Finally, a Concert Hall Worthy of Finnish Music

A year after its opening, the acoustically pristine Helsinki Music Center has become the heart of Finland’s vibrant music scene.

By Wif Stenger
SO FAR, THERE HAVE BEEN FEW QUIBBLES ABOUT THE long-awaited Helsinki Music Center and those that have come up have primarily concerned its humdrum looks. Those who grumble about the complex’s appearance are missing the point. Everything in this building has been designed—in obsessive detail—to serve sound. All else is secondary.

“Couldn’t they have made a compromise,” the skeptics ask, “something that both looked good and sounded good?” The answer to that question stands just a few hundred yards away: Finlandia Hall.

Architect Alvar Aalto’s last major work, Finlandia Hall was completed in 1971, a few years before his death. Though graceful, it soon proved to have many problems, including expensive marble slabs that could not withstand the Helsinki winters and acoustics that horrified performers and audiences alike. Despite repeated efforts to fix both problems over the years, the venue has remained something of a white elephant.

Twenty years later, officials at the music-driven nation’s main conservatory, the Sibelius Academy, began to discuss the idea of a purpose-built music complex in the city center. They soon invited the city’s two orchestras, the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra and the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, to join the project to share costs and space.

Despite the lack of a location or capital funding, enough money was scraped together to retain the services of acoustician Yasuhisa Toyota. This turned out to be a stroke of luck, or shrewdness; the Japanese expert was then little-known but has since become the world’s leading acoustic designer.

“We wouldn’t have been able to afford him if we’d tried to hire him now,” says Marja-Leena Lehtimäki, the center’s communications coordinator. In the intervening decades, she notes, Toyota has designed Los Angeles’s Walt Disney Concert Hall, Tokyo’s Suntory Hall and Copenhagen’s Danish Radio Concert Hall as well as the renovation of the Sydney Opera House.

This soft-spoken sound guru always insists on close cooperation with a building’s architects, in this case LPR Architects from Turku. They won the design contest in 2000 with a proposal called a mézza vóce—suggesting a subtle, subdued tone. And subtle it is. Even the dark shades of the hall and the lobby have been compared to the dim, mysterious atmosphere of a Finnish sauna.

Nearly two more decades passed before the Musikkiitalo opened in September 2011 across from the House of Parliament. Soon music lovers and performers sighed with relief: the project had been worth the 20-year wait and a $200 million price tag. As the complex’s half-dozen music venues finally
The 140-seat Organo Hall has organs dating from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.
filled with audiences, the acoustics proved to be stellar.

Since then, the HMC has earned rave reviews and attracted nearly half a million visitors. Thousands have taken tours, while others simply enjoy the outdoor café, which is pricey but one of central Helsinki’s few with a quiet, green setting. Next to it, a rather odd sculpture called “The Pike’s Song” was unveiled last August.

Like many of Toyota’s other buildings, the HMC’s main 1700-seat concert hall is arranged in the vineyard style with seating around the stage, rising in slightly irregular rows like sloping terraces. This arrangement makes things easy for international artists accustomed to working in other Toyota-designed venues. For instance director Peter Sellars, who has often collaborated with Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen, directed a concert-and-video version of Wagner’s “Tristan and Isolde” in August. After working in the hall for several days, he bubbled with enthusiasm.

“The acoustics here are super-intense, extraordinarily impressive,” said Sellars. “This hall is so related to Disney Hall, where we premiered this work, that we feel right at home. But this is more compact. So the sound is a bit more aggressive, more in-your-face, which works for Wagner!”

While primarily designed for classical music, the HMC’s large hall has hosted a few rock, pop and folk shows as well. This past summer, keyboardist Herbie Hancock became the first major jazz performer to play the main hall. After his first song, Hancock chatted with the audience through his wireless headset, praising the look of the new venue. Then he stepped off the central stage into the audience, asking his band to play so he could hear how it sounded. Hancock stood there with a big smile, nodding his head before leaping back onto the stage.

Unfortunately, his mostly electric show later revealed the potential pitfalls for non-acoustic musicians playing the big hall. Heavy funk jams sound sludgy while electronic keyboard sounds were occasionally harsh. Best-sounding was Hancock’s solo segment on the grand piano, as Satie-like chord clusters conjured up limpid ripples on a placid lake. Again, though, this revealed an odd difficulty of the hall: the near-perfect acoustics also amplify the slightest sounds from anywhere in the hall, including coughs and door movements.

“This is partly a question of concert etiquette,” says Lehtimäki. “People...
The Center’s café provides a calm oasis in the heart of Helsinki.
just have to get used to hypersensitive sound.”

A Helsinki Philharmonic performance of Sibelius on the composer’s birthday last year, heard from near the top of the canyon-like structure, was breathtaking. Whereas in many concert halls one can hear each instrument arrayed like feathers in a bird’s wing, here you can even discern each strand within each feather. That said, the sound can be completely different depending where you sit.

While most assume that the closest seats are the best, that isn’t necessarily so. Naturally, the front rows do offer an intimate experience. The irregularly arranged seats in the round create a casual, cozy “pull-up-a-chair-and-listen” feel. Yet most reviewers say that the best seats are the higher “nosebleeds” looking down on the orchestra. Lehtimäki says her personal favorite spot is high up behind the stage—which is fine as long as you’re not afraid of heights and don’t need to see the performers’ faces. In truth, though, there’s not a bad seat in the house.

Fiddler and vocalist Kukka Lehto, who has played in the main hall several times with various groups and attended many concerts, says the sound experience can change drastically depending on the set-up and who the sound technician is.

Lehto prefers to play unamplified in the main hall, but points out that

A crowd of second-graders were wowed by the Tapiola Simfonietta during the Helsinki Festival last August.
“Audiences have embraced the building and top international artists keep coming back.”

this is not always possible. The sound was clear and fluid when she played unplugged with the improvisational “power folk” trio Ruuti as part of last summer’s lunchtime concert series.

Frankly speaking, says Lehto, her most difficult experience playing in the main hall was a show with the renowned folk-rock ensemble Värttinä. “The drums started bouncing all over the walls and back, so that sometimes we couldn’t hear anything,” she recalls.

The HMC offers a smaller venue better suited to louder music: a dry-sounding, echo-less venue known as the Black Box. This is where another former Miles Davis sideman, saxophonist Dave Liebman, has taught and performed with students from the Sibelius Academy. He describes the HMC as “a fantastic venue for both listener and performer—and Finnish musicians deserve no less.”

The backbone of the HMC’s programming is provided by its two resident orchestras, the HPO and the FRSO. During the first season, they staged 60-odd concerts each. Nearly all were sold out, drawing nearly 200,000 listeners.

All the top Finnish conductors, including Salonen, Vänskä, Saraste and Oramo, performed in the premiere season. Another one, Hannu Lintu, who takes over as chief conductor of the FRSO next year, calls this “one of the most stimulating new halls in the whole world. The conditions are almost perfect. Naturally, the orchestras have been thrilled, though at first it seemed that many orchestral musicians were surprised by how much they had to change the way they produce, balance and color their sound,” he adds. “This has been a rewarding process for the FRSO and they’re now enjoying the brightness and acoustical support of the hall. However, we all agree that it may take years to adjust to it properly.”

How, then, has the HMC established itself in, or changed, the city’s musical life so far? “At the moment, it seems that classical concerts have become even more popular than before,” says Lintu. “The HMC has changed the urban dynamics of downtown Helsinki and become one of the most important public buildings in the area. This is particularly important for the Sibelius Academy and the young Finnish musicians.”

“Now we can concentrate on playing in great acoustics,” sums up the FRSO’s General Manager, Tuula Sarotie. “Audiences have embraced the building and top international artists keep coming back. The Helsinki Music Center has once and for all made Helsinki a European center of music.”

Wif Stenger is an American journalist who has lived in Finland on and off since childhood. He is an English news anchor with the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle).