

My ears told me that the acoustic of both concert hall and theatre are excellent. And analysis, using the above criteria as a check list, confirmed by initial empirical impression.

My analysis of the technical functioning of the building hit a uniform high as well — give and take some matters of detail, most of which were in particularly subjective areas.

Incidentally, the questionnaire had some potential to bite the Consortium who contracted to design and provide the acoustic and equipment installations. If 50% of the questionnaires rate any aspect below the category very good to excellent, and 60% of such answers proposed the same remedy, then the Consortium are obliged to carry out that remedy at their own expense. But consideration of this possibility in terms of the laws of either statistics or chance will suggest that any bite will be from dentureless gums rather than fangs. Nevertheless, the debate which accompanied the questionnaire meetings provided a useful means of getting the final detailing correct and ensuring that the facilities were of the standard required. (The contract calls for the highest international standards, with each facility and each item of equipment to be among the best in the world for the purpose for which it is intended.) One cannot overestimate the value of the questionnaire as psychotherapy for the performers and other users. And, they are reported to

have responded, on the whole, very favourably indeed. Particularly to the acoustic.

### The Auditoria

The questionnaire however did not ask for comment on what I found to be a particularly exciting feature of the whole enterprise. The one which, despite everything else reaching perfection, can sink the ship. And that is, of course, the ease with which the audience can acquire a corporate identity and then form a sympathetic relationship with the stage.

In this respect the Theatre is not just successful but remarkably successful. Indeed I am tempted to say spectacularly successful. It has 1526 seats but seems smaller. Much of the intimacy stems from the three shallow balconies which reach out, slightly descending in steps, along the walls towards the stage, terminating at the orchestra rail. (Or the edge of the forestage when this is formed by raising the pit elevators.) Yet every seat has an unimpaired sightline, with the single row of side balcony seats angled towards the stage rather than requiring their occupants to hang over the rail in courtyard fashion.

From the glowing timber walls to the plush of the seating there is warmth everywhere, set off by the cool elegance of the balcony fascias. With its exuberantly coloured exterior, its grandly sumptuous yet

not overwhelming foyers and its warmly intimate auditorium, this theatre will provide a sympathetic environment for a broad range of the larger scale works, especially those embracing music.

And the Concert Hall with its similar but by no means identical exterior and its equally sumptuous foyers is a performance room where the fascias emanate something of a cooler more classical restraint, deferring to the organ the privilege of making the dramatic visual statement.

My enthusiasm for all the audience aspects of the architecture is so positive that I almost feel the need to apologise! I did try very hard to find nits to pick and it was not easy. I do have some flickers of unease at the structure and decoration of the walls in the area between the orchestra pit and the proscenium: always a tricky area because it can intrude into one's peripheral vision when focussed on the stage action. But I do have to say that I felt this when I sat in critical mode before the show rather than when it got going and I got involved. So, no quibbling, this is a splendid piece of theatre architecture on all counts: the forms, the decoration and especially, the scale. Everything is in proportion. . . . and that is perhaps the most difficult thing to get right.

The Concert Hall building also includes an attractive Recital Hall with a good chamber acoustic. The National Theatre's studio is, alas, a gesture to the dwindling school of black box believers.


### The Technology

But so much for the public areas. What about the technology? Well, it is essentially that of a German opera house. The main stage is four elevators, each 16m wide by 3.15m deep. Sets mounted on the rear wagon (which includes a revolve and is the same area as the main stage) can be rolled forward on to the main stage area and dropped flushed into it. Or sets can be rolled from the side on any or all of the three wagons which correspond in size to the elevators. These elevators are capable of dropping full height sets to below stage where the wagons can be run upstage into the lower backstage area for parking or resetting. Storage racks are mounted on the forward wall from where the elevator can collect cloths or the special stage carpets which define the acting area for chinese opera. And four table elevators (6m wide x 1m deep) can be inserted as required.

With the exception of the revolve, the intent of such machinery is not for production effects but to facilitate technical management of the stage. However Alan Nieh's sets for the premiere of *Journey to the West* used the elevators as a dramatically effective visual device.

There are 30 lines of computerised flying and 20 with hand-operated counterweights. To watch the computerised flying was a dream come true. Here was technology offering a smoothness and proportional timing that is virtually beyond the human hand!

The lighting installation is also in the style



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