

The new Ordway: Bigger, with better sound

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The area's largest arts project since the new Guthrie will include an 1,100-seat concert hall for the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.



The next big project for the arts in the Twin Cities is about to rise in downtown St. Paul.

Plans for a \$75 million expansion of the Ordway Center -- the biggest arts building project since the new Guthrie Theater was completed in 2006 -- were announced Thursday by four arts groups. The 56,000-square-foot expansion will create a primary home for the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.

Ordway officials said they have secured \$51.5 million of the project's \$75 million goal. Money raised so far came from individuals, corporations and foundations, plus \$3 million from the city of St. Paul and \$16 million in state bonding. An anonymous donor gave \$5 million, Ordway officials said.

Construction is expected to start next spring, with an opening in 2014. Architectural renderings show an 1,100-seat, shoebox-shaped concert hall being built in space now occupied by the 306-seat McKnight Theatre. A group called the Arts Partnership steered the capital campaign, which includes \$35 million for construction and a \$32 million endowment to help fund operations, plus \$8 million in transition costs.

It is made up of the Ordway and its principal users: the SPCO, the Schubert Club and Minnesota Opera -- representing a more harmonious arrangement than the once-fractious relations between the Ordway and its tenants.

"When I first came here, I walked over to Bruce Coppock [then head of the SPCO] and he showed me a 6-foot

-high file cabinet of vituperative correspondence between the SPCO and the Ordway," said Ordway president and CEO Patricia Mitchell. "We don't even use the landlord-tenant terminology anymore. We are in a new day."

"This is a triumph of the civic and philanthropic leadership that made it happen," said Coppock, who flew in for the announcement. He is managing director of the Cleveland Orchestra's Miami Residency.

Designed by HGA

The new hall is designed by HGA Architects of Minneapolis. The exterior continues the bands-of-glass look of the 1985 Ordway, designed by architect Ben Thompson, offering views of historic Rice Park, Landmark Center and the St. Paul Hotel.



Inside, the new venue bears a resemblance to Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis, with a similar-shaped oblong auditorium.

Drawings show a ribbon-of-mahogany ceiling of sound-reflecting panels. Some seating encircles the back of the stage.

"It will be a seamless addition that will be in harmony with what is already here visually," said lead architect Tim Carl. "And it will have fine-tuned acoustics that allow us to hear big choral concerts and the gentlest note of a piano."

Audiences and critics have complained in the past about an indistinct acoustic for orchestral music presented in the Ordway's 1,900-seat main hall.

The new concert hall will give the Ordway more flexibility in bidding on touring Broadway shows.

Minnesota Opera said it may stretch out its runs over two weeks instead of one, giving singers more time to rest between performances.

A new home downtown will not stop the SPCO from doing its popular series in other Twin Cities locations.

"We will continue the same mix of doing 50 percent of our shows in downtown St. Paul and 50 percent in neighborhoods," said Sarah Lutman, president and managing director of the SPCO.

"This solves the chronic problems that we have faced over the years of not enough time and not enough money, Mitchell added. "The SPCO will have a new home and it will open up the calendar a bit and be funded. It presents huge possibilities for the whole community."

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