

HOUSE CONCERTS

A House Concert is like an old-fashioned salon in your living room, or barn, or loft.

In the program I perform, I'll be sharing several (5 - 7) short solo pieces. The program moves from me performing set choreography, to improvising –as explained above – to actually teaching the audience a simple dance so that the evening can end with a dance party! (This is optional.) The work is playful and mixes dance and theatre. In one piece, which I've just performed at a Cabaret in New York City, I give members of the audience an instruction that they can call out. When they call out an instruction, I respond. In this way they are actively choreographing, in real time, the dance that I am performing.

Depending on when you might want to host this event, there can be another act. I have been creating a solo for a young dance artist and she will be able to join me for performances in the summer in BC and Ontario.

Please see my website and vimeo site for samples. www.standupdance.com & www.vimeo.com search Meagan O'Shea.

This is a guide to hosting folk music house concerts that I've amended.

How To's of House Concerts:

The key to success is this: a house concert is a gathering of friends; only secondarily is it a show for the general public. When you invite friends to a party, 30 or even more will come, right? So it is with a house concert. Yes, strangers are welcome (they can't be all that strange if they like the same obscure folksinger, or in this case dance artist!) but they are the icing, not the cake. I have played (and put on) dozens of successful house concerts where people have had a grand time and, at the end of the evening, the performer has walked away with anywhere from \$300 to over \$1000.

For performers: how to find sponsors

Ask. With every mail order that goes out, and with most other pieces of correspondence, I send a little notice headlined "Would you want this man in your living room?" "All it takes," the flier explains, "is 30 people chipping in \$10 or \$15 each, and we will take care of the rest. It is as simple as that, or pretty nearly." Any bites that come back, I file away. Next tour, I get back in touch.

The money (1)

Let's get the money out of the way straight off. \$300 to \$400 is, I figure, a pretty fair base rate for a solo musician on a quiet night, and that breaks down to only \$15 or \$20 per person for 15 couples. Convincing 15 friends to come (with a partner or guest) is not a big deal.

Add a few more people, or a few bucks to the ticket price, stir in tee-shirt sales (I sell tee-shirts for my “dance like no one is watching” project), and the gig quickly moves from subsistence to downright profitable. Remember, one of the main reasons for a house concert is that there are no hall costs, and with a few bottles of wine and some nibbles, it’s a great and cheap night.

The money (2): performer's guarantee

Should the sponsor offer a guarantee? I think it only fair, but then I'm Canadian. Americans seem to find this a foreign notion. I just figure a worker should be paid. When I present someone here on the island, I always offer a guarantee, though it is safely low.

As a performer, I have become so confident of the success of my house concerts that I don't worry much about the guarantee. But without one, I am insistent that there be advance ticket sales. Then I can check sales a couple weeks ahead and back out if the show sounds like a disaster. In fact, I have never had to do this, and have only played twice (out of dozens and dozens of shows) to uncomfortably small audiences.

If, as the promoter, you are worried about covering a performer's guarantee, try dividing the cost among friends. Ask each if, in the unlikely event of a loss, he or she would chip in up to \$20 or \$30. This has the added benefit of getting more people involved early, and with a vested interest to boot. I recently made this kind of arrangement to cover a guarantee for England's Jez Lowe and the Bad Pennies who I knew were performing nearby. I had no trouble finding a couple dozen “foul-weather” friends. In fact the show (and the weather) were great, with the gate leaving the guarantee in the dust and the backers' stakes safely in their pockets.

The money (3): dividing the spoils

When it comes to disposing of the proceeds, various arrangements are possible. Many sponsors will give performers the full door. Some take out expenses for the coffee, etc., some like a small cut, and some want to share the money with a favourite cause. All can work. But bear in mind: a house concert is something that is sponsored for love not money. That is part of the charm, part of what makes it personal, part of the reason friends will come even though they have never heard of the performer.

Numbers and space

I tell sponsors I need a minimum audience of 30. (Then, if there is a blizzard and only a dozen couples show, I still have a playable house.) Usually, and happily, the attendance is higher. A few times I have played to about 100 in a large (and very crowded) living room.

The actual size of the room will pretty much determine the potential audience. A good rule of thumb is 5 square feet per person.

Your living room is too small? Remember the sponsor and the host need not be the same person. It is a long-standing and sensible tradition to guilt-trip a

wealthier friend with a big living room into offering it for the occasion. Do not feel badly about this, but rather, think of it as a favour.

Technical issues

What technical issues? Check that there is toilet paper.

[I need a sound system, the one you have in your living room is probably more than enough. I can either plug an iPod cable in, dock my iPod, or use cd's.]

Promotion

In my experience, people will come to a house concert for the following reasons.

In order:

1. They are happy to accept an invitation from a friend.
2. It sounds like a good party and a chance to see the gang.
3. It is an odd and intriguing thing to do.
4. It is for a good cause (if it is for a cause).
5. They want to hear the particular performer.

Which is to say, it is essential to "promote" the event in the same personal way you would any celebration you have decided to host at your home. Whether you phone people or send written invitations, the personal contact is crucial. If, in addition, you want to advertise (whether by a poster at the office, a note in a newsletter, or an announcement in the press) that is grand, and the resulting extra sales are a bonus; but the friends you invite yourself must fill most of the seats.

Other promo tips:

- Loan out CDs or cassettes. This can be very effective. When we presented Jez Lowe, I made up cassettes with three representative songs and left them at the local coffee bar for borrowing. They moved briskly, and the show (which we put on outside) drew 250 people, virtually none of whom had heard of Jez Lowe before.

[In the case of this dance house concert, I'd recommend posting links to my website or vimeo site: www.standupdance.com and www.vimeo.com search Meagan O'Shea, or forward the youtube video I'll attach to this e-mail.]

- Performers can (and should) provide promo material, including graphics, poster art and a write-up the sponsor can send out or draw on.
- To add to the party atmosphere (and the attractiveness of the event), invite people to bring a plate of finger food and/or a bottle of something.

Tickets (1)

Should there be printed tickets? A reservation list? RSVPs? This is a judgement call for the host to make. I recommend the advance ticket route (or pre-paid reservations). For several reasons:

1. People who have already bought tickets don't change their minds at the last minute.
2. I have seen an RSVP-ed (but un-ticketed) full house evaporate because a storm blew in.
3. The best advertisement is someone who has already bought a ticket.

Tickets (2): Price

You know best what price is suitable for your friends. But don't skimp. I am comfortable charging \$20- \$25 or "whatever you can afford."

I recommend you have an "earlybird" price, expiring a week or two before the show. Say \$15 or \$20 for the early bird, \$20 or \$25 after that. The purpose being, of course, to encourage advance purchase. There are several other ways to skin this cat, but the important thing is to know well in advance how many people are coming. Then you will know, for instance, whether to say yes or no to last minute callers.

Seating

There are several ways to seat 40 people in a living room. Ask everyone to bring a folding chair or a cushion; borrow stacking chairs from a church or union hall. In my experience, as old as we are, we can still sit on the floor for an hour in relative comfort. In fact it can feel kind of good, psychologically.

Going public

Yes, you can hold a house concert in a public hall and invite the general public. Many have done this successfully - although you should be aware that the expenses can mount quickly. I, myself, never use a sound system in a living room. In a larger hall or public space, sound or lights may be necessary. This is still not an onerous proposition - talk it over with the performer. However, though the event is now "public", you should still promote it in the personal way.