

SURPRISING NASHVILLE

By Vera Marie Badertscher

A world-class symphony hall. An art museum that brings the best visual art of the world to town. Ever-growing subscription lists for opera, ballet, theater, and Broadway road shows. Can this be Nashville, Tennessee? The city's recent burst of cultural activity, particularly the Schermerhorn Symphony Center, redefines the nickname "Music City."

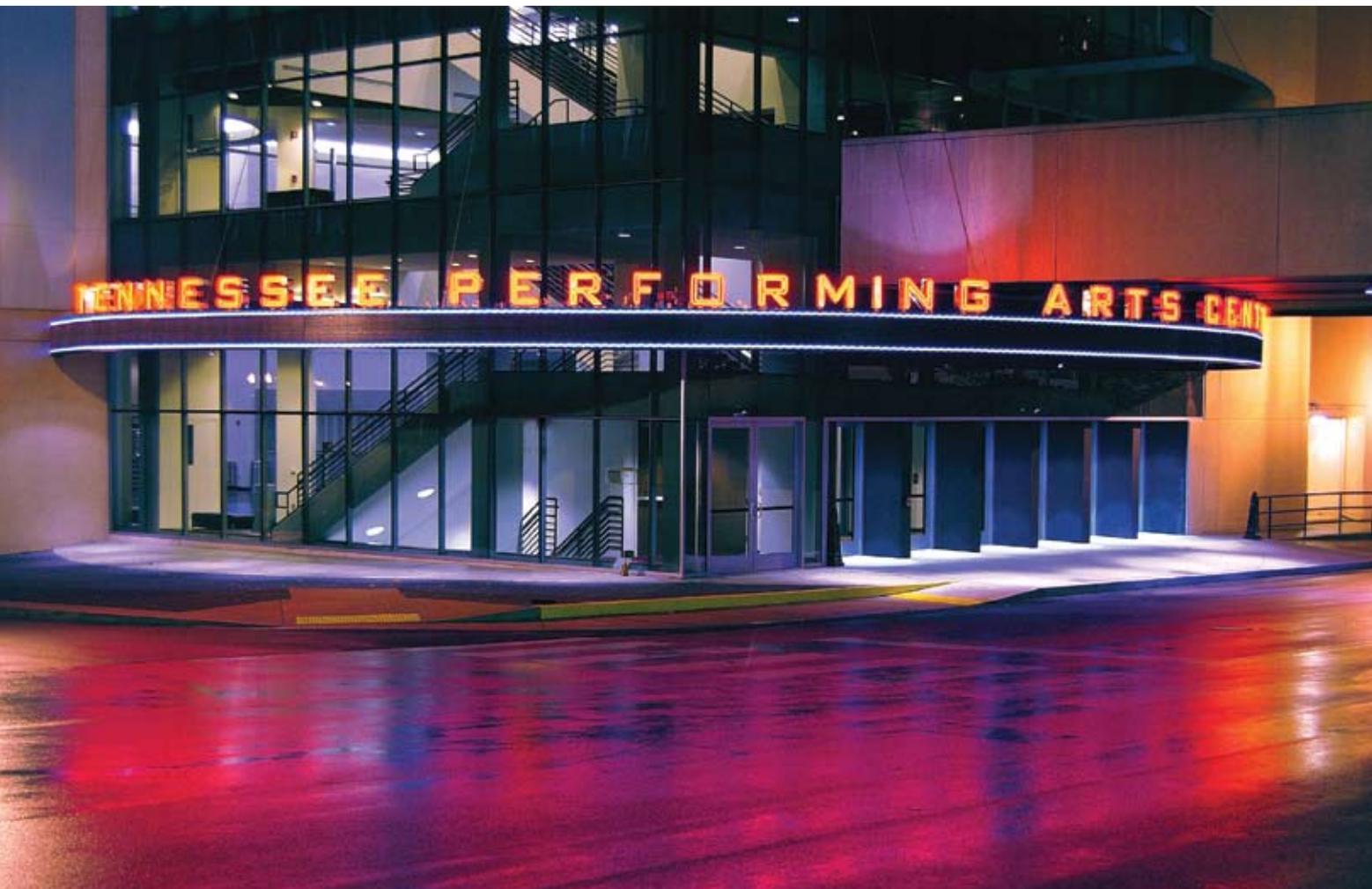


Photo by Rick McBride

The Tennessee Performing Arts Center (TPAC) fosters performing arts in Tennessee. Among its many operations, TPAC presents a series of Broadway shows and special engagements, and administers a comprehensive education program. TPAC is home to three resident performing arts organizations: the Nashville Ballet, the Nashville Opera Association, and the Tennessee Repertory Theatre.



Courtesy of the Frist Center for the Visual Arts

As arts patron Martha Ingram points out in her book *Apollo's Struggle*, the city nearly abandoned the arts for several generations after the Civil War. In the mid-20th century, commercial music began to dominate the Nashville music and entertainment scene with country music broadcasts and recording and publication of country, gospel, jazz, and rock. Now, commercial and traditional musicians support each other as the city makes room for the best of classical along with music with American folk roots.

Like Ray Charles said, "There's two kinds of music – there's good music and there's bad music."

Long before the Grand Ole Opry beamed across America on radio station WSM, people called the capital of Tennessee the "Athens of the South." According to Alan Valentine, executive director of the Nashville Symphony, founders of the city envisioned "an oasis of learning and culture in an otherwise agricultural region." The town still houses 21 accredited four-year and postgraduate institutions that helped earn it the reputation of a cultural leader.

For a long time, the only city art museum hid in a below-ground gallery at the full-sized replica of the Parthenon in Centennial Park. There the city parks department still displays the James Cowan collection of early American painting plus changing exhibits. American masterpieces on display include paintings by Albert Bierstadt, Winslow Homer, George Inness, Thomas Moran, and Benjamin West.

Specialized collections, like that of the Parthenon and other small collections at the Tennessee State Museum and Teakwood Botanical Garden and Museum, lacked space for large touring exhibits. In order to bring the best of the world to Nashville, the city and private contributors banded together to create a new museum.

In April 2001, after about 18 months of renovation, the Frist Center for the Visual Arts opened in an old post office building. The availability of this architectural gem from the federal building boom during the Great Depression saved the arts community the expenditure for a new building. Even so, it

The Frist Center for the Visual Arts is housed in what used to be a main post office. With 24,000 square feet of gallery space, the museum hosts major U.S. and international exhibitions as well as works by local, state, and regional artists.



Interior view of the Tennessee Performing Arts Center located in downtown Nashville.

poured \$45 million into the renovations, with the first \$19.9 million coming from the city, and the rest from private contributors led by Dr. Thomas Frist and the Frist Foundation.

The exterior of the building, with its orderly arrangement of blocks and squared columns, adopts the impressive classical style favored for government buildings of the period. Inside décor, following government manuals of the time, features spare and graceful art deco designs symbolic of the industry and transportation of the area. Architecture fans, particularly those fascinated by art deco, may have to be dragged from the lobby into the main gallery. There, the historians among them will be looking down at the minutiae of the past life of the gallery. Paper clips, foot scuffs, and scraps of daily life at the post office remain under the varnish on the original floors in this National Historic Landmark Building.

Because this museum started with an idea rather than a collection, it brings outstanding assemblages of art from leading museums around the world to Tennessee in constantly rotating shows. The year 2008 brings paintings from the Cleveland Museum of Art, for the exhibition “Monet to Dali;” Tiffany glass art from the Neustadt Collection; “Color as Field” featuring American paintings from 1950-1975; and 60 bronzes by Rodin.

Although a visitor may be surprised to find outstanding visual art in Nashville, everyone expects to hear music. Musicians play free concerts at the airport. Recording devices hang on light poles at intersections so pedestrians do not have to endure a red light in silence. The clubs and bars along Broadway open at 10 in the morning and reluctantly shut their doors around 2 a.m. After all, Nashville became the Music City when first the Grand Ole Opry and then a wave of performance venues and recording studios brought musicians of all kinds flooding into the city.

Bill Metcalfe, owner of the Nashville Steinway Gallery has observed the cultural scene in Nashville since he came from Indiana in 1989. “Nashville is pretty much the [music] publishing capital of the world. Consequently, we have a lot of musically educated people who look to the arts in a much broader spectrum than just one genre,” Metcalfe says. “We have a wonderful, wonderful country music venue here but it is only a portion of all the arts we really have.”

Kyle Young heads the Country Music Hall of Fame. From his office in a modern downtown building that houses a museum and an extensive scholarly library of musical artifacts, he has observed the synthesis of music in Nashville.

He believes that the available work for musicians helped build a strong base for the symphony. “Nashville Symphony musicians worked on country recordings as early as 1952,” says Young. “Owen Bradley used string players from the symphony to back [his recording]. The song was ‘Don’t Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes’ that became a huge country hit in 1953.”

Young credits his counterpart at the symphony, Alan Valentine, with programming that reaches across genres. For example, “At the opening of the symphony it was Bela Fleck and Edgar Myer. Edgar Myer is a classical composer as well as a bass player who did a ton of session work at one point,” Young says. Valentine scheduled a concerto composed by Fleck and Myer on opening night.

Young gives another example of the cross-fertilization in Nashville. “Mark O’Connor, who at one point was a childhood prodigy and a fiddle contest winner, moved to Nashville and made a great living playing sessions and has also been very active with the Nashville Symphony and other symphonies around the country. It is pretty normal in this town.”

To further underline the blending of genres, O’Connor composed a piece for the Eroica Trio based on the life and works of Johnny Cash. But then, classical musicians have long borrowed from “people’s” music. Chopin wrote mazurkas based on Polish folk music, Dvorak used African folk songs in his “New World” Symphony No. 9, Mahler used many German folk tunes in Symphony No. 9, and, of course, Aaron Copland adapted American Western folk for such symphonies as “Rodeo.” Even Bach and Beethoven got into the act, adapting various folk music.

“There is a really vibrant creative city here across all types of music from country to classical. We have what I think is an unparalleled creative community that virtually no other city can hold a candle to,” says Young.



Young points to the fact that both the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Schermerhorn Center located buildings in downtown, almost adjacent to each other. “There is no other city in the country in which there is that juxtaposition. I think it is more than symbolic,” he says.

Those who prefer cello over fiddle, harpsichord over keyboard, Wolfgang or Johan instead of Dolly or Garth, cheered the arrival of the new state-of-the-art Schermerhorn Center, which opened in late 2006. Like many overnight success stories, the Nashville Symphony’s took a long time to mature.

Many people credit one woman with the Renaissance of Nashville arts.

“It doesn’t hurt to have someone who is as astute a business person and as generous a philanthropist as Martha Ingram to lead the charge,” says Young. “She supports the arts in general – including this museum [the Country Music Hall of Fame].”

The symphony joins other arts organizations in Nashville that owe their growth over the past 25 years, and in some cases their very creation, to a woman who Steinway dealer Metcalfe calls “the angel of the arts.”

Martha Rivers Ingram, chairman of the board of Ingram Industries, puzzled over why citizens of Nashville had not developed the interest in the

The Schermerhorn Center’s gala Laura Turner Concert Hall, which seats 1,900 guests, is set for a Steinway performance. The Schermerhorn Center is home to the Nashville Symphony.

Photo by Steve Hall of Hedrich Blessing

VISITING NASHVILLE

Asked where she would take a guest in Nashville, Martha Ingram says that the first thing she would show guests is the Schermerhorn Center (www.nashvillesymphony.org). Then she suggests TPAC (www.tpac.org) and Tennessee's capitol building (www.state.tn.us/generalserv/psm/capitol.htm), which is on the same block as the Performing Arts Center. She says, "I like them to know about our lovely downtown library – which is extraordinary, and has opened within the past few years in this beautiful new building" (www.library.nashville.org). She wants people to see the Frist Visual Arts Center (www.fristcenter.org).

"I also insist they see Vanderbilt University" (www.vanderbilt.edu), says Ingram, adding that, as chairman of the board, she is "very proud of where Vanderbilt is now and what we are doing." She notes that Nashville has 100 parks and greenways, encompassing more than 10,000 acres within 20 minutes of downtown. In the middle of one of those parks, Ingram would stop at the Parthenon – a replica of the real thing (www.nashville.gov/parthenon).

Although Ingram's tour concentrates on cultural sites, to see the commercial music that made Nashville famous, be sure to visit Ryman Auditorium (www.ryman.com), the Country Music Hall of Fame (www.countrymusichalloffame.org), and the Hatch Print Shop, a vintage poster printing operation still going strong as a branch of the Hall of Fame.

To get a glimpse of the visiting artists and conductors that perform at the Schermerhorn, or the actors, dancers, and opera stars at TPAC, choose one of two downtown hotels – the Hermitage (www.thehermitagehotel.com), a historic property, or the Hilton Downtown Nashville (www.hilton.com). The newly restored Union Station Hotel, a Wyndham Historic Hotel, shares a parking lot with the Frist Center for the Arts (www.unionstationhotelnashville.com).

Christy Crytzer, director of communications for the Nashville Symphony, shares a list of her favorite restaurants: "My favorite restaurants in town are Watermark [www.watermark-restaurant.com]; Radius 10 [www.radius10.com]; Sole Mio [www.solemionash.com]; and for great Southern food I would recommend Monell's [www.monellsdining.ypguides.net]."

arts that she saw in her fellow alumnae of Vassar College who came from the Northeast or the Midwest. She wanted her children to have the benefit of good music, theater, opera, and dance. Word of her interest in the arts reached Washington, D.C., and the president appointed her to the Kennedy Center of Performing Arts' Board of Advisors shortly after it opened in the '70s. Ingram says, "When I saw that wonderful place, I thought, my goodness, if they can have that in Washington, why can't we have that in Nashville?"

In 1972, the state was planning a new office building in downtown Nashville. Ingram headed a group of citizens who suggested that the state alter their plans and build a performing arts center on the lower levels and the offices on top. The money to outfit what became the Tennessee Performing Arts Center (TPAC) would come from private donations.

After eight years of political and funding struggles, the center opened. Ingram says, "At first it was a struggle ... We had a modest symphony, we had a community playhouse, so we realized that it was not just building the building; we were going to have to get the money together to pump up the symphony. And then we had to invent the opera and we invented the ballet and we had to invent the professional theater. And [now, 28 years later] we

have all of those things operating at full tilt, and all with multimillion dollar budgets."

Groups presently using TPAC include the Nashville Opera, the Tennessee Repertory Theatre, and the Nashville Ballet. Additionally, TPAC presents touring Broadway shows and hosts numerous smaller arts organizations and meetings and a full-fledged educational program.

When TPAC started to be overwhelmed by its own success, Ingram and others realized that the performance spaces were overbooked and something would have to change. In 2000, Kenneth Schermerhorn, then-conductor of the Nashville Symphony, challenged symphony supporters to raise \$2 million so that he could add 16 full-time string players. If they did, he promised, the orchestra would go to Carnegie Hall. Ingram again headed a successful fundraising effort. The orchestra received rave reviews at Carnegie Hall, and the mayor of Nashville asked, "What are you going to do next?" "We want to build a concert hall," said Ingram, "a Carnegie Hall for Nashville." She adds, "And we opened almost six years to the date from that concert." The new Schermerhorn Center carries the name of the conductor that Ingram credits with building the orchestra "in an unbelievably competent manner." And incidentally, this classical music conductor's career started in jazz. Although

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A PIANO'S ODYSSEY

Of the five Steinway grand pianos and two Boston uprights that the Nashville Symphony purchased for the new hall, the 9-foot Model D made in Hamburg provided the most sleepless nights for Director of Operations Tim Lynch.

Pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet volunteered to help find the Steinways that would contribute the most to the new venue. At a dealership in Paris, he found one made at the Steinway Hamburg factory that he liked. Tim Lynch tells the story.

We purchased the piano from the [Paris] dealer and had it shipped here. And that is pretty much when all of the strangeness started. The piano was immaculately packed, as you would expect from Steinway anywhere.

However, a regulation promulgated sometime earlier in 2005 took effect at the end of May 2006, and our piano was en route during that period of time.

The export company hired to ship the piano used an exterior shipping container – not the one that Steinway packs, but the exterior one – made of wood. All wood, according to this new regulation, had to be treated to make sure that no parasites of any kind could get into this country. At the conclusion of that treatment process, the shippers must place a stamp [on the crate]. The stamp, about two or three inches long, looks like a little tree. For some reason, according to what I was told, they treated the wood properly but never put the appropriate stamp on the wood.

The piano made its way from Paris through New York and arrived in Nashville on May 24 and all of that time it stayed “in bond,” which means they shipped it across the ocean and all the way to Nashville without ever clearing customs. It would clear customs here in Nashville. Due to the backlogs at the customs warehouse and the Memorial Day holiday weekend, we were not able to get an appointment for clearance until after June 1.

At the end of May the word came down: “We no longer let things slip through.” From June 1 forward, anything that comes in, no questions asked, goes right back if it does not have this stamp on it. So we were sort of in limbo. It was here, but was an illegal alien as far as customs service was concerned.

The local head of enforcement for these [customs department] regulations here in Nashville said, “Look, I understand. This is a very delicate instrument. It has been shipped all the way over here.” He realized that we were stuck between a rock and a hard place.

The official said, “I’m going to let you take it from the unair-conditioned warehouse here to your concert hall storage, but the container must go back to Paris. You will have three days to make the arrangements, but if you don’t comply the way I’m telling you to, we will get that piano out of your symphony hall and it will go back as well.”

As I recall, the piano stayed in the [customs] security lockdown until June 9 when we finally liberated it and brought it to the hall. ... I was quite concerned all that time that the piano still sat propped on its side in a shipping case in a warehouse with forklifts zig-zagging around it. I could imagine a forklift tong going right through the crate accidentally.

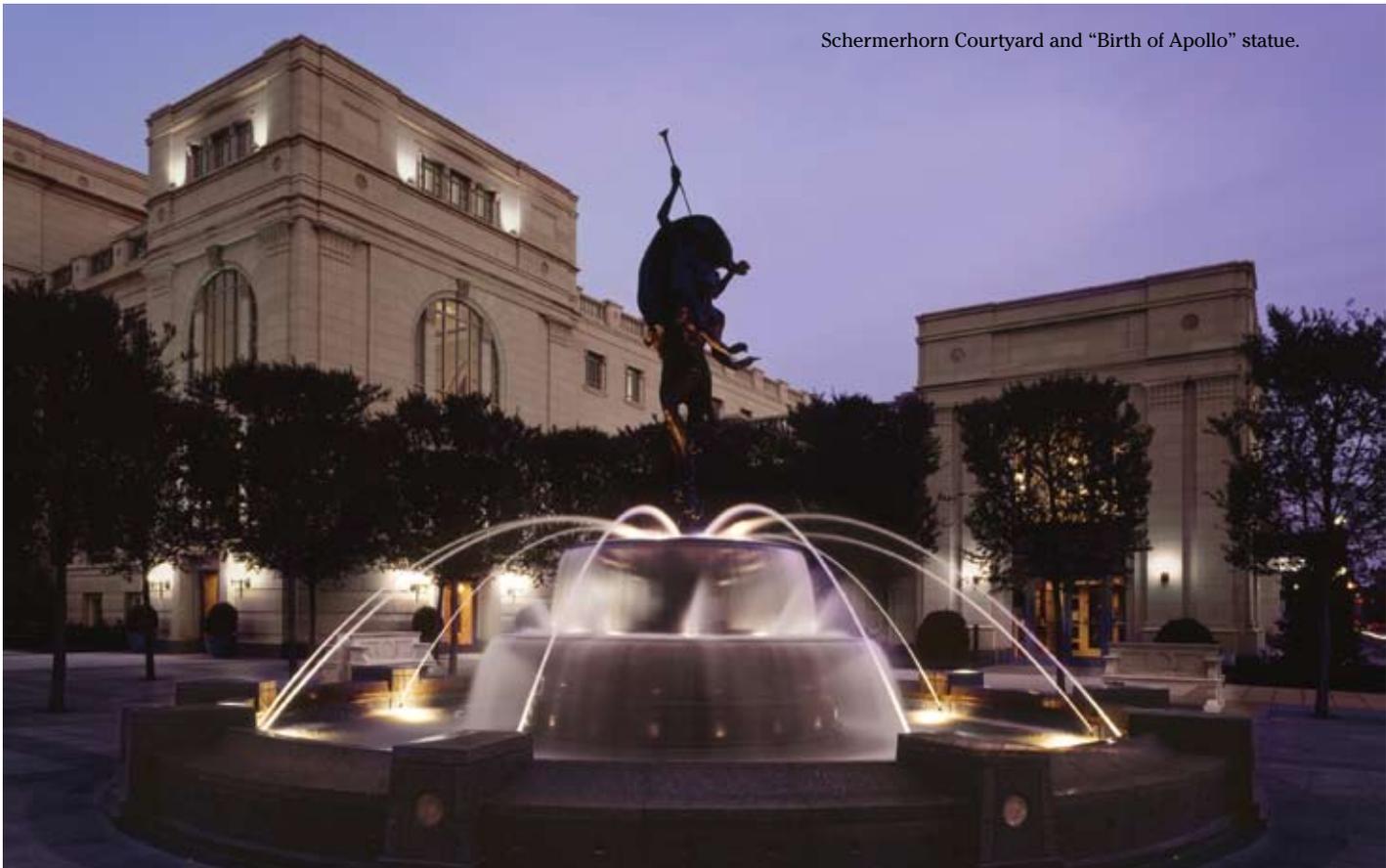
So there was a mad scramble to make sure that we got all the paperwork done on time. Basically, we had to unpack the piano [at the airport customs warehouse] before we brought it to the symphony hall. We had to repack the [outside shipping] crate and export the crate back to Paris. The container was what was in contention, not the piano. So the container went back to where it was supposed to go because the treatment had not been properly documented, but they allowed us to keep the piano, which was a great relief.

When the piano movers brought it to the Schermerhorn, we immediately called in our technician, Candace Wilkin. She was the first person to actually get her hands on the piano after it had been shipped in here. She had to tune it and sort out a few things resulting from the rigors of its storage and its trip. It was in such good condition, even right out of the box, that there was not a great deal to do to it.

Our pianist, the orchestra’s keyboard player, Charlene Harb, was the first to actually play on the instrument when it arrived.

Jean Yves Thibaudet played the first concert on the new piano in the new hall. At the first classical subscription concert on September 14, 2006, he played the Liszt Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major for piano and orchestra.

While it may have been a coincidence, Lynch expresses gratitude that the customs inspector in Nashville was the son of a piano teacher.



Schermerhorn Courtyard and "Birth of Apollo" statue.

Schermerhorn broke ground for the building, he died before the hall opened.

Tim Lynch, director of operations at the Nashville Symphony, says of Ingram, "One-of-a-kind. A large number of people made this [the Schermerhorn Center] possible, but she is a unique individual."

The Schermerhorn reminds audiences and musicians of great European halls and for good reason. Building on the fundamental principle that there would be no compromise when it came to sound, David Schwarz, the architect, and audio engineers from Akustiks, LLC, in Connecticut, along with board members and staff, traveled to Europe to "develop a common vocabulary," Valentine, explains. "We saw a total of seven concert halls in five countries in a five-day period." The visit reinforced some decisions, like using "a traditional architectural vocabulary." While Nashville had modern architecture at the arena and the new Country Music Hall of Fame, the symphony supporters wanted the neoclassical architecture that evokes the Athens of the South. The tour confirmed the acoustical superiority of a shoebox-shaped auditorium. The tour also sparked some new ideas, like clerestory windows to allow outside light to stream in and a plaza setting on the outside. They learned how to plan the choral seating so the people with that unique viewpoint do not feel isolated. They weighed the immense formal lobby areas in places like Berlin against the smaller, intimate spaces of the Musikverein in Vienna, and decided on cozier spaces where, as Valentine puts it, "people wanted to hang out."

"We learned that we were setting about the process of changing the whole experience of going to concerts for the audience," says Valentine.

The clerestory window idea "made the acousticians crazy because it is hard to make them soundproof," says Valentine. "So we have 30 clerestory windows, soundproof, with 3-inch-thick glass on the outside, 2 inches on the inside and 24 inches of dead space between."

The major acoustical trick consisted of constructing a building within a building. The Laura Turner concert hall remains isolated from the exterior building that wraps around it by 8-inch-thick granite-filled concrete walls inside another set of 12-inch-thick walls with a 2-inch gap between. With these double walls and double windows, outside sounds do not have a chance to impinge on moments like the nightingale song in "The Pines of Rome."

Season ticket sales nearly doubled in the first year. After the first concert for all the construction workers and craftsmen who contributed to the project, the symphony threw a big party for the whole community. Now Nashvillians join tourists lining up for a midday tour given five days a week. Townspeople use facilities for educational projects, corporate meetings, and weddings in addition to various concerts.

A visit to the Schermerhorn can include a gourmet meal in Arpeggio restaurant before each concert, or visitors can dine at the Café pre-concert and from 10 to 2 on weekdays. These restaurants and catering for events operate out of a 4,000-square-foot kitchen with a full-time staff of seven people headed by Chef Roger Keenan, who previously supervised the kitchens at Pinehurst Country Club.

Like a chef's skillful blending of spice and sugar, smooth texture and rough, Nashville blends popular music and the glitter of solid gold Cadillacs with the best of classical music and fine art.