



Stern Grove Executive Director Bob Fiedler is pleased that the festival has been the among the first large-scale events to return to The City. (Courtesy Stern Grove)

## Stern Grove's director doles out free music

"For me, it's borderline sacred. It's a basic human necessity."

Jul. 2, 2021 2:00 p.m. / NEWSLETTER / THE CITY

By Carly Schwartz

Rosalie Meyer Stern wanted land. On the heels of the Roaring 20s, the local philanthropist and arts enthusiast—married to one of Levi Strauss' nephews—sought an outdoor gathering space to host free musical performances for the public.

She discovered a natural amphitheater 14 stories below street level on the southwestern edge of The City. To test the acoustics, legend has it, she brought together an opera singer and some musicians. It sounded beautiful. In 1931, to the delight of spectators, she organized a free performance by the San Francisco Symphony in the same park. That event became a regular occurrence starting in 1938.

"The Stern Grove Festival is so San Francisco that it goes all the way back to Levi Strauss," says Bob Fiedler, the organization's executive director. "The symphony has been with us every single year since it began."

For 84 years, audiences have enjoyed free summer concerts in Stern Grove's lush meadow. Last week, I made my way through the park's tangle of trees with some picnic supplies to catch an epic Pride performance by queer icon Perfume Genius. The energy and collective relief of recovery was palpable as I gazed around the maskless crowd. And this Sunday, upholding its Independence Day tradition, the S.F. Symphony returns.



The San Francisco Symphony, pictured in 2019, has played the Stern Grove Festival consistently since 1938. (Courtesy Stern Grove)

It's a special season for Bob and his team, who spent the pandemic producing digital videos of past performances. I caught up with Bob to learn about his long career facilitating free concerts, how the Stern Grove brand pivoted under pressure, and his own love story that brought him to the Bay.

**CS: It feels like a historic healing moment for San Francisco: the symphony, back in Stern Grove, on the Fourth of July.**

BF: Things really are starting to move forward and open up now. Outside of sports, we were the first large-scale, mass event to return to The City. It certainly will help symbolize S.F.'s reopening. Having our longest partner celebrate the Fourth of July with us couldn't be better. It's very healing and very symbolic, and it will be very celebratory.

**Last Sunday, I couldn't help but notice that there wasn't a mask in sight. And yet, I'm still asked to wear one at my local grocery store.**

Being outdoors has a lot to do with it. We're operating at reduced capacity to give people a little bit more space. We've been following the health department guidelines all along—to even get approval to have a live season, we had to pull together a really lengthy health and safety plan that had much more stringent requirements. Once the Department of Health said that people don't need to wear masks outdoors if they're vaccinated unless it's a "mega-event" of 10,000, we felt we fit that criteria. Our capacity is just under that.

**It's so exciting that you were able to put together a live season! How did it all come together?**

It was a circus. It's been crazy trying to program given the uncertainty. I remember conversations in February and March where we were thinking there might not be a season at all. We only got approval six weeks before the first show. While we had been having conversations with artists, we couldn't lock anyone in until that point. The talent agents were cool about it. My staff worked

double time and we were able to pull it off. To boot, we have a brand new director of programming, and I've been trying to assure her that next year will be much easier!

**Speaking of challenges, last year, you had to cancel entirely.**

It was crazy. The world was changing day by day. Things shut down in March, right around the time we were in a full court press to put on a summer season. I remember leaving the office and I didn't really put away my pens and paper; I thought this was going to last a week or two to slow the spread. I thought there was no way that our June festival wouldn't happen. But we were able to weather the storm, and we didn't even need to accept a PPP loan. Fundraising had gone well enough in the first part of the year, and we were able to keep all eight of our year-round staff employed.

**It sounds like they became filmmakers.**

Programming was a serendipitous thing; we had been filming our concerts for a long time and not doing much with our footage. I questioned sometimes why we even did that, but the magic reason presented itself. The local CBS station asked us if we wanted to make TV shows for the same 10 weeks we would have been live. We directed, edited and scripted these digital episodes that we called "Best of the Fest." About 570,000 people watched our programs, which is way more than would have come in person. We've been lucky that there have been some silver linings.

**Your job sounds amazing: bringing joy to so many people through live music. How did you end up here?**

I've been giving away free music for most of my career. I came from Chicago, where for a couple decades, I was running different kinds of arts nonprofits. For almost 10 years, I ran a totally free community music school for low-income kids. It's a passion and mission of mine to be able to give music away for free. So when Stern Grove was looking for a new executive director, the stars aligned perfectly. I was in a long-distance relationship with a woman who lived in the Bay Area, and I was already looking to move here.

**That's romantic. How did you two meet?**

We actually met at a music festival called Symbiosis. It was a very sweet, weekend-long courtship. By the end of the weekend, a strong connection had been made. I moved here for love, and we're getting married in October. I got the dream job and the dream woman.

**All you need now is the dream home.**

We did buy a house together! We're in Fairfax, up in Marin. We walk out our front door, and it's jaw-dropping.

**Can you tell me a little bit more about the importance of free music for people?**

I could talk about that for a long time. It depends on how deep you want me to go.

**Let's go medium deep.**

For me, music plays a unique role in all of our lives. Pretty much every person in every civilization has used music for spiritual, healing and celebratory purposes. I use music as medicine every day to uplift myself; it's the soundtrack of my life. For me, it's borderline sacred. I think when you're in a place like Stern Grove, it's gorgeous, it's a natural cathedral, and you've got music bridging cultural gaps. It's almost a basic human necessity. The weekend before our first show, there was a shooting at Lake Merritt. I looked around at our crowd that first weekend and it was about 40 percent white, 40 percent Black, and the rest from other backgrounds. Amazing diversity to see everybody together celebrating. People who enjoy music together aren't killing each other. It's an equitable environment, because our shows are free.

**Well...equitable as long as you're able to get online and snag those tickets in time.**

People have had heartburn with our new reservation process. There's a lot of demand for our shows. Since we opened for online reservations, every one has sold out within an hour, and sometimes much more quickly than that. We have limits, but we want to offer the experience to as many people as possible. We aren't a football stadium. I wish we could be there for everyone, but we're live-streaming this year, so you can still get a flavor.

**Last question, because I love talking about why San Francisco is so magical. Stern Grove is clearly a beloved city institution. What's your other favorite local institution?**

I'm such a music junkie. Sitting here looking above my desk, I see a list of 25 Bay Area music venues. My goal is to go to all of them. I love exploring music in different settings. There are so many iconic places, from smaller venues like the Chapel and the Independent to bigger spaces like the Greek Theatre. We live in a culturally rich place, and I'm honored for Stern Grove to be a part of that.

[CLASSICAL MUSIC](#) [CORONAVIRUS](#) [OUTDOORS](#) [SAN FRANCISCO](#)