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Marion Oliver McCaw Hall

A Tour

With

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Seattle Center Sound Department

Monday, November 17, 2003, 7:30pm

[Directions and Map to Seattle Center](#)

On the site of the old Seattle Civic Auditorium, newly transformed Marion Oliver McCaw Hall stands as the centerpiece of the performing arts community at Seattle Center. Join us at 7:30pm in the Nesholm Family Lecture Hall for a guided tour of the new facility.

Nesholm Family Lecture Hall

Marion Oliver McCall Hall

Seattle Center

Enter off Mercer Street just east of the skybridge.

7:30pm

N.B. For security reasons, you must arrive at the Nesholm Family Lecture Hall before 7:45pm. We will station someone at the doors until that time, after which time the doors will be locked and unattended.

A Bit of History

Originally constructed around 1929, the Civic Auditorium was home to the Seattle Symphony and various visiting artists. In 1956, the Civic Center bond issue was proposed and approved by voters to upgrade the Civic Auditorium into a performance space for the 1962 World's Fair. The bond issue provided \$2.75 million to the Civic Auditorium for improvements to the exterior and public areas however no improvements were made to the mechanical, technical and backstage areas.

The architect for the remodeled hall, B. Marcus Priteca (1889-1972), also known as "Uncle Benny" or "Mr. Architect" is considered to be the Dean of American Theatre architects. During his career, he designed over 150 theaters and was the primary architect for the Pantages Theatre chain. In the Northwest, he designed Pantages Theatres in Seattle(1911) and Tacoma(1918), (the Seattle Pantages later renamed the Palomar Theatre), Coliseum(1916), Orpheum(1927), the Paramount(1929) Admiral(1938) Seattle Center Opera House(1962) and Portland Civic Auditorium(1968).

More about Benny Priteca

pstos.org cinematreasures.org historylink.org

The Seattle Center Opera House

In 1959 construction began to transform the aging Civic Auditorium into a 3,100-seat Opera House in preparation for the 1962 Seattle World's Fair. The remodeled hall was a fan-shaped room, with two balconies, seating about 3,100 persons. It had a three-channel (left/center/right) sound system that was the first of its kind in the country according to the acoustician, Paul Veneklasen. Priteca convinced Veneklasen to design and incorporate variable acoustics in the hall using movable shutters (tonal walls to the cognoscenti) that opened into additional absorption in the sidewalls, reducing the RT60 to a range more suited to speech.

In the late 1970s, the sound system was modified for increased output, improved coverage, and a mixing location created at the rear of the hall. The three-channel format again remained, but the high-frequency devices were moved to carriages that could be lowered for use. This was necessitated by an obstruction added by another user. A Yamaha PM-2000-24 became the FOH console. The revamped hall served for nearly four decades as home of a revitalized Seattle Symphony and the new Seattle Opera and Pacific Northwest Ballet companies, but in the end, no amount of remodeling could disguise its inadequacies and accelerating deterioration.

Marion Oliver McCaw Hall

Under the leadership of then Mayor Paul Schell, plans were drawn up to rebuild the Opera House as part of a package of other Seattle Center improvements and new community centers. On November 2, 1999, Seattle voters approved \$72 million in bonds, including \$38 million dedicated to the Opera House, in anticipation of an additional \$90 million in private and community contributions.

The former Arena was remodeled to become the Mercer Arts Arena so it could serve as an interim home for the Opera and Ballet during reconstruction of the Opera House. Bruce, Craig, John, and Keith McCaw of McCaw Cellular Communications gave \$20 million to the project, the largest arts or cultural capital gift ever made in the region, to recognize their mother's lifelong arts support in the community. They named the hall after her -- Marion Oliver McCaw Garrison (Garrison is her current married name). The Kreielsheimer Foundation gave \$10 million, and the first floor garden in the lobby is named the Kreielsheimer Promenade.

The architectural team for the new hall was LMN Architects, led by Owen Richards and Mark

Reddington. The \$127 million refurbishment saved about 30 percent of the original building, part of that being the old ceiling. The rebuilding of the auditorium improved the sight lines for the audience by staggering the seats and steepening the rake (the angle of grade of the auditorium floor). To improve acoustics and to make the performance space more intimate, the hall's side walls were brought 30 feet closer together. The Opera House, although adequate for ballet and opera acoustics, had many weak spots in certain seating areas, and did not work well for symphonies performing on the stage. Jaffe Holden Acoustics of Norwalk, Connecticut, designed the acoustics.

Besides the new auditorium, McCaw Hall refurbishments include a five-story lobby with a floor-to-ceiling curved glass wall overlooking the Seattle Center and Mercer Street, an indoor garden on the main floor, state-of-the-art backstage technology, an improved backstage and orchestra pit, a new lecture hall, a coat check, a gift shop, and an indoor-outdoor café. Some heating, ventilation, wiring, and plumbing systems that dated back to the 1928 Civic Auditorium were replaced, and the new building has the latest in seismic safety and disabled patron access. The new hall also increased the number of women's restroom stalls from 35 to 90 -- a welcome relief.

In this latest remodel, the building's sound systems finally got the updates they deserved. The three channel format was preserved, but with multiple full-range systems covering the space for each channel, stage lip and balcony fill channels, a multitude of individually addressable surround speakers that can be used as individual effects speakers or as part of a 5.1 surround system, multiple subwoofers, and numerous backstage and lobby systems. A Yamaha PM1D with dual control surfaces serves as the FOH and monitor console.

Interesting Links

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Our meetings are open to anyone interested in Audio. AES membership is NOT required for you to attend our meetings.

Last modified 11/11/2003.