

Kansas City's New Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts Opens

By Dr. Yasuhisa Toyota

Kansas City, Missouri's cultural life welcomed a major new addition to the city on September 16 and 17, 2011 when the new Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts (KCPA) hosted its Gala Opening concerts. The center's major funder, the Muriel McBrian Kauffman Foundation gave the center its name, but I've often thought how appropriate it is that the initials "KC" of KCPA can refer to both Kauffman foundation and Kansas City. In Japan, a theatre and hall of this scale would most likely be a public works project, joint public and private project or, more rarely, funded by a corporation. It would be almost unheard of for an individual's foundation to be the primary source of funding for a project of this scope. However, the United States has a long history of this kind of project being funded by private philanthropy.



Figure 1: KCPA Exterior

The Project's Steady Course in a Down Economy

The center's 1,800-seat, proscenium-style theatre and its 1,600-seat classical music concert hall make the new KCPA a truly large-scale, major cultural facility. The total project cost of some US\$415 million (including an operating endowment) provides quantifiable substantiation of the scope of the project and the scale of the new center. KCPA's scale and cost have been a focus of media attention.

With the world currently weathering numerous economic crises and the U.S. situation likewise not immune, various projects have been abandoned, put on hold or scaled down. In this environment, the completion of the large-scale KCPA project as originally planned became a newsworthy topic. The New York Times' article about the center's opening devoted several paragraphs to a discussion of the economics of funding arts facilities in the United States. Other key U.S. media also took this approach in their reviews.

Kansas City's Culinary and Cultural Delights

If you pinpoint Kansas City, Missouri on a map of the United States, you will see that it's located more or less in the middle of the country. If I think of a corresponding part of my home country of Japan, I'd liken this central location to that of Nagano Prefecture, except that Nagano Prefecture has enough mountains to have hosted a winter Olympics while Kansas City has none. The aptly named Great Plains extend as far as the eye can see.

Kansas City is known especially for its dairy and beef industries. The restaurants in Kansas City serve some of the most delicious beef steaks I've ever eaten. Also, regardless of the kind of cuisine, the high quality of the meals served in this city's restaurants far exceeded my expectations. From a Japanese perspective, the appeal of typical U.S. west-coast destinations lies in attractions other than their restaurants. The culinary attainments of Kansas City's restaurants are so far above the ordinary that I'd say they rate "off the charts" in excellence compared with my experiences in most other U.S. cities where I've traveled and worked.

Does a city's wonderful restaurants mean that the city's other cultural offerings are also a cut above the norm? Kansas City is home to three professional performing arts companies, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Kansas City Ballet and Kansas City Symphony Orchestra. These three companies draw their audiences from among the two million people who live in the city's metro area that includes both the city and surrounding suburbs. Kansas City proper has a population of about 500,000 people. In terms of size, Kansas City's population ranks it as a typical U.S. Midwestern city. The presence of a professional opera and a professional ballet company, as well as a professional symphony orchestra in a city of this size surely attests to the city's vibrant cultural life and commitment to the arts. Now, with the addition of KCPA's two halls as the cultural hub of this city, Kansas City's performing arts venue infrastructure may well make it the envy of other cities of similar size, at least as far as the performing arts are concerned. All three of Kansas City's professional performing arts companies will be resident at KCPA, using it both as their home venue for subscription concerts and for rehearsals as well.

KCPA's Gala Opening Events



Figure 2: KCPA Theatre



Figure 3: KCPA Concert Hall

KCPA's two main facilities, the Muriel Kauffman Theatre (the 1,800-seat proscenium-style theatre) and Helzberg Hall (the 1,600-seat concert hall) each held a gala opening on consecutive evenings. First, the theatre held its opening performance on September 16, 2011, followed by the hall's opening concert on September 17. Banquet dinners for audience patrons followed both evenings' performances. (In particular, tickets to the September 16 theatre opening included dinner invitations for all 1,800 patrons.) The two nights of all-evening affairs rivaled the style of inaugural event programming one would expect at the opening of a major cultural venue in a more well-known "destination" urban center. Specially priced tickets for the theatre's opening night ranged from \$1,000

to \$5,000 a seat (and from \$500 to \$3,000 for the concert hall's opening). However, ninety percent of these ticket prices were designated as tax-deductible donations to the theatre's and the hall's ongoing operations.

On both Opening Gala nights, the programs featured world-renowned performers certain to please everyone in the audience. Placido Domingo, Tommy Tune and Patti LuPone were featured performers on the theatre's opening night. Itzhak Perlman and Diana Krall were the top-billed names for the concert hall's opening evening. Kansas City native Bobby Watson and his Jazz Orchestra gave virtuoso performances on the afternoon of September 17. The theatre's opening included performances by the resident Lyric Opera and Kansas City Ballet companies and, of course, the resident Kansas City Symphony was featured prominently on both nights' programs, impressive performing in both the theatre and concert hall.

Music at the Gala Opening and Helzberg Hall's First Subscription Concert

The inclusion of pops, Broadway musical tunes and jazz seem to be essential programming elements for the opening galas of concert halls in the United States. It's not unusual for a special producer from outside the hall's or orchestra's organization to be brought in to produce this kind of one-time milestone celebration. The resulting variety-packed, popular emphasis of opening gala programs also seems to be an unavoidable part of the birth of new concert halls.

For KCPA's theatre, the opening gala's programming gave the audience an opportunity to hear this acoustically multipurpose venue's functionality, some of its performance characteristics and how the theatre can be adapted to a variety of performance genres and needs. However, as the concert hall's acoustical consultant, I unabashedly share that my preference would have been for the Helzberg Hall's gala opening to devote its program to the kinds of symphonic and orchestral music for which we designed the hall. Acoustically speaking, it may suit my perspective better to think of the concert hall's inaugural concert as taking place a week later when the Kansas City Symphony Orchestra performed its first subscription concert in the hall. I will leave to another occasion to report on Helzberg Hall's acoustics during this and other performances.