

Diva with a Heart Supports Women in Armenia

Benefit Concert featuring Soprano Hasmik Papian to benefit the Armenian American Wellness Center in Armenia

By Negar M. Joy

WASHINGTON, DC - Hasmik Papian has been called "the best Norma alive." Her singing has been described by *The Washington Post* as "gorgeous." I am sure that as a world-famous soprano, she has collected a number of titles during her long and prosperous opera career. The Armenian-born Hasmik Papian now has a new one to add to her collection, and one that is closest to her soul -- *Diva with a Heart*. That is how the Washington DC-based Armenian American Cultural Association (AACA) has labeled her. And the description is right on target.

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Hasmik Papian was in Washington, DC last month to perform the title role of Bellini's Opera "Norma" with the Washington Opera Company. As *The Washington Post* review put it: "There are certain challenges that can be met only by a few -- climbing Mount Everest, running a four-minute mile, swimming the English Channel and singing the title role in Vincenzo Bellini's 'Norma.'" So, you would think that the Diva, who is booked through 2006 and manages to inspire the critics and fans alike, would want to take a rest in between this demanding role and save her energy and voice for the next performance. That is what most divas would have done. Not Ms. Papian.

Papian performed at a Benefit Concert in appreciation of the Humanitarian Project of the AACA-AAWC in Armenia.

On Friday, October 10, 2003, Ms. Papian stepped out of her title role and sang in support of the health of women in her native Armenia.



Hasmik Papian at the Austrian Embassy Concert Hall during her Benefit Concert performance organized by the Armenian American Cultural Association, AACA

She performed at a Benefit Concert in appreciation of the Humanitarian Project of the American Armenian Cultural Association (AACA), the Armenian American Wellness Center (AAWC) in Armenia. The Wellness Center was established in 1997 in Yerevan through the efforts of Rita Balian, the President and Chief Volunteer Officer (CVO) of AACA, in response to alarming incidence rates of breast and cervical cancer in Armenia

"I've known Hasmik since 1989," says Rita Balian, President of AACA and Founder of AAWC. "Three years ago, Hasmik visited the Wellness Center in Yerevan. She was very impressed with the Center's work and agreed to, one day, give a concert to benefit the health care of women in Armenia. In January 2003, when Hasmik was in New York singing Aida at the Metropolitan Opera, she contacted me. We spoke about her upcoming performance of "Norma" with the

Washington Opera Company in October 2003. It seemed to be the perfect opportunity to organize the Benefit Concert

we had agreed upon several years ago," remembers Balian. **In honor of Mrs. Papian a Special Reception was held**

on October 5 at the Embassy of Armenia.

In honor of Mrs. Papian and to give contributors an opportunity to meet this charming Diva in person, a Special Reception was held on October 5 at the Embassy of Armenia in Washington, DC. Benefit Concert contributors of \$100 and more had a chance to chat with Ms. Papian, her husband, Konrad Kuhn, and their sweet twenty-seven-month-old daughter, Siranoush, and also shared individual photo opportunities with Ms. Papian and Ambassador Arman Kirakossian. Guests enjoyed Armenian delicacies prepared by the AACA Committee Members. It was a wonderful event on the eve of the highly anticipated Benefit Concert.

The Benefit Concert was a huge success.

The Benefit Concert, organized between "Norma" performances on Friday,



Armenian Soprano Hasmik Papian on stage with acclaimed accompanist Frank Conlon, who also donated his talent and time to the 'noble cause' of helping women in Armenia



L to R are: Rita Balian, President & CVO, AACA and Founder of AAWC; Chuck and Diane Paskerian, who flew in specially from San Francisco to attend the Concert and "Norma"; Amb. & Mrs. Arman Kirakossian; Keith Simmons, USAID Armenia Mission Director and wife Chris Simmons



L to R are: Thomas Nowotny; Austrian Ambassador Eva Nowotny; The Hon. Esther Coopersmith, the Goodwill Ambassador to the World; Socialite Rene Robinson of the Nation's Capital; Susanna and Armenian Ambassador Arman Kirakossian; Diva Hasmik Papian; former US Amb. to Armenia Harry Gilmore and Carol; and Rita Balian

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Hasmik Papian (seated) with AACA Board Members, Concert and Reception Committee, and Ushers during a photo op at the Reception in her honor at the Armenian Embassy

October 10th, at the Austrian Embassy's Concert Hall was a huge success. AACA annually brings the Armenian community of Metropolitan Washington together to promote cultural and educational activities, and introduce Armenian talents to the Nation's Capital. Through the coordination of AACA, the Armenian and Austrian embassies collaborated in co-sponsoring the event. The two respective Ambassadors, H.E. Arman Kirakossian and H.E. Eva Nowotny in their opening remarks shared their joy and pride in Ms. Papian as a native of Armenia and as a resident of Austria.

H.E. Arman Kirakossian expressed the sentiment of most Armenians when he said: "I am greatly impressed by and proud of Hasmik Papian's generous contribution that will benefit the Wellness Center in Yerevan. As an internationally famous soprano, Ms. Papian epitomizes the best Armenian culture has to offer to the world. Her benevolence and care for the vulnerable women of Armenia are manifestation of her noble character and Christian spirit of giving."

Ms. Papian epitomizes the best Armenian culture has to offer to the world.

Over 350 guests of all ages packed the Concert Hall to hear Papian's rendition of arias from Puccini, Verdi, Mozart and ballads from Komitas and Ganatchian. The audience was awed and humbled by not only the talent and crystalline voice of Ms. Papian, but also by her beauty, charming personality, generosity and bigheartedness.

"Everything regarding my native Armenia is very precious to me," said Ms. Papian. "Whatever is going on there concerns and touches me deeply. I am so happy to see important progress in many fields in Armenia, but

still there remains a lot to be done. Many of the improvements we can see today have been set in motion through the generous support and selfless initiative of devoted people from the Armenian Diaspora." Praising the efforts of AACA and especially its President, Rita Balian, for founding and supporting the Wellness Center, Ms. Papian explained: "When Rita came up with the idea to organize a benefit concert, I couldn't refuse. To give a hand to her and contribute to her never-ending activities aiming at improving the health and saving the lives of our sisters in Armenia by means of supporting the Armenian American Wellness Center was just one little thing I could do, and I did it with great pleasure and pride."

I did it with great pleasure and pride. The funds raised through the Benefit Concert – close to \$30,000 -- will assist AACA in supporting the work of the



L to R are: Paola and Robert Krikorian, Ph.D; Diva Hasmik Papian; Scholar Levon Avdoian, Ph.D (Benefactor), Library of Congress; Drs. Nira and Michael Stone, Professor of the Armenian Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem



L to R are: Dr. Heros Noravian, Concert Benefactor and Dr. Emma Zargarian, AAWC Medical Advisory Board Member; Diva Hasmik Papian with her daughter Siranoush and Ambassador. Arman and Susanna Kirakossian

Armenian American Wellness Center in Yerevan and its two Satellite Clinics. Through early detection of breast and cervical cancers, AAWC improves the health-care system for women of Armenia and sends a "gift of hope" to each of them.

An evening to remember.

This concert was no ordinary benefit recital, as the singer was no ordinary singer. "Hasmik Papian's devotion, both artistic and personal, to Armenian roots provided an occasion that filled all Armenians with a profound sense of

pride and created an evening to remember," said Rita Balian. "We are so grateful to Hasmik Papian, numerous contributors from all over the East Coast of USA and many volunteers in our organizing committee in Washington, DC who helped us make this event truly memorable."

For more information on the Armenian American Wellness Center, interested persons should contact AACA, Tel: 703-416-2555 or e-mail: usaaca@aol.com.



L to R are: Donna Dowsett-Coirolo, World Bank Country (Armenia) Director; Amb. Arman Kirakossian; Diva Hasmik Papian with daughter Siranoush; Roger Robinson, World Bank Resident Representative, Armenia Mission; and Susanna Kirakossian at the Armenian Embassy Reception



L to R are: Jerar and Anahid Nishanian, Concert Benefactors; Diva Hasmik Papian with daughter Siranoush; Ambassador Arman and Susanna Kirakossian at the Armenian Embassy Reception