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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
Letter in Nomination of John Bilezikjian
for a National Heritage Fellowship in the folk music category

Dear Sirs and Madams:

Please accept this letter as nomination for **John Bilezikjian** for the National Endowment of the Arts Heritage Fellowship in the folk music category.

Mr. Bilezikjian is "America's Oud Virtuoso." In his 46 years of performance on this ancient instrument, he has made the music of the Oud available to kings and queens, heads of state, concert audiences and students alike, all with the same verve and musical integrity. Mr. Bilezikjian is a composer of note, having composed classical and film music as well as music for the theater. John Bilezikjian should be considered a National Treasure as an American musician.

The Oud is a fretless ancient musical stringed instrument originating in Persia and played throughout the Middle East and Asia Minor having (in its present form) eleven strings with no frets; it is played with an eagle's quill talon. The instrument is 2500 years old. In the hands of John Bilezikjian, the Oud is a nimble instrument, capable of sounding ancient and modern, ethnic and oddly American.

PERSONAL HISTORY

I came to know John Bilezikjian because I was searching for a composer to help me with a production of *Arabian Nights* by Mary Zimmerman, to be performed at the University of California, Irvine in February 2005. In my role as musical director, I sought a composer who could provide my graduate and undergraduate cast of actors with songs and underscoring that had the feel and essence of the Ancient Middle East without the burden of asking them to sing in micro-tones or insisting on academic "purity."

Mr. Bilezikjian was a consummate musical collaborator. He wrote songs to lyrics already set by the author that was appropriate, accessible (from both a performance and audience perspective) and moving. Additionally, John Bilezikjian performed with the students during the two-week engagement in the Robert Cohen Theater on the UC Irvine Campus. He provided underscoring and overture, entr'acte and exit music and became a part of the acting troupe as well, portraying the "elder musician" in one of the stories.

My personal experience of working with John Bilezikjian was one of the highlights of my career in the theater, and as a musician. His scoring and musical underlay to this play was so integral that I cannot imagine the play without his music.

MUSICAL BIOGRAPHY

John Bilezikjian is an American of Armenian decent. He is self-taught on the Oud and has taken that instrument into the recording studios of Hollywood as well as the concert stage. The highpoint of his performing career so far, was playing the Oud as soloist with the Boston Pops Orchestra on June 11, 2005, with Maestro Bruce Hangen. (This is the first time in the history of this 2,500 year old instrument that it has been featured as a solo instrument on with symphony orchestra.) He has also played the Oud with the Los Angeles Philharmonic under the baton of Zubin Mehta.

John studied Composition, Oud and Violin at Cal State University, Northridge, where he graduated with a B.A. Since that time, he has played and performed with musical and performing artists from all genres and styles, including Placido Domingo's CD, *De Mi Alma Latina* and Cantor Isaac Behar's *Sephardic Sabbath Chants*, as well as popular music with Robert Palmer's *Ridin' High*, Leonard Cohen in concerts and recordings, as well as an unlikely engagement backing up Little Richard in Las Vegas.

MOTION PICTURE SOUNDTRACKS

Prince of Egypt (Disney) Anastasia (Fox) Mission Impossible (Sony) Affair to Remember (Warner Bros.) Schindler's List (Sony) Maximum Risk (Warner Bros.) Executive Decision (Tristar) Telefon (Lorimar) The Postman Always Rings Twice (Universal) Ruby Cairo (Universal) Deception (Universal) Bashkaus, Sibera (Universal) Exotica (A. Egoyan, Canada) French Connection (Warner Bros.) Queen of the Damned (Village Roadshow Productions) Accidental Spy (Miramax) Scorpion King (Universal) Voices from the Lake—Documentary of the Armenian Genocide (Armenian Film Foundation)

MUSIC FOR TELEVISION

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| 20 th Century Fox | Thirty Something |
| Paramount | Mission Impossible, Murder, She Wrote, Happy Days, Mork & Mindy, I Spy, Ohanian, Laverne & Shirley, Apples Way, Wings of Eagles, Three's Company |

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| Warner Bros. | The Pirate, Cheers, St. Elsewhere, 21 Hours at Munich, Bionic Woman, Hart to Hart, Alice, Samson & Delilah, Maurice Jarre & Frank Capp |
| NBC | Princess Daisy (with Lalo Schifrin) |
| ABC | Hardy Boys (with Stu Phillips) |
| Universal Studios | Voyagers (with Elliot Kaplan) |
| | Austin City Limits (with Leonard Cohen) |
| KCET | Documentaries on Greece, Egypt, Russia |

GUEST LECTURSHIPS

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| 1978-1997 | GIT (Guitar Institute) Oud Demonstrations |
| 1996 | APS (Armenian Professional Society) Armenian Music |
| 1989 | UCLA guest lecturer with Dr. Jihad Racy |
| 1988 | UCLA guest lecturer on Armenian Music |
| 1988 | USC guest lecturer to the Sephardic Music Club |
| 1988 | USC guest lecturer to Ethnomusicology Dept. |
| 1986 | SFVSC – Performance Lecture on Oud Technique |
| 1986 | UCSD Guest Lecturer, Armenian Music, Armenian Studies |
| 1974 | Dana Hills High School Lecture Demonstration |
| 1967 | Grant High School- Lecture Demonstration on the Oud |

ARTISTRY IN ACTION

One might conceive that an artist with the musical talent of John Bilezikjian, working in the highest echelons of musical forums (Hollywood recording studios, world renowned philharmonic orchestras, classical and popular music icons like Placido Domingo, Leonard Cohen and Little Richard) might consider himself “above” working in a nightclub, or playing a bar mitzvah, or an Armenian folk festival, or providing music for a local university or high school.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

John Bilezikjian is one of the most humble, affable, kind-hearted and generous human beings that I have ever met. He puts his artistry in action by making his music *available* anywhere that there is an opportunity to reach people. Like any great folk musician, he knows that he can touch, move, divert, and entertain people... “folk.”

It is my experience that my former students (some of whom are now performing on Broadway, television, in films, in regional theaters like the Oregon Shakespeare Festival) still inquire about John Bilezikjian. He left an indelible mark upon them and they will carry his music making with them for the rest of their artistic lives. So will I.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I urge you to consider my recommendation of this great Armenian-American folk artist. John Bilezikjian is truly a National Treasure and nothing would delight me more than to have him be honored with an NEA National Heritage and Traditional Arts Fellowship. Please do not let this American treasure go forth as an “unsung hero” of folk and traditional music.

I would be honored to speak with you and provide you any further information on this nomination.

Respectfully submitted,



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