

Talking Points: Mid-Peninsula League of the San Francisco Symphony – Symphony in Flowers

Cover Slide (Slide One):

Mid-Peninsula League is one of 9 volunteer leagues of the San Francisco Symphony, overseen by the Volunteer Council, which reports to the Board of Governors. We are one of six geographically based leagues. Fundraising, along with audience development and community-based music education, is one of our three missions as a league. We currently have 54 Active members and 26 Associate members. We had 45 Actives in 2014.

Slide Two: Short History

Garden tour was two-day ticketed event showing off three or four local residential gardens; started in 1988. Event won a Gold Book Award some years ago. Garden tours became too difficult to arrange and to execute physically for MPL members. Became a late afternoon garden party with silent auction, and then a dinner auction event at a prominent country club in 2011. Our late past president said it best, “We bring the garden indoors” with our floral-themed dinner auction fundraiser. To “change up” the event, we adopted location as well as musical themes: Paris in 2013; Venice in 2014; Broadway in 2015.

Slide Three: Event Revenue

Revenue model is based on income from dinner tickets (priced at \$190 for regular ticket and \$275 for sponsor ticket), donations in lieu of, or in addition to, tickets (Active members are required to purchase at least one event ticket), silent and live auctions, and a Fund-A-Need. In 2014 we also had vendors come to sell high-end specialty goods with a percentage of their revenue coming to us. One third of revenue comes from event tickets, 45% from auction items, and 25% from Fund-A-Need, donations, and underwriting.

Slide Four: Event Model

Six stages in the event program: (1) guests welcomed with floral décor, silent auction, vendor tables (2014 only), cocktails, and passed hors d’oeuvres; (2) guests moved to dining room for welcoming announcements and seated dinner is served; (3) silent auction tables are closed and silent auction results are tabulated during dinner; (4) live auction and fund-a-need conducted; (5) musical performance takes place, often featuring musicians from the SFS; (6) guests check out, paying for auction purchases and fund-a-need pledges.

Slides Five and Six: Décor

Highlight of the event is the décor, arranged by one of our talented members who has excellent relationships with several local florists. Florists are given a musical theme around which to build their arrangements. Arrangements are sold as part of the silent auction.

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Table décor compliments the flowers. Our Evening in Venice event in 2014 featured a spectacular flower-filled gondola, shown here with our event chair, Jane Hartman, and her husband, Mike.

Slide Seven: Auction Dynamics

Have had to experiment with successful auction strategy. Important to have event guests – avoid the trap of “selling just to ourselves”. Guests provided 60% of auction revenue in 2014. Have learned that tangible items (rugs, jewelry, artwork) and services (hair care, exercise sessions) sell poorly to our members and guests. Most popular are privately arranged tours, home concerts, dinners, brunches. Last year added marketing company’s pre-arranged tours to fill out the auction offerings, but the revenue split makes these less lucrative. Discontinued live auction this year – auctioneer is expensive and results can be disappointing.

Slide Eight: Vendors

Experiment in 2014 to vary the dynamics in the silent auction area and generate additional revenue. Selected five specialty vendors to display and sell their goods. Revenue produced (\$1000) was insufficient to compensate for time and effort involved, and distraction from more profitable silent auction. Discontinued.

Slide Nine: Volunteer Effort Involved

Event requires a significant commitment of personal time and effort by the event chair and the members of her core committee (17 members in 2014). Coordination of the auction is the most time-consuming and complex task. This is where almost all of membership (45 actives) participated, soliciting auction or creating auction donations or donating money to purchase auction items, assembling auction packages or baskets. Securing appropriate musical entertainment requires good contacts within the musical community and the SFS. Administrative work prior to the event (invitations, guest list and seating assignments, program preparation and assembly) and at the event (guest check in and check out) also requires considerable effort by members with financial and computer skills. Relatively limited number of other on-site volunteers required: just 10 (4 overseeing auction tables; 2 spotters for live auction and fund-a-need; 2 for guest check-in and 2 for check-out) plus 2 SFS staff members (helping with credit card payments).

Slide Ten: Fund-A-Need

Raises money for league's local school music program, called the Ravenswood Project. Fund-A-Need concept initiated by Nancy Greenbach, our LAO volunteer representative, who had seen this technique used effectively with other nonprofits (she is pictured on the left in the upper photo). Very attractive way to secure money in advance for this local low-income school district music education program: with one ask, we can more than fund the program a year in advance. Tremendous immediacy factor created by asking a local audience to fund an appealing music program for the local community. Speaker is Ravenswood Project chair, Mimi Kugushev, pictured in lower photo. Raised \$13K in 2014, almost two years of program funding and 2 ½ times more than in previous year.

Slide Eleven: Event Preparation Time Line

Great deal of advance preparation required. For an event in March, preparation starts almost ¾ of a year ahead: reserve date with country club in summer, coordinating with SFS musicians' availability and enabling membership to calendar it; core event committee meets in early fall to set event theme and map out overall assignments; league members asked in late fall to begin soliciting auction donations and appeals increase over the winter; firm donating invitation design and printing contacted in early winter; menu reviewed and set with country club in January.

Slide Twelve: Near-Term Preparation

Work intensifies beginning about two months before the event. Invitation copy is proofed and printed, along with a matching program cover design. Invitation database is reviewed, new addresses added, and invitations are mailed. Auction item appeals to the membership intensify, with auction items are collected at a membership meeting. Auction items are catalogued. Sponsor gifts are selected and purchased. Décor and floral arrangements are finalized with florist donors. Musical performance is set. Three weeks ahead, auction catalogue is finalized and printed, along with the program; table décor is finalized; wine donation from SF Symphony is arranged; check-in and check-out forms and procedures are agreed; room layout finalized with country club. A week ahead, programs are assembled; table seating is finalized and place cards prepared; bidder numbers assigned to guests auction baskets are assembled.

Slide Thirteen: Day of Set-Up

Country club allows only one day of set up, on day of event. Floral arrangements and wine (from SF Symphony) delivered. Floral and other décor arrangements arrive and are set in place. Clipboards and auction items arranged. Table place

cards and sponsor table gifts properly placed on decorated tables. Check-in list and checkout forms and credit card charge devices readied.

Slide Fourteen: Results

High net income event. Gross receipts in 2014 were \$73K, with net income of \$40K. Handout details more of the numbers. Fund-A-Need (\$13K) more than covered next year's costs for Ravenswood Project.

Slide Fifteen: Challenges

This is not an easy event to execute. Requires dedicated event chair who is highly organized, understands the dynamics of auctions and events, and can influence others to provide assistance. Requires administrative competencies among supporting committee leads. Lots of competing events in the SF Bay Area and the price point for this event is high: challenge to attract guests. Have tried incentives such as lowering the price for tickets of multiple guests brought in by a single member. Auction dynamics can vary year to year. Sometimes surprised by items that do not attract much bidding. Older audience makes an auction more difficult. Checkout process can be bottleneck at the end of the event. Complicated by some guests trying to check out before all auction results have been properly tallied. Cannot justify auction software used by largest nonprofit auction events. Need to accept credit card payments, but unable to do so in a truly safe and secure manner until advent of lower cost mobile card swipe systems, now made available to us by the SFS.

Slide Sixteen: Accomplishment and Satisfaction

MPL is proud of what has become signature event for us. Great sense of satisfaction at the end of the evening when we hear all the compliments from guests.