion, dedication and discipline, coupled with the refusal to rest on his accomplishments. Highly attuned to the sensitivities of his audiences, he is always growing and experimenting to keep his music fresh and exciting while also preserving traditional elements beloved of his ethnic listeners. Perhaps no other living folk artist has made a greater contribution to preservation, innovation, and excellence in the folk and traditional arts. I strongly recommend John's designation as a Bess Lomax Hawes NEA National Heritage Fellowship recipient. If there is any further information that I can provide in support of his nomination, please do not hesitate to call on me.

Sincerely,

Gail B. Schwartz
M.A. Ethnomusicology