

Symphony Suite

**THE NORTH
CAROLINA
SYMPHONY MOVES
INTO MEYMANDI
CONCERT HALL
AMID A CHORUS
OF SUPERLATIVES
FOR THE NEW
FACILITY.**

BY MIRIAM SAULS

When the North Carolina Symphony returns to Raleigh from road trips this year, it will be to a place it can truly call home for the first time in its distinguished 68-year history.

And what a home. The new 1,700-seat Meymandi Concert Hall, where the symphony will play a grand-opening gala concert on February 21, was designed strictly with music in mind. The new hall, says symphony President and CEO David Chambless Worters, “will forever change the experience of making and appreciating music. It offers an astonishingly clear and rich quality of sound, placing it among the top four or five concert halls in the country.”

Meymandi is part of the new BTI Center for the Performing Arts in downtown Raleigh, and it is familiar ground for the symphony. Memorial Auditorium, its longtime base and one it shared over the years with a multitude of artists, is part of the complex. The new concert hall flanks Memorial to the west, and a new 600-seat Fletcher Opera Theater adds symmetry to the east. Rounding out the extraordinary center is a new plaza in the front and an outdoor pavilion and the 170-seat Kennedy Theater in the back. A renovation of Memorial Auditorium will complete the BTI complex.

Dr. Assad Meymandi, one of the symphony's major patrons, named the new hall — not after himself but in honor of his late mother. He acknowledges the role that state and local government have played in making this symphony dream come true. "One of the reasons the arts flourish in North Carolina is that our beloved state rewards creativity, competence, and initiative and encourages citizens to patronize the arts by joining its efforts," he says. "Our private/public partnership has made this new home for the North Carolina Symphony possible."

OLD-WORLD INTIMACY, NEW WORLD SOUND

Acoustics have been a guiding principle of concert hall planning and design, and as a result Meymandi will have the best in sound. For this we can thank Lawrence Kirkegaard & Associates, internationally acclaimed acousticians, and the design team at Pearce Brinkley Cease + Lee Architects of Raleigh. Above all, the designers wanted the hall to reinforce the quality of what takes place on stage. "We set about achieving the functional features before we even addressed the architectural features," says Irv Pearce, who has been involved in the project on a daily basis for the last five years.

Form and function eventually merged, creating an intimacy and character befitting the purpose. Patterned after the classic shoebox shape of the best European concert halls, Meymandi re-creates the type of room where classical music was originally intended to be played. Columns along the outside aisles are reminiscent of old churches, and 10-inch-thick, 40,000-pound concrete wall components mean that no sound is absorbed, optimizing the impact of the sound that stays in the room. Every seat is in front of the stage, so audience members will feel close to the musicians from any spot in the house, either in private boxes on two levels, or in orchestra, lower, or upper balcony seating.

Choir seats immediately above the orchestra will be available when no choir is involved in the con-

cert. "The choir loft is a tip of the hat to the old concert halls in the European tradition," says Worters. "We hope even season ticket holders will trade in their regular seats once in a while and experience the choir seats, because they will provide the unique opportunity to experience the music as if you are practically sitting with the orchestra."

Even the heating and air-conditioning system was designed with sound as well as comfort in mind. Most concert halls bring air in through the ceiling, but air will come from below in Meymandi Hall. "This is only the fourth time a system like this has been used in this country," says Pearce. "The engines don't have to work nearly as hard to deliver from below, so there's much less noise to compete with the music."

RAISING THE BAR OF EXCELLENCE

When talk about augmenting Memorial Auditorium first began, there was no mention of a space just for music. The early vision included another multipurpose venue that could host everything from concerts to movies to Broadway shows. Richard Hoffert, then president of the symphony, suggested that the orchestra should have a home all its own, with the trappings befitting a well-respected state symphony.

Raleigh officials were skeptical. So to convince the city of the seriousness of his proposal, Hoffert committed \$4 million from the symphony — a bold move for an organization that had never approached a number like that in its fundraising history. The idea took hold and gained momentum.

The concert hall was originally priced to be very economical — less than \$10 million. "We could have had an acoustically sound concert hall for \$10 million, but as people have heard about the plans and have become more and more excited and inspired, they have stepped forward as patrons and raised the bar of excellence," says Worters. "As more funding has become available, both from individuals and city and county government, we have been able to add more features that will enhance the quality of the music."

For example, automatic adjustable risers have been added to the stage design. This feature will enable orchestra members to hear one another as they never have before, Worters says, enabling them to achieve their highest possible quality. Further, "we will now be able to adjust the size of the orchestra with the new stage, making it possible for the first time to present some types of music meant for smaller orchestras. We can now play a Baroque

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piece like a Brandenburg Concerto or we can play Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*.”

An enhancement made possible by symphony trustee Anne Packer is an organ loft behind the stage, ready and waiting to house a world-class organ when funds become available. The area will be closed off until an organ is installed, at which time the pipes will be a breathtaking backdrop to the stage.

As the budget grew along with patron excitement, the architects had to stay flexible to incorporate upgrades. “It was a bit like designing for a moving target,” says Pearce. “The BTI Center started out as a \$14 million project and has grown to nearly \$40 million. We have been like traffic cops unifying all the upgrades and add-ons and all the needs from acoustics to handicap access to water line ties to city code adherence. It might not have been an ideal

Encore Performances

Did you know the North Carolina Symphony ...

- was founded in 1932 by Lamar Stringfield, Pulitzer Prize-winning composer, and served in the 1930s as a WPA project. In 1943 it became the first orchestra in the United States to receive a state grant for support on an ongoing basis and has received that state aid every year since the “Horn Tootin’ Bill” was passed in 1943.
- is a statewide organization, performing in more than 50 counties, playing in concert halls, auditoriums, gymnasiums, and outdoor settings.
- performs to approximately 100,000 schoolchildren, and 275,000 adults hear the symphony each year. The orchestra travels extensively throughout the state to large and small communities.
- has a home base in Raleigh and performs some 75 concerts a year in the Triangle.
- is under the artistic leadership of Gerhardt Zimmermann, music director and conductor, and William Henry Curry, associate conductor.
- employs 65 professional musicians working 41 weeks during the regular season with four weeks available in the summer.
- hosts yearly workshops to train public school music teachers to teach educational concert repertoire and provides teacher and student handbooks, educational aids, and recordings. Up to 300 teachers from across the state take part in these workshops each year.
- has a string internship program for students from major universities across the state including UNC Chapel Hill, UNC Greensboro, and East Carolina University. The interns attend rehearsals and perform with the symphony during six weeks of the regular season. The internship affords students the opportunity to learn from professional musicians while gaining valuable concert experience.

way to design, but we have sure ended up with an ideal music hall. And it is a bargain at \$17 million.”

“Our architects are modest,” says Worters. “I’d say it was a stroke of genius to figure out a way to build such a great hall for \$17 million.”

THE SOUL OF THE HALL

Integrating Meymandi Hall and Fletcher Opera Theater, both of which are buildings in their own right, into a stately and venerable institution like Memorial Auditorium presented its own set of challenges. Pearce Brinkley Cease + Lee had designed the renovation of the auditorium 10 years ago and decided to stay with the theme of marrying a contemporary look with the majesty of limestone. “It was a tall order to add two new halls and unify them with the existing auditorium,” says the firm’s Jeffrey Lee.

Because the public responded quite positively to the elegance of the glass lobby that was added in 1990, Lee decided to bring the glass across the whole site to connect the two new halls with the original building, making them one structure.

The impressive glass lobby enfolded the concert hall is named for Benjamin and Maxine Swalin. It was under Dr. Swalin’s 33-year leadership that the symphony established its grassroots emphasis on traveling around the state. (The orchestra performs 120 concerts a year outside the Triangle area, half of them for schoolchildren.) A gallery within the building is named to honor recent Secretary of Cultural Resources Betty Ray McCain, during whose tenure the symphony flourished. The North Carolina Museum of Art will provide artwork from its collection for the gallery walls.

A special donor room on the northwest corner of the building will provide a place for supporters to gather and relax during intermission or before and after performances. Escalators and elevators will move visitors around the hall, and every seat in the house will be handicapped-accessible.

North Carolinians can expect to see

“sold-out” signs at the box office, both because this 1,700-seat venue holds 600 fewer people than Memorial Auditorium and because word is expected to get around about the superiority of the new hall. But the symphony has a solution. Performances will be added to meet demand, even as the orchestra maintains its traditional level of travel.

IT COMES DOWN TO SOUND

As exciting as all the special features of this new hall are, it all comes back to sound. Jimmy Gilmore, principal clarinetist with the orchestra, perhaps puts it best. “The hall is elegantly appointed and pleasing to the eye; but as beautiful as it is, the soul of the hall is its sound,” he says. “Our new facility is designed exclusively for the presentation of music, which will enable us to fully develop the sound and character of the orchestra. Of course good acoustics are of utmost importance to me as a musician, but I think listeners will be amazed at the difference it makes for them.”

Music director and conductor Gerhardt Zimmermann exuberantly agrees. “Meymandi Hall will be like hearing the orchestra for the first time, in a venue which enhances the music so vividly that it is heard as the composers meant it to be heard,” he says. “This exciting new home for our orchestra will recharge our deep commitment to bringing great performances and the highest quality orchestral music to the people of North Carolina.”

Along with his support, Dr. Assad Meymandi brings a grand vision to sum up the impact of the new hall. “I believe wherever there is a building, no matter how humble or how grand, when it is used in the service of the arts, it becomes a temple. With the new symphony hall we are engaged in building a temple to promulgate the gift of music to humanity.”

What a grand thing for North Carolina.



Miriam Sauls lives in Raleigh.

MINT *to be* *together*



Teapot circa 1762, Josiah Wedgwood. English
Blue Horizon 1992, Kurt Weiser. American

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