

ARTS

## Berkeley folk and traditional artists buoyed by Hewlett Foundation grants

Faye Carol, Mahsa Vahdat, Susana Arenas Pedroso and C.K. Ladzekpo are among the 10 artists “steeped in diverse cultural traditions” who’ll get at least \$50,000

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Iranian-born vocalist Mahsa Vahdat, who performs at Zellerbach Hall with Kronos Quartet Dec. 2, is one of several Berkeley residents to receive a major Hewlett Foundation grant for traditional artists. Credit: Tahmineh Monzavi

After a brutally parched year Berkeley is looking a whole lot more green following the weekend's historic downpour. The city's traditional arts scene is also getting a major infusion of green, according to an announcement Tuesday by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

The latest wave of commissions flowing from the Menlo Park-based foundation provide 10 artists with at least \$50,000 each to develop ambitious new works in traditional art forms.

Nearly half of the musicians and choreographers have deep Berkeley ties, including jazz and blues vocalist Faye Carol, Iranian-born vocalist/composer Mahsa Vahdat, and Afro-Cuban choreographer Susana Arenas Pedroso, who are all Berkeley residents. While Ghanaian American choreographer and master drummer C.K. Ladzekpo lives in Richmond, he's the longtime director of UC Berkeley's African music program (and co-artistic director of the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival).



Susana Arenas Pedroso. Credit: Brooke Anderson

Each artist is paired with a Bay Area cultural institution and nonprofit organization, and in Ladzekpo's case that's the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts in Richmond, where he's been on faculty for many years.

The Dynamic Miss Faye Carol, a wellspring of African American musical knowledge, is teaming up with Art + Soul Oakland to create "Blues, Baroque, and Bars: From the Streets to the Symphony." Scheduled to premiere in 2022 at the revived Oakland Art + Soul Festival, it's an evening-length suite featuring a music jazz piano trio, string quartet, and rapper. In reimagining traditional blues repertoire, Carol provides a soundtrack for a definitive American narrative tracing the journey of Black peoples from the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the plantations of the American South through the Great Migration.

Vahdat, the celebrated Iranian-born vocalist and composer, is working in collaboration with Freight & Salvage on an evening-length song cycle interweaving classical and contemporary Persian poetry. Slated to premiere in late 2024 over two nights, "Woven Verses: Poetic Resistance and Resilience" is a multi-media production rooted in classical and regional Persian music forms, which involve extensive ornamentation.

"I always work with contemporary and classical Persian poetry, but in this project it's a deep dialogue and I really want them to meet together in a very interwoven form," said Vahdat, who performs Dec. 2 with Kronos Quartet at Zellerbach Hall in a concert presented by Cal Performances.

The commission offers another opportunity to develop new material with her husband, Atabak Elyasi, a composer, arranger and master of the Persian setar. His settings will feature a small ensemble made up of mostly traditional instruments from Iran and the Middle East. Vahdat envisions a dialogue between past and present represented by her and her sister, vocalist Marjan Vahdat, with whom she's collaborated since they were adolescents.

"One of us can be a voice from the past, and one contemporary, and sometimes our roles change," she said.

Vahdat is looking for texts from writers who've defined Persian culture for centuries, including Hafez, Rumi, and Omar Khayyam, "poets I've been very involved with my whole life," she says. "It gives me the possibility to touch them from another perspective." Among the 20th century poets she's thinking of using are Sohrab Sepehri ("His approach is very simple and profound, and I haven't worked with much of his poetry before," she says) and Forugh Farrokhzad ("also an amazing filmmaker").

Launched in 2017 in honor of the Hewlett Foundation's 50th anniversary, the five-year, \$8 million Hewlett 50 Arts Commissions represent a major commitment to artistic expression and public engagement with the arts in the Bay Area. Other recipients of commissions this year include Cambodian American dancer/choreographer and culture bearer Charya Burt, who lives in Windsor, and Santa Rosa-based Native American artist L. Frank Manriquez, who hails from the San Diego-area Tongva, Acjachemen, and Raramuri tribes.

Vocalists are well represented, with Richmond-based Tibetan American musician, dancer, and Tibetan opera singer Tsering Wangmo, and seventh-generation North Indian Nautanki opera performer, writer, director Devendra Sharma, a professor at Fresno State. Rounding out the roster are San Francisco-based Brazilian American capoeira master and teacher Marcia Treidler and El Cerrito composer and Vietnamese master traditional artist Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ, whose Blood Moon Orchestra presents the world premiere of her [Songs of Strength Dec. 4](#) at Zellerbach Hall (a production that includes Mahsa Vahdat, rapper DemOne, and breakdancer Tunji).

Applications for the next and final round of the Hewlett 50 Arts Commissions, supporting Media Arts, will open later this year. More information can be found on the [Hewlett Foundation website](#).

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*A Berkeley resident since 1996, Los Angeles native Andrew Gilbert is a longtime arts and culture reporter who has contributed to Berkeleyside since 2011.*