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Think Tank

Frank Gehry's New World Symphony Orchestra campus is as engaging as it is inspired. Carol Kino gets a closer look.

January 25 sees the opening of the first home for the New World Symphony Orchestra, America's first full-time orchestral academy. While the symphony is the brainchild of Michael Tilson Thomas, the new building is the work of Pritzker Architecture Prize laureate Frank Gehry, the legendary talent behind the soaring, titanium-clad wings of the Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain and the dramatic stainless steel curves of the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. What does Gehry have in store for Miami Beach? We decided to find out.

How does this building differ from those you've designed in the past?

It's in Miami.

So you've never worked here before?

Nope. But I take great pains to respond to the locale. This wasn't the site for a Bilbao-type building or a Disney Hall. Michael saw it as a very neutral building that you could pass by and get engaged with.

It seems such a departure for you, though—all the expressive architecture you're known for is hidden inside the building, while the exterior is almost minimalist.

It depends which building you're talking about. I'm a contextualist. We did a building in Berlin, the DZ Bank, that's also a box with the architecture inside, which you see through the windows. There, we had a narrow site and the city had very strict building constraints. Here, we had a very tight budget so we've put the money into the auditorium. It was Michael's idea to put a screen on the outside so that people in the park could witness what was going on inside.

Disney Hall is renowned for its incredible acoustics. Did the techniques you developed for that project inform this one?

There's an element of acoustics that is psychological. My acoustician [Yasuhisa Toyota of Nagata Acoustics] and I call it psycho-acoustics. I don't mean psycho like the Alfred Hitchcock movie—it's about feeling and relationships and the perception of warmth and clarity and community. If people feel they're hearing better, they do. One of the biggest issues is the relationship between audience and performer. If you feel comfortable with the performer and they with you, there's a give and take. The performer plays better, the audience feels it, and then the performer plays even better. So the room has to feel comfortable. The normal way to do it is to make everything wood, like we did for Disney Hall. But it's not the only way. And for Miami we wanted an all-white interior. It sort of goes with the town.

Not hot pink?

It could've been hot pink, absolutely—and it still can be. We've got projectors all around the room, so you can make it hot pink with light. The projectors also allow the conductor to explore the visual side of music. You could do excerpts from an opera and project a stage set. Or you could bring in a video artist, like Tal Rosner, as they're doing for the opening concert, and project colors and patterns. You could have pictures of Mahler and Mozart. You could project a firestorm, water or clouds. You could do a lot of things—and people will. Michael will also use the projectors and the building's Internet 2 connection to teach other student orchestras around the world. It's something he's been doing already, using a small television screen. I think it will become a very important music teaching tool that could have major repercussions in many other fields. And that's the heart and soul of who Michael Tilson Thomas is. I've known him since he was eight years old, and



Frank Gehry


he's a born musical genius and teacher.

Back then you were his babysitter, weren't you?

Yeah, and at eight he was talking the talk already. By 11 or something he was already studying music at USC. He's a unique talent and we've tried to create a tool for him to teach other people. Michael is already very happy—he keeps calling and telling me so. It's a little embarrassing! He keeps saying, "You wouldn't believe what I just did!" But there are things that room can do that he doesn't even understand yet.

Like what?

He could have a battle of orchestras, with four playing together, and he could see them all. It's not just a box; it's an amazing tool. Think of it as a living thing—there's nothing static about it, inside or outside. And as it grows this will become more apparent.



“It’s not just a box... Think of it as a living thing—there’s nothing static about it, inside or outside.”
—Frank Gehry

PHOTOS BY CLAUDIA URIBE; MELISSA MAJCHRZAK (OPPOSITE)