



Peninsula Ballet Theatre's Robert Burns Lowman and Chloé Watson perform while incorporating COVID safety protocols at Mori Point in Pacifica. (Courtesy Vin Eiamvuthikom)

Performing arts groups surviving pandemic's challenges

Local organizations weathering storm with diligent budgeting, creative programming

JAMES AMBROFF-TAHAN / Nov. 1, 2020

Soon after curtains fell on Bay Area performing arts organizations in March as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown, concerns surfaced over the ability of these groups,

particularly smaller and midsize companies, to weather the pandemic's storm. But as they progress through the usually event-rich fall season, many, though shuttered, have managed to stay afloat financially, adapt and even plan for the future.

For some, the status of the houses where they perform — likely settings for the spread of the virus and therefore dark during the pandemic — has not posed an obstacle to meeting monthly financial obligations. It's because many of the facilities are government-owned with little or no rent assessed, and in some cases forgiven. For others, who do pay rent, it's done on a per-performance basis.

Noting that the San Francisco Choral Society's pre-pandemic 2020 budget for rent was \$26,000, including for performances at Davies Symphony Hall, the group's executive director Jessica House Steward says, "Ten thousand dollars of that amount would have gone to the city of San Francisco, but we are not bound to pay most of those fees due to the pandemic."

The Berkeley Symphony's case is typical of groups not facing rental overhead because it pays rent on a per-performance basis and, with the season canceled, has no such debt obligations.

Berkeley Symphony Executive Director Jim Tibbs says the orchestra rents a concert hall from University of California, Berkeley and a venue from the city of Piedmont at a sum representing about 8 percent of its seasonal production budget, and adds, "We rent on a per service basis so we are not incurring any rental expenses currently."

Despite significant savings from not having to pay rent, groups aren't necessarily free from worries about where they will perform or rehearse once the pandemic is over.

While the all-female vocal group Kitka was able to get refunds on rental deposits and postpone contracts for future dates, artistic and executive Shira Cion says, "Sadly, however, the small nonprofit that was providing us subsidized rehearsal and workshop space was forced by the current economic hardship to give up their lease, so we will need to find new affordable creative space when it is safe to gather and rehearse vocal music again."

Looming larger than rent, however, are salaries of performers and other employees, many of whom have borne the brunt of hard choices required when seasons are canceled.

"Artistic salaries and benefits are approximately 28.5 percent of our annual expense budget, and we were able to procure a Payment Protection Program loan, part of which covered artistic salaries from April to June, which included 16 dancers on a 37-week contract," says Smuin Ballet Managing Director Lori Laqua. "But for fiscal year 2021 [July 1-June 30, 2021], it was necessary to reduce the size of the company, now at 13 dancers, and reduce the contract to 29 weeks."

The end of July was critical for furloughed workers because that's when the federal government's supplemental \$600 unemployment benefit ended, which in some cases had been replaced on a limited basis through other relief programs and special funding.

Calling the CARES Act's \$600 supplement the most helpful source of funds for performers who are without work, American Conservatory Theater Executive Director Jennifer Bielstein says, "There have also been sources of support throughout the city of San Francisco, and through various organizations such as Theatre Bay Area's Performing Arts Worker Relief Fund."

The extremely high cost of living in the Bay Area hasn't helped matters.



From left, Rashaun Mitchell, standing left, and Silas Riener look on as Hope Mohr Dance artists perform in a 2019 workshop; Mohr has noticed how COVID-19 has made an "already precarious" financial situation for Bay Area artists even worse. (Courtesy Hillary Goidell)

Despite grants from foundations and other funders that help pay salaries, Hope Mohr, who founded and runs Hope Mohr Dance, says many people are leaving, moving home or going back to school, because they can't make ends meet: "It's a disaster compounding the already precarious situation the Bay Area artists were in pre-COVID due to gentrification and housing costs."

Some performers turned to in-company teaching or other pursuits, which disqualified them from unemployment benefits.

"We have been able to hire several of the dancers as teachers for our classes," Laqua says. "But, because many take on choreographic or guesting contracts during layoff periods, they have not had the option of unemployment benefits."

While salaries and rental costs constitute the bulk of expenses, arts groups face other costs specific to adapting to the pandemic.

“Working remotely and converting all platforms, data and information to the cloud has been a significant and unexpected expense for us, including the conversion of our phone system so that it can be used remotely by our box office and staff,” Bielstein stays. “We are also concerned about what costs we may need to incur when we can return to operating in person, which could involve PPE, testing and other protocols that will be important to ensure everyone’s safety.”

The pandemic also has caused serious dilemmas for long-term plans of some organizations, particularly groups working on major projects.

“We had just gone into a construction project to build 25 artists’ apartments and had secured financing and begun the demolition, and it’s been a very difficult decision for us but we’ve decided to move forward on that, because we don’t know that we’ll ever receive the financing for it again,” says Berkeley Repertory Theatre Managing Director Susie Medak, mentioning that “astronomical” Bay Area housing costs are likely to continue. She adds, “That housing project has become sort of our talisman that says we are going to come out of this and we have to plan for the other side of this as well.”

On the revenue side, while ticket sales as an income-generating source for canceled shows has been lost, that funding has not been nearly as important as donor support.

“Ticket sales make up around 7 percent of our annual budget; they might cover the cost of the artists, but rarely cover the costs of advertising, travel and accommodations, facility and equipment rentals, production staff and printing costs,” says Other Minds music festival Associate Director Blaine Todd. “The majority of these expenses are covered by charitable gifts.”

In many cases, donor support has been generous, well-timed and game-changing.

“Private donations are very important to our bottom line and have come in despite the pandemic,” says Midsummer Mozart Festival Executive Director Robin Hansen. “I believe people in the Bay Area understand the fragility of nonprofit performing arts organizations and wish for them to continue. MMF has been fortunate to receive notice of a large bequest that will help us toward our next festival season.”

And while it’s also helpful that patrons often were not refunded on tickets purchased for canceled performances, those savings represent a short-term fix for a longer-term problem.



The Alexander String Quartet participated in a recording session at Kohl Mansion in Burlingame in July. (Courtesy Patricia Kristof Moy)

“Eighty-five percent of Music at Kohl’s generous audiences donated back the value of their tickets for the three canceled main stage concerts last season, so the loss in ticket revenue was minimal,” says Music at Kohl Mansion Executive Director Patricia Kristof Moy, who adds that an 80 percent drop in ticket sale revenues is anticipated, with the loss subsidized through operating reserves.

Either at the outset of the pandemic or soon after, many organizations turned to virtual programming, with generally positive results and sometimes enthusiastic participation.

“We created a ‘Virtual World of Dance,’ utilizing social media platforms to provide resources to local artists and Bay Area families,” says Presidio Dance Theatre Artistic Director Sherene Melania. “Daily posts ranged from dance performances, free movement classes, educational family activities, and resources for mental health, and our virtual spring season consisted of free public performances and workshops.”



Presidio Dance Theatre performers — from left, Zurab Dudashvili, Avtandil Kurashvili, Sherene Melania and Vakho Ioseliani pictured in 2018's "The Little Lantern" at the Palace of Fine Arts — have created robust online programming during the pandemic. (Courtesy Presidio Dance Theatre)

Virtual performances may play an important role in companies' seasonal repertory even after a vaccine for COVID-19 is developed, mass-produced and widely distributed.

"We will definitely use virtual performances as a bridge to live performing," says Peninsula Ballet Theatre Executive Director Christine Leslie. "It could be as long as through 2021 before we can expect over 1,000 people to feel comfortable being together in an inside space."

Some groups are seeking clear operating guidelines from the government about public gatherings in the future.

"We haven't explored alternate revenue streams — paid video content, for instance — but if the restrictions on live audiences persist for a longer period, we may explore this option," says New Century Chamber Orchestra Executive Director Richard Lonsdorf. "We are hoping the local and state government will work together with the performing arts community to establish safe guidelines for orchestras to resume even modified activity, with or without audiences, so we can get back to doing what we love and sharing our music with the community."

Some companies have considered staging outdoor performances, often in creative ways.

“Because our festival has the advantage of specializing in chamber music, which requires only small groups of performers, we are exploring the idea of hybrid virtual-live performances, repeated several times in one day, to accommodate socially distanced, masked audiences spaced throughout the venue,” says Valley of the Moon Music Festival co-founder and co-director Tanya Tomkins, adding that the live concerts could simultaneously be distributed virtually.



Valley of the Moon Music Festival co-founders and co-directors Eric Zivian and Tanya Tomkins are exploring the idea of presenting hybrid virtual-live performances. (Courtesy John Hefti)

There are logistical and practical challenges associated with staging outdoor concerts, though, which are not limited to unfavorable weather conditions.

“We are researching some outdoor options that could possibly be effective, especially since all of our performances are scheduled afternoon matinees, but the production costs — lighting, sound equipment, chair rental, piano rental — for these types of performances will be our biggest hurdle,” says Pocket Opera Executive Director Jeffrey Jordan.

Whether performances are indoors or outdoors, protecting the health of the performers remains a significant challenge, regardless of the artistic genre.

“A further complication, particularly if a performance includes existing repertory that involves close physical contact (as all of our work does), is how to use regular testing and podding to safely make that possible,” says RAWdance co-director Ryan T. Smith. “We’re looking at that kind of planning now, but it comes with much higher costs than a regular rehearsal schedule and can be a real challenge for performers who have other responsibilities to consider. For a small organization like ours, that may or may not turn out to be prohibitive.”



RAWdance choreographers — from left, Katerina Wong, Ryan T. Smith and Wendy Rein — have safety issues to consider as they create and perform in the COVID-19 era. (Courtesy Elena Zhukova and RAWdance)

Ultimately, the uncertainty posed by the unpredictable course of the pandemic may prove to be one of the biggest challenges facing arts organizations in the coming year, particularly regarding a timetable for returning to live performances.

“Since performing arts organizations often look a year or two ahead, this continued uncertainty will complicate our ability to respond toward easing restrictions,” says San Francisco Early Music Society Executive Director Derek Tam. “The best we can do is make educated guesses.”

In general, many performing arts organizations are trying to make the best of the relatively slow period the pandemic has forced upon them, and are largely optimistic about the post-pandemic artistic landscape.



The San Francisco Early Music Society — Derek Tam on fortepiano with the Costanoan Trio are pictured — is continuing to make educated guesses about the future of live performances. (Courtesy San Francisco Early Music Society)

“We view this time as one of investment and providing much needed content for our supporters,” says Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra Executive Director Courtney Beck. “What makes or breaks an organization is its planning and its ability to see past the current moment while making sure the present is rich in creativity, it answers the needs of all kinds of patrons, and learns lessons about what we’ll take with us when we get back to the other side.”