Request Name: Moab Music Festival
Description: Moab Music Festival
Agency: Heritage and Arts
Funding for: $25,000 One time / $25,000 Ongoing
Private Not-for-Profit
Piano Care on a Rugged Trail
At the Moab Music Festival, located at the gateway to Utah’s Arches and Canyonlands national parks, three chamber music concerts are held each summer in a red-rock grotto on the banks of the Colorado River. Before each performance, a Steinway Model B is transported to the secret location by jet boat. Operations Director Dave Montgomery says that the move starts before dawn, when a team of six to nine workers load the tightly-wrapped instrument onto the boat from a launch site forty-five minutes upstream. At its destination, the instrument is wheeled up a jagged trail on a cart with tractor-like wheels, then set up in the cavernous grotto for a last-minute tuning. Artists arrive, followed by patrons (at a ticket price of $350) and the reverse process occurs at day’s end.

Unexpected boulders, muddy soil and a flooded river bank are among the variables that the Moab crew has faced. “There may be some times where there’s only one piece with a piano and it may be a short piece,” Montgomery notes. “I think, ‘couldn’t they have changed the program?’ But we’ve got to bring the piano. Nothing beats having a Steinway in that place, and how much that blows people away when they see that.”
Where will the sounds of music take travelers in 2018? The destination may depend on your favorite song, but whether that means jazz, Afropunk, rock or another rhythm entirely, there’s definitely a place to go.

Music fans may want to visit Utah for the Moab Music Festival (Aug. 27 to Sept. 13) where jazz and classical music concerts are set among the region’s renowned red rock formations. At the Bach Festival (June 8 to 17) in Leipzig, Germany, concerts are held in 40 venues across the city, including outdoors at Leipzig Market, the Leipzig Zoo and the city’s main train station.
The Moab Music Festival Is a Feast for the Senses

Using the landscape as inspiration, the annual gathering gives audiences a one-of-a-kind listening experience.

By Cindy Hirschfeld 7/26/2018 Published in the Midsummer/Fall 2018 issue of Aspen Sojourner

I turn down a dirt road off Highway 128, the serpentine Scenic Byway along the Colorado River that ends in Moab, Utah. Eroded red sandstone cliffs jut out of the landscape; a rock formation known as the Priest and Nuns looms on the right. It’s the kind of road I’ve traveled for years here on my way to mountain-biking trails.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m standing on a shaded patio, sipping a glass of rosé and chatting with virtuoso jazz pianist Marcus Roberts, the evening’s performer, and Jamie Bernstein (daughter of Leonard). Later on, about 75 of us gather in a ranch house living room as Roberts sits at the Steinway grand to play a program of some of his own compositions, as well as works by Miles Davis and Duke Ellington. I listen, rapt, from about 20 feet away. He ends with a majestic performance of Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue.” After the concert, we all feast alfresco on an outstanding farm-to-table dinner.

Living in Aspen, I’ve enjoyed access to a remarkable slate of cultural experiences, but the Moab Music Festival is something else. Held annually from late August through early September, it offers 20 classical, jazz, and Americana concerts in incredible settings—a riverside grotto, a hike-to meadow, a stunning private home—
with unparalleled intimacy. (Not to mention: the ticket for the Roberts evening, cocktail party and dinner included, was $250—a relative steal compared to prices in Aspen.)

New Yorkers Michael Barrett (he’s a conductor and pianist) and Leslie Tomkins (she’s a violist) started the festival in 1993, a time when Moab’s economy was transitioning from uranium mining to outdoor recreation. The couple had discovered the town a couple of years prior, as they were also thinking about forming their own music fest. “There was a perfect moment, when we were sitting at Arches National Park, watching a thunderstorm on the horizon, and a double rainbow appeared,” recalls Barrett. “Leslie said, ‘Let’s make the music festival here.’”

From the outset, Moab’s striking natural landscape has been a fest hallmark. “What makes us so unique is how we’ve been able to marry beautiful music-making with these extraordinary places,” says Barrett.

While a handful of concerts take place inside the historic Star Hall, most are held outside, some in local parks or at riverside guest lodges. More-intrepid concertgoers head out with a naturalist guide on half-hour hikes to a wilderness venue where the musicians play. Most inspired are the three afternoon concerts held in a tucked-away grotto along the Colorado. And a pair of multiday guided raft trips bookend the schedule, complete with performers (and their carefully packed instruments) on board.

The breadth of artists matches the range of venues. Barrett brings in leading musicians he knows personally. “Whether they’re a fiddle player or a classical pianist or a Latin trumpet player, these people are at the tippy top of their fields,” he says. This year’s performances, for example, include vocal group Take 6; an evening of Beethoven and Chopin; traditional fiddle music; and Tony Award-nominated soprano Lauren Worsham with pianist Kyle Jarrow (he wrote the book for Broadway’s *SpongeBob SquarePants*).

The day after the Marcus Roberts concert, I board a modified school bus for the drive to the river, where we take jet boats to a sandstone grotto for an all-Bach program. After a mellow 40-minute ride, we disembark and walk through a leafy tunnel before popping out into the grotto. About 100 folding chairs are set up on the sand floor, as well as, improbably, a grand piano. Striated rock walls embrace the venue, soaring some 200 feet above. “It’s like a holy site for me,” says Barrett. “I want the concerts here to be extra special.”

Like all of the grotto performances, this one begins with a full minute of silence before the music commences. As a pianist and flautist play Bach’s Sonata in B Minor, the purity of sound within the natural amphitheater is nothing short of astonishing. When the audience claps, the gentle noise is like raindrops pitter-pattering onto the desert floor.
At the post-concert reception, I ask violinist Ayano Ninomiya what it’s like to play in this unusual setting. “It’s so still that you can hear every little thing—it makes you listen better,” she says, before adding, “It’s so magical here. There’s nothing like it.”

This year’s Moab Music Festival takes place August 27-September 13. Tickets for single performances range from free to $350. For lodging away from the hubbub of town, consider a suite or cabin at Red Cliffs Lodge (there’s a winery on-site too) or the luxury Sorel River Ranch Resort and Spa; both properties will host a Music Fest concert. In Moab proper, the Aarchway Inn offers comfortable motel rooms along with a large pool and landscaped grounds.
February 1, 2019

The Hon. David Hinkins
Senator, Utah District 27
PO Box 484
Orangeville, UT 84537

Dear Senator Hinkins,

On behalf of the Moab Music Festival, I would like to thank you and the State of Utah for over ten years of pass-through funding support for our non-profit performing arts organization. We truly appreciate your ongoing advocacy and continued efforts to secure this vital aid to our organization. With your help, the Festival received $25,000 for FY 2019 for which we are truly grateful. The Festival continues to benefit Grand County economically and culturally through both its significant draw of national and international visitors, and its quality programming of classical chamber, jazz, Latin and traditional music. By presenting world-class musicians in the area’s unique red rock landscape, we’re not only culturally serving rural Utah, but are providing an internationally unique experience that the entire state can take pride in as something no other arts organization provides in quite the same way. **Approaching our 27th season, we hope to gain your continued support through our request for recurring funding at $50,000 in acknowledgement of the Festival’s established role and over quarter-century of commitment as the sole presenter of professional art (classical) music in rural, Southeastern Utah.**

The Moab Music Festival continues to provide a significant economic impact to rural Grand County while diversifying Moab’s tourism draw as an Arts destination. MMF concert goers make significant impacts to the local economy as patrons of hotels and restaurants. They buy adventure experiences and shop at various stores. The MMF also brings second home buyers to the area. In 2018, our Festival survey responses show over 53% of visiting patrons spent 1-5 nights in Moab, eating at local restaurants and partaking in other outdoor activities. In 2018, our eighteen-day Festival drew 41% of our audience from out-of-state and outside the US. 17% of buyers came from within Utah, but outside of Grand County. In addition, our nationally recognized Festival provides local seasonal and year-round jobs, not only through the Festival itself, but indirectly by helping grow Moab’s music education programs. Between multiple afterschool music programs, the return of in-school strings, and the recent introduction of pre-k music programs, the number of full and part-time paid music educators in Moab has tripled since 2011 as a direct result of our advocacy for and partnership with local music educators.

The Moab Music Festival is also working to expand its presence in the community beyond the well-established fall Festival, with the goal of providing and expanding on smaller, quarterly events in winter, spring, and summer, starting as early as 2019. To start, the Festival already draws additional visitors to Grand County in the winter off-season for its expanding 4th annual Winterlude, a mini season that runs throughout February. The Festival is looking to partner with the Moab Arts Festival, long-term, to present additional concerts in late May, and will work with the Moab Area Travel Council to bring performing
artists to Moab during the November-December holiday season. The Festival is excited to see how we can expand our offerings through significant community support. In 2018, over 140 area businesses and individuals donated concert venues, artist housing, purchased ads in our program book, and volunteered at Festival events.

And finally, the Festival continues to garner significant national publicity for Moab and Grand County with highly visible mentions and features in national publications such as The New York Times, The PBS NewsHour, and Minnesota Public Radio’s Performance Today, a nationally recognized program with host Fred Child, who brings classical music to the masses. These are all highlights from the 2018 season, alone. The 27th Festival will continue our tradition of fine programming by featuring artists like the GRAMMY award winning Sergio Assad (of the Assad Brothers) and GRAMMY nominated daughter, Clarice Assad. Additional highlights include Kimberly Hawkey and the Elvanelle Band, a tribute to American jazz great, Bix Beiderbecke, and a full-scale production of Igor Stravinsky’s chamber work, L’Histoire du Soldat.

Through prudent budget management and a focus on the development of new sponsors, the Festival continues to grow and is working toward calculated programming and marketing goals to realize its full potential. We are a significant attraction for out-of-state vacationers as well as Utah “stay-cationers” from outside Grand County. Festival programs and artists bring economic and cultural notoriety to Southeastern Utah. The State’s support for the Festival in 2019-20 will make a significant contribution to the success of the Moab economy by helping us attract ticket buyers and attendees to the Festival from around the country.

I look forward to the opportunity to talk with you directly about our request.

Most sincerely,

Laura E. Brown
Executive Director