



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Some of the most beautiful and romantic music ever written. From the mythic to the ultra real – the difficulties of love are expressed by the most seductive of instruments by one of the great flutists of our time.”

-From Barbara Siesel,
“Current Repertory,”
www.tugboatmusic.com

I recently attended a Saturday solo flute concert at the San Francisco Public Library. Even though it was on the July 4th weekend, I was still dismayed to see that only about 25 people were there to hear the incredibly talented flutist, Barbara Siesel. Her presentation was called “Flute Music From Around the World,” and it was precisely that. There are still sounds in my head from the concert, particularly a haunting and powerful modern piece that vividly tells the story of a man left alone in the desert. There were a few notes that sounded exactly as if they were traveling across huge expanses of land, instead of simply from the flute to the listeners in the Koret Auditorium. My impression of the flute has been permanently changed after hearing her play.

Afterwards, I couldn't help reflecting on why there was such a small turnout. How could anyone resist a free concert given by a world class

musician? Could it be the publicity? It is always challenging for a public library to get the word out, especially to people who aren't regular users. Press releases are sent out, flyers are put up, and announcements are put on the website; nonetheless, there will be people who see none of these.

That leaves word-of-mouth, probably the most powerful tool a library has. I'm not sure, though, how well it works for one-time programs. Ongoing ones, like our weekly sing-alongs, build up a group of regulars over time. But special events are more of a challenge, unless the featured program includes someone well known. My impulse, though, is to use people who are less famous. Part of this is economic, but the other part is that I like the idea of introducing the community to new experiences. And I choose carefully – quality, not price, is always my guide.

Perhaps that is the crux of this issue: quality. When my

children were very young – before I worked in a library – there were regular programs at our local library. Yet even though I lived only a few blocks away, I rarely went to them. Why was that? I could say it was inconvenient times or lack of interest, but the truth is it didn’t occur to me that they would be worth attending. After all, they were offered by the local library and they were free – how good could they be? The answer to this is that they could be excellent or even outstanding. And if I had taken the time, I would have figured that out.

So could it be others share this impression - that free programs just can’t be as good as ones that cost money? Could it really be that something free is not appreciated?

If so, it is ironic, since nothing at public libraries is actually free. Our communities support us with tax dollars and

bond measures and donations and the hard work of organizations like the Friends. We are a small democracy at work and we work well. And when I sit down at my desk and peruse the information I get from performers or when I attend all day events where performers present samples of their programs, or when I collaborate with other organizations on programs we could present together – through all of that, I am aware of the public money I am spending and I choose very carefully. So, if you haven’t yet, take in a program at your local library – you’ll be glad you did.