

The performance hall, according to Aalto's notes, was inspired by the remains of an amphitheatre he visited in Delphi in the 1950s. The main aisle is not centered and there are more seats to house left than to house right, thus providing no mirror images of itself. Two actual balconies and a third used for technical and/or performance purposes are set trimly back. The house seats a total of 1125, with the possibility of removing one side row to allow wheelchair access.

The walls, main curtain and areas surrounding the stage are colored a deep indigo blue-said to be inspired by the Duke Ellington composition *Mood Indigo*. The dark shade absorbs the stark white of the balcony balustrades. The seats, also blue with black leather trim, have an air handling ventilation system built into the backrests.

A typical Aalto element is the sculptural curved slats on either side of the stage which provide a

screen for light and sound equipment installations. The top balcony in addition to being used as a light bridge, has a raised nook for additional orchestra members.

Acoustics in the new house can be adjusted to accommodate the needs of musicians and various periods of music. Above the mesh ceiling are panels which can be tilted mechanically and curtains which open and close allowing conductors to find the configuration that achieves the sound they need.

Working in conjunction with the panels are six separate sections of the orchestra pit that can be raised or lowered. The completely climatized pit seats one hundred musicians. The fire curtain, which is nearly .5 meter thick, closes to contain both the stage and orchestra. The sheer weight of the top .33 of the curtain, when lowered, pulls the remaining .66 from below to form an airtight

joint that keeps potential fire contained for 90 minutes.

The interior walls are poured concrete. In the public areas these have been plastered and painted white. In the non-public areas they have been whitewashed and the only ornamentation is color-coded lines and doors to facilitate finding one's way through the labyrinths of backstage areas.

The Aalto is a very self-contained community with well-equipped shops and wardrobe facilities on the premises and positioned in appropriate proximity to the stage. Nearly 700 people are employed fulltime. The main scenery elevator is the width of a tractor trailer and the height of three stacked trailers. Scenery can be moved easily from shops on the outside to the stage level and then into the lower storage areas nearly 20 meters under the stage.

The Aalto was designed as a multipurpose house. Besides opera, operetta, and dramatic plays expected to be presented on alternate evenings, there is a 28-member ballet corps with its own rehearsal studio and dressing rooms. There are two musical rehearsal spaces, though neither is the size of the stage, which makes precise staging somewhat difficult when stage access is not immediately possible. There is a company cafeteria that opens onto the garden.

There has been criticism of the new theatre. Rehearsal space is inadequate and there is no small experimental stage. In some high traffic backstage areas the elevators are too small, and in one wing of the building, exit doors open into elevator waiting areas.

More serious criticisms are aimed at the fact that the theatre is basically a traditional proscenium box and the design has not benefitted from changes in traditional theatre approaches. The Aalto's managing director Manfred Schnabel has referred to the house as a "modern museum."

But local theatre critics and historian Andreas Rossman point out that many in Essen were afraid of the modernity of the house. "Essen is more traditional without a strong public that wants new things." He also notes that the Aalto was already listed in architectural guides long before it was finished.

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