

## **Barenboim-Said Academy**

**By Daniel Beckmann**

In the German capital city of Berlin, the Barenboim-Said Academy is building a new home for itself. The Academy is the brainchild of the Argentinian-Israeli pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim, currently the Music Director of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden (Berlin State Opera) and its orchestra the Staatskapelle Berlin, and the late Edward Said, the Palestinian cultural critic and author. The future Academy is the outgrowth of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, which was founded by Barenboim and Said together in 1999, joins young musicians from Arab countries and Israel in order to foster understanding between young people from different sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Academy offers “Education through Music,” Barenboim’s concept of a combined musical and humanities curriculum. Up to 90 students from the Middle East will be enrolled for four-year scholarship terms.

The Academy is building its new facility in a historic scenery warehouse for the State Opera in the Mitte (Middle) district in Berlin, steps away from the Berlin State Opera and the Konzerthaus Berlin. The warehouse will house academic and practice facilities, and the centerpiece will be the 620-seat Pierre-Boulez-Saal designed by Frank Gehry. Local architecture firm RW+ has handled the overall building with the academic facilities, as well as executive architecture services for the Hall, in collaboration with the donated services provided by Gehry’s office. Nagata Acoustics was invited by Frank Gehry to participate in the design of the hall, to provide excellent and innovative acoustics suitable for the artistry of its namesake, Pierre Boulez, as well as its founder Daniel Barenboim.

### **Architecture of the Pierre-Boulez-Saal**

The Pierre-Boulez-Saal is the insertion of a new function into an existing, historic structure, similar to the Auditorium Giovanni Arvedi in Cremona, Italy (please see the September, 2012 newsletter). Therefore, the existing historic building has defined the overall available space for the room. The hall is intended to serve first of all as a rehearsal space for the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, and also as a performance venue for chamber ensembles and recitals by the students and guests of the Academy. Overall, a space of approximately 25m square and 14m tall was available in the existing building for the performance hall, requiring a unique vision of a flexible layout in order to accommodate all of the necessary program.

The innovative design by Frank Gehry organizes the seating in an oval shape around the performers in the center of the square room. (See the photo: “Gehry Model #1”.) Audience enter the performance hall on one side, from a four-story tall atrium separating the performance hall from the academic facilities, at the top of five rows of seats which step down to the central stage area. A dramatic oval balcony with two rows floats above the audience, and is rotated gently against the oval shape of the seating below. The balcony is apparently supported only by four slender columns, in addition to touching the main walls of the room near the mid-point of each wall, allowing the corners behind the balcony to merge with the main volume of the space. The most dramatic element of the balcony is the

gentle rising and falling of the floor level around the room: in the course of walking all the way around the balcony, one has risen and fallen by roughly one meter. (See the photo: “Gehry Model #2”.)



Figure 1: Gehry Model #1



Figure 2: Gehry Model #2

In order to accommodate the 622 planned audience seats as well as the space for large orchestra rehearsal, a highly flexible seating layout was developed. At the center of the room, on the same level as the musicians, there are three rows of loose seats. Then, four rows of seats are installed on retractable risers. Finally, at the level of the audience entry, one fixed row of bench seating is installed as the last row of seating surrounding the stage. Together with the balcony above, the loose seats and retractable risers offer many different performance configurations.

### Acoustical Design of the Pierre-Boulez-Saal

The acoustical design of the hall is focused on providing a space for full orchestra rehearsal within a concert hall for chamber music. The most important design direction to accommodate a full orchestra is to keep enough ceiling height above the stage. Since the project is the renovation of an existing building, there were many restrictions. The final result places the stage at the bottom of the building so that we can make the most use of the existing structure. Thus the entire volume is used acoustically. The overall shape of the hall is a typical shoebox. The best direction of acoustical design remains to use this basic shape. To keep the strong benefits of the shoebox style, our aim was to design the floating balcony with the greatest possible acoustical transparency. The guard rail in front of the audience is made of thin pipes, in order to keep maximal transparency. Furthermore, the overall structure of the balcony was designed to be acoustically transparent, resulting in the concrete truss punctuated with many large holes. (See photo: “Pierre-Boulez-Saal Under Construction”.)



Figure 3: Pierre-Boulez-Saal Under Construction

**Project Status**

The project is currently under construction, since May 2014. The building is planned to finish construction activities in May 2016, followed by four months of preparation for the opening in October 2016. More information can be found at <https://barenboimsaid.de/home>.