

Let the Music Soar

Roll over, Beethoven – there’s a whole lot of new concert hall building going on, as *Ngjom* discovers



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Opposite and above: artist's renderings of the exterior and interior of Hamburg's Elbe Philharmonie

Music and architecture, when properly combined, truly soar, complementing one another in an almost heavenly resonance, like cathedrals of both physical and tonal structure. No wonder the great music palaces – concert halls and opera houses – are renowned both for the venerated orchestras they house and the performers they showcase as for their acoustic and architectural virtuosity.

Those few which have achieved landmark or iconic status: Carnegie Hall, the Met, Covent Garden, La Scala, and undoubtedly the most iconic of them all, the Sydney Opera House, are so much more than great venues to listen to music and opera – they are an integral part of the musical experience.

However fine their sound-enhancement and fidelity, however, these buildings were also products of the state-of-the-art of their time, even if periodically upgraded and refitted. The design for Sydney Opera House is a half century old; it was completed 35 years ago.

So just what *is* new in today's – and tomorrow's – music palaces? We take a look at some exciting and decidedly unique designs.

The ideal large concert hall should cater to an audience limit of 2,500 people or less; other than that, the shape of the concert hall continues to morph from the original rectangular “shoe box” into forms that are more fluid and daring.

The first large modern concert hall to break away from the shoe box (and the *de riguer* grand entrance stairs) was Hans Scharoun's Berlin Philharmonie, built in 1963. Significantly, it carries a democratic attitude which pervades throughout: from the shape of the hall which is determined by acoustic requirements, to the position of the stage which is located in the center for better bonding with the audience. The form of the building is reflective of what goes on inside, devoid of traditional symmetry (and those grand entrance stairs). The street also continues inside the building and the fluid terraced seating appears more as landscape than formal structures.

The latest significant completed concert hall that places exuberance over formality is Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, completed in 2003. Gehry's public architecture is recognizable for the unequalled sculptural freedom that it entails, unlike anything seen before or since, no doubt aided significantly by computer technology. Gehry paid tribute to Scharoun's Berlin Philharmonie before embarking on the design which is uniquely his own. He speaks about being captivated by Scharoun's space and its antithetical quality, which is engaging and encourages conversation (although, one assumes, not during performances).

Gehry decided on a formal performance space as a calming relief from the exuberance around it. Knowing that there were no hard and fast rules



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in achieving the ideal acoustic space, Gehry's decision to have a formal performance hall appeared even more intentional. In the end the building was much more expressive than Scharoun's but not quite consistent in its content.

Gehry's striking metal ribbon facades – so reminiscent of his Guggenheim in Bilbao – are like an unfolding alien entity that has fallen to earth – this time along Los Angeles' Grand Avenue. Like Scharoun, Gehry "lifted" the hall off the ground, enabling the street to flow into the building. Just as Scharoun, Gehry encircled the stage with seating, but in a symmetrical manner using concave and convex forms.

One of the most provocative emerging designs is Herzog and de Meuron's Elbe Philharmonie in Hamburg, Germany. This time, the entire new building sits over an existing large building. The new is seemingly ephemeral, made up of crystalline translucent glass, whereas the existing building is a 1960s solid brick warehouse! Crowned by a series of glass

peaks, the new building will resemble a ghost ship hovering on water – a neo-gothic *and* post-modern metaphor that would seem appropriate in the land of Richard Wagner and Caspar Friedrich.

By planting the new building over an old established one, the architects appear to have addressed the question of regeneration of an existing urban fabric rather than avoiding the important issue of context. Just like Gehry, the architects studied Scharoun's Berlin Philharmonie and, like Gehry, adopted Scharoun's primary concept of surrounding the stage with seating. Likewise, the balconies tilt toward the stage in the middle. While Gehry played with convex and concave seating forms, Herzog and de Meuron created forms that undulate back and forth, setting the space in continuous motion. Scheduled opening: 2010.

The new Paris Philharmonie by Jean Nouvel takes design radicalism even further. With the dramatic effect that glass technology can

now contribute to spectacular architecture, the main auditorium is encased in a glass box. Consistent with his affinity toward media-like architecture in a world full of signs, video images will stream across the glass facade, transforming the building to one that borders between reality and unreality. Not only does the building now hold performances; but performances are also projected to the external world, contributing to the urban spectacle.

Conventional circulation is broken even further. No longer is there a singular mass movement of people, nor even that of people moving along singular planes. Ramps, bridges and mounds now connect people to various activities or even to reach the balconies in the concert hall. The balconies are like horizontal pods suspended in space. The journey to listen to music is in itself filled with experiences, and once inside, is akin to being in a womb filled with music floating in space. Scheduled opening: 2012.

However, the *grand dames* of the performing arts centers are the opera houses and they are often designed to make every visit a grand occasion. The first large opera house was built in Venice in 1637 and since then opera houses proliferated throughout Europe, many of them in the 19th century. Current major opera houses in the pipeline are the Oslo Opera House (Norway) and the Taichung Metropolitan Opera House (Taiwan). Both are the result of intense international architectural competitions.

Oslo Opera House was designed by the Norwegian architectural firm Snohetta i and s scheduled to be completed this year.



Clockwise from far left: Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles; interior, top right and above: artist's rendering of interior and exterior, Taichung Metropolitan Opera House, Taichung, Taiwan

Taichung's hall, designed by Toyo Ito, should help take a nondescript city into international prominence, much like Gehry's Guggenheim Museum did to Bilbao. Ito's opera house is spatial music in every sense, but derived logically. He calls it "the Sound Cave;" a network of spaces and activities that grows logarithmically from interior to exterior, connecting seamlessly with the surrounding park and eventually, the whole of the city itself. It is as spatially complex as anything seen in the architectural world, but the complexity is built on a few geometric rules. A membrane between two surfaces is divided into alternative zones A and B. As the surfaces are pulled apart, continuous spaces between A and B emerge, separated by the membranes. This is repeated horizontally as well as vertically, resulting in a complex organic web, which is as fluid and rhythmic as music. Scheduled completion: 2009. **TH**