

## A sound plan

The newly formed Acoustic Committee has set out to tweak the sound of Orlando's performing arts venues

By Pierce Hoover

Your favorite Mozart compositions are being performed by your favorite orchestra. Your excitement at seeing and hearing the great composer's music is tempered, however, by the realization that it actually sounds better at home on your CD player than live in the auditorium.

This is a scenario that a group of performers and patrons known as the Acoustic Committee hopes will never trouble Central Florida audiences.

"Our product is the sound we make," says David Schillhammer, executive director of the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra. "Once it is gone, it's gone forever. There's only that single moment when it is delivered, and if you don't have quality sound, you are not delivering your best product."

The Acoustic Committee's self-appointed task is to ensure that the "sound product" created by orchestras, opera singers and other performing artists is not compromised by the poor physical design of an auditorium. What began as an informal group discussion in 2001 has now solidified into a committee that includes members of most all major local performing arts groups, plus a number of interested patrons.

Committee co-chairman Steve Goldman says that, though the group is still in its infancy, it has already targeted several potential action items that would improve sound quality within the Bob Carr Performing Arts Centre, the main venue for local orchestral and operatic performances.

"In all the marketing studies we have done, the number one reason for [audience] dissatisfaction with performances is the physical nature of the auditorium," he says. "This involves both seeing and hearing the performance."

"The first issue involves the visual element ... call it *psycho* acoustics. People come not just to hear the sound, but also to see the performers."

For orchestras performing on the Bob Carr stage, Goldman says an inexpensive solution to this problem would be to install risers that would raise musicians in the back rows to provide eye contact with the audience.

The addition of risers is seen as a relatively simple, inexpensive way to improve *psycho* acoustics. It would, however, require modification of the auditorium's existing shell — the bowl-like background structure that envelops the stage, and is designed to direct sound toward the

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audience — to improve the audio acoustics.

Modification or even replacement of the existing shell would not be a bad option, says Goldman.

"A shell is sort of like a loud speaker horn, designed to reflect sound out into the audience. If it's not made from a good reflective material, and is not free of holes, a lot of the sound escapes, leaving the music sounding thin or weak."

"But as it is now being used, it has gaps that let sound escape into the backstage areas. Also, the material the shell is made of is too thin to contain base notes. A new, first-class shell would be a good solution."

Another option the committee is considering is the installation of what is known as *active* acoustics. This is a new technology, not just a public address system, Goldman stresses.

"Until recently, I was prejudiced against any kind of electric amplification system. This technology uses speakers hidden around the auditorium to recreate the sound reflections that would exist in a perfectly designed auditorium."

One interesting feature of an active acoustic system, Goldman says, is that once it is installed, it allows users to configure the acoustics of the auditorium according to their needs.

"Requirements for an opera are very different from a ballet. With this system, you could dial in whatever acoustics you need for the performance ... you could even set it to reproduce one of the world's great concert halls."

Goldman stresses that the committee's work is just beginning, and many of these ideas are in their infancy.

He feels that in time, its work will impact not only the sound quality of the Bob Carr Auditorium, but other sites as well, including the new downtown Center for Arts and Education.

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*Pierce Hoover is a Winter Park-based writer and editor. In his 20-year career, he has covered topics ranging from technical engineering to adventure travel. He is currently editor of Sport Diver magazine and director of communications for the Philippe Cousteau Foundation.*