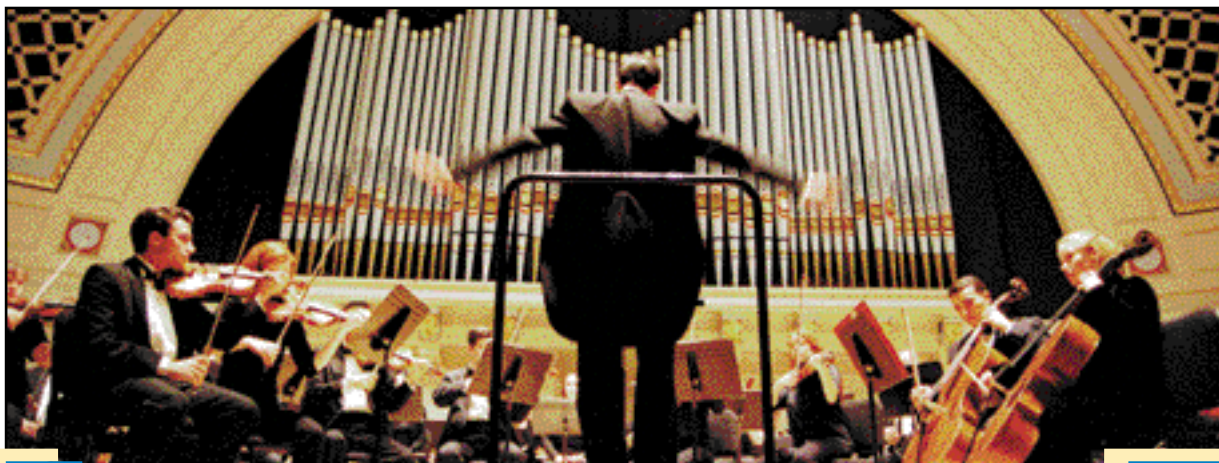


FRIDAY FOCUS



A HILL OF A TIME

BY ANNA CLARK ♣ DAILY STAFF REPORTER

Chicago wanted them. So did Pittsburgh, and Los Angeles, and a swarm of other major American cities. But Leonard Bernstein would bring the Vienna Philharmonic — perhaps the most prestigious ensemble in the world — to only four North American cities on his 1988 world tour. New York, Toronto and Washington, D.C. earned three of the coveted slots — Ann Arbor won the fourth.

“Bernstein had been to Hill Auditorium once before,” University Musical Society President Ken Fischer said. “When he left he told me this: ‘I love this town. I love the people. I love this hall. I’ll be back.’ And he did. Bernstein came back.”

Bernstein isn’t the only performer who’s fallen in love with the University’s Hill Auditorium. Since 1913, Hill has been the temptation that’s enticed the world’s greatest performers, orators and musicians to the University.

In fact, flutist James Galway called Hill one of the two greatest halls he’s performed in — the other being the Sydney Opera House.

People from every walk of life, including former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, poet Nikki Giovanni, comedian Adam Sandler and composers Serge Prokofiev and Dergei Rachmaninoff, have swept the stage.

“In general, Hill has an extraordinarily distinctive history of performance events, major ceremonies and speakers,” said Jeff Kuras, managing director of University Productions. “All the great classical artists have played that hall.”

And Fischer contends all “the greatest artists in the world want to come” to Hill.

Acoustically sound

Hill offers a performing experience unlike any other, said Jerry Blackstone, who’s been conducting the University Men’s Glee Club and other campus vocal ensembles on Hill’s stage for 12 years.

“It’s acoustically wonderful,” he said. Detroit architect Albert Kahn, who designed many Central Campus buildings, including Angell Hall, the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library and the Natural Science Building, is credited with the creation of Hill’s near-perfect acoustics.

“Hill brings human quality to the voice,” Kuras said. “You can speak in a regular voice from center stage and be heard in the second balcony.”

“And beyond that,” Kuras went on, “people like the intimacy at Hill — the encounter they have with the artist.”

Kuras said the unique shape of the stage design adds to Hill’s appeal.

Men’s Glee Club member Trip Finnegan, an LSA senior, said he remembers his first performance on the Hill stage more than three years ago.

“The place was just packed,” Finnegan said. “It was the most amazing thing to see all those people looking back at you, expecting something, expecting this beautiful sound.”

Finnegan went on to say that the sound in Hill is so perfect, he has heard a conversation in the corner of the main floor while sitting in the third balcony.

Room for improvements

Despite its praised acoustics and atmosphere, Hill is far from perfect.

“Much of the auditorium is unacceptably below par,” University President Lee Bollinger said. “And I’ve made a decision that we, as a university, need to restore Hill.”

Fischer, Kuras and Blackstone said they agree that much of Hill is in dire need of improvement.

“We need to make it a more comfortable place for both patrons and artists,” Fischer said.

Fischer said adding elevators to Hill to accommo-

date the elderly and disabled is a top priority. He also said additional bathrooms are needed for the facility.

Kuras added that there are no smoke alarms at Hill and the backstage area is “extremely poor.”

“The star’s dressing room is a dump,” Finnegan said. “It looks like a dorm room after a party. It’s almost an embarrassment to the University to put these famous, important people in there.”

Bollinger echoed these feelings.

“We want to move the backstage facilities of our visiting performers up to the quality of the performers themselves,” he said.

University students have their own thoughts on what could be improved at Hill.

Corey Sandusky, an LSA freshman, said he would like to see larger and more comfortable seats.

“And better parking in the area too,” Sandusky added.

Although Hill is below code in terms of American Disabilities Act compliance and fire safety, it continues to be a suitable performance space.

“It’s an amazing building that needs a lot of work. The fact that it’s so old and still so amazing — well, that’s incredible, to say the least,” Finnegan said.

Revamping Hill

“Unfortunately the renovations are going to be terribly expensive,” Fischer said.

Bollinger said \$50 million will be necessary for the renovations to Hill, which was named for former University Regent Arthur Hill who, in 1910, bequeathed to the University \$200,000 from his estate for the construction of an auditorium.

“We just don’t have that money right now, though,” Bollinger said. “However, I’m prepared to commit \$30 million to get what we can do. Hopefully, we could earn more for these improvements through fundraising.”

Bollinger said there needs to be consensus among the groups that use Hill, including the UMS, UProd and other campus performance groups concerning the planning of Hill’s renovations.

“We’re still in the planning process right now,” he said. “It may continue through the semester and perhaps longer. With planning and execution, this may be a three to four year project.”

Fischer commended Bollinger for his handling of the Hill renovation project.

“Everyone who cares about Hill is pleased with Bollinger’s support,” he said. “He’s really making an effort to find out what’s best for everyone with this.”

While the execution of the project is long overdue, one thing is for certain — the renovations will cause great inconvenience.

In fact, Hill will almost certainly be shut down for the first time in its near 90-year history during renovations, Bollinger said.

University groups that regularly perform at Hill, including the orchestras, bands, glee clubs, choirs and School of Music recitals, will be displaced for approximately a year.



TOP: Rossen Milanov conducts the University Philharmonic Orchestra in Hill Auditorium Oct. 5, 1999. ABOVE: University alum Vincent Frappier paints Hill in October.

“I’m sure it’s going to be difficult to work with,” Blackstone said. It will be “a real challenge.”

Fischer said losing Hill’s stage during renovations will make a large impact.

“When you lose a 4,163-person hall, it’s going to be huge,” Fischer said.

Hill was renovated once before in the 1940s to meet new fire codes and to provide larger seats to the auditorium’s patrons.

But Kuras said it was unnecessary to shut down Hill for any significant length of time.

Returning to ‘U’

But Blackstone said he isn’t worried about losing any University performances. He said the Power Center, Mendelssohn Theater and Rackham Auditorium are alternative venues.

“All are unique in their own way. Hill is certainly the best place to perform on campus. It makes the most beautiful sound. But we’ll do just fine in other theaters.”

Fischer said the quality of outside performers won’t suffer either.

“This will give us an opportunity to be more creative in our performances,” he said. “Ten years ago, if we were told Hill was going to shut down, we’d panic. But UMS has already expanded to other venues. Right now, only about a quarter of the 93 events we’re sponsoring this year are at Hill.”

Kuras said the loss of Hill for so many months will hurt University programming, but the temporary inconveniences will be both necessary and worthwhile.

“We’ll be doing a lot of rerouting and creative planning, which will be difficult,” he said, “but when Hill reopens, the public will see that it was worth waiting for.”

Blackstone said he agreed. “This is a small price to pay for what we’ll get in return. We’ll do whatever it takes to make Hill the best it can be.”

Kuras further pointed out that the renovations could not only improve the building’s condition, but also the way in which it’s run.

“With the addition of air conditioning, we could extend programming at Hill through the summer,” he said, adding that Hill’s performance season typically runs from mid-September to mid-May.

Curtain call

When the renovations are complete, Fischer said the University community will renew its appreciation for all the voices, music, laughter and applause Hill has brought to Ann Arbor.

“Hill is a real treasure; not just to the University, but to the United States and even the world,” Fischer said. “I’ve personally had some of the great moments of my life there. A place like Hill — people see the greatest of concert guests there, it’s where people graduate, it’s where people who’ve now been married 50 years first met.”

“It kind of pulls at your heartstrings,” he said.

Kuras described one of the most memorable concerts he saw at Hill.

“It was Jessye Norman. The last song she played was a Strauss piece, with a full orchestra. Afterwards, the audience was so moved that there was total silence for 15 to 20 seconds. Usually people applaud before a piece is completely over, but not then.”

“After, of course, there was an immediate standing ovation,” Kuras said.



FILE PHOTO
Hillary Clinton closes the Year of Arts and Humanities with a speech at Hill Auditorium on April 28, 1998.



FILE PHOTO
TOP: B.B. King performs at Hill Auditorium Nov. 11, 1998.
ABOVE: Weird Al Yankovic fills Hill with his accordion style Sept. 26, 1996.



FILE PHOTO
Chris Rock delights the Ann Arbor crowd at Hill Auditorium on April 6, 1997.

Hill Legends

In its 90-year history, Hill has hosted artists from every genre of performance. Here is a sample of Hill’s legends who have performed in the past five years.

Oct. 8, 1994 — Indigo Girls

Nov. 16, 1994 — Phish

March 16, 1995 — Sarah McLachlan

Oct. 26, 1995 — Blues Traveler

March 20, 1996 — Film Director Oliver Stone speaks on the media’s influence on society

Sept. 26, 1996 — Bruce Springsteen

Sept. 27, 1996 — Tori Amos

Nov. 21, 1996 — Bob Dylan

Jan. 30, 1997 — Leonard Nimoy talks about his life, his career and being Jewish

Feb. 12, 1997 — Wynton Marsalis

Feb. 15, 1997 — Ray Charles

April 6, 1997 — Comedian Chris Rock stops by to “Bring the Pain”

Sept. 21, 1997 — Cecilia Bartoli

Oct. 16, 1997 — Ani DiFranco

Oct. 23, 1997 — Counting Crows

Oct. 27, 1997 — Adam Sandler speaks to a rowdy crowd and trash-talks Ohio State University right before the big game

March 21, 1998 — Comedian Norm MacDonald fills Hill with laughter

April 22, 1998 — Harry Connick Jr.

April 28, 1998 — First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton speaks on the role of the humanities in higher education

Oct. 2, 1998 — Michael Stipe and Phillip Glass perform in honor of Allen Ginsberg

Oct. 9, 1998 — St. Petersburg Philharmonic

Nov. 8, 1998 — B.B. King

March 13, 1999 — Rusted Root

April 12, 1999 — Jesse Jackson speaks on civil rights

April 12, 1999 — Ellen DeGeneres opens to a five-minute standing ovation

Oct. 27, 1999 — Ben Harper

Oct. 30, 1999 — Buena Vista Social Club

Feb. 3, 2000 — Beck