

FOLK DANCE ICON NEVARTE HAMPARIAN HONORED

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By the Tribute Committee, April 2011



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Nevarte Hamparian is all of these and more. And on Saturday, October 2, 2010, nearly 100 attendees -- made up of dancers, musicians, folk devotees and clergy -- honored the 84 year-old doyenne of dance for her contributions to the cultural advancement of the Armenian people as the Co-Founder and Director of the Nayiri Dance Group of New York (not to be confused with the eponymously named NY Hamazkayin dance group formed in recent years).

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The testimonial -- featuring a luncheon, guest speakers, musical tributes, a DVD presentation and festive dancing -- was held at Pashalian Hall of St. Illuminator's Armenian Cathedral in New York City, a historic destination where the honoree and most of those present had been actively involved for many years.

After his invocation, Pastor of St. Illuminator's Cathedral, Rev. Mesrob Lakissian praised Nevarte, saying that to create and direct an Armenian folk dance group in America is to carry out the safeguarding of a nation.

In his opening remarks, Master of Ceremonies, newspaper columnist and member of the Nayiri Group Charles Kasbarian spoke of the honoree's remarkable life. A leading exponent of the Armenian folk dance and a founder of the Nayiri Dance Group, Nevarte Hamparian has for years presented this appealing art form to an increasingly wide public. Nevarte, born in New York City on August 1, 1926, learned many native Armenian dances from her father, Nazar Der Manuelian of Palou, and her mother, Zarouhi of Sepastia who were both born and raised in these provinces of Western Armenia.

At the age of four, Nevarte began taking dancing lessons from Madame Seda Suny, and later earned scholarships to study ballet at the Ballet Arts School of New York and Balanchine's School of American Ballet. While Nevarte studied the Italian technique with the renowned ballet master,

Maestro Vincenzo Celli, she was also receiving a musical education in piano, theory and voice. She is a graduate of the High School of Music and Art in New York City, and in 1943, this school elected her a member of The Honor Music League.

Nevarte's first professional appearance, at age 16, was as a dancer with the Metropolitan Opera Company in the opera "Aida." Prior to this, she was performing in numerous dance recitals and Armenian functions. One in particular was the Armenian opera "Anoush," in which she played the title role in the ballet dream sequence. Nevarte was also a member of the Armenian Folk Dance Society of New York, and, at one time, served as its director.

In 1946, Nevarte joined the USO Camp Shows concert company of "Russian Revels." This exciting group of highly trained artists, some of whom were members of the famed Don Cossacks, presented Russian and Gypsy songs and dances. Nevarte danced and sang with this group for two years, touring with the U.S.O. to United States military hospital bases from coast to coast.

As the co-founder and director of the Nayiri Dance Group, formed in 1963, Nevarte presented dances from the Armenian regions of Erzeroum, Erzinga, Palou, Sepastia, Shabin-Karakissar, Van, and elsewhere. She also choreographed exciting new dances for the group's performances for "Armenian Day" at the New York World's Fair in 1964 and 1965. The Nayiri Dance Group received a commemorative award from Gov. Nelson Rockefeller for its outstanding performance at the New York State Pavillion at The World's Fair.



In the years that followed were a series of highly acclaimed concerts presenting authentic folk dances entitled "A Dance Trip Through Armenia" and which Nevarte conceived expressly for the Nayiri Dance Group. These performances took place at New York's Carnegie Recital Hall, Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall and elsewhere. The group also performed at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, and at President Lyndon B. Johnson's birthday party in 1964, the Folk Festival of 50 Nations at Convention Hall in Philadelphia in 1966, the New York City Bicentennial Heritage Festival at Rockefeller Center in 1976, and the Pontifical Banquet for Catholicos Khoren I, among many other recitals.

The Nayiri Dance Group, which, at its apex, consisted of 30 adults and children, performed well into the mid-1990s for Armenian and American audiences. The group represented three generations of American-born Armenians whose knowledge of their heritage is derived from their forebears who survived the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Throughout these many years, Nevarte's professional career and her training equipped her well for her role as an instructor, choreographer, dancer, director and mentor. With an impressive background from which to draw, Nevarte has done much to gain recognition for and to carry forward the historic Armenian dance. Nevarte is the wife of the late Nishan Hamparian, an art director, former principal of the St. Illuminator's Armenian Saturday School,

and set designer of the Nayiri Dance Group performance at Carnegie Recital Hall. They have three children, Aram -- an award-winning natural body-builder and nutrition consultant. Anahid -- an art director of children's books, and Vartan -- a classical pianist. Equally dedicated to preserving and perpetuating with great dignity and beauty the ancient and authentic folk dances of historic Armenia, Nishan, Aram, Anahid and Vartan all performed alongside Nevarte in the Nayiri Dance Group.

The tribute continued with the reading of a letter from Yerevan from Dr. Krikor Pidedjian, a member of Armenia's Union of Composers and Ethnomusicologists. In it, he congratulated Nevarte, "the well-seasoned dancer, knowledgeable and talented dance instructor, artistic choreographer and leader, ethnographer and collector of folk dances," and "considered himself fortunate to have had the honor to have worked with such a caliber of artist."

The letter -- read by Nevarte's nephew, Raffi Hamparian of the ANCA and a Nayiri performer himself -- was not limited to congratulatory expressions. Mastro Pidedjian reflected on his experience, as the Co-Founder of the Nayiri Dance Group and Founder/Director of the Kousan Chorus, of working with Nevarte to launch the thrilling performances of Western Armenian folk songs, dances and instrumental music at the NY World's Fair. "Because of Mrs. Hamparian's artistry and deep understanding of the soul of traditional Armenian folk dances," he wrote, "we were able to present Armenian ethnographic songs and dances in their complete beauty and majesty to a huge Armenian and non-Armenian audience of tens of thousands." Pidedjian also made a request: "The mushrooming of new Armenian dance groups in most Armenian communities should be a positive and hopeful development," he wrote. "However, surprisingly enough, with the passing of the years, inside me grows a pain caused by my concerns that like other Western Armenian cultural heirs, Madame Hamparian's invaluable collection of Western Armenian folk dances will be lost too with, regrettably, no return." Pidedjian, the former Pastor of St. Illuminator's Cathedral and former Principal of the Hovnanian School of NJ, asked Nevarte, "before the passage of many more years, to record her deep knowledge and understanding of our rapidly vanishing Western Armenian culture" to enrich the Armenian ethnographic treasury and serve as a cultural repository and teaching guide.

Another letter, this time from renowned tenor Armen Babamian, unable to attend the tribute, followed. Called the foremost interpreter of Sayat Nova in America by the late Maestro Mihran Toumajan (himself one of the famous "five" pupils of Gomidas) Maestro Babamian has been, among other accomplishments, leading choirs at St. Illuminator's Cathedral and at Sts Vartanantz Church in NJ as their choirmaster for a total of 65 years. In his letter to Nevarte -- read by her daughter, Anahid -- Mestro Babamian said, "I've always admired your work. You always worked with precision and discipline, and it showed in the beauty in which your dancers performed. Our entire Armenian community has become richer because of you, and no one deserves recognition for her life's accomplishments more than you."

Wearing a Nayiri costume replicating the traditional dress of the Gesaria region of Armenia, author

Lucine Kasbarian spoke of how, when the Nayiri Dance Group was created, Maestro Pidedjian brought back from Armenia books illustrating traditional dress. Costumes such as the one Kasbarian was wearing were meticulously replicated under the direction of fine dressmaker Annette Kouchakdjian, bringing a high level of authenticity and craftsmanship to the group's attire. A member of the Nayiri Dance Group since age 4, Kasbarian spoke of Nevarte's talent, training and leadership qualities and how Nevarte loved to teach and disseminate, "recognizing that these dances were part of our national inheritance, not sacred recipes to be taken to the grave, never to be prepared or savored again." Kasbarian commented on how, "through an unfortunate accident, Nevarte lived most of her life with the use of only one eye. And yet with that one eye, she managed to see more than most of us did with two. Some would even say that as a dance instructor, Nevarte had eyes behind her head to catch even the slightest deviation from the assigned dance steps." The crowning moment of Kasbarian's training with Nevarte and the group occurred, Kasbarian continued, when Kasbarian had occasion to meet and dance with the Maratuk Ensemble of Armenia, who specializes in Western Armenian folk song and dance. She said the dancers were not familiar with the Bijo dance of Sepastia. Kasbarian became very emotional as she described how it gave her the greatest satisfaction to show it to them, knowing that in doing so, the Bijo could once again find its home in Armenia. Kasbarian concluded by thanking Nevarte for "allowing us to emotionally live in Western Armenia through dance when we could not physically live there."

Ms. Kasbarian introduced a multi-talented musician whose original compositions have been translated into more than 13 languages by top singers and musicians throughout the world and who has even taken our ancestral melodies back to Western Armenia itself, Ara Dinkjian. In his remarks, Dinkjian said that "when we musicians here today play at a barahantes (dance party) and see people doing all these folk dances, I think we can say we know where they learned it: and it's from you, Deegeen Nevarte." Dinkjian continued, "Having traveled somewhat, I witnessed how in Dikrangerd, the people know one traditional dance. In Van, they have their one dance. But in America, you can go to an Armenian barahantes and see all of these folkdances danced by everyone, and that this may be the only place in the world where you can witness that." He said Nevarte was the major reason that this has occurred and that we all owed her a great deal for it. Dinkjian also thanked Nevarte for the role she played in his career as a musician -- hiring him at a very young age to accompany the dance group and for her role in giving him so much of his identity and a job today that he loves so much.

Dinkjian introduced a DVD for viewing, a videotaped dress rehearsal of the group preparing to perform at Carnegie Recital Hall in 1971. Dinkjian spent countless months locating sound recordings of Nayiri dance performances and applied his engineering skills to match sound to this silent footage. Where none existed, Dinkjian applied archival and customized music in synchronization, effectively bringing across the spirit of the group. At its best, the reconditioned footage is a historic dance document to be disseminated in the years to come.

Dr. John Vartan, the multi-talented master musician and university instructor with one of the largest collections in the world of Near Eastern instruments rose to say that he considered himself fortunate to be part of a group that had the opportunity to know Nevarte, perform with her, and share in our cultural heritage and group spirit.

John Berberian, considered to be one of the finest oud virtuosos in the world, played an exquisite piece in Nevarte's honor. Also having performed with Nevarte, he called her a "torchbearer who has helped perpetuate our folk dances all these years." If it weren't for you and people like you," said Berberian to the honoree, "my four year-old granddaughter would not be in an Armenian dance group today."

In introducing another musician who had performed with Nevarte, the renowned folk singer Onnik Dinkjian, the Master of Ceremonies described the colorful way in which Dinkjian first came to St. Illuminator's Cathedral from France to sing in the choir, and how he has, since then, become one of our most beloved singers of sacred and secular Armenian music. And, how "his popularity and love for his roots has, more than anyone we know, done more to bring the Dikranagerd identity to the world stage, and even back to Dikranagerd itself." To express his sentiments for the occasion, Dinkjian magnificently sang Garod, a song of longing and exile.

Before Onnik's son Ara performed his own tribute, Ara said, "while Nevarte taught us dance, she also taught me music, important songs, and who Gomidas was." He said "Perhaps the most emotional event in my musical life occurred when I performed a concert in Hayastan. The thought of giving back to those who gave you your identity is almost too much to handle." He said to Nevarte, "And here's an opportunity for me to play for you the songs that you taught me," he said, as he performed Gomidas' "Erengi" and the folk melody, "Tarakama," on the oud.

Der Moushegh, Pastor Emeritus of St. Illuminator Cathedral, spoke of his closeness to the Hamparian family, his admiration for Madame Nevarte's dance instruction and preservation, and the thrill with which he first observed the Nayiri Dance Group perform in Whitinsville, MA many years ago. He marveled at the DVD's restoration, and like John Vartan before him, urged its wide dissemination to inspire and educate others. He also recognized the elder-statesman of music, composer Vazgen Muradian, who was present to honor Nevarte. Also acknowledged were Nayiri Dance Group musicians, the late oud virtuoso George Mgrdichian, the late musical director Florence Mardirosian, and the noted oudist/vocalist Jack Baghsarian (now known as Archpriest Gomidas Baghsarian of the Sts. Vartanantz Church in Providence, R.I.) whose ecclesiastical duties prevented him from attending the tribute.

Nevarte received from St. Illuminator's Cathedral a plaque honoring her for "profoundly enriching the cultural life of the Armenian-American community," a rose bouquet and recording of Ballanchine ballerinas on behalf of all attendees, and various personal gifts.

After the cutting of cake, Nevarte thanked everyone present, noting how it was in Pashalian Hall that

she witnessed her mother dance with her uncle -- sister and brother, arm in arm -- doing the Sepastia Bar, and how parishoners joined in to learn it. Then sister and brother performed the Bijo, another dance of Sepastia, effectively teaching the steps to the community. She reminisced about collecting "Manir, manir," a spinning song from Sepastia, which she learned from the eldest female member of the family whom everyone called medz mairig (grandmother) -- and choreographed a dance to complement it for the group's repertoire. Nevarte also praised her musicians and dancers and in recalling her early loss of sight in one eye, reminded everyone that even when we think we have a handicap, we can always do more. Nevarte also announced her desire to resume dance group rehearsals with Lucine Kasbarian as her assistant director.

Musicians John Berberian, Noubar Boyajian (also a dancer with the Nayiri group), Ara and Onnik Dinkjian and John Vartan performed ensemble for everyone's dancing and listening enjoyment, specifically playing music from the dance group's repertoire.

Master of Ceremonies Kasbarian summarized the contributions of the guest of honor in his closing remarks by noting that "Nevarte did for folk dance what Gomidas did for folk music: she took the raw material generated in the villages of historic Armenia and without introducing any extraneous matter that would have disturbed the purity of the folk creation, transcribed them with great taste and skill for presentation on the stage for people to see what a great culture we Armenians possess. Nevarte, we salute you."

The tribute, skillfully recorded by Haig Sarajian and Eric Holmes, will be prepared for viewing -- along with the Carnegie Hall performance -- to be circulated at a future time to the Armenian Library and Museum of America, the Smithsonian Museum and various repositories in Armenia.

The executive committee is making plans to resume rehearsals sometime in the future. All those interested in receiving information may provide their contact information in an email to Nayiri Dance Group Executive Member Mary Ann Mozian at the following address: mmozian@Tstleon.org

