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KRISTIN LANCINO • LA JOLLA MUSIC SOCIETY

# An open mind

New York arts administrator keeps an open mind as she prepares to guide LJMS through important transition

BY JAMES CHUTE

**W**hen she was a student at Oberlin College, Kristin Lancino thought she would probably be a music teacher. But life and opportunity interceded, and Lancino found herself engaged in a succession of jobs: a vice president at G. Schirmer publishing, director of artistic planning at Carnegie Hall, executive director at IMG Artists, and an independent arts consultant.

“It’s not a path I thought I would take when I was 22,” Lancino said from her home in New York. “But I followed my North Star, or whatever, to engage in different organizations that I would learn from, that I could give to, and that had meaning to me.”

She’s engaging in another one. And this one will demand all of her hard-won skills. Starting Thursday, she becomes president and artistic director of the La Jolla Music Society.

“I feel very privileged to be at this point where I have had these various experiences that I can bring with me,” she said. “And with a great staff, and a great board, and the community of San Diego, I can make something, I can build on something that is existing but can be even deeper.”

She’ll be responsible for the most critical transition in the organization’s nearly five-decade history. Lancino will oversee the Music Society’s move into its own concert hall, the \$50 million Conrad Prebys Performing Art Center, which will require the institution to expand and build increased capacity.

“When you are thinking about a new hall, community engagement is supreme,” she said. “There are many nights of the week, and many afternoons of the week, and there are many ways to bring in lots of new people that are presented by La Jolla Music Society, and not presented by them.”

“Having a professional hall really well maintained, and beautiful, and with acoustics that are astounding, is going to be a great asset to our (city’s) culture.”

## Core beliefs

Over the years, Lancino has developed a set of principles that concern what she wants to present and the way she manages.

“One of my passions for a very, very long time has been new music,” she said. “I like to be open and curious about new works, allowing composers, actually inviting composers, to be part of an organization.”

“I believe firmly that composers are the core, the root of everything we do. And it’s the same with playwrights, novelists — it’s the person who looks at the blank page and creates something that’s sometimes miraculous.”

That would represent a shift in direction for an organization whose regular-season offerings have been largely devoid of new music, and whose SummerFest presentations have been cautious at best regarding the way contemporary music is presented.

But in the area of education and community outreach, Lancino will find an organization that’s completely in sync with her priorities. Even before her arrival, the Music Society had expanded its relationship with the San Diego Youth Symphony & Conservatory, and the design of the new Performing Arts Center accounts for increased educational and community activities.

“I spent a lot of years doing presenting in Carnegie Hall, which was an unbelievable experience, and a lot of that was building educational programs,” she said. “We really invested in young people, and I learned a lot (about) the many things you can give back to the

community, and the many things you can get back from the community.”

After more than a decade of service, she left Carnegie Hall in 2000 when a top management change prompted several high-level resignations. (Carnegie’s new director, whose decisions caused the upheaval, was gone before the end of the year.) She was also caught up in what some commentators characterized as a “bloodbath” at IMG Artists, an artist management firm where she worked for just over a year. But she learned an important lesson from both of those experiences.

“I think that having internal agreement of a direction and a mission, and invoking that mission over and over so it drives everything you do, is how I would work in La Jolla,” she said.

“You don’t want to surprise anybody, and you don’t want to be a dictator. One of the things I feel very, very strongly about is mentorship. I’ve been mentored throughout my career by surprisingly wonderful people who I’ve have often been able to call upon for advice or to look at something differently.

“That’s what I want for our staff, our volunteers, our board — that we are a blooming organization, that no idea is a bad idea.”

## **Trusting the process**

Ultimately, Lancino sees herself as someone who is process-focused, an inclination that goes back to her days at Oberlin.

“I got a master’s in teaching as well, as I was a very mediocre pianist,” she said. “And I love the process of engaging artists, composers and audiences. So my philosophy is that it’s not, ‘walk in the hall, sit down, be quiet, have a concert and then go’; it’s everything that goes around it.

“It means looking deep with what you are doing.”

That could involve giving audience members opportunities to interact with the musicians and the composers, or the staff, or others.

“Whatever it is that we can do to make this art that I have loved for so long accessible,” she said. “And accessible might mean that kids could be composing too, and accessible could be that audiences have a say.

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“I want to hear what the audience says. I want to sit right in the middle of the audience during a concert and hear what they have to say. It’s an ongoing conversation, that’s all it is.”

That conversation will extend to other arts organizations. Lancino already has a long-standing relationship with the San Diego Symphony’s new CEO, Martha Gilmer (while at Carnegie Hall, she worked with Gilmer in presenting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra). She’s never met the San Diego Opera’s new general director, David Bennett, even though he also worked in New York, but she’s looking forward to working with him.

“Collaboration comes in so many different forms,” she said. “It could be a collaboration with any organization, including museums, including schools, including the military.”

Collaboration is important enough that when she is finally here full time in early January (she starts in October, but will return to New York in late November and move to San Diego in December), she’ll make a priority of meeting with her colleagues.

“I want to hear where they are and their challenges, and talk about where we are and what we can do together,” she said. “If this person does this better, and that other person does something else better, or we can collaborate and make something even better, why not? I’m all for it.

“I think more is just more. Because when all the organizations are doing well, then your organization is doing well.”