

Tobin Center's acoustics to rank with the best

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Photo: Kin Man Hui, San Antonio Express-News

Music patrons slowly fill the new Tobin Center for the Performing Arts for an acoustical test-run performance called, *The Science of Sound*, on Thursday, July 31, 2014. Over 800 guests participated in a sound test session with the help of Youth Orchestra of San Antonio for acoustical experts, Akustiks, who are in the process of fine-tuning the venue for optimal sound. The first actual performance will be in September.

The Tobin Center for the Performing Arts' main concert hall will have the ability to rank with the best acoustics venues in the country, experts with the consulting firm that helped guide the design of the center said Thursday.

Audiences "will be blown away. It will be a sound they haven't heard before," said Chris Blair, principal and tuning conductor for Connecticut-based Akustiks LLC, in an interview before the Youth Orchestras of San Antonio conducted a test-drive performance for sound purposes Thursday night with an audience of almost 800 people.

Several musicians of the San Antonio Symphony and YOSA alumni also sat in with the youth orchestra in a program that included music by Antonín Dvořák, Camille Saint-Saëns, Modest Mussorgsky and Charles-Marie Widor, with excerpts of Saint-Saen's Symphony No. 3 and Widor's Symphony No. 5

featuring the H-E-B Performance Hall's portable electronic organ.

The audience was part of the sound test, too, as the acousticians explained during the concert. "The Science of Sound" event sponsored by Texas Public Radio was the first time the acoustics consultants could hear classical music from the Tobin Center's main stage with sound-absorbing humans in seats.

Thursday night's audience was seated only in the orchestra level. Stage curtains were positioned to mimic the effect of people sitting in the upstairs mezzanine and balcony levels.

"There were no surprises. We're pleased," Blair said after the concert. He explained curtains due to be installed in the stagehouse will help tame the sound on stage.

YOSA Music Director Troy Peters praised the clarity of the sound.

"There's more reverberance than we are used to," Peters said. "There's warmth. That's a good thing."

"I thought the sound was clean, really pure. We're lucky to have this facility in San Antonio," said audience member Bill Reynolds.

The Tobin Center opens for its first formal event Sept. 4 featuring members of the San Antonio Symphony, Ballet San Antonio and Opera San Antonio.

Consultants Blair and Russell Todd, principal at Akustiks, said they became convinced during a Youth Orchestras rehearsal Wednesday night that the Tobin Center would be one of the best acoustical halls anywhere.

"The sound will envelop you," Todd said. "It's an experience you can't get from your CD player ... You will feel the orchestra viscerally."

The Bexar County Performing Arts Center Foundation decided on the 1,759-seat capacity for the main concert hall when told that was about the optimal size of a hall for acoustics purposes.

The first goal of the acousticians was to establish the possibility of absolute silence, Blair and Todd explained.

"You have big sounds, but much of the magic of music happens in the edges of silence," Todd said.

The design and construction materials flowed from the decision on the seating capacity, they explained.

Now that the hall is built, the acoustics can be adjusted by sound-absorbing curtains, the tilt of the forestage reflector near the orchestra shell and other stage features, they said.

The consultants discussed the hall's acoustics goals with San Antonio Symphony Music Director Sebastian Lang-Lessing. They said Lang-Lessing wants impact, envelopment and an even frequency response from high notes to bass notes.

The acoustics of the hall also can be adjusted by an orchestra's sectional seating arrangement and the possible use of risers for the musicians, which soon will be delivered to the Tobin Center but were not present Thursday.

Orchestra musicians will be able to hear themselves across the stage and also in a feedback loop from the hall itself, allowing them to perform with better balance.

"The community will be able to understand what a great orchestra it has," Todd predicted. "The best part will be the orchestra developing its own signature sound" in the Tobin Center.

The Tobin Center will be San Antonio's first concert hall built with symphonic and opera music in mind, they said.

The Municipal Auditorium, the Tobin Center's site, was built as a multipurpose civic center in the 1920s. The Majestic Theatre, also dating to the 1920s, was built as a movie house. The Lila Cockrell Theater is a multipurpose Convention Center hall, and Trinity University's Laurie Auditorium is a lecture venue. The AT&T Center was built mainly for basketball games.

"We're already better than those" for concert acoustics, Blair said. The consultants said they would be returning to the Tobin Center indefinitely to continue fine-tuning the concert hall.

The Tobin Center orchestra shell, which the San Antonio Symphony will use, made its debut Thursday. It is wood grain in color to match the wood paneling throughout the concert hall.