

Victoria Erickson

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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

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 present musician John Bilezikjian, a master of the oud, as a candidate to receive the National Endowment of the Arts Fellowship in the folk and ethnic category.

I have known John for at least twenty-five years. For a number of years, I enjoyed his music and attended many of his performances, both as part of an audience, as a dancer, and later as a fellow musician. One night, I rather timidly approached him at a small nightclub to ask him to teach me to play his primary instrument, the oud. A forerunner to the European lute, the oud (al 'ud) is a fretless eleven-stringed instrument of the Middle East. He asked me why a mainstream woman of obvious Irish heritage would want to play the oud. I told him that I had learned to love the music and wanted to be able to play songs for my friends. He agreed and within a week, we began the first of ninety-four lessons that stretched over a period of eight years (1987-1995). Little did I know the depth and intensity of the music heritage I was attempting to incorporate into my life. Over the years, as I learned more, I also realized how very little I knew.

I was not John's only student, but one of many. From my own experience, I can tell you that John was one of the most generous, demanding, caring, insightful, and patient teachers I have ever known. (And I know I must have tried his formidable patience on more than one occasion.) From my first scales to classical Middle Eastern pieces, John didn't just teach me notes on an instrument. He taught me the contexts, historical, familial, and societal, of the music. I learned what pieces to play for particular audiences and why they were important to each group. Under his tutelage, I learned to identify music from many areas, from Turkey to Greece, from Lebanon to Egypt, and my love for all deepened beyond my expectations.

His teaching, however, extends beyond the one-on-one lessons with his students. John uses every opportunity to expand people's understanding of the music he loves. Each performance includes a short introduction to his instrument and he often informs his audiences of the origins of the music. Far from professorial, these gentle lessons are delivered with a puckish humor so familiar to those who know John.

A master of dozens of ethnic and modern classical instruments, he has performed in numerous multi-cultural events, from intimate concerts at the renowned Claremont Folk Music Center, to the J. Paul Getty and Armand Hammer Museums, and the Hollywood Bowl. In synagogues, Armenian picnics, churches of all denominations, Greek festivals, and numerous multi-cultural events, he is a constant participant. He is a regular teacher at the annual week-long Mendocino Music and Dance Camp where students get the unique opportunity to completely immerse themselves in these musical traditions among the coastal redwoods of Northern California. I will never forget sitting on a log in a forest trying to wrap my brain around the equivalent of musical calculus. Wood smoke, fingers of fog winding through the towering trees, and delicate music everywhere around me created a musically transcendent experience I will never forget. I have attended gatherings at his home where he brought together musicians of all stripes, including one memorable rainy evening, a large Eastern European women's chorus. And, I've clapped along to his rousing renditions of *Rocky Top* in smoky Middle Eastern nightclubs. His every performance, intended or not, was a cross-cultural musical outreach.

John's repertoire draws from Armenian, Middle Eastern, Turkish, Eastern European, Russian, Ladino, Sacred, Classical, Klézmer, Sephardic, Medieval traditions, and popular music.

He has performed and recorded with artists as varied as Placido Domingo on his CD, *De Mi Alma Latina*, and Cantor Isaac Behar's *Sephardic Sabbath Chants*. Over the years, his talents have been called upon by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, the Wilshire Ebell Theatre, the Claremont Folk Music Center, and the Joffrey Ballet Theatre.

His work on movie scores includes *Anastasia*, *Prince of Egypt*, *The French Connection*, *Schindler's List*, *Accidental Spy*, *Blackhawk Down*, *Syriana*, *Must Love Dogs*, *Queen of the Damned*, *Hidalgo*, *Charlie Wilson's War*, *The Right Stuff*, and *Beowulf*.

He has contributed to popular music in projects with The Boston Pops Orchestra, Robert Palmer (*Ridin' High*), Leonard Cohen in concerts and recordings, and one memorable night in Las Vegas backing up Little Richard. So active has he been in popular music over the years, I suggest John's efforts have helped pave the way for the emergence of these influences even in contemporary cutting-edge rock groups such as System of a Down.

He has also contributed to numerous television programs and commercials.

As much as he loves the full spectrum of the musical experience, John has never forgotten his cultural and musical roots. His true love is the oud and everything he does is grounded in his experience with this complex instrument.

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I have written for *The Beirut Times* (English section), *The Cymbal* (quarterly publication of M.E.C.D.A., The Middle Eastern Culture and Dance Association), and *Habibi* (international quarterly magazine for Middle Eastern culture, arts, and dance enthusiasts). I have also served as a writer and editor of the San Gabriel Valley and Inland Empire weekly newspaper, *The Herald Tribune* (circ. 100,000) (not associated with the *International Tribune*). In this capacity, I have attended and reviewed many and varied performances. I can honestly say that I have never encountered a more vibrant or exciting performer than John Bilezikjian. His expertise and technique are awe-inspiring.

I will not list all of the recordings he has either produced (twenty-five, <http://www.dantzrecords.com/catalog.html>) or participated in. Attached with this letter is a list of some of his representative work that would be of specific interest to you, as well citations of articles and writings about him.

Over the years, John has accumulated a museum quality collection of ethnic instruments. A number of the instruments are antiques. Some he has made himself (such as his revolutionary flat-backed oud). The collection even includes a miniature oud he crafted for his grandson.

He has an extensive library of vintage sheet music and recordings, as well as books about the culture, history, sociology, analysis, and significance of many styles of music. He has also written extensively about his craft and sheaves of his own compositions fill his filing cabinets.

John Bilezikjian is truly a living musical national treasure. I can think of no one more deserving of your grant and I hope you will give this nomination serious consideration.

If you need anything further or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Victoria Erickson