

Le Bon Journal

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Volume 2 Issue 5: Organising concerts, soirees, and parties

Organising and performing in concerts, soirees, and parties is something that has become second nature to me --- a hard habit to break.

I have organised soirees since I was a kid. Only then, it was called parties. Getting together with other musicians, whether professional or amateur, was a normal thing, far more interesting than light gossip.

The best kind of soiree has a little bit of everything. The best kind of music is live. And memories of the best parties linger on.

What makes a good party

In spring 1997, I attended a party which ignited my curiosity about key success factors. I wanted to know what it took to organise a party to remember.

This party didn't serve food only beer. Yet, I stayed there way past midnight. Why?

The diversity index was high. There were people from different nationalities and cultures, different types of professions. There weren't enough people to form a clique of any sort. The pleasant weather invited everyone to meander outside to the lawn and the street. There was plenty to drink. But most importantly, everyone there was single.

I concluded that **high diversity index, plentiful drinks, and comfortable surroundings** were the critical success factors. Everything else was icing on the cake. By high diversity index, I mean nationality/culture and profession -- enough to make each person interesting to everyone else.

It's critical not to run out of drinks. I was embarrassed to toast the bride and groom with an empty wine glass at a wedding reception where the wine ran out after only two glasses.

The best party I ever organised was my farewell party in Houston. It started at 5 pm and ended the next

day, with several people sleeping over. I had ordered wines from the Napa Valley a month earlier. But it was my friend's potent sangria that did the trick. It was spiked with exotic liquors. The food that my friends contributed and I ordered was ethnically diverse: Vietnamese Spring rolls, Thai satay chicken, Jamaican jerk chicken, Filipino baby ribs, French bread, French cheese, and more. There was live music - piano, violin, guitar, and voice.

How do you know it was a good party? We're still talking about it several years later!

Intimate performance

I have always fretted over the small size of my living room, concerned that it is not big enough to host a public performance.

Tonight fourteen listeners watched a classical guitarist perform less than one foot away. We could hear his breathing. We could feel his anxiety. We could see the veins on his hands. We were so close to him that we could sense our effect on him.

When it was my turn to play, I turned my back on the audience. I couldn't move my piano, but they could see my hands on the keys. I didn't sense my audience's reaction because I was totally engrossed in the music.

Later we all played a part in the performance. We read poems. We sang. My cosy living room allowed this intimacy of the performer and the audience.

The day after

I wasn't as anxious as before - about getting people to help me clear and clean up. After the last guests left, I proceeded to wash all the wine glasses, plates, utensils, pots, and pans. After I was 85% done, I went to bed at 3 am.

I was tired but at peace. It occurred to me, as I went to bed, that I had forgotten all my worries during the

party. I was so focussed on making it a good party that I completely forgot about work and other worries.

Bachelor party

The back-up plan was to go out, in case it rained. Otherwise I would bring four bachelors to my new-found single friend, as a present.

When I found out that the barbeque was cancelled and that her friends had arranged something else, I was stuck with four bachelors. What am I supposed to do with four bachelors on a Saturday night?

One flew over from Southern California. Another from Copenhagen. A third from Scotland. And a fourth from London.

I decided to make a mini-Spanish summer soiree out of this opportunity. I would prepare sangria and tapas. I would play cocktail music as background to their conversations. I would play hostess extraordinaire.

But wait! Why would four bachelors want to talk to one another?

So I asked the one from Copenhagen to bring a girl he knew. I invited a neighbour to come to the party. She called her sister to come by. Later on, another neighbour "gatecrashed" my party. Thank goodness for all these ladies.

The more the merrier, so the saying goes. Indeed, we drank, ate, talked, and sang until we got too tired to be merry.

Preparation galore

I have done this a hundred times. But why am I so disorganised this time? Perhaps it's the false confidence of having my mom around to help prepare. And so I've slacked off.

She's already anticipated the appetite of some three dozen guests. So she asked me to buy two bags of flour and several dozen eggs. And while I paced up and down thinking about the sequence of events

tomorrow, she's been rolling the dough and making fillings for the curry puffs.

While I've been taking it easy, my mother's been quietly making bags of ice --- every single day.

Spanish summer soiree

Today's the big day!

The first to arrive was Yousif, the painter who had renovated a church to make it into his studio and exhibition hall followed by Paul, the conservatory designer.

It's one of those sunny days, warm enough to remain outdoors for a long time, but not too hot to trot.

Ayyub, the architect who had saved my brick shed disaster in April, had a brilliant idea. He used a piece of string and some lights to design an outdoor stage. Such vision! I would never have thought of the potential.

Today we were blessed with a visitor from Seattle.

6 pm doors open

sangria and tapas served

7:30 pm out door concert

8:10 pm more hot dishes served

9:00 pm in door concert

The first to arrive and the last to leave was Paul at 3 am.

Targeted advertising

Critical of the way magazine, newspaper, and television advertisements interrupt my train of thought, I am the last person to choose advertising as a way to raise awareness. But lessons from organising concerts, selling my old books, and promoting my new book have taught me that advertising has its virtues.

My first approach is to tell people I know personally. I believe in the personal touch, and that people will respond because they know you. There is some accountability and responsibility in knowing a person.

Personal touch is powerful. Unless you have a large and powerful personal network, you have to

consider advertising to a targeted audience, i.e. those that would be interested in going to your concert not because of who you are but because of the repertoire and the venue.

After the party

The long anticipation - and then it's all over. Here's my post-party analysis.

Food: Not enough. I forgot to serve my coconut cake and my oatmeal raisin cookies. I should have prepared more olive oil laden vegetable skewers on toothpicks, certainly two more dozens of stuffed mushrooms and devilled eggs.

Music: gave the party a focus. Not just any party, but one in which there's serious entertainment. Wish there was more time to prepare.

Guests: high diversity index; both right and left brained, from painting through to stockbroking.

Nationalities: UK, US, Ghana, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, ...

Drinks: Sangria was a hit. The trick is to marinate the wine and not-too-much sugar in cut fruit overnight

Conversation: everyone was talking.

Weather: perfect, though it did get hot in the indoor concert. Luckily somebody opened the front door.

Every time I do a concert party like this I say I'd never do it again.

Before long, I decide to organise another one!

Organising a public concert

It took me two months to organise my first public concert in London. Since the venue I had chosen did not allow ticket sales, I counted on audience donations, programme sales, business sponsorship, and volunteers to make it possible.

Organising this concert involved choosing a date, selecting a programme, booking a venue, organising a photo shoot, writing and issuing a press release, producing a flyer, contacting local businesses for sponsorship, inviting people to attend, booking a place to hold the post-concert reception,

requesting a local restaurant to sponsor the concert by providing food free of charge to over 100 expected attendees, inviting the mayor to open the concert, appointing three friends to act as ushers during the concert, researching the music and the composers, writing the programme notes, producing the programme card, getting the programme printed, practising for the concert, organising dress rehearsals, requesting someone to record the concert, purchasing parking tickets, advertising the concert, producing a page on my web site, and getting feedback from everyone.

Needless to say, I needed two more months (after the concert) to recover.



Anne Ku, editor, writes from personal experience of organising parties, concerts, and other events. Her home concerts can be found at <http://www.analyticalQ.com/music/concerts/default.htm>

Feedback from readers:

First of all I want to thank you for arranging the concert in December - I do so admire you for pulling the whole event off so slickly, and for giving us the chance to play with you. It was hard work, but well worth it, and if we were tired, you must have been doubly more so with all that cooking!!

The concert was lovely. I so enjoyed it and could tell that a lot of thought and rehearsal had been put into it. It was a first to be in the same room as a bassoon! What a mellow sound it makes.

It was a fantastic night, big success, everyone who came really liked the music and there should be more of these occasions! I think the free food and post concert reception was a very good idea as it gets the community together and people get to meet other people in their area, whom they may not have had the chance to meet before.

Major congrats on last night. Home Run. You cultured, and fed a community for free! And it was acknowledged by the community leader. You should feel complete! You have invented and done something huge and significant!

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