



Conrad Prebys — Earnie Grafton

La Jolla Music Society raises \$50M for new center

JAMES CHUTE • U-T

Society's new home, the Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center, to open in 2017

The La Jolla Music Society has raised \$50 million to fund the construction of a new performing arts complex, which will be named the Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center.

With the year-long “silent phase” of the capital campaign completed, the Music Society is launching a public effort to raise an additional \$10 million for an endowment to help support programming at the center, the society announced Saturday at its SummerFest gala.

Construction of the new center on Fay Avenue is expected to begin in late 2016 and be completed by October 2017. The fund drive will continue through the Music Society's 50th anniversary season in 2018-2019.

“I can't tell you how excited I am,” said Prebys, who was the campaign's most generous donor, giving \$15 million toward the construction of the center. Because of his philanthropy, Prebys' name has become ubiquitous in San Diego, from the

Conrad Prebys Elephant Care Center at the San Diego Zoo to the Conrad Prebys Theatre Center at the Old Globe.

"When the Music Society opportunity presented itself, I think I took five minutes to make the decision," Prebys said. "I consider it my pride and joy."

The La Jolla Music Society purchased a 30,760-square-foot parcel of land at 7600 Fay Ave. (between Pearl and Kline streets) in late May for an undisclosed price. Last week, it announced the Cambridge, Mass.-based firm of Epstein Joslin Architects will design the center, which is anchored by a 500-seat concert hall and includes a 150-seat cabaret/multipurpose space.

"I have great faith in the architects and we were familiar with their music hall in Rockport (the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Massachusetts)," said Brenda Baker, a longtime La Jolla Music Society board member and former board chair, who with her husband Steve Baum, donated \$10 million toward the center.

"Shalin Liu is a unique facility. The design is absolutely perfect for that spot, it has beautiful acoustics, and it's both comfortable and surprising, which is what we hope for the building here."

In all, 11 donors (or donor families) accounted for the \$50 million, with "lead gifts" from Joan and Irwin Jacobs (\$10 million), Raffaella and John Belanich (\$5 million), Baker and Baum, and Prebys.

"We're great believers in the La Jolla Music Society," said Baker, who now lives in Exeter, N.H., but returns to San Diego regularly to attend the society's annual chamber music festival, SummerFest. "Consistently over the years, the board, staff and the various heads of the organization have been very well balanced in being good stewards of the money and producing wonderful music. So we felt this was a good investment."

The La Jolla Music Society, with an operating budget of approximately \$4.1 million, is San Diego's principal presenter of touring performing artists. Unlike the symphony, it does not have its own ensemble. Its motto is "we bring the world to San Diego," referring to the distinguished musicians and dance companies who offer concerts under the Music Society's sponsorship at venues around town, but primarily at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's Sherwood Auditorium in La Jolla.

Although building its own concert hall had been seriously discussed at least twice by the board in the Music Society's 47-year history, it was only with the Museum of Contemporary Art's announcement of long-range plans to renovate and expand its campus and convert Sherwood Auditorium into gallery space that the society was forced to act.

"This is probably the world's record for fundraising (in terms of raising a large amount of money in a relatively short time)," Baker said. "And it's because, first of all, it had to happen; we didn't really have a choice. And secondly, there's no time like the present. Don't delay; costs go up, everything goes up. So let's get it done. And a number of people simultaneously felt that way."

The Music Society had initially explored the possibility of partnering with other organizations that had access to a hall, said Music Society president and artistic director Christopher

Beach, or even moving its concerts to the Auditorium at The Scripps Research Institute, formerly known as the Neurosciences Auditorium.

But that proved unfeasible, and the board and the society's patrons wanted something that would be in or close to the village of La Jolla and could become a place where the community gathered not only for music, but for lectures, films, meetings, and other community events.

Prebys said he and Beach visited two other sites in La Jolla before deciding on the Fay Street location, which will also house the Music Society's administrative offices and box office.

"Two of them didn't do it," said Prebys. "And then we saw this one and it was a matter of seconds before I said, that's it, that's the one."

"I've been in real estate ever since I've been in San Diego, so I can recognize real estate by this time. I think it's perfect. It's just the perfect location, and I think it will be something very, very special for San Diego."

Prebys is president of Progress Construction and Management, which he helped form soon after moving to San Diego in 1965. He (with his company and trust) is now one of the county's largest land owners, with dozens of properties, many of them apartment buildings. But when he was younger, he thought he might be a musician.

"I was once considered a piano prodigy, but what it was, was I was more of a showman," Prebys said. "I remember entering a contest to play with a big symphony. ... And I had the greatest outcome in the world; I failed miserably."

"So I benefited from that bit of adversity, I didn't have the talent or the discipline to go on and become a concert pianist. I went into other areas and it worked out quite well for me."

A 2012 analysis by Business Insider, based on data from the Chronicle of Philanthropy, named Prebys the 24th most generous person in America, estimating that he donated \$63.1 million in 2011 and had a net worth of \$125 million. He was just behind Joan and Irwin Jacobs, who ranked 22nd with 2011 donations of \$64.9 million and a net worth estimated at \$1.15 billion.

"You know, it sounds kind of nutty when I say it this way, but I really don't have much use for money, I really don't," Prebys said. "I'm a very simple person with very simple tastes, as far as food and other things. So I can't think of a better thing to do with my money than just share it with the community."

His causes have ranged from Scripps Health (\$45 million for a new cardiovascular institute) to San Diego State University (\$20 million which resulted in the new student union being named in his honor). But he says this one is especially close to his heart, and he will have more of a hands-on role in the project's "nuts and bolts" than in his other endeavors.

"Music is everything for me. Everything," said Prebys, who grew up in South Bend, Ind. and attended Indiana University. "For me, music is experiencing the sublime. I live every day with music around me, whether it's in my car, whether it's at home... So it's extremely important."

Prebys has supported other musical causes, whether his previous sponsorship (with Debbie Turner) of the San Diego

Opera or his \$9 million gift to UC San Diego to build a new music center, which was named the Conrad Prebys Music Center and contains the Conrad Prebys Concert Hall.

Now there's going to be an additional performing arts center with his name on it. Are people going to be confused?

"It's just in discussions, but one way to handle that is to call this new one The Conrad," Prebys said. That's one of several ideas that emerged from an early Music Society brainstorming and nothing has been decided.

But Prebys said that name would be fine with him.

"I've always said," Prebys explained, "I liked my first name better than my last."

Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center Founding Donors

The 11 individuals (or families) who gave \$1 million or more, for a total of \$50 million

Conrad Prebys: \$15 million

Brenda Baker and Steve Baum: \$10 million

Joan and Irwin Jacobs: \$10 million

Raffaella and John Belanich: \$5 million

Additional donations of more than \$1 million from:

Rita and Richard Atkinson

The Beyster Family

Silvija and Brian Devine

Joy Frieman

Peter and Peggy Preuss

Clara Wu and Joseph Tsai

Anonymous

Source: La Jolla Music Society

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