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A new acoustics firm is listening to Verizon Hall

Lending an ear to performances is the first step toward fixing what ails it.



By Peter Dobrin

Inquirer Classical Music Critic

The Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts has chosen a sound doctor to fix what ails Verizon Hall.

Threshold Acoustics, a Chicago firm founded in 2006 after its partners broke away from renowned acoustician Kirkegaard Associates, will undertake a full range of work that in effect transfers acoustical oversight from Artec Consultants, the hall's original designer.

Kimmel president Anne Ewers said Threshold had been engaged for the project from start to finish.

"Basically the scope is to do an evaluation of existing conditions, review the previous acoustical report of Artec, make recommendations to address acoustical problems, compare recommendations [with Artec's], provide an estimate of costs and . . . suggest tests and make alterations without disturbing operations."

The Kimmel does not yet have a signed contract with Threshold, but the firm's partners have already begun listening to performances in Verizon Hall, Ewers said, and will be attending rehearsals and concerts during the 18 to 24 months it will take to complete work.

The time frame, she said, would allow the Kimmel to study fund-raising strategies for underwriting the remedial construction.

"In many ways [the 18- to 24-month span] is a good thing. We can do the quiet work of determining what the capacity is without asking people for money at this point, which is clearly not the economy to be asking people to do this kind of work."

Recommendations are expected by summer.

When it opened in December 2001, the \$275 million Kimmel Center aimed to provide for the Philadelphia Orchestra an acoustical antidote to the beloved but dry Academy of Music, its home since its 1900 founding. Yet various critics, instrumentalists, administrators, and even Artec have said that the 2,500-seat Verizon falls short of its potential. Sound presence greatly varies from seat to seat, and with the size of the ensemble on stage.

Artec issued a report in September 2004 stating that the hall suffered from a "low level of reverberance" and a "relatively low level of impact of the orchestral sound."

The report cited "construction deficiencies" and suggested substantial remedies.

"It needs help," wrote R. Lawrence Kirkegaard in a second, less formal assessment in 2007. "The building, the orchestra, the city, the donors, the future generations of listeners all deserve something better than what's there in acoustic terms. There's a weakness that should not be the case for a major orchestra in an important hall."

Neither Artec nor Kirkegaard ventured to estimate what solving the problems might cost.

The Kimmel and orchestra formed a joint committee following these conclusions, charging the group with determining a next step in the pursuit of better sound.

Ewers said "it's not easy" proceeding with an acoustical makeover without a music director at the helm of the Philadelphia Orchestra - searches are under way for a music director, president and chairman - but that chief conductor and artistic adviser Charles Dutoit would be brought into the process.

"We're going to do this hand in hand with the orchestra. This has been put off far too long for various reasons, and so Dutoit will be involved as will players," she said.

But, she added, "the whole point is to let the acoustical firm determine what they hear and what they think is needed."

She said the aspect of Threshold's presentation that won her over was "the way they answered questions - it was very much 'let's do this together.' I love that approach."

While Threshold is only a few years old, its partners have worked on a number of orchestral venues during employment at other firms, particularly Kirkegaard.

The point person on the project is Dawn R. Schuette, an architect who at Kirkegaard worked on the Woodruff Arts Center in Atlanta, the Atlanta Symphony Center, Aronoff Center for the Performing Arts in Cincinnati, and others.

Schuette yesterday declined to answer a number of questions about the project, saying that such discussions at this point are premature.

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