

Dear dancing friends,

Here in Findhorn this summer we greatly enjoyed our first post-pandemic, in-person Festival of Sacred Dance, Music, and Song. Next year promises to be an equally beautiful event with guest teacher Chrisandra Harris teaching dances of the Silk Road, which she has researched personally in Armenia, Turkey, Greece and other parts of the world. Chrisandra's emphasis is on circle dancing and she fuses traditional dance and modern choreography in a unique and inspired way. She tells the story of her journey with Armenian dance in her own words below.

We hope to see many of you in the Festival next July at Findhorn – it will be a true celebration of dance and abundance!

With blessings in the dance,

Laura Shannon

My Armenian dance journey: A personal story by Chrisandra Harris

Almost thirty years ago I was at a general folk dance class when we were taught a new dance. The movements were quite unusual and the dance was from Armenia – a place I had never heard of. The music came on, we began to dance and I fell in love! That might sound like an odd statement, but the effect was immediate and dramatic. Little did I expect what a life-changing event this would be.

I returned home and began a quest to find more about Armenian dancing. This was long before the internet, so information was scarce and difficult to find. However within a few years I had met Shakeh Major Tchilingirian

(then Avanesian) at one of Laura Shannon's dance seminars in London, where she gave a beautiful solo performance in Armenian costume. I also attended seminars with Tineke van Geel, a Dutch teacher specialising in Armenian dance, and Dalila Heath, a dancer of Armenian heritage living in the UK, who over time has become a great friend. Gradually I built a small repertoire of Armenian dances which I enthusiastically shared with my local circle dance group.

To understand Armenian dance, I needed to understand Armenian history. Armenia was once a huge country, covering much of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). Armenians lived under Ottoman rule until the Armenian Genocide of 1915-17, when at least 1.5 million Armenians were killed and the remaining population scattered across the world. As a result of this Diaspora, more people of Armenian heritage live outside Armenia than in the Armenian nation today (which is relatively small, with a land mass about the size of Wales). Dances which we know as 'Armenian', therefore, might come from Armenian communities in the USA, France, Western Armenia (present-day Turkey), or the Republic of Armenia.

My dream was to visit Armenia, but in the 1990s this was very difficult. Armenia had been part of the Soviet Union, and after independence in the early 1990s suffered greatly as its infrastructure, industry, and pensions system virtually collapsed. In addition, a huge earthquake in Northern Armenia in 1988 affected almost every citizen in the country. Eventually, however, in 2005 I was able to visit Armenia for the first time. After a long journey, I arrived in Yerevan in the early morning, just as it was beginning to get light. Looking out of the window, I experienced a tremendous feeling of coming home, of knowing this was exactly where I needed to be. As I travelled out of the capital, this feel-

ing increased, and in Yeghegnadzor, a small town to the south, on a hill looking at Mount Ararat on the horizon, I knew that this was my place. From then I became a regular visitor to Armenia and Yeghegnadzor, and established many friendships in the town. Eventually I began to take small groups of dancers with me on my visits.

Meanwhile, at home in the UK I made friends with a young Armenian woman, Hasmik, who was spending a year in my area, and Haniel, a woman of Armenian descent who encouraged me to establish an Armenian dance group – and in 2007 ‘Kilikia Dances for Armenia’ was born. Our aim was to tell the story of Armenia through dance and to raise funds for different projects there, including Hasmik's Centaur project, which combines support for disabled children and their families with an animal rescue centre, and projects in Yeghegnadzor. Over time, ‘Kilikia’ has grown to over 20 people, with over a hundred costumes and a full programme of presentations and events.

Back in Armenia a dance revolution was taking place. After the collapse of the Soviet system, people were focused on survival, state funding for the arts had disappeared, and dance and music classes were in decline. Then in 2005, Gagik Ginosyan began to rescue Armenian dance from the brink. With his ‘Karin’ dance ensemble, Gagik initiated open air classes on Friday evenings in the centre of Yerevan – picture a huge bank of amps, like you would have at a music festival, and circle after circle of young dancers, each with a member of Karin in traditional dress in the centre teaching the dances. Gagik made traditional dancing ‘trendy’ and infused a whole new generation of Armenians with pride in their artistic heritage. Through the project ‘Our Dances and Us’, Gagik managed to integrate traditional

dance into the curriculum of every school in Armenia, so now every young person in Armenia learns to dance.

Gagik also began to research the old 'disappeared' dances, many of which predate Christianity and are clearly very ancient. Some of these dances are the forerunners to the dance that we know as Daroni or Gorani, the very first Armenian dance that I learnt almost thirty years ago. The well-known choreographed arrangement of Daroni stems from a traditional Armenian dance which has many ancient variations, including a 'water' Gorani where the dancers pass bowls of water and the chief dancer dances with one of these on his or her head. This was a dance associated with periods of drought and was a type of prayer for rain. Another dance reborn is known as the 'Mother Goddess' dance, celebrating the divine feminine. Gagik has also reintroduced eight dances that were recorded by Father Komitas, the Armenian priest and ethnomusicographer, between 1899-1910, including Komitasi Shoror. All of these 'lost' dances come from Western Armenia, the part of historical Armenia in Asia Minor which is now present-day Turkey. Interestingly, these ancient dances are danced by both men and women together in the circle, with women clearly taking an equal part. There are also women's dances such as Madzune Bar, a beautiful and popular dance which was danced by women whilst making yogurt.

While traditional circle dances are experiencing a comeback in Armenia, the Armenian lyrical dances, with more complex choreographies and a more formal dance style influenced by ballet, has become less popular there, though Paylak Sargsyan, the 'king' of the lyrical genre, continues to create these beautiful dances to exquisite music by famous Armenian composers such as Khatchatour Avetissian. [*Laura adds: of course Shakeh Major Tchilingirian, the Armenian dancer and*

teacher based in London, is also an important source of Armenian lyrical dances, inspired arrangements of traditional movements in circle form, which are now among the favourite dances in our worldwide circle dance repertoire.]

Over time, wishing to learn about what was left of the Armenian legacy in present-day Turkey, I became friendly with Ahmet Demirbag, Professor of Traditional Dance and Music at Istanbul University. Ahmet has developed a network of traditional dance groups across Turkey, and travels regularly to record dance groups from the different regions and ethnic groups within the country. With Ahmet I have organised many dance tours to different regions of Turkey to further understand dance traditions in Asia Minor. As communities from many different ethnic and religious backgrounds co-existed for many years in Asia Minor, the dance tradition was largely shared. It is often difficult to separate dances ethnically, and only really possible geographically.

So, almost thirty years after I learnt my first Armenian dance, I can truly say that that event changed my life. Through my journey to learn about Armenian dance and culture, I have made many friends and had wonderful experiences in Armenia and Asia Minor. As a result of dance, doors have opened to me in friendship, generosity and trust. I hope that in my turn I am able to tell a little of the story of Armenia through my endeavours, and that by sharing my now rich and varied repertoire of Armenian dances, maybe others can fall in love with Armenia, just a little bit, the same way that I did all those years ago.

Findhorn Festival of Sacred Dance, Music, and Song: July 8-18 2023, with guest teacher Chrisandra Harris sharing Dances of the Silk Road, plus Peter Vallance, Barbara Swetina, Susanne Anders Bartholomaei, Laura Shannon, Kate O'Connell and many more musicians and Findhorn Sacred Dance teachers.