A Gala Ground-breaking Event in Miami for New World Symphony's New Hall

By Dr. Yasuhisa Toyota

On the evening of January 23, 2008, in downtown Miami Beach, an audience of invitation-only guests attended the ground-breaking ceremony for construction of the New World Symphony Orchestra's new hall. The construction phase of this project will last about 2.5 years. The new hall's projected opening date is in 2011.

Figure 1: Exterior View (Model by Gehry Partners)

The Unique Mission of the New World Symphony

The New World Symphony (http://www.nws.edu) was established in 1987 under the artistic direction of Michael Tilson Thomas. This orchestra prepares young musicians through a range of educational programs. Its mission makes it a truly unique organization among the world's ensembles. The gifted, young music university and conservatory graduates who are accepted into the New World Symphony join the orchestra for the limited period of three years, during which they pursue intensive and diverse educational and performance opportunities. After their three years with the orchestra, the musicians leave the orchestra and pursue their profession in many venues around the world.

Around the year of 1987, the late Leonard Bernstein was planning to found the Pacific Music Festival in Asia-Pacific region, and it was established in Sapporo, Japan in 1990. The PMF is also dedicated to educating and training gifted young musicians and its establishment came at nearly the same time as that of the New World Symphony. After the first PMF season in 1990, Artistic Director Bernstein passed away suddenly, and Mr. Tilson Thomas assumed the Artistic Director responsibilities for the festival, continuing this work for 10 years. At that time, we could already see the incredible energy and passion that Mr. Tilson Thomas puts into music education, and especially into the training of the next generation's orchestral musicians.

Funding a Project that Grew from US$30 Million to US$200 Million

Nagata Acoustics' participation on the New World Symphony's new hall project began in 2002. Two of our other projects, the Art Hall in Sapporo Art Park ("Geijutstu no Mori"), completed in 1995, and Sapporo Concert Hall, completed in 1997, are the Pacific Music Festival's main venues, and because Mr. Tilson Thomas was extremely pleased with these halls, he involved us in the New World Symphony project. As initially conceived, the project

was to have a budget in the range of US$30 - 40 million. In 2003, the project sponsors chose Frank Gehry as the project's architect and as the architectural design work progressed, the budget also grew at a rapid pace. Eventually, the project's budget reached US$200 million, including an allocation to fund an endowment for the new hall's operating costs.

In the United States, the planners of construction projects that will benefit the arts and the community often look to private philanthropy to donate the monies that fund the projects and this is the approach the New World Symphony took. After Mr. Gehry was named as the project architect and the New World Symphony's marketing campaign effectively promoted news of his selection, both donors' pledges and the scale of the project increased significantly. This kind of philanthropic drive exemplifies a hallmark of American culture unthinkable in Japan.

Unique Needs and Features of the New Hall

The project programming for the new hall reflects the unique mission of the New World Symphony and distinguishes the new hall from other, typical concert halls. Instead of focusing on the ultimate performances in front of audiences, this hall gives higher priority to the orchestra's use of the hall for rehearsals. In addition, the New World Symphony's broadly inclusive and dynamically evolving modern as well as traditional classical music repertoires, its use of a variety of standard and non-standard ensemble configurations and the educational programs' innovative forays into a wide range of experimental and contemporary music all contributed to the need for a hall design unconfined by traditional concert hall assumptions and incorporating experimental spatial aspects and functionalities. The key unique features of the hall's acoustical room design are:

1. The stage can hold an orchestra with up to three wind sections in a small-scale hall of 700 - 800 seats.
2. The audience seating surrounds the orchestra in an arena configuration.
3. Both the stage and the first floor seating can be raised and lowered, enabling great flexibility in the hall's layout, including the ability to arrange the height of the stage and the first floor seating to create a large, flat floor.
4. In addition to the main stage, three small stages placed amidst the audience seating provide the ability to stage simultaneous and consecutive solo and small ensemble performances.
5. Large, white sidewall surfaces entirely surround the hall above the stage and blocks of audience seating, creating "canvases" for lighting and other projected visual productions.

At the start of the planning phase for this project, the scope included only a new main hall. The project organizers intended to continue to use the current location, Lincoln Theater, for the rehearsal, classroom and ensemble facilities needed by the orchestra's extensive educational programs. When the project budget increased, these facilities and even administrative office space and instrument storage space became added to the project scope of the new building that will house the hall. Including the main hall, the project now counts in scope more than 30 large and small rooms for ensemble use, plus all of the support rooms needed to run the orchestra's operations, and has become a large project with a total of 95,000 sq. ft of floor space.

Pioneering the Use of Internet2 for Near-real-time Audio-visual Exchange

Another noteworthy feature of the New World Symphony's activities is its pioneering adoption of Internet technologies to bring near-real-time audio-visual connectivity to its Miami Beach location. For example, the orchestra has already successfully held master classes taught by musicians located far from Miami who teach the students across extremely fast broadband connections.

Figure 2: Hall Interior View (Model by Gehry Partners)

The Internet technology harnessed by the New World Symphony is named Internet2, an advanced, next-generation networking technology that provides faster speeds than generally available Internet connections currently offer. Internet2's faster speeds provide a networking environment capable of the near-real-time audio-visual exchange necessary for musicians located in different locations to be able to play together simultaneously. Educational events and musical collaborations that only yesterday would have seemed like an impossible dream have already become reality in Miami. Internet2 connectivity will of course be built into many of the spaces of the new hall building, including the main hall and the other ensemble rooms.

The Nighttime Ground-breaking Ceremony

The hall's ground-breaking ceremony gathered several hundred invited guests to the project site. The audience was composed mostly of major donors and prospective major donors to the project. The ceremony commenced in the early evening with several bulldozers moving through the site accompanied by a fireworks display that added a touch of the spectacular to the event.

Figure 3: Ground-breaking Ceremony

Evening ground-breaking ceremonies are virtually unheard of in the United States. Compared with a morning or afternoon ceremony, the evening time frame undoubtedly made it easier for many of the invitees to attend the event. Mr. Tilson Thomas wanted to ensure that every invited person associated with the project could attend the ground-breaking ceremony. Under his strong and persuasive direction, the ground-breaking event "played" to a full audience and completed this milestone exactly as he envisioned it.