

# The Washington Post

SUNDAY, JANUARY 30, 2005

## Strathmore's Hidden Assets

*New Music Center Makes the Most of Its Sheltered Setting*

By BENJAMIN FORGEY  
Washington Post Staff Writer

**I**t is in many ways a beautiful building, the new Music Center at Strathmore, a treat for the eyes and other senses. Also for the mind.

With its elegant 1,976-seat concert hall and plentiful complement of classrooms and rehearsal halls, the center, opening this week, is yet more proof of the expanding cultural ambitions of Washington's suburbs.

Located in Montgomery County, just a few miles north of the District line, the \$100 million center is a tra-

ditional urban institution in a fast-changing suburban setting. It'll contribute most significantly to the cultural life of its home county, of course, but, with the Baltimore Symphony treating it as a "second home," it'll add choices for many music lovers in the metropolitan area.

The architecture itself will be an attraction, eventually. In an age of prominent, in-your-face, innovative civic architecture, the center is a deceptive exception. For one thing, it hides its innovations with a graceful, easygoing architectural manner.

For another thing, the excellent

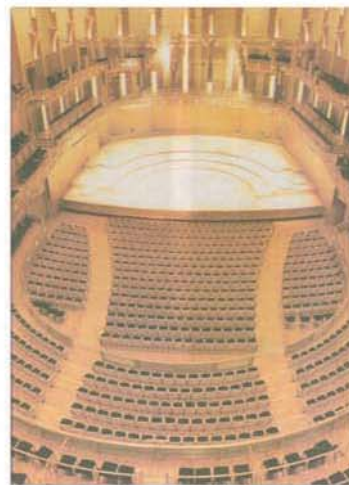
new facility literally hides its architectural charms from much of the general public. Fronting a nondescript suburban lane and practically invisible from nearby Rockville Pike, the center is perhaps the most inconspicuous important civic structure in the Washington region.

Furthermore, the center turns its worst face forward: Its most visible elevation, the one on Tuckerman Lane that most passersby would interpret (wrongly, as it turns out) as the front door, is a rather humdrum affair. With high, narrow windows set in a handsome limestone skin, it might casually be mistaken for an updated 1930s federal courthouse annex.

Things get a lot better behind this cautious facade, as dramatic photographs of the center's swooping roofs and splendid glass walls invariably show. But to see the building at its best a visitor has to get up close and then get inside.

Fortunately, neither is a major problem. The center is strategically located close to major roads—the Beltway, Interstate 270 and Rockville Pike—and to mass transit. The Grosvenor Metrorail station is nearby. Actually, it's about a 300-yard walk from the station exit to the concert hall entrance but county officials expect at least 15 percent of the audience to arrive by train. On warm evenings, the percentage of transit riders is likely to be appreciably higher, for the walk is quite pleasant ... but that's getting ahead of the story.

To comprehend the center's architecture and curious layout, one has to start with the distinctive challenges of the site. From the beginning there were two big advantages: the favorable location, vis-a-vis transportation, and the fact that the land was publicly owned, having been acquired by the county back in 1979.



The pedestrian bridge leading to the Music Center at Strathmore bends like a path in the woods.



The west elevation of the concert hall features three bulging, stepped facades made mostly of glass.

William Rawn Associates, Architects, Inc., Boston, MA.

# The Washington Post

SUNDAY, JANUARY 30, 2005

## Music Center at Strathmore Stays Ahead of the Curve

elers, you would compromise—perhaps destroy is the better word—the parklike character of the place. You would forever overshadow the mansion and its historic setting. And you'd be putting a lot of unwanted distance between the building and the Metro station and parking lot.

For these reasons, the Rockville Pike location was quickly dismissed by all concerned, leaving only one reasonable alternative: The new buildings would have to be squeezed into a narrow valley to the mansion's east. William Rawn, for one, enthusiastically embraced the valley site, which is a very good thing because Rawn, principal of William Rawn Associates of Boston, was selected to be the chief designer of the new facility. "Above all, I wanted this concert hall to say it's part of a park," he said.

That Rawn Associates, with the assistance of Maryland's Grimm + Parker Architects, succeeded in making this wish a reality (for the most part) has to be counted as a large victory for site-sensitive design. Rawn argued forcefully and successfully that the main lobby of the concert hall be placed at the north end of the building, away from the road and facing parklike surroundings, so that on both arrival and departure, concertgoers would be conscious of the green space all around.

This was a counterintuitive decision, for in conventional thinking the north side would be considered the rear of the site, while Tuckerman Lane would be considered the front. Also, the north location added significantly to the distance of the walk from the parking garage and Metro station.

But it was a wise decision, for it enabled the architecture to unfold gracefully onto the land. This is a long structure. From end to end the two connected buildings measure more than 400 feet, with the concert hall taking up nearly two-thirds of this length. By placing it to the north, Rawn had the chance to make the hall's roof the center's chief expressive device—that long, supple, bending silhouette that pays elegant homage to the rolling ter-

rain.

Curving lines and forms were a way to relieve the severity of the buildings' basic rectangular shapes—the concert hall is at heart a "shoebox," the classic acoustical form, and the education building is sort of a typical suburban public school turned on end. (Rawn once described his design effort as "fighting the rigidity of the shoebox.") Thus, like the concert hall, the "schoolhouse" got its own curved roof—shorter, steeper and more dramatic.

They're all over the place, these softening curves. The steel and glass pedestrian bridge from the parking lot over Tuckerman Lane—which is the way most folks will get to and from concerts—bends subtly, like a path in the woods. Inside, stairwells are curved where possible. Corridors, too. The west elevation of the concert hall, which could have been severity itself, was given a striking profile. Three bulging, stepped facades made mostly of glass, so that people on three levels are in direct visual contact with the spacious surroundings, greatly enliven the architecture. (The glass is subtly treated with ceramic frit to minimize heat gain from the western sun.)

Transparency is another enlivening device. Rawn knew that to entice people into enjoying the long walk, he first had to make the walk as enjoyable as possible—hence the curves and the glass. Second, he had to provide a memorable destination. This comes in two parts. Maybe three. There is the lobby, with its soaring, inward-angled, white-trussed glass wall, a space that dramatizes the natural setting. For good-weather nights and days, there are outdoor terraces at both orchestra and balcony levels.

And then, of course, there is the concert hall itself. Architecturally, the Strathmore room is on a par with the best new concert halls in the United States. (Its acoustics, of course, remain to be heard. The Baltimore Symphony will provide the first test on opening night Saturday.)

Strathmore isn't as visually exhilarating as Frank Gehry's expres-

sionist Disney Hall in Los Angeles or as consistently poetic as Rafael Vinoly's Kimmel Center concert hall in Philadelphia, but it has its own inimitable character. With rich birch veneer floors and walls (interspersed with tightly woven bronze grilles), comfortable wood-backed seating and pleasant dimensions (a mere 75 feet, for instance, from stage front to the edge of the first balcony), this hall is intimate and warm. It's soothing and yet somehow lively.

Not surprisingly, curves abound. Orchestra seating is arranged in shallow arcs, with wide aisles bending in opposite directions. Balcony and box railings are all gently rounded. Box seats are cantilevered from the walls in a staggered pattern for visual liveliness. Sight lines, from seat to stage and also from seat to seat, are excellent. This will be a good place for audience-watching. Architectural details are simple and fine—note, for instance, the wooden exteriors on the metal-framed balcony railings, or the patterned glass sconces, set in wood. Designed in close collaboration with acoustician Lawrence Kirkegaard, this is a concert hall that, unlike many, looks like a place where music is meant to be made.

The educational facilities add an important dimension to the center, giving it an extended community presence throughout the week. (This is one of the main reasons, not incidentally, that both the county and the state were willing to put up \$50 million each to pay for the place.) The classrooms are not extravagant but first-rate. One has a sprung floor for young dancers, and two have extremely high ceilings to provide good rehearsal acoustics for bands, orchestras and choirs. Not incidentally, the educational activities will keep the center humming throughout the day.

On a pleasant afternoon, even older, non-musician types might enjoy a visit to the attractive cafe that is a feature of the concert hall's main concourse. The cafe provides good views from the inside to the outside, which is one of the rare treats of this particular concert hall. And, if you were to take your sandwich outside and find a comfortable spot on the Strathmore hill, you definitely will enjoy the view back to the building. It's the best—and in fact the only—place from which to truly appreciate the architectural rhythms of this welcome, but hidden, new cultural treasure.



The entrance to the Music Center, whose supple lines pay homage to the site's rolling terrain. Left, the seating is arranged in curves.