

MPRnews

Ordway plans \$75 million expansion

by Euan Kerr, Minnesota Public Radio

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St. Paul, Minn. — St. Paul is well on its way to getting a new world class concert hall. The city's Arts Partnership announced today it has raised two-thirds of the \$75 million dollars it needs to build and operate a new 1,100 seat concert hall at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts.

Groundbreaking could come as early as next spring.

In the same week the Minnesota Orchestra revealed a record \$2.9 million deficit for the last fiscal year and the SPCO projected a deficit of up to a million dollars for the current year, an announcement of a new orchestra hall clearly cheered the crowd of dignitaries and donors at the Ordway.

Campaign co-chair Lowell Noteboom offered his congratulations.

"To have raised 51 million dollars in this economy is truly amazing," Noteboom said.

The concert hall will be home to the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, but will benefit all members of the Arts Partnership. It consists of the Ordway and its major tenants: the SPCO, the Minnesota Opera, and the Schubert Club. About half of the \$75 million will go to building the hall, the remainder will fund an endowment to support programming on both of the Ordway stages. Eight-million dollars will be used for transition costs.

The funds raised so far includes \$16 million in state bonding money.

The new hall will sit on the site currently occupied the Ordway's 300-seat McKnight Theater. It is designed to be warm and intimate, with the ability to present orchestral events, and other musical performances. The hall will feature a classic shoebox shape, with an acoustically-neutral wooden dowel roof. It will be taller than the McKnight, and feature a second floor that will wrap around the back of the stage to be both a choir loft and extra audience space.

Lead architect Tim Carl of the HGA firm said the design team drew upon the design of the Ordway mainstage, and consulted the SPCO musicians who play in halls around the world.

Carl said one issue was kept at the forefront.

"Acoustics cannot be sacrificed," Carl said. "There is never a point where you say, 'No, but it'll be so beautiful if we do this, please.' You can't do that because you can't sacrifice acoustics."



Backers plan a \$75 million expansion to build a new concert hall at the St. Paul Ordway Theatre Center. (Courtesy of Ordway Center for the Performing Arts)

Acoustically, there won't be a bad seat in the house, but there will be variations in the experience, Carl said.

"If you sit close, front, side, back — the sound has a different impact on you," Carl said. "Some people prefer a different place, and some people like to move around so they get that variety of experience."

The new hall will be a huge change for the Ordway Theatre Center. Having the SPCO in its custom-designed space will free the larger music theater and allow for greater overall flexibility in programming, said Ordway President Patricia Mitchell. She says booking so full in the Ordway center it leaves little time for groups beyond the Ordway's principal tenants.

"We get tired of saying to people, 'I'm sorry but unless you are interested in the third Monday in November, there really is no time in the music theater for expanded activity,' and I really think that will be a huge benefit to the community," Mitchell said.

The Concert Hall will also be available for events beyond the SPCO concerts, and could be home to some of the Ordway's world music and dance programs.

The Arts Partnership is now working to complete the \$75 million campaign drive by March 31. If the deadline is met, groundbreaking could take place late spring with a projected opening in spring 2014. If the campaign drive does not meet its deadline, the project will be pushed back a year to avoid interfering with the Ordway mainstage programming.

Despite the bad financial news from the Minnesota Orchestra and SPCO this week, Mitchell is not worried they won't reach the goal, as the Arts Partnership has been careful to tap new financial resources.

"I am very hopeful, and somewhat confident," she said about making the March deadline.

Mitchell is confident about the SPCO longevity, and orchestra officials predict the new hall will actually reduce costs, while generating the excitement of a new facility.



The 1,100 seat hall will stand in the space currently occupied by the 300 seat McKnight Theater and will become home to the St Paul Chamber Orchestra. (Courtesy of Ordway Center for the Performing Arts)