

Classical Music Chat

Stories, advice and more from classical presenters

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Melanie Smith from San Francisco Performances talks about presenting for classical audiences after Covid

By Gail Wein

As the pandemic comes under control in the United States, Covid restrictions are gradually being eased across the country, and performing arts presenters are looking ahead to their next steps. I spoke with Melanie Smith, president of San Francisco Performances, about the presenter's experiences throughout the past 14 months and their plans as they look ahead.

San Francisco Performances was founded in 1979 by Ruth Felt and has been led since 2016 by its president, Melanie Smith, who calls the organization, "the city's premiere presenter of chamber music." Ordinarily they present 60 mainstage performances annually.

When the world shut down last spring, SFP was resourceful, and almost immediately began making performance content available online. In March 2020, when their offices were forced

to close, Smith said, "I literally grabbed a stack of archival CDs from past concerts. We started posting them online one by one a year ago last April, and we developed a digital series that we call Front Row," said Smith.



Not long after that, some local artists reached out to SFP, and recorded performances from their homes or from a church in Marin County, which provided SFP with some new material to share with their audience. Next, said Smith, their music historian in residence, Dr. Robert Greenberg, created a series of podcasts on themes that were to be part of the coming season. "We still believed in my wild optimism that we would get back to live concerts during the 20-21 season."

SFP is gearing up for a return to in-person performances in July 2021. Events will be in the Herbst Theater, SFP's home venue, which seats just under 900 people. They plan to

accommodate around 200 patrons spaced throughout the hall. The organization had never before presented during the summer. "SFP is not a summer festival, but this year we have the opportunity to do it. I think the need is there," said Smith.

Throughout the pandemic, SFP made sure to keep up communication with their patrons. "We have a weekly newsletter and our wonderful communications team and marketing team have come up with new and exciting news to share, following the artists that our audiences know and love all over the world."

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SFP launched a major fundraising campaign last October that is on-going. "Typically, we'd have a year-end campaign, then we'd start again with the subscription renewal campaign. But since that's coming later, we've kept this fundraising campaign going all these many months. People have been incredibly generous."

As Smith's optimism prevailed, SFP did not immediately cancel their entire season. "Because we are chamber music and often it's just four or five people on stage with no singing, we thought, well, we have greater flexibility. They can easily be six, ten feet apart from each other on stage," she said. "I kept holding out hope that we could somehow implement the socially distant Covid protocol plan we came up with last summer."

Those rolling cancellations helped them keep in touch with their patrons, too. "It became

another point of touch just to say, 'Hey, as we all know, the situation is not changing. These events are now cancelled or postponed, and we look forward to rescheduling them in the future'."

Those rolling cancellations also meant that SFP was able to keep all their staff on board. "Even though it's lean because of the resources, we're able to keep us intact, so that now that we're ready to come back, we're ready to roll," said Smith. "What's good is we're not going to have the challenge of trying to find staff suddenly in order to be able to mobilize. We're all here ready to come back and do this."

"I think we're going to see the financial implications of this for the next five years," said Smith. "We just have to be prepared for that. Our fundraising efforts have been extraordinary. The results have been extraordinary. That may not continue. The economic impact of this, while there may even be a sense of boom time in the short term, is going to be with us for a while."

"The biggest challenge is going to be the small size of audience, and that fact that there's not going to be any new income from ticket sales in July," said Smith. Patrons attending July concerts have credit with SFP from previously postponed performances. Smith added that there will be protocols in place that they've never had to consider until now. "Lines to avoid congestion, and even the seating map itself. Touchless everything. No concessions and no gathering. Those are going to be challenges."

For Smith, the eternal optimist, there is an upside to the whole situation. "Just seeing the incredible loyalty and generosity of our patrons, they really do see us as an extension of their families. Seeing that through their communication, through their donations, has been so heartening."

“I personally have had the opportunity to get closer to some of the artists that we work with regularly. We’ve had lots of chats about what the future might hold, and how they can get back to doing their art,” said Smith. These conversations planted seeds for the future: ideas for commissions, new projects and other endeavors that the artists have always wanted to do. “And the answer is why the heck not? If not now, when?”

Another silver lining, says Smith, is the opportunity to take down some sacred cows and work toward being more relevant to the times. “We’re still holding the foundation of the classical canon, but allowing new ideas, new work, new artists to come to the forefront to express their point of view. This very quiet time may have given us the space we needed to really take that on.”

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“I’m just sure that we’re really and truly coming out of it,” said Smith. “There’s been so much loss and grief and suffering, but I think we’re going to look back at some point at this time as a kind of catalyst for other things.”



Melanie Smith returned to San Francisco Performances as the organization’s President in 2016. She had previously served as SFP’s Director of Education/Artistic Administration from 1997 to 2006. Ms. Smith is a performing arts executive with more than 30 years of experience in management and administration both in San Francisco and New York. Her extensive experience in organizational development, change management, goal setting, strategic planning, fundraising and marketing have benefitted organizations including Carnegie Hall, the Midori Foundation, Young Concert Artists, the San Francisco Girls Chorus, and San Francisco Performances. Ms. Smith holds a BA in French and Voice from Cal State University Stanislaus and completed graduate studies in Non-Profit Management at the New School in New York.

Gail Wein is a New York-based music journalist and media consultant. She is a contributor to Playbill, NPR, and The Washington Post, among others.



Marketing through Audience Engagement with Dr. Leia Barrett from Kansas City Friends of Music

Who We Are:

The Friends of Chamber Music Kansas City (FCM) began in 1975. It had zero budget and featured concerts in the living rooms of the cultural elite. We quickly grew thanks to a little luck (the professional symphony had gone bankrupt and there wasn't anyone else to fill that void) and the founder's ability to showcase artists who would become big in the classical world. We presented the Tokyo Quartet right after they appeared on Johnny Carson, presented the Beaux Arts for several seasons, and presented Richard Goode performing every Beethoven Sonata before it was cool.

Today, we offer three series: Early Music Series; International Chamber Music Series; and Master Pianist Series. We present between 12-15 concerts/year, with our main venue being a hall of about 1,000 capacity (normally). We have some fan favorites who come back every other year (Tallis Scholars, Akademie of Alte Musik Berlin) and many of our groups are based in Europe.

Our Audience:

Admittedly, our audience has shrunk a little in recent years, and we are bracing for an even more intimate audience in 20-21. That said, we are entering 20-21 with more solvency than ever before. This is thanks to cultivating a stalwart group of donors who would be bereft if we weren't around. There are a few ways we've created this situation that I believe can be

applicable to chamber music organizations of any size:

- 1) **We thank...and thank... and thank some more**—Our audience knows they matter to us. We note birthdays, call donors and patrons we haven't heard from in a while, and hand address letters. With a small staff and a large collection of donors, it's tough, but it has helped us weather many storms. Concerts are important, but without people, they would not matter.
- 2) **We work to 'surprise and delight'** - When you know your audience well enough, don't be afraid to surprise and delight. Mail a book about that composer they raved about at your last concert. Pin a note to a long-time subscriber's seat thanking them for being at your concert. Encourage your staff/volunteers/board members to seek out audience members they see to find ways to make them feel special. It doesn't have to cost much but pays huge dividends in ways you can't imagine. It's especially helpful when something goes wrong! I know, I know, that never happens to you.

"We thank...and thank... and thank some more—Our audience knows they matter to us. We note birthdays, call donors and patrons we haven't heard from in a while, and hand address letters. With a small staff and a large collection of donors, it's tough, but it has helped us weather many storms."

- 3) **Speaking of engagement**--A fabulous marketing coach from the orchestral sector, Jack McAuliffe, states that what we do isn't marketing; it's audience

engagement. To that end, we strive to find simple ways to engage our audience and make them excited about the performance they're attending. Use your online platforms to educate, inspire, and surprise. Don't be afraid to be a little silly or take a trip down memory lane. We've started cleaning out our storage and found pictures of when we presented Sir Andres Schiff and he was about 30 years old. #ThrowbackThursday, anyone?

Building and Retaining Audiences:

Admittedly, we're in a re-growing period. There are many reasons for this, but it has given us the opportunity to examine our message and our branding. As mentioned above, we encounter more success when we blend education on our digital platforms with marketing efforts.



Recently, we've seen less direct sales with our print media (postcards, etc.), but when combined with digital efforts we see measurable results. One of the easiest and cheapest ways to track ROI is discount codes.

What we're doing:

This year we are experimenting with more targeted mailings. New this year, we will devote less time and effort to bringing back subscribers. Once someone has subscribed at least 3 years, they are significantly more likely to re-up, so we extrapolate those individuals and create a less elaborate, simplified renewal system.

On the other hand, we're planning to create a **flashy campaign for first-time subscribers** offering 50% off the cost of subscription (first

year only). Since we've had a lapse in subscribers, we're doing to offer this to lapsed subscribers as well. Several orchestras use this to great effect; my prior orchestra increased their subscriptions by 400% in five years, primarily with this method.

Last thing: maximize your mailing list.

We had our local printing company do a demographic study of our donors and long-term subscribers and discovered that only about 25% of our mailing list was even viable! They created a demographic profile of our audience, and from that we've rented a list of 5,000 extra names who have commonalities with our demographic. We tested the list by sending notifications about our streaming programs and got about 100 signups in about 2 months plus significant traffic increases to our website.

We're doing our subscription acquisition in about a month and are eager to see if this list yields results. Renting a list like the one mentioned above costs about \$1,300/year. In conclusion, I hope some of the above has been helpful. Please feel free to email me if you have any questions or just need to chat. Good luck to everyone as you transition back to live events!

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Dr. Barrett has more than a decade of experience in non-profit arts administration. Prior to her appointment as Acting Executive Director of the Friends, she was Marketing and Outreach Director. She moved to Kansas City from Orlando where she served as the Director of Education for the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra for six seasons. Her innovative children's book series Symphony Storytime is a classical music series for young families that has become enormously successful.

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Tom Gallant is the Editor of Classical Music Chat and Director of General Arts Touring and has always worn many hats as a professional musician, concert producer and artist manager. Over the years he has been involved in managing several summer music festivals and produced concerts in a wide variety of places from Carnegie Hall in New York City to Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. Tom produced his first concerts in his backyard and his living room as a child at the age of 12!