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PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID WARELY

The Weill Hall interior, including a view from the lawn through the opened rear section

THE GREEN MUSIC CENTER: MORE THAN A CONCERT HALL

The new Sonoma County venue is finally ready to open. With its unique performance space, a partnership with Carnegie Hall and facilities for working with at-risk children, it's set to transform academic and cultural life, says **Jason Victor Serinus**

On the edge of the Sonoma State University (SSU) campus, in the fertile wine country north of San Francisco, the world-class Donald and Maureen Green Music Center – new home of the Santa Rosa Symphony (SRS) – has taken form. Modelled on the Seiji Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood, its 1406-seat Joan and Sanford I Weill Hall is set to open on September 29.

Conceived to serve university and community alike, the Center was designed by the same team that made Ozawa Hall – the firms of architect William Rawn and acoustician Larry Kirkegaard. Its architecture and colour scheme reflect the golden summer grasses on the rolling hills surrounding the campus, with a respectful nod to the wetlands of adjacent Copeland Creek. The rear wall of the traditional shoebox-shaped Weill Hall opens on to a lawn with terraced patio to accommodate an outdoor audience. When viewed from the stage, the hall's rear balcony above the opening makes for a thrilling perspective, dominated by the warm, earth tones of the handcrafted European steamed beech wood chairs and acoustic-tuning shades.

Near the lawn is the 150,000 sq ft Weill Commons, on which an outdoor pavilion is to be built. Also in the complex are the Trione courtyard, a restaurant and patio, and a conference room – all with an *echt* Sonoma County feeling of warmth and spaciousness.

Opposite the main building is the new home of the SSU music department, which houses the 250-seat Schroeder Hall. Still under construction, this second gem of a venue was facilitated by a donation from Jean Schulz, widow of cartoonist Charles Schulz, whose Peanuts character the hall's name memorialises. Designed primarily for smaller-sized concerts, as well as community performances and lectures, Schroeder Hall will include a rare Brombaugh tracker organ.



'The Santa Rosa Symphony will enhance itself in this beautiful jewel. It's an opportunity for us to fine-tune and find equilibrium' — Bruno Ferrandis, SRS conductor

GENESIS

The idea for SSU's new music venue arose in 1994, when the university's president Ruben Armiñana returned from a visit to Tanglewood and declared, 'Something like this belongs in California. We have better weather in the summer – cooler and dry. A music centre like this would fulfil the role of the arts in a public institution. I want one.'

In 1996, Donald Green, owner of Advanced Fibre Communications, donated \$5m for the construction of a choral hall. A year later, after he and his wife Maureen had visited Tanglewood, they donated another \$5m for the Tanglewood-inspired music centre. Two years later, the SRS came on board as a partner. Groundbreaking took place in 2000; but the post-9/11 downturn caused donations to drop precipitously, and construction slowed down. Although the SSU's new music department building opened in 2008, and the first student concert took place in 2010, it was not until Joan and Sanford I Weill bought a home in the area and donated \$12m that SSU could complete work on the concert hall and adjoining lawn and commons area.

THE FIRST SEASON

So rich is the programming for the opening season (and the promise of the Green Music Center itself) that two months before single ticket sales began, well over 2000 season subscriptions had already been sold. The Grand Opening weekend begins with a gala recital by pianist Lang Lang, whose early exploratory visit to the hall helped to convince Weill to invest his \$12m. Lang Lang declared the hall 'extraordinary' – he was 'very impressed with its acoustics and overall beautiful look'; and Weill, spurred on by a second thumbs-up from Yo-Yo Ma, hatched an ambitious plan that reaches far beyond the academic community.

Day two of the opening weekend begins with an early choral sunrise concert, continues with Bruno Ferrandis conducting the SRS, and concludes with Alison Krauss & Union Station featuring Jerry Douglas. All events are open to both the 1406 patrons within Weill Hall and up to 15,000 outdoor attendees.

This is but the start. The ensuing months promise many more riches. But concerts are just one facet of the Green Music Center. Thanks to the collective vision of its instigators and supporters, it holds the promise to transform virtually every aspect of academic and cultural life in the county and beyond.

THE CARNEGIE HALL COMPONENT

Beginning in June 2013, Carnegie Hall will launch a new partnership with SSU and the SRS. The venture begins with a year-long artists-in-residence programme at SSU by a group of young professional musicians, all alumni of the Academy programme of Carnegie Hall, the Juilliard School and the Weill Music Institute in partnership with the New York City Department of Education – the first time that Academy alumni have initiated such an extended residency in a university setting. Complementing this is a five-year pilot partnership between the SRS and Carnegie Hall's Link Up National programme, which will see the creation of Simple Strings, modelled on Venezuela's El Sistema. This promises daily afterschool violin and viola instruction for Sonoma County schoolchildren aged six to 11. Each year will culminate in a live student performance at Weill Hall with the SRS.

IN TUNE

Several months before the opening, a packed audience of SRS subscribers attended an open rehearsal at Weill Hall. The evening also served as Kirkegaard's first opportunity to tune the venue with a full house, and to judge the sound as the audience diminished during the course of the evening. While marvelling at the clarity of Jean Ferrandis's flute in Ibert's Concerto, which maintained its warmth and resonance far back into the hall, I gained a greater understanding of how an acoustician must take every element into account, including the manner in which acoustic banners contract and the depth of lighting wells in the ceiling.

Santa Rosa conductor Bruno Ferrandis, brother of Jean, expounded on what the move means for the orchestra: 'It's very difficult to go from an acoustic with innumerable problems to one that is incredibly clear to the audience. It's like a tennis player being given a new racket or a new ball. We are going to enhance ourselves in this beautiful jewel. The full bloom and quality of our orchestra, and also the faults, will appear. It's an opportunity for us to fine-tune and find equilibrium.'

Weill explained the Center's wider vision: to transform SSU's 3200 dorm rooms – currently empty during the summer – into residences for performing-arts camps that will work with at-risk children from all over northern California. 'We'd invite some of the players from the San Francisco Symphony or SRS, or artists like Lang Lang who really care, to spend time with them so that they begin to understand a little bit about their culture,' he says. 'They'd leave feeling better about what life is about, and more motivated to learning in school so they can have the opportunities that America presents to people if they know what they are.' And you thought it was just another state-of-the-art concert hall. **G**

PICK OF THE OPENING SEASON

September 29, 7pm

In the first opportunity to enjoy the new hall from both inside and out, Lang Lang plays Mozart Sonatas Nos 4, 5 and 8 and Chopin Ballades Nos 1-4 – sure to be charged with excitement.

October 27, 8pm

An All-American Celebration with the International Contemporary Ensemble. John Adams conducts his *Son of Chamber Symphony* and is also joined by Jeffrey Kahane for Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

November 20, 8pm

Mezzo Joyce DiDonato joins Il Compleso Barocco, conducted by Alan Curtis, in 'Drama Queens': a programme of arias sung by queens memorialised by composers including Handel, Monteverdi, Gluck and Haydn.

April 21 2013, 3pm

In her much-anticipated northern Californian debut, rising mezzo Tara Erraught performs Wolf, Schumann and Rossini.

gmc.sonoma.edu/events