

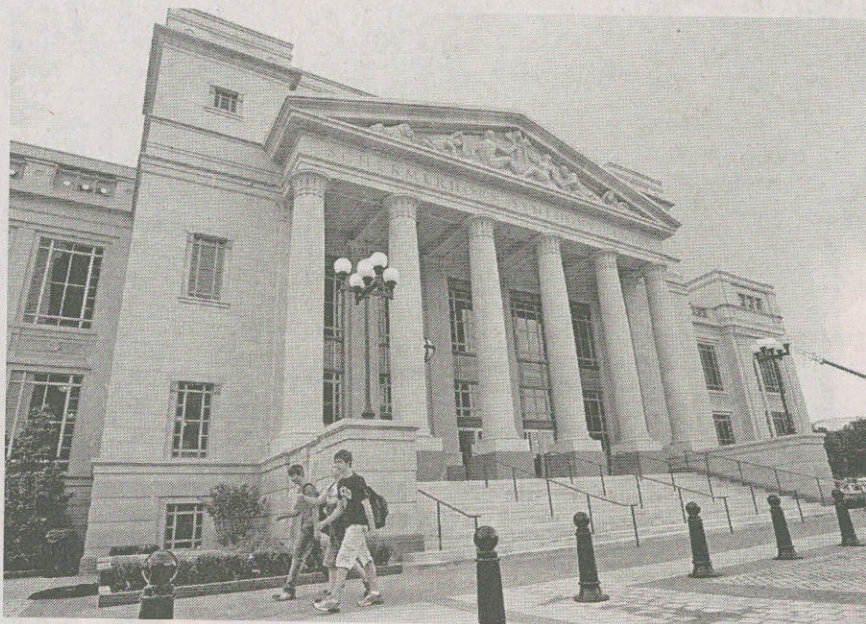
Nashville Goes Classical

By Michael Linton

Nashville, Tenn.

Home to Fisk University's Jubilee Singers (who introduced the world to Negro Spirituals), the Grand Ole Opry, the Country Music Hall of Fame, Music Row, the publishing houses where both the Methodists and Southern Baptists print their hymnals, and where the music business pumps more than \$6 billion annually into the national economy, Nashville has a two-fisted claim on America's musical soul and wallet. The sign at the airport says Music City U.S.A., right next to the one suggesting friendly visits down to the Jack Daniel's distillery in Lynchburg. And although thoughts of this city will conjure up strains of "Mah Sweet Lor' Loves Me but Mah Lover's Gone Bad" more than memories of Schubert, the Nashville Symphony is challenging such impressions with the opening of its Schermerhorn Symphony Center.

AP Photo/Mark Humphrey



The flashy architecture of other music halls has led to delays. But **Schermerhorn Symphony Center**, with a neoclassical design (above), opened on time and on budget. Much of its interior ornamentation (below) serves acoustics as well as aesthetics.

Inaugurated Sept. 9 and 10 with dual galas featuring conductor Leonard Slatkin, who was recently named the symphony's artistic adviser, and country singer Amy Grant, the \$123 million, 1,860-seat concert hall is an architectural and acoustic gem and one of the most successful auditoriums built in a century. Named after Kenneth Schermerhorn, the orchestra's long-time music director who died in 2005, the center is also a managerial triumph, as it was completed on time, on budget, and without rancor: The first performance in the still incomplete hall was a June love fest, when the symphony serenaded the construction workers and their families and later joined them at a barbecue dinner.

Many recent projects haven't been so lucky. Plagued by delays and cost overruns, the Philadelphia Kimmel Center was roundly criticized for its acoustics

cal designers; their buildings can turn into lumpy monuments to sentimentality, a particular problem in Nashville since the concert hall sits catty-corner from the modernist Country Music Hall of Fame. Mr. Schwarz solved the problem by actually making the building modest and integrating Nashville elements into his design.

Despite the fact that it occupies a full city block, the hall sits low, with nearby buildings significantly taller. The cream-colored Indiana limestone that clads the building and the broad exterior public spaces is warmly inviting. The exterior columns aren't classical ones, but neoclassical, borrowed from a nearby 1851 Presbyterian church, and have capitals

are part of an automated system and can be adjusted for acoustic settings appropriate for pop, country and jazz concerts. Even the floor is high-tech. The seats on the orchestra level are on motorized tracks that telescope them into the basement, transforming the hall into a ballroom (on the evening of Mr. Slatkin's concert, this feat was accomplished in slightly over an hour).

But if the architecture is traditional (with the required 21st-century bells and whistles), there's one thing about the Schermerhorn Center that is radical. Size.

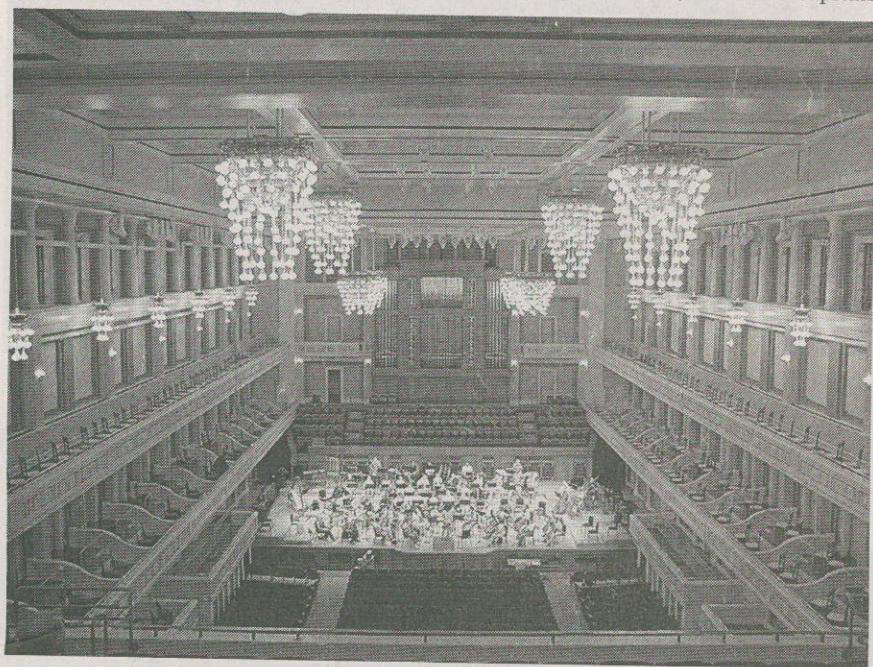
We experience music today primarily through headsets, which means it's portable and loud. Keenly aware that its audience is listening to Beethoven and LeAnn Rimes on iPods, the Nashville board purposefully chose to build a hall where the orchestral sound would have maximum "presence." At 1,860 seats, the Schermerhorn Center is almost 900 seats smaller than Avery Fisher and 400 seats smaller than the Disney Hall. The board hoped that the financial risk posed by reducing the hall's size and adding multiple concerts would be offset by increased enthusiasm for the music and higher subscriptions.

If last weekend's concerts are any indication, the board was right. This is a hall where every sound is not only heard but felt. Saturday's gala ended with the final movements of Mahler's Second Symphony. The initial consonants of mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade's pianissimo text carried throughout the hall. And later, when the orchestra was joined by its chorus on stage and brass scattered on balconies, Mahler's vision of resurrection was both explosive and ethereal. For Amy Grant's concert Sunday (during which the auditorium's stage was named for Ms. Grant in gratitude for her long support of the orchestra), many of the hall's surfaces were covered by acoustic shades. And while the auditorium looked a bit like an elegant woman who has pulled on a chador, the modification was effective for the amplified performers. The business outlook is good too: Subscriptions are up 20% from a year earlier.

But the biggest impact of the hall has been on the Nashville Symphony itself. Under Mr. Slatkin's leadership, the ensemble gave electric performances and stands poised to become one of the country's leading orchestras.

Nashville will always be the proud home of country music (the kind of music "a decent man sings when he comes home from work or stands up in church") as well as fine distilled spirits. But with the opening of the Schermerhorn Center, it's as welcome a home for Brahms, Mahler, Copland and Joan Tower too. Music City U.S.A. ain't all fiddling and whiskey sipping no more.

Mr. Linton is a composer and teaches at Middle Tennessee State University.



Ted DeDee

when it opened in 2001. The center took the architect to court (so much for harmony in the arts). When it opens Oct. 5, Miami's Carnival Center for the Performing Arts will be 20 months late. That's speedy compared to the 16 years it took to finish the \$274 million Walt Disney Hall in Los Angeles (Roy and Walt built Disneyland in a year). The Atlanta Symphony began planning its new hall four years ago. With only a third of the project's estimated \$300 million cost raised, no date for groundbreaking is even suggested.

Certainly part of the problem with these projects lies in the architects' unusual designs. Striking though it may be, it's trickier to build something inspired by crumpled aluminum foil than by a shoebox. But Nashville is a sensible city and went the shoebox route.

And what a shoebox. Architect David Schwarz has designed a neoclassical building with a central colonnaded portico and towers articulating the corners. Mr. Schwarz ran the risk faced by all neoclassi-

cal designers; their buildings can turn into lumpy monuments to sentimentality, a particular problem in Nashville since the concert hall sits catty-corner from the modernist Country Music Hall of Fame. Mr. Schwarz solved the problem by actually making the building modest and integrating Nashville elements into his design.

No matter how we might admire the sleek interiors of New York's Avery Fisher Hall or Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis, the eye—or at least my eye—eventually begs for some ornament. Mr. Schwarz answers this need by carrying his façade details into the interior, where he collaborated with the project's principal acoustician, Paul Scarbrough of Akustiks LLC. Modeled on Vienna's Musikverein, the center's Laura Turner Concert Hall is long and tall, with tiers of narrow boxes lining the sides and a clerestory allowing in natural light. Molding details honor themes of the life of Mrs. Turner, an art patron whose children donated money in her name for the hall. And the elaborate coffered ceiling, graduated wall panels, columns and pilasters serve to diffuse the sound. While these ivory and moss green elements lack the Hapsburg splendor of Vienna's gilded caryatids, their function is the same. They are also more high-tech. Many of the panels