

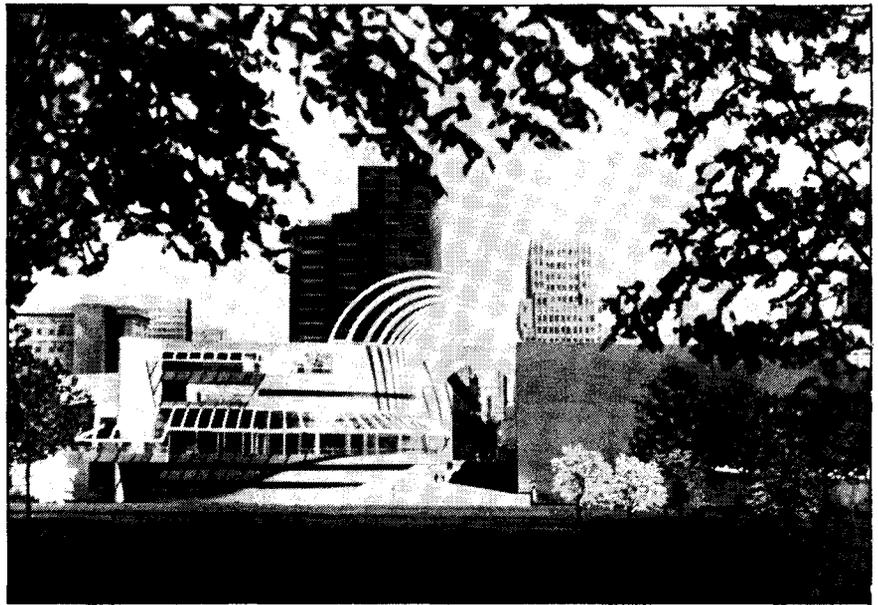
DENVER'S "SURROUND" CONCERT HALL: IS IT A GOOD IDEA?

by Irving Kolodin

FOR THE itinerant music critic, Denver has long been a place to visit on the way to someplace else in Colorado: to Central City for opera; to Aspen for high-level (7,850 feet) chamber music; to Boulder for seminars at the University of Colorado; and to Colorado Springs for one of Dick Gibson's jazz weekends. The recent "grand opening" of Boettcher Concert Hall has created a new focus of interest within Denver itself—a palace for music amid new 40-story office buildings and old joints, in a city long famous for fresh air but now beset by smog problems.

Ambitious as it is, Boettcher Concert Hall is only the first in a series of developments intended to establish Denver as an arts, as well as a sports and a money-minded, capital of the New West. The hall is the cornerstone in the evolving Denver Center for the Performing Arts, which will include theater and film centers, all connected by a huge, glass-roofed Galleria clearly related to the one in Milan. Boettcher (so styled because of major financing by a foundation bearing a name famous in Colorado's history) shows enterprise in design as well as careful attention to an all-important detail for which concert halls are famous or infamous—acoustics.

Internal appearance takes precedence here over standard considerations of good sound. What greets the visitor is a mammoth enlargement of what is well known as theater-in-the-round. Why such a nearly circular, but



The Denver Center—"A music palace amid new buildings and old joints."

asymmetric, layout of 2,700 seats in a hall for music? In order, says one of its planning participants, to promote informality, to get away from the long-time convention of a rectangular space in which one quarter is devoted to a platform for the performers and the other three quarters to the audience.

My first reaction on viewing a hall in which the banks of seats on four sides are surmounted by an encircling "ring" under the ceiling (for sound dispersion) was: "What a place for a prize-fight!" But my second reaction, after seeing a rehearsal, and my third, after

attending a concert, were more sympathetic to the basic "surround" idea, if not wholly convinced by its implementation.

This long stride in the right direction may be credited to acoustician Christopher Jaffe. Deprived of the rear wall that acts as a reflective surface in most concert halls and of the side surfaces that give the listener a sense of immersion in a tonal bath, Jaffe has decreed the creation, here and there, of baffles to break up the sound waves. Below the stage he has placed an open space (dubbed a "moat") to build up the reso-

nance of such low-toned instruments as the cellos and basses. Above all floats a cluster of large acrylic disks (106 by his count) that may be raised or lowered within a range of eight feet.

What is the outcome? Considering that the Denver Symphony—good as it has become under the able direction of Brian Priestman—is not one of our superorchestras, the quality of sound heard in the new hall was uniformly pleasant. But the quantity of sound, especially at top and bottom, left some details unheard. When one member of the string section was asked whether the players could readily hear one another onstage—an all-important necessity in a good hall—he said, “It’s better than it was before, now that they have raised the reflectors, but it still isn’t what it ought to be.” Queried on this and other points, Jaffe replied, “It’s a matter of trade-offs: You get more intimacy in this kind of a room, but you can’t arrange the reflectors outside of a certain pattern or they block the vision of some members of the audience.”

The “grand opening concert” (as it was billed) added something not previously available for evaluation—an audience. The festive mood was summarized by an elderly, well-dressed man who said to his wife, as they (and I) were approaching the entrance, “I’ve been waiting thirty years for the symphony to have a decent home.” As the audience assembled, it brought with it an animation, a sense of physical pres-

ence, a diversity of appearance, to replace the hall’s previously unvaried pattern of terra-cotta-colored chairs with their blond plywood backs (for sound dispersion).

Music finally attained its proper place (after speeches in which “magnificent” was as redundant as “ladies and gentlemen”) with a lovingly shaped performance of Ralph Vaughan Williams’s “Serenade to Music.” This composition, curiously, was also on the opening program of Lincoln Center’s Philharmonic Hall (in 1962). In Denver (with the choral portions sung by groups from the universities of Colorado and of Denver), it sounded better. Then Van Cliburn came on as a sonorous, if less than spontaneous, performer of the solo part in Tchaikovsky’s B-flat-minor piano concerto. Finally, Priestman conducted a meticulously prepared, admirably energetic playing of the Brahms Symphony No. 4 (in E minor).

Here the realities settled firmly into place. For a publicized amount of \$13 million (against the \$27.4 million expended to build Philharmonic Hall in Lincoln Center and to revise its interior to sound as it does today as Avery Fisher Hall), Denver has acquired a civic asset of the first importance. But it hasn’t resolved my reservations about a surround hall. It should be great for soloists, particularly pianists. Singers, I am told, will have to accommodate themselves to performing for the audience in back as well as the one in

front. But side and back views of orchestral players trying to make a living contribute nothing at all to musical enjoyment.

Why then the surround hall? In all probability, because some architects love to innovate rather than to duplicate and also because changing conditions have altered freedom of choice. In the nineteenth century, interiors were constructed of wood and plaster, which, in a well-shaped room, proved to have an uncommon affinity for sound. Under today’s building codes and fire prevention regulations, other materials take precedence.

So far, the best precedent for Boettcher Hall in Denver is the Philharmonie in Berlin, home of the Berlin Philharmonic, whose lifetime conductor is Herbert von Karajan. In a conversation in Salzburg a year ago, Karajan recounted the circumstances in which the Philharmonie had been converted from a tolerably good hall into an excellent one. In planning for a series of TV films, the director had asked that the strings be arranged in tiers, rather than having the musicians sit on the flat stage as is customary. “The change in sound was sensational,” said Karajan. “It was so good we adapted the same arrangement for our concerts.” In other words, no hall is ever finished until all its possibilities have been exploited. Good as Boettcher is, there is still work to be done.

Denver papers, please copy. ●



Concert-hall-in-the-round—“Internal appearance takes precedence over standard considerations of good sound.”

Fred Thornbort