



THE ORDWAY CONCERT HALL

Ordway Concert Hall during construction

On the first Wednesday morning of 2015, the musicians of The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra settled into their chairs on the stage of their new home, the almost-but-not-yet-completed Concert Hall at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts. They were dressed in black—an unusual choice for a morning run-through—but this rehearsal promised to be an uncommon affair. After racing through a series of rapid-fire scales, Concertmaster Steven Copes turned to Associate Concertmaster Ruggero Allifranchini and initiated an animated conversation punctuated by vocal approximations of instruments: “Dah, dah, bom, bom, bom, bom.” SPCO President Bruce Coppock hovered among the musicians like a proud parent.

Out in the auditorium, Paul Scarbrough took a seat, about twelve rows back. As the Concert Hall’s lead acoustician, Scarbrough

was eager to hear what the orchestra sounded like in this new space.

“You’re always on pins and needles until the first notes get sounded,” he explained. “Even though you’ve done all the calculations and drawn on your experience, really, until the first notes get sounded you don’t know for certain whether it’s all come together.”

The first notes in this case came from Beethoven’s Fourth.

With a swing of his bow, Allifranchini led the orchestra into the opening chords of the first movement’s Allegro vivace section—skipping, for the moment, the darker tones of its B-flat minor introduction. Within moments, the musicians were off and running, filling the new space with Beethoven’s spirited, sparkling main theme. Focused on their music, the players resisted the urge to gaze at their surroundings.



SPCO President Bruce Coppock and Associate Concert Master Ruggero Allifranchini

Their expressions remained fixed. They gave no outward hints as to what they thought of their new performance space. Then, as the strings dropped to pianissimo and turned introspective during the movement’s development section, timpanist Michael Israelievitch lifted his eyes briefly

to the ceiling. He returned his attention to Alliffranchini, caught the violinist's eye, and flashed a big smile as if to say, "I approve." Alliffranchini smiled back. With a thundering roll of Israelievitch's timpani, the orchestra launched into the recapitulation and coda, and brought the movement to a rousing conclusion. The audience of a few dozen people applauded. The players, freed from their music, nodded and beamed.

Sitting in the center of the auditorium, Principal Second Violinist Kyu-Young Kim was smiling as well. Kim was serving as the musicians' ears and eyes during their morning rehearsal. In his role as the SPCO's senior director of artistic planning, he had gained an insider's perspective on the Concert Hall's design and construction. As a listener, he had noticed something special about the hall at about the same moment Israelievitch had lifted his gaze to the ceiling, when the orchestra was working toward the fortissimo of recapitulation. "That was a really magical moment for me," Kim said. "You could hear them experiencing that sound for the first time in the hall, testing that limit. And then coming together in this huge explosion."

Musicians and listeners alike grasped for adjectives to describe the sound.

"Warm, glowing, but very clear and brilliant," Copes said.

"Acoustically fantastic," Coppock gushed. "Vibrant," Kim added. "And intimate."

Intimate. If one word could encapsulate the initial reviews of the Concert Hall, that was it. And it was just the adjective that



Principal Timpanist Michael Israelievitch

"It's about the audience member feeling really connected to the musician and the musician feeling really connected to the audience member." — acoustician Paul Scarbrough

acoustician Paul Scarbrough was striving for. "What the orchestra really wanted," he said, "was a room that would be resonant, but at the same time have a lot of intimacy. This is chamber music. This is not a full symphony orchestra playing big romantic works. This is a chamber orchestra playing that repertoire. And that repertoire is about intimacy. It's about the audience member

feeling really connected to the musician and the musician feeling really connected to the audience member. So that was really what we were trying to create here—a room where that sense of intimacy could be brought out, and the relationship between Twin Cities audiences and this orchestra could really grow and flourish and develop."

The process of turning the Ordway's tiny



SPCO musicians at the first Ordway Concert Hall rehearsal



SPCO Principal Second Violin Kyu-Young Kim watches the SPCO rehearse

McKnight Theatre into a much larger—but still intimate—1,100-seat music hall was trickier than initially anticipated. Since the building could not expand southward into the Ordway’s Marzitelli Foyer or northward into Fifth Street, it had to go up. And height, as it turns out, has its disadvantages. The space above the stage and auditorium, while creating a wealth of acoustic possibilities, posed a serious architectural challenge. “If you were to reveal the total volume of this space,” Scarbrough explained, “it would seem uncomfortably tall.”

So Scarbrough, working closely with architect Tim Carl of the Minneapolis firm HGA, came up with a novel solution to the height problem—one that would allow sound to penetrate the cavernous space above while maintaining the sense

of acoustic and aesthetic intimacy that the orchestra sought. The two men and their associates drew up plans for a series of descending, wave-like ceiling screens made of nearly 15 linear miles of mahogany-stained oak dowels. The result was stunning. Now the room, instead of seeming “uncomfortably tall,” felt appropriately scaled. The dowel screen was a visual magnet, an undulating pattern of beauty and warmth that guided the eye from ceiling to stage. Scarbrough and Carl had succeeded in turning the room’s height from a potential detriment into a distinct advantage.

But the dowel screen was just one of many architectural features designed to balance acoustics and aesthetics in the hall. The irregularly shaped acoustic panels on the side walls diffused sound while adding visual

interest. Even the audience chairs, with their solid wood and upholstered padding, were selected with sound in mind. To the musicians who anticipated spending a good portion of their professional lives in this new space, the end result was a revelation.

“We wanted the aesthetics of the hall to reflect who we are, to represent The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra,” said Copes. “Of course, its main function is to be for sound, but we wanted it to be a beautiful space with natural materials—something flowing, beautiful, and sculpture-like. It’s much better than I ever could have expected. From a visual standpoint, it’s gorgeous.”

Kim anticipated that the audience would be just as impressed. “Getting to play in this great space is exciting for us, but I think it’ll be even better for audiences,” he said. “It’s all about what the audience can experience, and making them feel they’re right there with you, rather than in the distance.”

The inaugural rehearsal, with its Beethoven rouser, kicked off what was to be a six-week tuning of the hall. The musicians needed time to get used to their new home, to listen to each other and adjust. The acousticians needed to hear what the orchestra sounded like as it played different styles of music in different configurations. In the process, acoustic panels might be moved and curtains might be pulled. Even the musicians were candidates for acoustical tinkering. A couple hours into the first rehearsal, Scarbrough’s associate, Chris Blair, walked up on stage and asked the bass players to move a few feet to their left. “We

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SPCO musicians rehearsing in the Ordway Concert Hall

wanted a little more power out of them, so by moving them closer to the rear wall and orienting them to face more toward the audience, we felt that they could improve their projection,” Blair explained. “I will shuffle the orchestra. They’ll be quite tired of me by the time we’re done.”

But the assumption was that the tuning, and all it entailed, would be worth it—that by the time the Concert Hall made its public debut in March, it would be ready to host the most acoustically polished chamber orchestra music ever performed in Saint Paul. The SPCO and the other three organizations of the city’s groundbreaking Arts Partnership—the Ordway, the Minnesota Opera, and the Schubert Club—had been working for many years to reach this point. They had hammered out agreements to avert future scheduling conflicts and established an endowment to help all three tenants pay their Ordway rent. In many respects, the new Concert Hall was the final piece of an intricate puzzle. It and the Arts Partnership’s other accomplishments amounted to a community success story that other communities, facing similar challenges, could only hope to emulate.

During his introductory remarks at the beginning of the rehearsal, Bruce Coppock had referred to that long process as “a fifteen-year quest,” one that had consumed much of his time and energy as SPCO president. But in some respects, Coppock understated the scope of accomplishment. The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra had moved through a series of performance homes during its 55-year history: Central High School auditorium; Crawford Livingston Theater in the Saint Paul Arts and Science Center; O’Shaughnessy Auditorium; the Ordway—not to mention other frequently visited performance spaces such as Orchestra Hall, Ted Mann Concert Hall, and a host of neighborhood venues. But none of those homes had been designed and built specifically for the SPCO. The Concert Hall at the Ordway was. Coppock was well aware of that history, and he was more than a little amazed that the “fifteen-year quest” was finally coming to end. “It’s a miracle,” he said. “Just unbelievable.”

— DAVE KENNEY



View from the Concert Hall choir loft during rehearsal

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