

COLORS OF PERSIA

Farima Berenji and Kevin Greek, San Jose, CA
Photos by Varol Ozkaner

The San Francisco Bay Area is one of the nation's largest and most diverse communities of ethnic dance, yet Persian and Central Asian folk dances in traditional costume are seldom performed for any audience. With the help of the NFO, we sought to improve awareness and enjoyment of the cultures of Iran and the Silk Road. Moreover, we wanted a large concert to celebrate the diverse cultural traditions of Persia with live music, dance, and poetry.

Over 25 musicians and dancers gathered to perform Colors of Persia for a single evening on Saturday, Sept. 29, 2018, some driving or flying great distances, to bring audiences a performance of the cultures, music, and dance traditions of Persia. A folk arts grant by the NFO, as well as generous contributions by donors and volunteers, helped make this concert possible.

Founded by Farima Berenji, the Simorgh Dance Collective is a world community of dancers and musicians that seeks to interpret, educate, and perform traditional dances of Persia and the Silk Road. Both student and professional artists are invited to join. Ethnic dances were performed in costume by the Simorgh Dance Collective, Farima Berenji, and Saleh Hassanzadeh (Aylan Azeri Dance Group), and included live music and vocals by Homeyra Banejad (daf), Vahid Zomorodi (setar, tambour), Soroush Foroudi (setar), Mona Garfari (tombak), Pooya Monajemi (daf), and Farin Foroudi (percussion). Two of the performing student members flew in from Anchorage, Alaska, where they had been joining us online for study and practice. Two juvenile students studied and performed with the adults.

The program introduced folk, classical, and sacred music and dances in traditional costume, as well as a reading of their culture and poetry, by each of the following regions or cultures of Iran.

Shiraz—Qashqai Dance

Traditionally nomadic, the Qashqai people live in Fars, as well as in other provinces in southern Iran. Cheerful, vibrant, and festive, the traditional Qashqai dance represents the coming of spring, joy, and giving thanks to the ancient gods and Mother Earth. Dancers hold vibrantly colored scarves, usually the seven main colors of spring, each color representing the seven gods and goddesses of creation: Earth, Fire, Water, Light, Love, Happiness, and

Health/Prosperity. Our Qashqai dance performance with live music featured these colorful traditional dresses and scarves.

Caspian Sea—Gilaki Dance

The Gilan province is in Northern Iran along the Caspian Sea. The dance and music of the Gilaki depicts the life of a people who live in the rice fields, love nature, and lead a simple life. Our Gilaki performance included a traditional basket dance, which featured the dancers playfully swishing skirts and holding baskets.

Greater Khorasan—Torbat-e Jam

Greater Khorasan is the vast province situated in northeastern Iran. The name Khorasan is Persian and means "where the sun arrives from." It is one of the richest regions of Iran in terms of its beautiful, mystical music, as well as ritual dances and folk dances. We performed one of the most popular traditional dances of the Khorasan region, a martial training and arts dance named Torbat-e Jam. Just as performed on stage, the dance often includes dancing with sticks and resembles dances done with swords, typifying warrior dances of the area.

Mystical Persia—Sema (Sufi Whirling Dance)

Whirling in the practice of healing and meditation originated over 10,000 years ago, with the ancient Persians using it as way of connecting the body and soul. Known today as Sema, Sufis today use it as a powerful meditation ritual with music, poetry, and movement. The mystical dancer stands between the material and cosmic world. The dancer represents Earth revolving on its axis while orbiting the sun. The purpose of the whirler is to empty herself of all distracting thoughts, placing the mind in a trance, releasing it from the body to become one with the universe. Farima Berenji performed Sema to live music beside two student performers whirling with illuminated drums.

Tehran—Qajar Royal Garden Dance

The Tehran province in central Iran is one of its most populous and culturally rich. Dance flourished in the courts of the Qajar Dynasty (785 to 1925). Graceful hand movements, flowing upper torso, delicate hip movements, expressive eyes, and facial expressions characterize these courtly dances. Dancers characteristically display a variety of feelings and also tease their audiences with coquettish looks. Our performance with live music presented a beautiful garden party of ladies. At first, each lady took turns dancing while the others were seated, but eventually all rose to dance together.

Sistan and Baluchistan

Sistan and Balochistan in the southeast of Iran, borders Pakistan and Afghanistan. Balouchi dance and music is

very rich and played with a variety of traditional instruments. Due to their demographics and strong cultural values, the Balouchi people have been able to keep their rich traditional heritage alive. We performed one of the most

famous Baluchi dances, known as the bracelet dance, where women gather in a circle and make rhythms with bracelets. This dance is known as a sacred ritual among the Balouchi tribe of Iran.

Azerbaijan
The people of Azerbaijan are proud, rich in tradition, and extremely melodious. Azeri dances are often performed at formal celebrations,

such as weddings and birthdays, and illustrate the nation's pride and strength. They are distinguished by their quick tempo, optimism, and portrayal of bravery. The Simorgh Dance Collective presented Incelik, a traditional Azeri choreography originating from the State Ensemble of Azerbaijan. A powerful Azeri men's solo was performed by Saleh Hassanzadeh. Naz Eleme, a traditional couple dance, a harvest dance featuring the entire ensemble, and finally Yalli, a folk dance, were also performed.

Other regions or cultures presented included Loristan, the Persian Gulf, and Kurdistan.

We had hoped for an audience of as many as 200; however, the concert quickly sold out at the door the day of the performance. People were turned away disappointed, although some people who came late were satisfied to stand in back and watch for free. Total admission was over 250

people. As soon as refreshments were set out or replenished, they were quickly consumed. Afterward, there was no end of praise for the concert among excited audience members. Overall, almost all audience members exclaimed how

surprised they were to enjoy a professional dance and music concert with refreshments for only \$25 admission.

The Simorgh Dance Collective gratefully acknowledges the support of the National Folk Organization, the Good Samaritan United Methodist Church, and other generous individuals. Many of the traditional costumes worn during the concert were designed and constructed by Nancy Rose

Aktas, who has researched dances and costumes of the Near East for many years. Other traditional costumes presented in this concert were acquired from Iran and Turkey.

The Simorgh Dance Collective takes pride in presenting dances and music of the Silk Road and currently has member companies and artist affiliations in Alaska, Canada, Turkey, the UK, Iran, and the U.S. For more information on the Simorgh Dance Collective, visit simorghdance.com.

Artistic Director and Choreographer Farima Berenji is an award-winning, internationally acclaimed performing artist, instructor, dance ethnologist, and archaeologist. Farima is the founder of the Simorgh Dance Collective, a member of the International Dance Council (CID-UNESCO), an NFO member, and a 2018 TEDx lecturer. For more details, or to contact Farima, visit farimadance.com.



Qashqai Folk Dance



Gilaki Folk Dance



Torbat-e Jam, a folk dance from Greater Khorasan



Incelik: Dance of Azerbaijan



Qajar Royal Garden Dance



Azeri Harvest Dance