

A photograph of two women standing side-by-side against a backdrop of a Salzburg cityscape at night. The woman on the left is Helga Rabl-Stadler, the festival president, wearing a black dress and a pearl necklace. The woman on the right is Alexa Lange Wesner, the SFS chairman, wearing a white blouse and a brown skirt. The city lights and domes are visible in the background.

The Salzburg Festival Society: creating community through philanthropy and partnerships

Interview with the Salzburg Festival Society (SFS) Chairman
The Honorable Alexa Lange Wesner

Festival president Helga Rabl-Stadler
and Alexa Lange Wesner, 2018

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The Salzburg Festival Society celebrates American philanthropy, which dates back to the founding of the Salzburg Festival. Funds raised by a dedicated board of directors and generous donors benefits the annual program of the Salzburg Festival. Core to our mission of philanthropy is to support a tradition of artistic excellence, prioritizing initiatives that are inclusive and promote peace in society and further developing programs that build a stronger community. The Honorable Alexa Wesner has been Chairman since 2018, bringing her insights and leadership as U.S. Ambassador to Vienna from 2013-2017. Now that the Festival is at the crux of a global pandemic and celebrating its Centennial, it enters a period of reflection and prioritization. We are reflecting on the extraordinary legacy of the first 100 years of staging excellence.

You were the U.S. Ambassador to Austria from 2013-2017. Is that when you discovered the Salzburg Festival and can you recall one of your first highlights?

Yes, I discovered the Salzburg Festival in 2014, the summer after I moved to Vienna. I remember so clearly being mesmerized by *Jedermann* – since the weather permitted, we were

able to sit outside at the Domplatz and the street procession made it festive and exhilarating. *Jedermann* was the first performance of the Salzburg Festival on August 22, 1920, so I thought it was fitting that it was my introduction as well. It has become my annual tradition.

You have been a Director of the Salzburg Festival Society and its Chairman since 2018. What have some of your objectives and accomplishments been over these years?

When I became chairperson in 2018, I had big shoes to fill. My predecessor, Gerry Andlinger was one of the most generous patrons of the Salzburg Festival. He was a great leader and built a strong organization based in the United States. My goals at the outset of my chairmanship were to continue Gerry's legacy, to grow our donor base in the United States, and to modernize our approach to patron recruitment. Our board, our Executive Director, and I, have taken a fresh look at our processes, our events and our offerings. We have started outreach programs in various cities across the U.S. and have created partnerships with other organizations that share similar missions. We still have a lot of work to do, and we remain committed to effectively spreading the word about The Salzburg Festival in the U.S., as one of the finest international arts institutions.

American philanthropy has been important to the Salzburg Festival since its founding. Do you find that younger generations are providing the important financial support necessary for performing arts institutions to thrive?

American Philanthropy is a model for the world. Giving is a part of our culture, and incentives like tax deductibility make it even easier for people to give. Apart from incentives, Americans have traditionally prioritized the preservation of human values, to inspire and transform communities. Since the founding of the Festival, major donors have played a transformative role to ensure that special projects and programs are realized. As we have moved forward we have relied more and more on the generations that were not alive during the Festival's inception, after WWI. This means that we have an opportunity to remind and educate audiences about why the Festival was started – as a peace project. I want to draw in, to the Festival, the younger generation and convey that the origin and early mission of the Festival is of continuous importance. I believe the younger generation will step up to continue support of our cultural institutions – but I also believe we need to work hard to make it compelling, and not just take for granted that they "should" support them.

You represent the younger gen-

eration of philanthropy. What sort of programming do you believe most effectively attracts this younger generations financial support?

I love that you state I represent the younger generation of philanthropy. I just turned 48, so maybe I'm on the cusp. But thank you. Perhaps I can see myself as a bridge between some very generous and established philanthropists and those that are just wanting to become philanthropic in their lives. I do feel like there are always ways in which our programming can improve to be more attractive to younger audiences. We need to meet the younger generation where they are (be that on a social media platform or engaging them and their families, with programs like the opera camps).

We hope we are soon in a post-pandemic period where many lives already impacted can find the new normal. In what ways can the Salzburg Festival and SFS use this time to explore opportunities for growth and positive social impact?

We are not yet in a post-pandemic period. I fear we might be in a mid-pandemic period. I hope I am wrong. The Festival can use this time to create thoughtful programming that engages the general public and its core audience. We discussed many opportunities on a recent conference call and got so ex-

cited about how we might pivot in certain ways to address even wider audiences and bring the festival – into large or small curated social events. This would increase our outreach of the Festival's artistic program, reaching more people across the globe. In a sense, we can become even more accessible through technology, with a captive audience at home. This is where we have an opportunity to further develop a volunteer base.

You are also a member of the Salzburg Global Seminar (SGS) Board. In what ways do you think the SFS can use its strategic partnerships locally and internationally to further expand and fulfill its mission?

Partnerships. We are all better off when we come together to support our common missions or shared passions. SFS and SGS have so much in common. Salzburg Festival founder, Max Reinhardt, conceived the idea of the Festival at his Salzburg home, Schloss Leopoldskron. This is now the laboratory of SGS. It is fun to explore how many ways we can leverage each of our strengths for the betterment of both our organizations, and society at large. SFS is exploring other partnerships with like-minded organizations, such as the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, performing at the Festival since its founding in 1999. We will all be better off through identifying efficiencies created through partnerships.

We are better together!

The SFS supports the Festivals tradition of excellence, celebrates its mission to promote peace and works diligently to create a community of friends. How do interested volunteers and contributors get involved?

Great question! Program contributions are first and foremost on my list of ways people can step up and help. Spreading the word and involving friends is another. We are looking for ambassadors in key cities to relay the importance of the Festival, in the United States. We welcome everyone interested in participating. We need to support our cultural institutions – especially during this global crisis – because often times our cultural institutions are the first to suffer from a philanthropic stand point. Our cultural institutions give us the capacity for renewal, they teach us about ourselves and reveal the human psyche – how to respect and learn from the past, and be better in the future.

To support us or learn more, please go to our website: www.sfsociety.org/engage.

Alexa Lange Wesner is the former United States Ambassador to Austria. Wesner was born in Washington, D.C., and spent her childhood in Reston, Virginia. She is a first generation American with parents from Germany and Latvia. Wesner has founded a number of companies in recruiting, technology, civic engagement and communications. Wesner now lives in Aspen, Colorado. She has three children.