

A Room for Music by William Rawn

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The following are excerpts from an interview from March 1994, as construction was being completed on Seiji Ozawa Hall.

What mission were you given in designing Seiji Ozawa Hall? The ultimate goal was to build a serious concert hall that opened to the outdoors—a daunting assignment. The fundamental question became how to build a structure with thick walls, as you must for optimal acoustics, while, at the same time, opening the building to the landscape. To put it more broadly, the question was how to retain Tanglewood's intimacy and informality, while responding to the intensity of the music.

We faced the inevitable choice—whether to begin from inside the building and consider the acoustical imperatives, as if the hall could be built

that stance is wonderful; it's one of those things that tells the visitor that Tanglewood has a very democratic spirit.

How is Tanglewood democratic?

Because of the way it's laid out, you feel that everyone is welcome on this grand estate. On weekdays, there is no admission charge. You can casually walk in and listen to very famous musicians teaching their classes. It's the polar opposite of a theme park.

We had to design a concert hall that would seat 1,200 people and create good sight lines for another 2,000 people on the lawn outside. One way to do that is to site the hall like an amphitheater,



Picnic on Tanglewood's Lawn



Musikvereinssaal, Vienna



Stadt-Casino, Basel

anyplace, or to begin from the outside, with the setting. In our initial interview with the client, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, we focused on the question of the landscape. We wanted to define the experience and the particular joy of Tanglewood. Later, when we began the design process, we immediately confronted the critical acoustical issues.

What did you say about the landscape in that first interview? What's interesting about Tanglewood, we said, is that, in relation to the main manor house, which encloses Stockbridge Bowl, all the music buildings that Eliel and Eero Saarinen designed were put in the background, against the trees, almost like outbuildings. It seemed to me that, even though it's very important, Ozawa Hall should be a background building, in keeping with the existing scheme. I think

at the bottom of a steep slope. But the Tanglewood tradition is about spreading your blanket, laying out the picnic, arranging your wine glasses in front of you. It was important for us to preserve that gentle slope—steep enough to allow you to see over the heads of people in front of you, but flat enough to prevent your wine bottle from falling over. That's why we strongly advocated putting the hall higher up the hill.

What about the other half of the mission: the acoustics? Soon after we were chosen, we joined the Boston Symphony Orchestra's design committee in selecting Lawrence Kirkegaard as the acoustician. The acoustical requirements for the hall were critical, particularly for the students: The students had to be able to hear themselves and their colleagues as clearly and vividly as possible.

I spent three weeks in Europe looking at major concert halls in Vienna, Berlin, Basel, Zurich, Utrecht, Aldeburgh, and Amsterdam. I visited them in order to understand the spatial qualities and human experience in those halls. Kirkegaard, of course, knows those halls from his own acoustical perspective. He spent a long time with me, explaining the physical reasons why these are great halls. Later, I visited outdoor summer concert venues, including Wolf Trap outside Washington, D.C.; Lake Henrietta in Minneapolis; and Ravinia, near Chicago.

Did any of those halls or outdoor venues stand out as a model for you? Some of the

At Tanglewood, we wanted to be less formal, but we also wanted to capture some of the spatial quality. So we developed a grille made out of teakwood for our railing element. The teak is handsome, but it's also modest, weathers well, and reminds people of the outdoors.

How does the architecture come together with the acoustics? If you look at the grille, which is basically a grid, made up of square openings, you'll see that there's a curve routed into the wood. We did that on Kirkegaard's advice, so as not to allow a rhythmic pattern to develop across the surface. If the surface of the wood were flat and regular,



Philharmonie Hall, Berlin



Konzerthaus (Schauspielhaus), Berlin



Berlin's Philharmonic Hall

great European concert halls were designed in very simple ways, though they may have been dressed up over time. The Musikverein in Vienna was the one 19th-century hall with a very strong architectural presence, as well as great acoustics, so it became an ideal for me. Maltins Hall at Aldeburgh, England, is in a beautiful rural setting like Tanglewood; it also seemed to be a very powerful place.

What did you find most striking about the Musikverein's architecture? I feel that the most important visual element in a concert hall is the railing along the balcony and the loge boxes. Once a hall is filled with people, that railing becomes the most important architectural element, aside from the stage. In Vienna, the railing elements are gilded and highly ornate.

a disconcerting sound pattern might develop. But because the surfaces of the grille are hollowed out in slightly irregular curves, the sound is diffused when it bounces off the railing.

Is irregularity the key to the acoustics? Kirkegaard worries about routine patterns, so he wants everything to be slightly off alignment. Generally, he wants sound to be reflected back from all the surfaces as fully as possible, to give it depth and richness. But if any two elements in the hall are perfectly symmetrical, there is a danger that the sound will start to echo as it bounces back and forth. You want the attributes of symmetry, but not perfect symmetry.

For example, Kirkegaard's ideal side walls would be, maybe, half a degree off parallel. We

haven't done that at Tanglewood, but we did find ways to bring the surfaces of the side walls slightly out of alignment. In fact, we've canted elements all over the hall.

Is the ceiling canted, too?

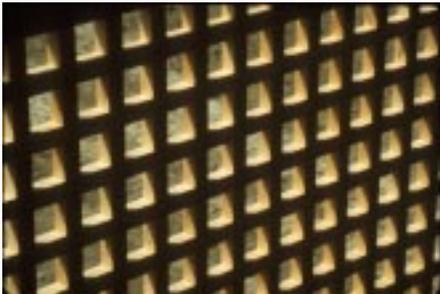
Kirkegaard said the ceiling had to be coffered, though not with perfect curves. So we built the ceiling out of precast concrete elements that look like upside-down bathtubs, each 21-feet-long. They are not perfect concave circles or ellipses.

Why such a heavy ceiling? It had to be. The walls had to be heavy, too. The building is a brick and concrete block shell; it has very thick side

weathers, like the shingles of Cape Cod cottages. The timber under the roof of the arcade is Douglas fir. All of the big, heavy timbers have been salvaged from old piers and train trestles. They don't look like they've been used before, but they've already dried out and won't shrink any further.

We designed chairs made of plantation teak. For outdoor venues, commercially available seating is made out of plastic. That seemed inappropriate for Tanglewood; at the same time, we knew the seats would have to stand up to hard use because of the climate. So we chose teak, which is very durable.

Is there a visual connection among



Balcony and Arcade Rail Detail



Balcony Ceiling Soffits



Sound Absorption Panel Grilles

walls, which keep the bass notes in the hall. Bass notes will go right through a thin wood wall, and only the treble will reflect back. That's why the great halls of the world have very thick side walls, which are generally parallel.

If the hall has to be so heavy and enclosed, how can it also be open to the landscape?

Essentially, Ozawa Hall is a brick shell into which we've woven a wooden frame. The brick is what holds in the sound; the wood holds the audience. Inside, the balconies and loge boxes are wood. Outside, the foyer, platforms, and arcades are all made of wood. Structurally, the foyers and balconies open up the building and give it a human scale; in terms of material, they help the building blend in with the surrounding landscape.

The timber that's exposed to the weather is Alaskan yellow cedar, which turns gray as it

these elements, apart from being made of wood?

The backrests of the seats pick up the grid motif of the balcony railing, as do the wooden grid elements fitted between the coffers of the ceiling. The grille is picked up on the exterior balconies, too. That's another way of weaving the wood throughout the building, through this repetition of grid patterns. Each time, of course, we try to make the grid a little different, so it's not relentless.

How have you handled the hall's windows?

We couldn't allow ourselves very many windows, because bass notes go through glass as easily as they go through wood. So we've built glass-block clerestory windows high up; they pick up the square grid motif again. At the northeast end of the hall, behind the stage, we have tall, narrow windows, the shape of which is echoed by the vertical backrests of the chairs.

The vertical windows let you see as much of the outside as possible, without putting in too much glass. They may remind you of organ pipes at the rear of the stage in many great concert halls—but that was probably an after-the-fact rationalization for us. We would have loved to have made the whole back wall out of glass, but that just wouldn't work acoustically.

Do you feel you've captured a sense of the outdoors in the hall? You'll certainly get light through the clerestory windows and, from the second balcony, you'll see the trees. As the concert begins, the windows behind the stage will let you see the sky change

presents a very soft edge to the sky. A pitched roof with a gable end presents a strong ridge against the sky, as does the edge of a flat roof. We didn't want anything that hard-edged, because Tanglewood is essentially a soft comfortable landscape.

We were also trying to figure out ways to bring the scale of the building down to a human proportion. Kirkegaard told us that the ceiling in the hall had to be 50 feet high, otherwise we wouldn't get the proper acoustic volume. The building had to be at least that tall—taller, in fact, because we needed an attic space for ventilation and lighting. The curved roof allows us to modify the effect of that height. We're able to



Exterior Arcade



Interior Balcony seating



Seiji Ozawa Hall

from sunset to twilight to night. It was important that each of the side doors had glass, so you'd get glimpses of the outside from the seats. Of course, during major concerts, the big door to the lawn— what we call the barn door— will be open to the audience outside. When that door is open, the feeling of the lawn definitely comes into the hall.

The barn door should be seen as a side door opening to the garden, but we did not deliberately intend for the building to be read as a barn. Obviously, the curved barrel roof is one of the hall's distinctive features. When we were designing the building, we found a 19th-century Shaker school in Mt. Lebanon, New York, with that roof form. That's the only building of this shape that we found near Tanglewood.

Why did you want a curved roof? It

go from a 66-foot-high ridgeline to a 42-foot-high cornice line, while keeping the interior at 50 feet.

How else have you tried to maintain a human scale? During the early phases of design, we talked a lot about a community coming together for music. That's why we dispensed with the proscenium, so you wouldn't have the performers on one side of a divide and the audience on the other. Most European halls, including the Musikverein in Vienna and the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, lack a proscenium stage, so there is precedent for such a move. By creating balconies and loge boxes, we designed Ozawa Hall so you'd see the faces of the people all around you, in the side balconies and in the seats behind the stage.

It sounds like a Friends meeting house. I wouldn't claim any direct influence like that,



but we did want to give people the sense of being together in a room, which we simply called “a room for music.”

Our consultants at Theatre Projects in Connecticut and London gave us wonderful ideas about how to make the space very intimate by making the balconies as tight and low as possible and by making the building as snug as we could. We saved every inch possible.

What about the support structure, the Leonard Bernstein Performers Pavilion? We designed the Performers Pavilion so it could be built as simply and frugally as possible, using wood-frame con-

struction. It’s a simple one-story structure, with an open courtyard in the middle. It provides changing rooms, a green room, recording equipment, a small library, and piano storage.

building code requires that any public assembly building over 35 feet high must be made of fire-resistant material, which means it cannot be built from wood. The only exception is for churches. That’s the law, and we can’t do a thing about it. We could have designed a metal structure, or maybe something in poured concrete; but it seemed that those materials would violate the landscape.

Now, at the end of the process, how do you regard the building? When I began this project, I started reading about the history of concert halls, and learned that in 17th-century Europe, concerts often took place in the garden. Music came indoors in the 18th



Interior balconies and loge boxes



Plantation teak Chairs



Arcade Wall Detail

struction. It’s a simple one-story structure, with an open courtyard in the middle. It provides changing rooms, a green room, recording equipment, a small library, and piano storage.

Perhaps its best feature is the open courtyard— something you’d never build in New England. But since we didn’t have to heat this building during the winter, we could have a courtyard, which can be an informal green room for the performers, a gathering place after concerts, or a hang-out spot for students.

What’s your response to objections that you designed a brick building for Tanglewood? Nothing else at Tanglewood is built out of brick, but we recognized that there’s a very eclectic mix of building materials and building styles. That gave us tremendous design freedom. More importantly, Massachusetts’

century; only in the 19th century did it enter into grand concert halls. So we’ve come full circle with history here.

It’s been important to think of the magic of Tanglewood and to balance the spirit of the landscape and its informality with a commitment to the intensity of the musical experience. That’s why we tried to fight against formality in Ozawa Hall by bringing people close to one another, by putting in as many windows as we could, by using the teak grilles to provide a warmer feeling. This building is trying to find a balance between the seriousness of a concert hall and the informality that’s such an essential element of Tanglewood.

