



'New crowd' helps fill a Paris concert hall

With eclectic offerings, Philharmonie de Paris draws new audiences

BY FARAH NAYERI

Until 2015, most world-class orchestras and soloists invited to Paris performed at the Salle Pleyel, an Art Deco concert hall near the Champs-Élysées in the upscale Eighth Arrondissement. Concerts were attended by a largely affluent and well-groomed crowd, middle-age and older.

Today, top-tier orchestras and performers play at the Philharmonie de Paris, a 2,400-seat concert hall in the working-class 19th Arrondissement, on the capital's northeastern rim.

Before the Philharmonie's January 2015 opening, there were widespread fears that Paris's classical-music patrons would balk at traveling to a blue-collar area to hear music. "This was risky: I also was worrying about how they could bring the audience," said Christoph Lieben-Seutter, general and artistic director of the 2,100-seat Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, Germany, which opened this year. "We were all asking, 'Will this work?'"

"And it does," Mr. Lieben-Seutter added. "They really succeeded in getting a new crowd of people, also from their area, younger people. And they have very reasonable ticket prices. This helps a lot."

Plans for a big Paris concert hall date from the 1970s. They were put on ice with the construction and 1989 inauguration of a huge opera house on the Place de la Bastille. What Paris got, six years later, was the Cité de la Musique:

a 900-seat concert hall and musical-instrument museum in the Parc de la Villette, on the border between Paris and Pantin, a suburb. It took 20 more years for the Philharmonie to open next door (incorporating the Cité de la Musique).

After the Philharmonie's inaugural concert, the New York Times music critic Anthony Tommasini wrote that,

"from first impressions," the concert hall "seems acoustically marvelous," though he noted that "its true character will take time to emerge."

He recalled the challenges of getting the hall built, and concluded, "If the hall fulfills its potential, this risky move could be a momentous breakthrough for a troubled field."

The complex would neither exist nor function without hefty subsidies. The new Philharmonie building, a sprawling edifice designed by the Pritzker Prize-winning architect Jean Nouvel over-

looking the Parc de la Villette, cost 386 million euros (about \$450 million) in taxpayers' money, nearly twice the original estimate. (Mr. Nouvel has disassociated himself from the finished building, saying he was prevented from making a final set of modifications to it, and he is engaged in legal proceedings against the Philharmonie to ensure that those modifications are made and to establish that neither he nor his agency are responsible for construction delays and cost overruns, said Mr. Nouvel's lawyer, William Bourdon.)

For its everyday operations, the Philharmonie receives an annual tax-funded subsidy of around €40 million, according to its president, Laurent Bayle. It raises an additional €45 million itself, with sponsorship and space rentals generating about a quarter of that total, and ticket sales the rest.

Ticketed activities attract about 1.15 million visitors a year and cover classical, pop, world music and jazz concerts; museum visits and exhibitions (such as the 2015 David Bowie exhibition and another dedicated to Chagall and Music in 2015-16); music-education workshops for school groups and young families; and conferences and talks.

Mr. Bayle recalled how, during construction, "a lot of people said the hall was too far away, and that Paris's classi-

cal-music audience lived in the west of Paris, where the more privileged classes and the older segments of the population lived." Classical music, he said, "was characterized as an art that concerned mostly an elite, and mostly older people."

The new hall is proving the skeptics wrong, he said, noting that concerts in the main auditorium (all genres combined) run at 95 percent capacity on average, up from 85 to 90 percent at the smaller Salle Pleyel. While Pleyel audiences came chiefly from Paris's wealthier west, the Philharmonie is pulling in patrons from all over Paris and its immediate suburbs, thanks to a diverse program.

"We avoided concentrating exclusively on classical music," Mr. Bayle explained. "If you program 500 concerts a year, and they're all performances of the 19th-century classical repertoire, there will come a time when you'll end up seeing the same audiences over and over."

Pricing has also played a central role. Roughly half of all concert tickets cost €40 or more; the other half are €30 or less. The priciest classical-music tickets are €100 to €110 (with exceptions two or three times a year, when they go as high as €160.)

What appears to be a winning formula — music-education workshops, affordable tickets — was pioneered over two decades by the Cité de la Musique. The Cité was "very influential for me and for my understanding of how a concert hall in the 21st century should be," Mr. Lieben-Seutter said of the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg.

The opening of mega-halls in Paris and Hamburg has compounded the pressure on London to build its own. A fund-raising campaign is underway for the construction of a hall, led by the London Symphony Orchestra's new music director, Simon Rattle (previously the Berlin Philharmonic's artistic director)



The estimated cost is 200 million to 250 million pounds, or about \$265 million to \$332 million. The New York-based architects Diller, Scofidio & Renfro — responsible for the redesign of Lincoln Center in New York, as well as the Broad museum in Los Angeles — have been chosen to draw up the designs.

Nicholas Kenyon, managing director of the multiarts Barbican Center in London (which hosts the London Symphony), said he felt “supported and reassured” when Paris opened, because the need for a major venue was “not just something that we were feeling. It was something that was being felt around Europe.” He noted that London had “some great historic halls” but had “fallen behind in the idea of creating a hall for the 21st century.”

He described the Philharmonie de Paris’s concert hall and acoustics as “a wonderful success,” but said he was less drawn to “the outside and the approach to it.” A concert hall should be “a welcoming center for music that really draws people in from the street,” he said. With the Philharmonie, which is a short

walk from the main avenue and inside a park, “it’s almost as if you have to suffer a bit before you get to it.”

Buildings aside, the challenge for all classical-music institutions around the world is the genre’s lack of appeal to audiences in their 20s and 30s. The Philharmonie is striving to reach out to them digitally. Its Philharmonie de Paris Live website live-streams 60 concerts a year free of charge, and makes them available for six more months, drawing tens of thousands of views each time, said Hugues de Saint Simon, the Philharmonie’s secretary general.

Music venues also have to become destinations, just as museums have, Mr. Bayle said: offer restaurants, cafes and movie theaters that will help lure an uninitiated and younger audience to the musical programming.

Ultimately, “classical music has very strong advantages as it moves forward in the 21st century,” he said. “When it comes to the performing arts, society will always, despite the pre-eminence of digital, have a need for places of gathering.”

**Events**

Ticketed activities at the Philharmonie de Paris attract about 1.15 million visitors a year and cover classical, pop, world music and jazz concerts; museum visits and exhibitions. John Cale, above right, performed there last year. The complex also held a Velvet Underground exhibition last year, right.



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**Introductions**

Above left, the Orchestre de Paris performing the inaugural concert at the 2,400-seat Philharmonie de Paris in January 2015. Above right, visitors waiting to enter the complex during an open house a few days later.



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