

Case study

Running a fundraising gala for the first time

Brittany Wellner-James Head of Fundraising and **Bethan Quartermaine**, Fundraising Manager at the Academy of Ancient Music



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The Academy of Ancient Music was founded in 1973 to energise baroque and classical music by getting back to the style and spirit in which this music was first performed. Their performances explore the sound worlds that inspired Bach, Handel and Haydn. Live performance is at the heart of their work and they use authentic instruments — flutes made out of wood, trumpets without valves, strings woven from gut – and tailor orchestra sizes to the unique character of each piece.

In September 2012 they became Associate Ensemble at the Barbican in London, alongside their position as Orchestra-in-Residence at the University of Cambridge. Over the past 40 years they've played to audiences on six continents, and in 2012–13 we they visited over 15 countries across the world from Sweden to South Korea. Their discography of over 300 CDs features Brit-, Gramophone-, MIDEM- and Edison-award winning recordings of masterworks from Purcell to Mozart and from Bach to Beethoven. In 2013 they launched our own in-house record label, AAM Records.

Objectives

In their 40th year they held a fundraising gala, organised by Head of Fundraising Brittany Wellner-James and Fundraising Manager Bethan Quartermaine. They aimed to:

- celebrate 40 years of achievements,
- thank their supporters,
- make new connections and meet new potential donors, and to collect their details in their database,
- make a small profit (as it was the AAM's first gala in their 40 year history, financial expectations were cautious).

Target audience

The gala aimed to reach their top levels donors, trustees, gala committee and their contacts. They aimed to access musically-inclined individuals through the personal networks of these individuals, and they also invited significant trusts and foundations and funders like Arts Council England. It was important that most of the individuals invited were able to both purchase tickets and spend money on the evening, in order to ensure it was a financial success.

Process

Committee

The process started with the recruitment of the Chair and Members of the gala committee. The AAM was fortunate to have an existing member of their Development Committee who was keen to take the role of Chair and who had past experience of galas. Brittany and Bethan then worked with the Chair to come up with a list of suggested members, and the Chair reached out to them with support from AAM staff. Each member of the committee was met to ensure that they understood their role, and was given a written copy of the expectations (including selling tables and sourcing auction prizes). The Gala Committee of 20 people were given creative agency, which was crucial in keeping them involved and giving them a sense of ownership.

The Gala Committee met every 2 to 3 months, with an average of 12 members attending each meeting, with increasing frequency as the event approached. By the evening, however, they were free to look after their guest and enjoy themselves.

Venue

The first thing to be confirmed was the venue, as supporters the Marquess and Marchioness of Salisbury very kindly offered to host it at Hatfield House. The date was set quickly as there are only a limited number of places for charity events at Hatfield House each year.

Selling tables

The Committee and staff started by sending Save the Dates to Trustees, donors and other close supporters of the AAM about nine months in advance. Based on just this small group, with a particular emphasis on the Gala Committee themselves, they sold all the tables. This was a great success to have early on, but the team were actually worried that making the Gala invitation-only might cause ill feeling. With assistance from Hatfield House, they were able to accommodate a greater number of guests, and additional tickets were sold to the AAM's wider group of supporters.

The ticket cost was £300 (£150 ticket cost and £150 suggested donation, which was eligible for Gift Aid) and tables had ten seats each. Even once the tickets were sold, a significant amount of staff time was still needed administrating responses, payments and answering questions.

Entertainment, food and drink

The Committee, who retained creative control of the evening, organised a wonderful programme including a recital by operatic superstar Joyce DiDonato, accompanied by AAM's acclaimed Music Director Richard Egarr; a banquet of dishes designed specially for the evening by celebrity chefs Rowley Leigh, Sally Clarke and Ruth Rogers; a key-note speech by distinguished historian David Starkey and live and silent auctions of more than 25 fabulous prizes. Sean Rafferty of BBC Radio 3's In Tune presided over the evening. Wherever possible, the key elements of the evening were sourced in kind or at discounted prices through Committee and Gala links, but it was a challenge to strike the right balance between cost and profile.

Auction and programme sponsors

In order to make the evening financially worthwhile, it was crucial that additional money was raised on the evening and both the live and silent auctions were key to this. Those who were not able to be there were still able to bid on the silent auction via a special website set up by iBid, who provided the software and equipment (including tablets on each table) on the evening. Thanks to the Committee, there was a great selection of prizes and this was a particularly successful part of the evening.

The AAM also sought sponsors for the programme, which proved more challenging and time consuming, and less financially valuable.

Logistics

Bethan spent a huge amount of time organising the logistics of the evening. This included everything from catering, furniture, lighting and sound equipment, table plans and flowers, through to musicians to accompany the soloists and even headsets to allow the team to keep in touch on the evening.

The guests spent time in a variety of areas: welcome drinks outside; drinks inside which listening to the speeches; then dinner in a marquee. All of these areas needed setting up, and keeping on top of precise timings for the evening was vital. There were a huge number of small tasks that were time-consuming in the run up to the evening, including ensuring deliveries went to the right part of a large site, and going on site visits (once every 2-3 months) to confirm details.

It was important to arrange transport and coaches were provided on the evening so that guests could drink and enjoy a relaxed evening without worries about getting home.

Outcomes

The Gala was a huge success, with 250 guests who all had a wonderful evening. It achieved or surpassed all of the objectives:

- it was a wonderful celebration of the achievements of the AAM's 40 year history,
- supporters felt thanked and valued, and many are more engaged in the organisation,
- some of those guests who were new to the AAM have donated or signed up to the AAM's Benefactor and Patron groups of donors,
- financial goals were exceeded, particularly because of the success of the auctions.

Brittany and Bethan are regularly asked about the AAM's next gala, and the trustees are particularly keen that future events are arranged. At the moment, it is likely that these may tie in with the 45th and 50th Anniversaries of the AAM, with the 50th Anniversary Gala being particularly large.

Things to remember

Capacity

Do not underestimate the work and the challenge, particularly for a small organisation. It took months of both Brittany and Bethan's time, and as the AAM is such a small organisation (with only 11 employees) at times every single staff member was involved. Brittany suggests considering outside help: there are consultants who offer a 'gala package' which might look expensive until you take into account the staff time which will be required otherwise.

Record keeping

It is hugely important to invest in a database and keep meticulous records. The AAM team used Donor Strategy, which Bethan described as essential. Gala Committees won't keep details of tables and tickets sold or auction prizes, so this must be done by the staff. It is important to remember to keep detailed records of supporters and the logistics of the evening.

Costs

It is very hard to include all of the costs in your initial budget, and 'secret costs' like lighting and sound equipment hire, transport, delivery, and even umbrellas for guests in case of rain can all creep up on you.