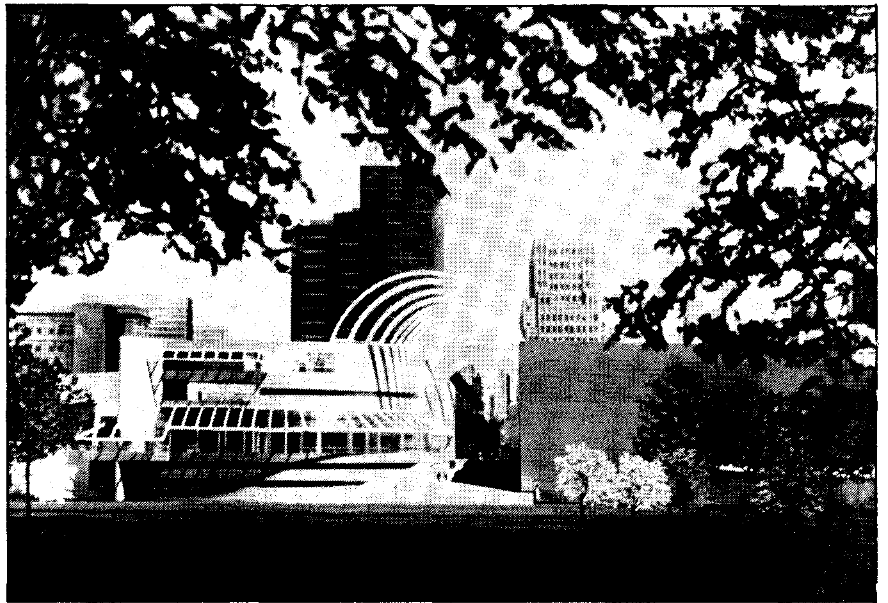
DENVER'S "SURROUND" CONCERT HALL: IS IT A GOOD IDEA?

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.



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

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 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-

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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 presence, 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. ◉

Fred Thunhart

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

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THE MOVIES

The Worst Years of Our Lives

by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

I TAKE COMFORT in the report that we can expect a half dozen or more movies in the next year about the Vietnam War. So many of our national institutions, beginning with the executive and legislative branches of government, have agreed to drive the war out of our consciousness that we must be grateful to Hollywood for its willingness to stir repressed memories of that awful American adventure. Indeed, the whole period of the Sixties has acquired with extraordinary rapidity the aura of some remote, exotic, self-contained time—as if the Vietnam War had not ended only three years ago, with President Ford pleading for more military aid to enable General Thieu to keep on fighting and with Governor Carter of Georgia supporting his request.

Coming Home (United Artists) is a project of Jane Fonda's and obviously antiwar in its outlook. What other position can one possibly take about Vietnam? The problem, however, is to present the position without 20/20 hindsight and ideological self-righteousness. Things were not always that clear at the time. When Vice-President Mondale recently described the late Hubert Humphrey as the "conscience of the nation," it was a shuddering experience for those who recalled Humphrey's impassioned defense of the Vietnam War. Still, the dramatist must recognize the realities of the age. As the historian Frederic William Maitland once said, "It is very hard to remember that events now long in the past were once in the future." Another problem is how to translate general attitudes toward the war into persuasive human situations. And yet another problem is in deciding whether one is protesting the war in Vietnam or war in general.

The antiwar film is hardly a new genre. The revulsion against the First World War produced some of the best films of the Twenties and Thirties. The genre developed its own stereotypes, some of which are reproduced in *Coming Home.* One of the memorable scenes in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for example, has a German teacher working his class of teen-agers into militarist frenzy, only to be followed by Lew Ayres, the weary soldier on leave from the trenches, telling the bitter and disillusioning truths. In *Coming Home*, a marine recruiting sergeant whips the students up, and Jon Voight, the paralyzed veteran, cools them off.

Coming Home's basic plot is itself a stereotype, and not even of the antiwar film. A wife falls in love with a wounded non-com while her officer-husband is away fighting on the front. Such things have happened and brought much pain with them; but this is not a plot that connects up terribly well with an antiwar message, even if, as in *Coming Home*, the paraplegic veteran is a dove and the absent husband, a hawk. The attempt to demonstrate a connection by making the gentle dove a better lover than the macho hawk only strengthens the flavor of falsity in the film. The capacity to induce orgasms is not necessarily correlated with the wisdom or folly of one's politics.

Coming Home reunites Hal Ashby, the director, and Haskell Wexler, the cinematographer, who last year joined their talents in that lovely and underrated movie about Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*. Jane Fonda is superb in the central role. She is her father's daughter all right—a fine, honest actress in the romantic naturalist style, transcending the rather glib images (new hairdo; revolt against the editorial restrictions of the newspaper put out at the post by the officers' wives) through which the film depicts her growth into maturity and independence. Both Jon Voight as the paraplegic and Bruce Dern as the husband are arresting but flawed—Voight not quite able to overcome the fact that his part as written is too good to be true; Dern so far into his instability act before he goes to Vietnam that the war's supposedly deranging impact on him does not work. The script is careless. Even Fonda cannot make altogether convincing either her strangely unemotional parting with her lover or her professions, before and after, that she really wants her husband.

Nor is Ashby's direction firm and consistent enough to persuade one to accept the implausibilities of the script. He succumbs to a couple of irritating tricks in the film. One is heavy crosscutting to hammer home ironic points: Dern jogging to prepare for Vietnam while wounded veterans in a hospital crawl miserably around; Voight attacking the war before the high school class while Dern wades into the South Pacific like Fredric March at the end of *A Star Is Born*. Another is an intrusive sound track that often drowns the dialogue in the querulous rock songs of the period. The climactic scene, in which the three at last confront each other, is badly botched, with Fonda required to stand uncomfortably through shot after shot holding her arms out to her husband, who meanwhile feebly flourishes a bayoneted rifle.

Still, for all its speciousness, *Coming Home* seems to me a valiant though stammering attempt to speak to profound national perplexity and guilt. Its most powerful scenes have no explicit argument at all: They simply display post-Vietnam life in the Veterans Administration hospital. Insofar as the film argues, it says that war is bad because it kills, cripples, and brutalizes people—perhaps not a politically sophisticated contention but entirely the sort of case that the nonpolitical persons portrayed in the film would naturally make, and therefore entirely right in the context. Too broadly stated, this contention would be an argument against all wars. Yet Voight in his most comprehensive disquisition on the subject qualifies his repugnance over killing for his country by saying that "there isn't enough reason for it" in Vietnam, which implies quite correctly that better reasons might alter the problem.

Coming Home, while hard on the surface, is soft at the core. Nonetheless, more than any other fiction film, it recalls, however imperfectly, the horrid waste and destructiveness of the most shameful war in American history, the worst years of our lives. I salute Jane Fonda for insisting that it be made. ◉

Fraser Young
Literary Crypt No. 106

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. *Answer on page 51.*

C T S C X C D Y Y I J T B I T D B M D A R C D Y A T K J-Q J X B R X X.

— Q X T R C T

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