



Grace Notes *for* THE KAUFMAN CENTER

A New York institution gets a facelift, inside and out

By: David Barbour

Is there a more typical New York institution than the Kaufman Center? Located in the center of the Upper West Side, the city's most musically inclined neighborhood, a few minutes' stroll from Lincoln Center, it houses a distinctive combination of educational and culture programs; it's also a top destination for serious music lovers, thanks to its eclectic programming. And, last fall, it got a sparkling and much-needed renovation.

The Elaine Kaufman Cultural Center consists of the Lucy Moses School, a community arts institution, the Special Music School (also known as P.S. 859, for musically gifted students), and Merkin Concert Hall. The latter is a 457-seat auditorium that accommodates hundreds of performances each year. In the month of April alone, it hosted, the pianist Karine

Poghosyan, the Calder Quartet, the harpsichordist Jane Chapman, the New York New Music Ensemble, the soprano Disella Larusdottir, the harpist Claudia Antonelli, and jazz percussionists Dafnis Priefto and Billy Martin, among others.

The Kaufman was founded in 1952; it was then known as the Hebrew Arts School, a Sunday children's program with an emphasis on Jewish culture. In 1978, it moved into the Goodman House on West 67th Street, named after Abraham Goodman, the founder of the Goody line of hair-care products. By 1981, Merkin Concert Hall was producing its own events, making it a preferred venue for intimate musical presentations. According to the center's promotional literature, an influx of Soviet Jews into the U.S. during late '70s and early '80s included a number of

master teachers from Russia's major conservatories, many of whom ended up at the Hebrew Arts School, as they were unable to find appointments at leading U.S. academic institutions. The addition of the high-caliber faculty led to the development of the Lucy Moses School. The Special Music School was added in 1996, in an arrangement with the city of New York.

As the Kaufman Center grew, however, time was not kind to the building that housed it. Designed by the architect Ashok Bhavani, of Johansen & Bhavani, it was originally considered to be a fine example of the Brutalist school. It's a style that didn't age well, however, as the steel façade grew increasingly grimy and the marquee that announced the existence of Merkin Concert Hall thrust onto the street in an intrusive manner. And, in many ways, the three institutions cohabited awkwardly in the space.

Now, thanks to a \$17-million renovation campaign—\$7 million of which was donated by Elaine Kaufman, a longtime board member, and her



The building before renovation.

timely overhaul so that it can survive long into the twenty-first century.”

A new face on the street

“The Kaufman Center is kind of rough and tough, because of the Brutalist aesthetic of the building,” says Stern. “It’s a powerful building, with good, strong bones, but it’s a little short on the grace notes.” His task has been to add those grace notes to the structure. For example, he says. “At a performance venue, the show should begin on the sidewalk.” Therefore, the

announces the building’s many identities: Abraham Goodman House, Merkin Concert Hall, Lucy Moses School, and Special Music School. The marquee has been replaced with a subtler, more stylish horizontal version; again, the names listed above are featured on the edge of the marquee, in backlit letters, while the name “Kaufman” is seen in large, vividly illuminated letters on top. The “f” in Kaufman is rendered with a flourish that makes it resemble the musical symbol “forte”.

The marquee also provides a kind of unifying function. Previously, there were two entrances to the center. At left, under the old marquee, was the entry to Merkin Hall; its lobby was separated from the box office by a dividing wall, an arrangement that created two cramped spaces. At the right was a separate doorway that led to the school. Now, patrons enter through a single entryway. Walk straight ahead and you enter the school. Turn to the left and you find the box office; then you step down into the vastly enlarged Merkin Hall lobby. “We’re blowing out the second level above the entrance to create a tall space, transforming the arrival experience,” says Stern. “The building is a school in the daytime and on weekends, but, during the day, there are ticket sales at the box office, so part of the job involved working out the flow of traffic in that space,” says Don Guyton, of Auerbach Pollock Friedlander, the project’s theatre consultant.

The lobby has been done over with dividers made of fire-red granite from Italy, which match the red walls (and which, in turn, match the red banners on the building’s exterior). Other design touches in the lobby include Modular Arts mineral-composite sculptural panels, perforated stainless steel panels on the stairways, and rust-colored carpet tile. A linear overhead lighting scheme adds to the bright, airy feel.



The addition of translucent channel glass makes for a more attractive exterior.

husband, Henry—the Kaufman Center has gotten a kind of cosmetic and aesthetic facelift, and the results are pleasing indeed. Outside, the Kaufman Center presents a sleek new face to the world; inside, it functions more efficiently.

“Thirty-five years is about the expected life span of most mechanical system,” says Robert A. M. Stern, the project’s architect, “so, even on the most mundane level, it’s time for a facelift. We’re giving the building a

rather dreary-looking aluminum panels on the façade have been removed and replaced with translucent channel glass. It’s a choice that makes for a more attractive exterior wall, and also, says Stern, “will bring soft light into the building, and, in the evening hours, will allow the building to glow from within, yielding an appropriate theatricality.”

In addition, the façade’s concrete has been patched and cleared, and a series of red vertical banners now



Left: Red banners and the building's marquee announce its various identities. Right: The building now glows at night.

Similarly, the balcony lobby was a cramped, narrow area, with minimal windows and little light. By removing a wall and combining the room with the corridor behind it, it has been opened up. The addition of channel glass to the exterior wall now means sunlight fills the space during the day. The room is visually of a piece with the downstairs lobby, with red walls, the same carpet tile, and more Modular Arts paneling.

Preserving the concert hall's sound

Inside the concert hall, the brief was to implement a number of technical improvements without affecting the room's superb acoustics. This is where Auerbach Pollock Friedlander and the acoustical firm JaffeHolden come in. "Our first rule is, always, do no harm," says Mark Holden of JaffeHolden, wryly taking the

acoustician's version of the Hippocratic Oath. "We saw the job more as a preservation program, along the lines of our work on [Cleveland's] Severance Hall or Orchestra Hall [in Detroit, now the Max M. Fisher Music Center]."

Indeed, looking at the space, one might be hard-pressed to describe exactly what about it has been changed. The answer is nearly everything, but the work has been done almost invisibly, to ensure the room continues to function as it always has.

Previously, "there was a distinct sound leakage" between the auditorium and lobby, says Holden. "The toilets in the rest rooms were audible." The addition of a sound lock now keeps such unwanted noises out. Also, the wood acoustical panels in the auditorium were removed, cleaned, and re-installed. "We measured and determined the exact

location of each reflector and made sure they were put back exactly," says Holden. Another important change: The auditorium has a new, quieter HVAC system, which supplies air from above and returns it from below. "Some of the background noise in the hall was not fan noise from the HVAC system itself," says Andrew Schmidt, of JaffeHolden, "but structure-borne vibration from the units themselves, which needed to be properly isolated."

Interestingly, Holden add, "We did a number of acoustical measurements and we found that the seats were key to the room's acoustics." They were to be refurbished and replaced by Irwin Seating, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with the addition of new cushions and fabric so, Holden adds, "We had them measured, then had an engineer measure the new seats, to make sure

we got the same kind of reflection from them.”

In addition, the hall benefitted from the fact that New York City’s Metropolitan Transit Authority, at the request of the board of Lincoln Center, provided sound isolation for the Number 1 and 2 trains running underneath it. “This helped reduce noise and vibration in Merkin Hall,” says Holden.

The auditorium’s sound system was also subjected to a complete overhaul, overseen by Ben Bausher, of JaffeHolden, and installed by Larry Politi of the New York office of SPL Integrated Solutions. The biggest addition was a new loudspeaker system, with four EAW MK Series two-way trapezoidal installation boxes for the main left-right system, (The MK Series is designed for more intimate venues, including houses of worship, and hotel ballrooms.) Front fill is supplied by six EAW UB 12 Series loudspeakers. (“As for front fills, I was on the fence as to whether or not to design them into the project,” says Bausher. “I went to an amplified performance and sat in the second row; it was clear to me that there needed to be some kind of intelligibility fill for the first few rows.”) Two EAW SB150 subwoofers complete the rig, with six SM Series

monitors for onstage use. Powering the system are five Lab.Gruppen C28:4 amps, as well as one of the company’s C16:4 units. In addition, 50 Atlas D161-8 in-wall loudspeaker units are used to distribute sound throughout the rest of the building.

A SymNet 4 x 12 Cobra DSP provides processing for the main loudspeakers. An 8 x 8 Cobra DSP handles all auxiliary systems, from infrared to backstage to the lobby; according to Politi, it “contains all of the interesting control logic,” including priority overrides for volume control, ducking algorithms for paging, interface with a bank of SymNet ARC controllers, and a nest of modules that modify the behavior of other modules, to make the functionality of the system appear seamless from the user’s perspective. There’s also a 4 x 4 Cobra DSP for the stage manager’s desk. “The dedicated stage manager’s DSP effectively decentralizes the rack from the rest of the system,” says Bausher. “Previously, we would have used a big multi-core cable that could have been plugged in at only a few places, each of which would be very costly to wire up. Since the SymNet system is connected via CobraNet, all the stage manager has to do is connect up to a network jack anywhere in the house, and he’s in.”

A recording studio, located in the hall’s basement is also linked to the auditorium. “This is one of the few New York city venues where live recording can be done affordably,” says Holden. “A big factor in the renovation was the integration of permanently wired Jensen transformer-based microphone splits for the recording studio,” says Bausher. “Previously, the studio had only a few lines from the stage and had to bring in splits when required. Now the studio wiring is fully integrated with the rest of the system.”

There are two consoles available in the hall. The main unit is a Yamaha M7CL, but there is a Midas Venice console available for those occasions when a sound engineer prefers an analog desk. These were purchased by the center itself, along with a few other additional pieces. “The microphones remain largely unchanged,” says Bausher, “although we did supply them with a few high-end models from Neumann and other companies. We also re-integrated the hall’s existing Clair Brothers 12AM biamplified monitors into the new system.” With the new set-up, however, the need to rent gear has been largely eliminated.

The result of the acoustical work has been noticed by the press. In *The New York Times*, the music critic Anthony Tommasini wrote, “The consultants from JaffeHolden Acoustics approached the renovation with a ‘do no harm’ attitude. Merkin has long been valued for its intimate acoustics...the acousticians may not have done much. Still, the sound on opening night seemed clearer and brighter than I remembered it.”

Streamlining the lighting system

At the same time, the staff of Auerbach Pollock Friedlander worked to improve and streamline the auditorium’s electrical systems. “The old dimming system consisted of LMI



The addition of sound locks provides acoustical isolation.



Top and bottom: Two views of the motorized rigging system from JR Clancy.

behind the stage-left pivot wall, with no acoustical isolation,” says Steven Friedlander. The new system consists of three Entertainment Technology IPS-DR-24-6 racks with six 2.4kW dimmers each for architectural lighting circuits, plus four ET Intelligent Raceways above the concert platform, with an additional Intelligent Raceway on the front-of-house catwalk. Each of the latter has 24 dimmers and an Ethernet tap. Performance lighting is controlled by an ET Marquee console, with dual 15" flat panel monitors; the architectural lighting is handled by an ILS

LyteScene controller, from Lightolier, a sibling company to Entertainment Technology. (The hall’s theatrical lighting was provided by Barbizon Electric, and installed by Michael Mazzeo Electric Corporation, based in Long Island City.)

For added flexibility, the rest of the control system includes two Pathway Connectivity Pathport D Series surface-mount nodes with two DMX outputs, one surface-mount plug-in station with two Ethernet inputs and one portable house light station input, and a Pathway two-port surface-mount DMX node, with two DMX

inputs/outputs and one Ethernet input.

In terms of making life easier for the hall’s technical staff, perhaps the biggest change was the installation of a JR Clancy Powerlift motorized rigging system. “Previously, they had to use a Genie lift to change the lighting,” says Guyton. “Also, because of the sound reflectors in the ceiling, there’s not much space up there. Now, the stagehands can bring the pipes down, and change the lighting.” (The photos on this page show the rigging in its up and down configurations.) The system, which was furnished and installed by I. Weiss, of Long Island City, includes four Clancy Powerlift hoist units, which can move up to 20' per minute, and have a capacity of 2,000lbs. (Andrea Dohar, of I. Weiss, notes that the company also re-installed the hangers for the hall’s acoustical panels. “It was different sort of job, doing a major construction project inside a school,” she notes, “but it turned out to be a really smooth project.”) Other changes in the auditorium include the addition of end panels on the seating standard equipped with aisle lighting fixtures from Permlight.

The revamped Kaufman Center opened officially on January 8, with a concert in Merkin Hall that featured performances by the Friends of the Kaufman Center Orchestra and the students from the Special Music School. The building is busier than ever, and seems ready to take its place in a neighborhood where new construction seems the norm, and where Lincoln Center is currently beginning a similar upgrade. “Equally important is the fact that the West Side has changed dramatically since the building was completed in 1978,” says Stern. “The neighborhood around the Kaufman Center has grown exponentially and has been completely revitalized. The century brings a new optimism, so it’s time to put on a bright new face.”