Symphony League of Kansas City

Awards – Wed, Jun 7 3:45 pm #3

2015 Symphony Ball: Rhapsody in Blue
Presenter: Elaine Mann

SLIDE 1: Title Slide

The Kansas City Symphony thrives in a metropolitan area home to more than two million people.

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SLIDE 2: Rhapsody In Blue

The Symphony League, an organization of more than 100 accomplished women, has successfully presented the Symphony Ball annually since 1983 as its only fundraising project. Proceeds from the event go toward the Symphony’s operating costs. By tradition the ball is held on the Saturday after Labor Day. Annette Sherrow and I were elected to co-chair the 2015 ball in the fall of 2013, beginning as co-chair elects.

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SLIDE 3: Timeline

Our first duty was to assemble the Silent Auction for the 2014 ball. By mid-September 2014 we were considering possible venues and themes for the 2015 ball, but we didn’t reveal our plans to the membership until December. Meanwhile, we recruited members to serve on the ball committee, selected an honorary chairman for the event, and announced a host and hostess for the benefactor party, a pre-ball cocktail party that encourages giving at higher levels.

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SLIDE 4: Goals

Our goals in presenting the 2015 ball were to exceed the net total of the prior year’s ball to maximize our donation to the symphony, to engage our members in working on the event, and to throw a fun and memorable party that everyone would enjoy. Ball chairs spend much time trying to come up with a new take on the old formula. Two years before us, the ball netted over a million dollars, astonished Kansas Citians by transforming Union Station into
Venice’s San Marco Piazza, and drew 750 people. One year before us, the ball began with a Kansas City Symphony concert in Helzberg Hall, the Symphony’s home at the Kauffman Center, and continued with dinner and dancing at the convention center across the street. We considered neither of these options to be viable for 2015. So we immediately faced several challenges.

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SLIDE 5: Challenges

We needed to do something original, to encourage our members to attend the ball and support it financially at a high level, rather than merely fulfill a membership obligation to buy one ticket. We needed to attract new patrons from the community and keep those who had come previously, primarily by giving them a memorable evening from start to finish. However, we needed to do all this on a strict budget, to preserve as much of our proceeds as possible for our net donation to the Symphony, in an era when expenses for food, drink, flowers, lighting, and ambiance are all going up.

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SLIDE 6: Our Solution: Back To The Basics

To meet these challenges, we decided to go back to the basics. The hundred year old Muehlebach hotel, now known as the Muehlebach Tower of the Kansas City Downtown Marriott, had recently renovated its ballroom and wanted to host us. They offered us a deal. We decided to focus the bulk of our expense money on food and ambiance, to make our patrons’ experience memorable. The symphony would provide our entertainment, but if we could also find a way to showcase the talent of a young musician, it would be a wonderful plus.

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SLIDE 7: Our Theme

Since the ballroom’s renovation had art deco embellishments, we chose an art deco theme and Gershwin’s famous Rhapsody in Blue (written in 1924) as the name of our ball, to complement our chosen venue and entice ballgoers with the promise of exciting music. We turned to an experienced and creative local floral and event designer to transform the ballroom into a swanky supper club, featuring art deco wall panels, silver linens, gold chairs, calla lilies, and a Fortuny-style chandelier suspended over the dance floor.

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Guests sipped “bee’s knees” cocktails as they bid on a select group of luxury silent auction items.

Ballgoers enjoyed the Kansas City Symphony’s performance of twenties-era American music, including *Rhapsody in Blue*. It was the highlight of the symphony’s performance at the ball, and showcased the talents of a young Juilliard piano competition winner, Fei-Fei Dong, at the beginning of what promises to be an illustrious career.

After a delicious dinner, guests hit the dance floor to music provided by the Karen Davis Project, a local dance band.

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**SLIDE 9: Revenue and Expenses**

*Rhapsody in Blue* succeeded on multiple levels. Our revenue exceeded a million dollars, while we held expenses to the minimum, producing a contribution to the symphony of more than $858,000, an increase of $150,000 over the previous year.

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**SLIDE 10: In Kind Donations**

Our in-kind donations exceeded $82,000, including auction revenue. Symphony league members demonstrated their engagement by working on the event, offering their ideas, donating at higher levels, and contributing in kind donations such as the benefactor party, the table gifts, and the kick-off party for the ball committee. Our silent auction featured nine exquisite pieces of diamond jewelry, a mink coat, and several unique dining experiences and trips, and generated more than $56,000 toward our net.

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**SLIDE 11: Member Involvement**

Our members are required to buy one ball ticket by our membership rules, but if every member did only this, we would not have a successful event. Accordingly, we attempted to involve as many members as possible in the planning and execution of the event. At every league meeting, we urged our members to plan on being benefactors or sponsors of the event. Fifty-two league members stepped forward to serve on the ball committee. Our handout lists the jobs filled by these members and the numbers involved. **CLICK TO ADVANCE**
SLIDE 12: Sponsorships Carried the Day

The bulk of our income came from sponsorships, ranging from the $1,250 benefactor category to the $30,000 founders circle, the $50,000 diamond founders circle, and the $75,000 platinum founders circle.

Our sponsors included symphony league members, corporations, longstanding ball goers, ardent symphony supporters, and some people new to the ball and to the ranks of symphony supporters. We sent approximately 900 letters soliciting sponsorships, and Annette made follow up phone calls to likely prospects. To encourage donations of $30,000 and above, we offered to our founder’s circle the opportunity to join a trip, (at their own expense), to the aspen music festival.

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SLIDE 13: Ball Night

On ball night, 17 volunteers recruited by Kansas City Symphony and approximately 12-14 symphony league members worked the event. They greeted the nearly 650 guests, checked them in, watched over the auction, sold raffle tickets, solved seating problems, and assisted with auction checkout and pickup. CLICK

Symphony staff played an important role throughout the planning period and the night of the event, especially by offering advice in soliciting donors and developing special high-dollar donor benefits, and by serving as important links to the symphony and our young guest artist. CLICK

The musicians of the Kansas City Symphony, under the baton of Michael Stern, played exquisitely at the ball, leaving ballgoers enthralled with the jazzy sounds of Gershwin and Berlin.

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