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## Birdfoot Festival says goodbye, celebrating 12 years of music-making.

NEW ORLEANS, September 2023—Birdfoot Festival, which delighted local audiences and gained an international reputation for its fresh approach to presenting chamber music and “youthful, rule-bending style” (*The Times-Picayune*), will close its doors after 12 years of artistic contributions to the community.

The challenges of sustaining arts organizations over recent years have been numerous. Recognizing that recent economic circumstances beyond the festival’s control have further compounded previous fundraising pressures, and that local government and private arts funding has not kept pace with rising operational costs, Birdfoot’s Board of Directors has reluctantly concluded that the festival is unable to overcome the significant structural and financial challenges it currently faces.

“As we say goodbye, we acknowledge the community support that has made 12 years of Birdfoot Festival possible—despite the odds and the challenges. We know that Birdfoot will be deeply missed,” says Kurt Weigle, President of Birdfoot’s Board of Directors. “We want to celebrate Birdfoot’s artistic achievements and the recent blossoming of chamber music in New Orleans that Birdfoot helped inspire.”

Birdfoot Festival was founded in 2011 with the idea that the musical culture of New Orleans—characterized by intimate venues and an engaged listening culture—had something important to offer the future of classical music. Creating time and space for musicians to collaborate and do their best work was central to the festival’s musician-responsive ethic. Each Birdfoot season began with an artist retreat in which pieces of chamber music were explored and “slow cooked” in advance of the public performances. Birdfoot’s public events similarly emphasized audience participation in the artistic process; community members and passersby were welcomed to Open Rehearsals and the festival’s popular Birdfoot Backstage event deconstructed and demystified chamber music with lively audience interaction. In 2021, while still restricted by the pandemic, Birdfoot produced an interactive digital season modeled after the festival’s signature “Birdfoot Backstage” that attracted audience members from across the country and three continents.

Artistic Director Jenna Sherry says, “Birdfoot Festival has been an ongoing experiment in how to bring chamber music to life so that it speaks to our contemporary pains and joys and feels relevant to the lived experiences of audience members; the enthusiastic audience response that Birdfoot has enjoyed is a heartening proof of concept—that chamber music presented with imagination and heart has both broad appeal and the ability to bring people together in truly meaningful ways.”

Birdfoot concerts often tackled big subjects. Drawing on 600 years of music and featuring unusual collaborations between locally based artists and a cast of international musicians, Birdfoot explored themes including mental illness (*Mania and Madrigals*, 2014), the emotional residue of Hurricane Katrina through spoken-word poetry and music (*Waterlines*, 2015, with spoken-word artist Kataalyst Alcindor), New Orleans’s forgotten contributions to classical music (*New Orleans 300: Creole Contradanzas*, 2018, with Afro-Cuban percussionists and jazz bassist James Singleton), the social contract (*Rules of the Dance*, 2017), truth, racial justice and the American dream (*Nothing But the Truth*, 2019, with countertenor Reginald Mobley), our intertwined relationship with the natural world (*Child of Tree*, 2023), and generational grief and environmental legacies of slavery (*Born by the River*, 2023, with The Descendants Project and singers Givonna Joseph and Tara Melvin).

Birdfoot was founded by violinist and Artistic Director Jenna Sherry alongside current Board Member Mark Growdon, and Tracey Sherry, who served as Executive Director until her retirement in 2022. Rebecca Crenshaw joined Birdfoot as Executive Director in 2022. Birdfoot grew rapidly from the festival’s first season in May 2012 into a much-anticipated annual week of live performances; the festival has since presented more than 180 concerts with the involvement of 113 musicians. Recent seasons have included lectures, collaborations with authors and poets, chamber music reading parties, and the Musical Feast dinner concert presented with local celebrity chefs and support from law firm Jones Walker, and a series of roving Community Concerts supported by the Selley Foundation. Birdfoot’s pre-pandemic offerings included a Young Artist Program (winner of the 2017 Big Easy Arts Education Award), Artist Residencies, and an online calendar of musical events in partnership with New Orleans Public Radio.

Contrary to industry stereotypes, Birdfoot audiences turned out for adventurous programming and often skewed young with over 55% of attendees falling under age 55 between 2018 and 2023. Of particular note was Birdfoot’s ability to intrigue chamber music newcomers: Between 10–20% of audience members at recent festivals were attending their first chamber music concert.

“For the past eleven years, Birdfoot’s mission and vision have been dedicated to expanding the horizons of chamber music in New Orleans. While the Birdfoot chapter is closing, the impact made in the lives of audiences and artists alike will live on through the memories and stories of our shared experiences,” reflects Executive Director Rebecca Crenshaw. “The groundbreaking success of the 2023 season and its community partnerships points to the fact that this unique work has a place within our incredible city. We have planted a seed—I’m curious to see where it will grow from here.”

In celebrating 12 years of artistic achievement and community, Birdfoot’s founders, staff and Board wish to express their heartfelt thanks to the many community members, local businesses, and foundations that made the festival possible. Partners and supporters not already mentioned above include: WWNO New Orleans Public Radio, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, Louisiana Bucket Brigade, Ruth U. Fertel Foundation, Tulane University, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival Foundation, The Rivers Retreat, the New Orleans Museum of Art, Brennan’s, and chefs Susan Spicer, Kristen Essig, Michael Stoltzfus, and Stephen Stryjewski. Birdfoot is also grateful for the loyal and long-term support of local restaurants including Café Carmo, Mayas, Stein’s Market & Deli, The Milk Bar, and St. James Cheese Company. Birdfoot would also like to thank photographer Ryan Hodgson-Rigsbee and graphic designer and Board Member Michael Ball, whose photos and graphics captured and communicated the festival’s spirit and ideals.

“Birdfoot has been a huge addition to our community, a beacon of hope.”  
— James Singleton, bassist

“To take part in the Birdfoot Festival was to experience a festival that honored the original concept of the word: Artists lived together, worked, and strove together for the duration, learning, developing, sharing their ideas and visions. The result was generously subsumed egos, not the polishing of them...Birdfoot created a working environment for the benefit of the artists, the audiences, and the community, for the growth of greater understanding and purpose, comradeship and healing.” — Roger Chase, violist

“Birdfoot was such a special festival that had such a distinct and beautiful ethos.”  
— Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir, cellist

“The Birdfoot Festival is an example of what more classical music organizations should be doing—reaching the community in more intimate ways...Singing for the ancestors buried near the Whitney Plantation and other plantations in the area was such a beautiful validation of what my soul longs to do...Together, we gave voice to the once voiceless. I am sure your impact will be long-lasting.” — Givonna Joseph, mezzo-soprano & founder & director, OperaCréole

“Truly the most unique, musically fulfilling, and special music festival I’ve ever been part of... Birdfoot is going to be greatly missed by everybody who had the privilege of experiencing it over the years.” — Rose Hashimoto, violist

“By far the best festival I’ve been to in the U.S.” — Julia Hamos, pianist

“I marveled at the diverse audiences that packed Birdfoot concerts. I hardly think I’m even slightly guilty of hyperbole by saying this: Jenna was able to bring some of the best performers from not only the U.S., but the best performers in the world, to New Orleans. What a great joy it was to be a part of this important festival.” — Yotam Haber, composer

“From the inaugural season, Birdfoot was a place that would embrace and support artists not just as performers but rather as whole beings. In my two decades as a professional in the classical chamber music world, I have encountered many kinds of leaders in our industry and can testify to the culture that each brings to their team. I have rarely encountered someone who cares so genuinely and holistically for their artists while also pursuing such an extraordinary vision for music-making in our times as Jenna Sherry. Whenever I would thank her for the insane amount of work she did and the countless hours she problem-solved so we didn’t have to, she smiled and gave credit to all of us for making Birdfoot together. I believe it’s this type of humble leadership that fostered a culture of thoughtfulness, grace, and community. With a huge heart for her city, Jenna invited us to feel that passion, vulnerability, and awe with her. It’s no coincidence that Birdfoot meant ‘home’ to me because it was her invitation to be a part of something so special and close to her.” — Clara Kim, violinist

“Birdfoot has been a bright golden star in the musical night sky of New Orleans and it will be sorely missed.” — Michael Rhiner, composer

Thank you again to all the musicians, volunteers,  
audiences, and community members whose contributions  
have made Birdfoot Festival so memorable.

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