

# Bay Area gala season's power players

By **Carolyn Zinko** | August 31, 2017 | Updated: August 31, 2017 5:18pm



Photo: Peter Prato, Special To The Chronicle

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The Rodin Sculpture Garden at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University, top, is the perfect setting for go-getters Sara Abbasi (left), Charlene Cogan, Melissa Badger, Michelle Kirsch and Komal Shah, who ... [more](#)

Summer is supposed to provide downtime to escape the stresses of life, but world events have kept us in a state of anxiety the past few months. The opening of the Bay Area's fall arts season comes not a moment too soon as a break from news about tweets, nukes and attacks — or at the very least, something else for us to think about.

That's the idea behind "Reflections," the theme of the Rodin by Moonlight benefit at Cantor Arts Center at Stanford on Sept. 23. The museum, with the largest collection of works by Auguste Rodin outside of Paris, is marking the 100th anniversary of his death by renovating the indoor galleries displaying his work. The collection has been winnowed and regrouped to make his story clearer for visitors, and the result, "Rodin: The Shock of the Modern Body," will look at his innovations in presenting emotion, psychological states and sensuality in nude sculpture.

How to innovate? That's the kind of food for thought Silicon Valley enjoys. But mental escapes are part of the creative process, too.

"The museum was a place of refuge," said startup executive Komal Shah, a dinner committee member, remembering her first visit to the Cantor 26 years ago as an engineering student at Stanford. "It was always a place to uplift and transport you to a different place."

That has only intensified with the opening in 2014 of the Anderson Collection next door, a second stop (after the Cantor) on the personal tour she gives art world friends of the campus' vibrant art scene. "It has added a gravitas," she said, "with a stunning collection of post-World War II art."

Philanthropist Michele Kirsch, wife of entrepreneur Steve Kirsch (Infoseek, Propel, Abaca), also on the dinner committee (for the seventh time in 14 years and who has chaired it in the past), sits on six other boards and took the bar exam this summer, a feat of time-management worthy of deeper reflection.

The committee meets regularly; members are expected to leverage personal connections in acquiring sponsors and party favors (like the Laduree macarons real estate agent Charlene Cogan flew in from New York one year) and to better the biennial event's record \$500,000 (net) raised in 2015, which goes to educational programs.

The dinner in the sculpture garden for 420 guests (paying \$1,500 and up per person to attend) features food by Paula LeDuc, with a guest celebrity chef (chef Staffan Terje of Perbacco this year) and dancing under the stars. The decor is being overseen by New York-based Colin Cowie Lifestyle. There is no satin-glove strong-arming of moneyed guests with raffles or silent and live auctions. "It really is the signature event for the Peninsula," Kirsch said.

For the San Francisco Opera's 95th season, Courtney Labe and Maryam Muduroglu will co-chair the Opera Ball at the Imperial Palace on Sept. 8. The performance of "Turandot," Giacomo Puccini's opera set in China and depicting a prince's quest for love, is the springboard for decor at a dinner by McCalls Catering for 750 patrons and benefactors (\$1,750 per person and up) styled by events man Riccardo Benavides of Ideas. (The younger Bravo! professionals group has its own dinner.) The evening benefits community and educational programs of the Opera Guild and the Opera that reach 60,000 students in Northern California a year.

On Sept. 14, the San Francisco Symphony opens its season with a gala chaired by Priscilla Geeslin and four dinners (including a Patrons Dinner, \$1,750 and up per person) catered by McCalls, a performance by the Symphony with cellist Yo-Yo Ma and an after-party. Proceeds go to programs including Adventures in Music for San Francisco public elementary schools, now in its 30th year, and the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra, now in its 35th year.

And that's how these parties — evenings of glamour, to be sure — provide more than glitter: by touching other peoples' lives in both abstract and concrete ways.

Cathryn Down, a San Francisco Symphony violinist, reflected on her time in the youth symphony, which she joined in its inaugural year. In the 1980s, as a 16-year-old, it was a sanctuary and a place to have fun again — she'd played from age 2 through 12 and quit, weary of the discipline required to excel. Without it, "I'd either be in economics or ..." she said, her voice trailing off. "I don't know if I would've been able to find that continued drive without youth orchestra. I had a strong one inside of me, but the orchestra was such a propeller that I just had to do it."

*Carolyn Zinko is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: [czinko@sfgchronicle.com](mailto:czinko@sfgchronicle.com)*

## Notable fall galas

**Sept. 8:** San Francisco Opera's "Opera Ball 2017 at the Imperial Palace," War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave.; [www.sfopera.com](http://www.sfopera.com).

**Sept. 14:** San Francisco Symphony Opening Night Gala with cellist Yo-Yo Ma, "Bernstein at 100," Davies Symphony Hall, 201 Van Ness Ave.; [www.sfsymphony.org](http://www.sfsymphony.org).

**Sept. 23:** Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for the Arts "Rodin by Moonlight," 328 Lomita Dr., Stanford; <https://museum.stanford.edu>.



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Features Reporter