

# Town&Country

## Sweet sounds of success.

*(renovation of music halls across the United States)*

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The current renovation of a number of venues for classical music in the US shows that the decline of the audience for serious music is a myth. Music halls are using their current success to build for the future. Most telling is the fact that most of these renovations are being financed by private funding.

If American audiences for serious music are aging and about to disappear--as is often said--why are we spending billions to fix up the nation's major opera houses and concert halls?

There are hammers ringing out in music halls all over America--and we don't mean the type found on pianos. Real steel-nosed jackhammers and drills and saws and rivet guns have replaced violins and oboes and sopranos as the soundmakers in an amazingly high number of old symphony halls and opera houses from coast to coast. Chicago's Orchestra Hall is in the throes of a \$105 million overhaul and expansion, for example, while only a few blocks away, the Lyric Opera of Chicago is renovating its Civic Opera House to the tune of \$100 million. In Cleveland, the grand, neoclassical Severance Hall--one of the nation's acoustic marvels--is about to get a makeover that will cost \$30 million.

In just a few weeks, San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House will reopen after \$84.5 million worth of renovations. It joins a host of recently refurbished major music theaters: Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts in Pittsburgh, the Detroit Opera House, Honolulu's historic Hawaii Theatre--not to mention important halls in Boston, Washington, D.C., and Norfolk, Virginia. The list of music halls in the news is long.

And getting longer. Brand-new music facilities keep opening to much acclaim: one for the Dallas Symphony Orchestra; another, at Tanglewood, in Lenox, Massachusetts, for the Boston Symphony Orchestra to use during the summers. A third, for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, is under way. Clearly, all the construction and renovation indicates a rage to hear serious music, right?

There's more involved, of course. Major cities like to have major music halls --civic pride demands no less. And what one city flaunts, another wants to match--competitiveness can exist over cultural facilities just as it can over sports arenas. Yet such explanations are glib and do not address a basic premise: that, according to a long and highly publicized study (and a spate of consequent essays and articles), the audience for serious music is aging--and thus slowly fading away. If that's true, why are so many serious music companies and their supporters investing huge sums in the future?

For the best of reasons. On further inspection, it turns out that the so-called graying of American audiences--at least for serious music--is a myth. Laura Young, public affairs director for Opera America, the international service organization for opera, quotes a National Endowment for the Arts study that found that opera actually enjoyed a 25 percent increase in audience numbers between 1982 and 1992. She adds, "While it was within the 35- to 54-year-old group that opera had the largest attendance growth, the number of operagoers within the 18- to 24-year-old group also increased by 18 percent."

Some of the confusion over the status of serious music may come from the fact that music audiences today are slightly less likely to be subscribers; mostly, they buy single tickets. "People are looking for variety," explains Tim Hartung of the architectural firm Polshek & Partners, who's responsible for the renovations of Carnegie Hall and the Santa Fe Opera. The demand for variety has resulted in an architectural phenomenon called the multipurpose arts center--which provides (often separate) facilities under one roof for opera, ballet, symphonies and Broadway shows. Perhaps the most glamorous of these is the \$65 million Nancy Lee & Perry R. Bass Performance Hall, now abuilding in Fort Worth, but it is far from alone. Other notable multipurpose halls have recently been completed or are close to completion in Houston, Jacksonville,

Milwaukee and Newark, with others scheduled for Miami, Seattle and Philadelphia. "There was a time," Hartung says, "when people would build halls just for music, but people can't afford single-use anymore."

Still, few already-single-purpose halls are racing to be outfitted with multipurpose facilities. Renovations of opera houses; for example, tend to focus on four areas that will make a night at the opera a fuller and more pleasant experience for performer and audience alike: increased and improved space and technology for set design, lighting and acoustics; increased rehearsal space; improved patron amenities; and compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act. Symphony halls are moving in a similar direction, minus, of course, the emphasis on set design and lighting.

What the need for improved production facilities reflects is a change in the public --not the lack of a public. Audiences have become, in Laura Young's words, "very sophisticated visually in terms of expecting a certain degree of elaborateness in all of their entertainment." They like bigger productions--and bigger productions mean bigger sets. Older houses with limited space for sets are now at a grave disadvantage. For example, before its renovation, the sixty-six-year-old Civic Opera House in Chicago had to store some of its backdrops outdoors on the sidewalk--literally. It may sound crazy, but had the Civic not done so, it would have had to turn down important coproductions with companies possessing more generous storage capacity.

The emergence of television is another factor in the demand for physical change. Television can serve live serious music by introducing it--especially opera--to ever wider audiences. The new and rebuilt halls thus provide a double service: they look good on the screen, and they can at least attempt to compete with the amenities so easily available at home. People with embattled bladders, for instance, will be glad to know that all the renovations include major expansions of w.c. areas. "Today's audiences have come to expect more comfort and amenities than they did forty years ago," says John O. Crosby, founder and general director of the Santa Fe Opera. "People aren't willing to sit on wooden benches."

Not too surprisingly, most renovations are being carried out without much, if any, federal or state money. Instead, the musical institutions depend upon painstakingly stitched-together patchworks of corporate and individual donors. Corporations can rationalize their contributions to music halls fairly easily. "A corporate community has a great interest in the way of life in the city in which it is located. People make choices [about where to accept employment] these days based on the quality of life in that city," says John H. Bryan, CEO of the Sara Lee Corporation. Bryan also happens to be chairman of an ongoing drive to raise funds for the renovation of Chicago's opera and symphony halls; the effort has already brought in the largest amount of money ever given by a business community at one time to support a local cultural project. Beyond quality-of-life issues, Bryan sees helping to maintain the nation's cultural life as an imperative -- nothing less, he says, than "the civic responsibility of the business community in America."

Municipal governments seem to agree with Bryan about the value of the arts, even as the federal government revokes its commitment. "Each city is different," says Schuyler Chapin, commissioner of New York City's department of cultural affairs. But the one thing they always have in common, he suggests, is a need to keep up with the times. So cities are becoming increasingly inventive in finding money for their music halls. San Francisco, for example, contributed \$49.5 million to the renovation of the landmark War Memorial Opera House, tapping a local bond issue for upgrading seismically damaged city buildings. City powers know that renovations bring undeniable civic benefits. The project to upgrade the Detroit Opera House touched off a renovation spree that led to the rental of more than 300,000 square feet of neighboring commercial space--and the brightening of Detroit's long-suffering downtown area.

Each of the new or renovated music halls also serves as a civic landmark, a symbol of its home city's aspirations. In Fort Worth, the prospect of having a world-class hall proved so enticing that contributions to Bass Hall exceeded the \$60 million goal by \$11 million. Some of the surplus money was siphoned into the endowment fund, some into an operating reserve. But \$5 million was used to improve Bass Hall's looks (substituting high-quality Texas limestone for the scheduled cast-stone facade, for instance). Clearly, the people of Fort Worth wanted a fine building, one that would reflect their pride in their orchestra as well as in their city. Which is precisely what is happening in other hubs, too, albeit in less dramatic fashion. The nationwide makeover of music halls adds up to a rousing vote of confidence in the future of serious music in America.