

## From czars to stars, the new Mariinsky II makes Russia's cultural history shine

Last month, a new 2,000-seat opera house opened in St. Petersburg with a three-day celebration that doubled as visionary conductor and Mariinsky Theatre director Valery Gergiev's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday bash.

As with any next day party recap, there has been no shortage of opinion on its success. Jack Diamond, the project's architect, points out with no misplaced pride that Mariinsky II is "the first major opera house to be built in Russia since the Czars." Gergiev says it is sure to "become a lasting part of the life of its city." Local doubters, somewhat amusingly, demanded that it be razed. Architectural critics wonder why Diamond didn't endeavor to make a flashier statement on Dekabristov Street, and yet the same critics were equally hard on the ostentation of an earlier design that positioned the hall inside a faceted, golden dome.

It's tough being popular.

Critical posturing aside, the first reports from those who've actually experienced the hall have been glowing. "The auditorium is excellent: like Glyndebourne's bigger brother, with light wood balconies, fine acoustics and superb sightlines," wrote Richard Morrison of *The Times* of London. "The house's acoustics are lucid and clean; the orchestra came together in a rich blend but individual voices – a harp, a piano – emerged clearly," said Zachary Woolfe of the *New York Times*. "Everything is possible here," said Gergiev as the opening season approached. "Now we have one of the best modern opera theatres in the world."

The project had a complicated past: three competitions, five architects, and several plans abandoned along the way. The FDA team knew they were in for a formidable challenge, not least because the building's foundations had already been started, based on an earlier scheme, when they were tasked with designing the auditorium. The years they worked with Diamond Schmitt Architects on the project were a true collaboration and a bonding experience as they both learned to work on a complex project within the Russian system. As a team, they knew they needed to bring the "strength, confidence and functional clarity" to the process that Gergiev attributes to the completed building.

On top of the political expectations tied to the project's history, trying to create a room for 1,800 seated patrons for opera that could hold as many as 2,000 with the orchestra pit covered was no small achievement, especially while ensuring that every seat was as close to the stage as possible.

"We're really proud of how compact and how warm it feels," says Josh Dachs. "The reports about the building, and all the performers we talked to about the hall, commented on its intimacy and excellent sightlines. That's what we were trying to achieve."

The two most unexpected features of the new Mariinsky II come from great Russian traditions: the typically sumptuous Center Box, and the private pathway to convey the country's leader securely through the Opera's public spaces. While the team was energized about designing a contemporary royal box, an exotic design feature one doesn't see at the Met or the Kennedy Center, there was also a certain amount of cynicism about the idea that this was needed in a contemporary society. How would the intimacy the designers

strived for in the hall be affected by an enormous break in the loge and balcony-level seating, and how would patrons react to a security corridor cutting through the otherwise airy lobby floor? Wrestling with these two uncommon design issues, Diamond and the group came up with equally uncommon solutions: the corridor would be a floating bridge, snaking in full view among the lobby's open stairways and lookout points, and the "czar's box" an open two-story room whose finishes would be similar to the rest of the hall's. Its relative pomp would be indicated only by a chandelier and the Mariinsky crest.

Then, during one of the opening performances, something magical happened. Diana Vishneva, star dancer at the Mariinsky Ballet, had just finished dancing Maurice Béjart's magnificent *Bolero*. After a dozen standing ovations for Ms. Vishneva, the audience turned in unison and began clapping toward the back of the hall, raising their eyes and hands toward the Center Box. In the box, a slender woman in emerald green stood, greeted Vishneva with a wave and a kiss, and bowed herself. The woman was 87-year-old Maya Plisetskaya, a former star of the Mariinsky Ballet who originated the *Bolero* piece in 1975. The audience turned back to the stage and applauded with even more gusto toward Vishneva, who was now waving at Plisetskaya. "This went on and on," said Josh Dachs. "Russian audiences are nothing if not enthusiastic about ballet! The moment brought the house alive – the box was another stage in the room. There was performance happening on stage; there was also performance happening in the box. The combination of the two was really wonderful."

The reciprocal bowing, clapping and acknowledging continued until the curtain fell one last time and the audience spilled out into the lobby. When patrons in the open-air lobby noticed Plisetskaya walking along the glass bridge, they took up their ovation again and she continued thanking them with waves and bows. In the end, the two features of the hall that seemed to represent outdated modes in fact became spontaneous stages. Significantly, President Putin chose to sit in the middle of the audience on the orchestra level on opening night and left his box available to friends and artistic luminaries. No one anticipated that the most challenging design problems would result in such animated, spectacular kinds of moments.

"Now the theatre is not only open, but it already has a legend to go with it," says Dachs.

**Selected designers and consultants who worked on the project include:**

[Diamond Schmitt Architects](#)

[Muller BBM Acoustics](#)

KB ViPS