

# A Musical Meeting Place

The Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center is a reflection of La Jolla's community spirit

By: David Barbour





**T**he community of La Jolla, California, already known for its vibrant arts scene, got a vital new addition in April with the opening of the Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center. Conceived as the new home of the La Jolla Music Society, it provides the downtown district known as La Jolla Village with a useful and ornamental venue for a variety of presentations. Costing \$82,000,000—all but \$700,000 of which had been raised by opening day—the 42,000-sq.-ft. building is named for the late philanthropist Conrad Prebys, who pledged \$5 million for construction and \$10 million for the center's endowment fund.

The team behind the project includes Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Epstein Joslin Architects, Theatre Consultants Collaborative, and Nagata Acoustics, the latter working with Robert F. Mahoney & Associates.

Joseph Wong Design Associates served as architect of record. Together, they have created a distinctively styled building that reflects the surrounding community and is well-suited to serve the needs of La Jolla Music Society. Indeed, it presents that organization with many new opportunities.

### **Finding a home**

For many years, La Jolla Music Society presented at Sherwood Auditorium in the town's Museum of Contemporary Arts. When the auditorium was eliminated as part of a renovation, the search was on to find a venue that the society could call its own. "They needed a place for their Summerfest, a chamber music festival that has been running many, many years," says Alan Joslin, principal, Epstein Joslin. "They also wanted to make sure that the building had features that allowed for broader range of performances. So, in addition to their main hall, they decided to build a second venue, one which would be smaller in scale and would offer space for music for younger audiences, children's and youth programs—in other words, very much a multipurpose room for 150 audience members." Diversity was the hallmark of the opening weekend, which featured the classical violinist Hilary Hahn, the ukulele virtuoso Jake Shimabukuro, the dancer Lil Buck (a specialist in the street dance form known as Jookin), the pianist Inon Barnatan, a chamber music quartet, the pop singer Seal, and the neo-swing band The Hot Sardines.



Photo: Darren Bradley



After a search, a footprint was found on Fay Avenue, on the site of a former one-story retail building. “They wanted to remain in the Village of La Jolla,” Joslin says, noting that, during construction, the supermarket across the street was converted into The Lot, a cinema/bar/café, which shows a combination of major studio and indie releases; the synergy between The Conrad and The Lot adds much to the neighborhood’s allure.

According to the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, “One unforeseen factor—which added \$1 million to the budget—is that the property The Conrad occupies is at a low point where rainwater accumulates from both directions. This necessitated constructing a giant ‘bathtub’ under the main floor seating area of the Baker-Baum Concert Hall to prevent flooding —although, in this case, the ‘bathtub’ is designed to remain dry and keep water out, rather than to be a receptacle for it. ‘There’s a huge drain line that runs diagonally through The Conrad site,’ Joslin said. ‘So we had to negotiate with the city of La Jolla to build over it.’”

Seen from the street, The Conrad Prebys is a sleek low-rise structure; thanks to municipal zoning rules, the building could not be higher than 30’ tall. The middle section, which includes the entrance, appears to consist of wooden pavilions, striking something of a tropical theme. “They may look like wood, but they are built of tubes of terra cotta, suspended in a steel frame,” Joslin says.

The exterior also serves another function, Joslin adds, “We organized the complex with the two performance ven-

ues [the Baker-Baum Concert Hall and the JAI, the multi-purpose space] across from each other, with a courtyard between them, which would function as a public space. We decided to close in the courtyard, but the terra cotta exterior has a permeability to it; it’s a kind of screen between the street and the courtyard. The concept of the tubes, or slats, was inspired by the Botanical Building in Balboa Park. It was a wonderful precedent to create an outdoor lobby; it’s rather fun to see people mingling behind the screen.”

To the left of the terra cotta pavilions is a white stucco structure, which houses the JAI. Its look is, in part, Joslin says, a tribute to Irving Gill (1870 – 1936), a noted local architect whose style had a major influence on the urban styles of San Diego and La Jolla. His extant buildings include the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, La Jolla Woman’s Club, and the George W. Marston House, the latter two of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The exterior of the JAI, Joslin adds, “is meant to recall some of Gill’s style in a way that is consistent with the whole.”

Delving further into the issue of influences, Joslin says, “The nature of the architecture in La Jolla is wildly eclectic, but we found that the buildings that have aged really well are in the Spanish style, with stucco walls and terra cotta tile walls. It’s also a style that people recognize as part of the city’s history; examples include the Atheneum and some of the churches in the area.”







Above and opposite: "We combined the shoebox and opera forms," Joslin says of the Baker-Baum. Surrounding the attractively curved horseshoe auditorium is a concrete shoebox. Separating them is a wood lattice, which defines the room visually and has acoustical implications. "The sound goes through the slatted walls and meets the concrete of the shoebox."

### Inside the Baker-Baum

The interior of the Baker-Baum Concert Hall, named after donors Stephen Baum and his wife Brenda Baker, is horseshoe-shaped, with seating on two levels. The overall design is more complex than it looks, however. "An acoustically natural sound needs a classic shoebox shape," Joslin says. "But it creates less-than-desirable side balconies in which the audience members are oriented perpendicular to the stage. We wanted to create a more intimate, lyric opera seating arrangement that would allow people to focus on the stage." Therefore, he notes, "We combined the shoebox and opera forms." Thus, surrounding the attractively curved horseshoe auditorium is a concrete shoebox. Separating them is a wood lattice, which defines the room visually and has acoustical implications. "The sound goes through the slatted walls and meets the concrete of the shoebox."

According to information supplied by Nagata, "The basic shape of the hall is a rectangular prism, with a rounded balcony at the far end of the hall. The ceiling slopes gently

upward from the stage to the balcony and along the cross-section of the hall; the ceiling is one large convex shape. The audience is laid out in a compact, yet comfortable, arrangement at the center of the hall.

"The audience and stage are enclosed by an acoustically transparent wooden 'nest.' The main outer volume of the hall is formed by rough plaster on heavy concrete blocks and is washed by color-changing LED cyc lights. This additional volume helps expand the space available for the necessary early reflections and the large volume necessary for richness or warmth. Behind the wooden nest walls, surrounding the stage on three sides, are the soffits, which send supporting reflections back to the performers.

"Large areas of sound-absorbing curtains are suspended on rails in this interstitial volume, allowing the hall to be prepared for amplified performances without making any visual changes to the hall. The front of the stage can take several different configurations for increased flexibility, and the upstage wall can slide away in order to present cinematic events on a large screen, or a scrim or a cyclorama





The Baker-Baum is set up for video projections, which can be used to enhance musical performances.

can be hung.”

Motoo Komoda, of Nagata, says, “From the beginning, we aimed to have a compact and very intimate space for performers and audience. We shared this concept with the architects, and they designed a horseshoe shape for the interior. But for the acoustics we needed a tall ceiling and as much room as possible.” Indeed, the space between the slatted and concrete walls is big enough to serve as a circulating space. (The room seats 513, an increase from the 400 at Sherwood Auditorium; seating is by Ducharme.)

Daniel Beckmann, formerly of Nagata and now principal of Beckmann Acoustics, says, “The majority of the room’s acoustic isolation is done with the 8” concrete block wall, with a 4” brick layer on the outside to provide additional isolation from street noise.” Overall, he says, “It’s not in a particularly noisy location. There are no major air routes to contend with and the Village is a relaxed seaside town.”

Two hundred and twenty-six air vents located under the seating provide circulation to the room. Beckmann says, “The mechanical room is below the main audience cham-

ber, and there is an under-floor plenum for air supply.”

“Yasuhiro Toyota, whose work is extraordinary, put a lot of emphasis on the quality of the stage floor,” Joslin told the *Union-Tribune*. “It was built almost like a Japanese temple, with lots of beams and a 2’-thick air space. We used Alaskan yellow cedar. The stage allows the musicians to subtly vibrate with the music, as they feel it through the floor.”

Jason Prichard and Curtis Kasefang, of Theatre Consultants Collaborative, specified technical amenities and gear to make the space truly flexible. (“It had to function as more than a concert hall,” Kasefang says.) One of the key features of the Baker-Baum, Kasefang notes, is “a tension wire grid that is not like any other.” Prichard adds, “It consists of diamond-shaped and triangular panels and it is bent to create a kind of bowl shape.” It functions as a visual ceiling, providing access to performance lighting and rigging and allowing for acoustic transparency.

Because it is a concert hall, Prichard adds, “There’s no stage house. The upstage wall is about 30’ from the edge

of the stage and there is room for three pipes on which to hang backdrops and screens.” Down front is a forestage lift that can extend the stage by 6.5'; three adjustable step wagons can be deployed on the lift to connect the stage to the audience. Also, rows of seating can be added, or a space can be opened up to make room for an orchestra pit. The wagon, rigging, and acoustical drapes were supplied by Las Vegas-based Protech.

In order to facilitate dance productions, Kasefang notes, “The side doors onstage pivot 90°, revealing positions for sidelight.” Additional lighting positions are found overhead and on the upstage wall. Kasefang says that the lighting package, which was chosen to meet the building’s NC-15 noise criteria, includes ETC Desire D40 downlights, Altman Lighting Phoenix ellipsoidals, ETC ColorSource Cycs (approximately 100 units distributed throughout the room to wash the ribs of the walls), High End Systems SolaFrame Theatre LED moving heads, ETC Source Four Series2 Lustrs for color-changing front light, Robert Juliat Oz followspots, and Rosco Cubes, the latter to highlight the chevrons placed on the wall’s grillwork. An ETC Ion console controls stage lighting. House lighting is run using an ETC Mosaic controller with a Crestron interface. (Other lighting gear includes Lex Products power and control cables, and accessories from Altman, City Theatrical, Doug Fleenor Design, and The Light Source.)

A Protech custom chain hoist system with CM hoists is used to lift the portable Da-Lite screen dedicated to cap-

turing the pianist’s hands as (s)he plays; it can also hoist Meyer Sound LINA line arrays used for amplified sound. (Other Meyer gear includes UPQ-1Ps, UPJ-1XPs, UPJunior XPs for delays, and 900-LFC subs.) Meyer MM-4XP surround speakers are embedded in the grillage surrounding the room, along with a left-center-right Acheron cinema system, also supplied by Meyer. Additional audio gear includes Shure ULXS wireless mics, Countryman E2 headset mics, Yamaha CL3 and CL5 mixers, and a Clear-Com HelixNet intercom system.

Projectors for showing video and film include Christie LWU720i-D and Digital Projection Titan units, along with a Strong MDI custom motorized screen. Installed lighting gear was supplied by Berg Electric, the fixture package was supplied by Production Advantage, and sound gear was supplied by Sound Image. Other amenities include a Harlequin Marley dance floor.

### The JAI and courtyard

The JAI, named for donors Irwin Jacobs and his wife Joan, can accommodate 116 people in table arrangements, 170 seated in rows, and 300 standing. It also features floor-to-ceiling windows. About the latter, Joslin says, “We had just finished the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport, Massachusetts,” a project done in collaboration with Theatre Consultants Collaborative, which features an upstage wall made of glass, offering a view of the Atlantic Ocean. “It was just wonderful to see daytime turn to dusk



This drawing shows the full layout, with the Baker-Baum and JAI separated by the Wu Tsai Courtyard and Garden, the latter fronted by distinctive-looking pavilions.





The JAI set up for a special event.



Steps leading up to the Belanich Terrace.

during the concerts. I was excited about the notion of people walking up and down the street, seeing performances taking place.” He notes that room is set up with a cinema screen and bar, for screenings and various social events. “Sometimes they fill it with lounge furniture,” he adds, “and it functions as an extension of the outdoor lobby.”

Kasefang notes that the JAI has a lighting package of ETC Desire D40s for downlight washes onstage, D22s as table spots, Source Four Series 2 Lustr front and side lights and SolaFrame Theatres, along with a d&b audiotechnik loudspeaker system, including d&b

audiotechnik 24C column speakers, B4 subs, and 10D amplifiers. Prichard notes that the room also features a set of acoustical drapes.

The Wu Tsai Courtyard and Garden, which separates the two performance venues, “is also used often for events,” Joslin says. “One evening, it was filled with beautifully decorated dining tables. Dance performances have taken place there, too.” The space has an upper balcony, the Belanich Terrace, which is used as a podium for DJs and public address and also a space for cocktail parties. “It really is their third performance venue,” Joslin notes. Kasefang points out that a show relay system delivers audio to loudspeakers placed in the surrounding shrubbery. Production lighting in the courtyard uses ETC D40-XT Lustr+ wash fixtures and SGM G-Spots for specials and moving lights. Seven video screens publicize coming attractions. Komoda notes that the Wu Tsai Courtyard performs a vital function, creating a natural sound isolation between the Baker-Baum and JAI.

Ancillary spaces include rehearsal rooms, a kitchen, storage, staff offices, and the Atkinson Room, which functions as a donors’ lounge.

“The La Jolla Music Society is made up of community members, so it is a place of identity for the community,” Joslin says. “It’s different from a performance venue that has everybody and anybody moving through it.” It seems guaranteed to be a musical meeting place that will serve La Jolla for years to come. 🎵



Wu Tsai Courtyard and Garden.