

The Sign of Music

There's no place like the Philadelphia Orchestra's new home.

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"It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance."

— Henry James, writer

It comes in many forms and evokes perceptions unique to each individual. It implies a personal, creative expression that seeks appreciation by others. It moves people in life-changing ways, transports them to places unknown and lingers in their hearts and minds. It is: Art.

More than a century old and no stranger to renown, the Philadelphia Orchestra upholds a reputation as one of the leading orchestras in the world, performing more than 300 concerts annually and touching the lives of countless music lovers. With its sustained worldwide acclaim, it's no surprise that the orchestra's new home is a

\$265 million landmark that occupies an entire block (2.3 acres) of Center City Philadelphia.

In December 2001, Philadelphia celebrated the opening of the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts. A symbol of the city's appreciation of its 300-year, performance-art history, the Kimmel Center features a great indoor plaza, year-round roof garden and an immense, glass-and-steel-constructed, barrel-vault roof that towers 150 ft. above Broad St.

Verizon Hall and the Perelman Theatre, the Kimmel Center's primary venues, are constructed as two freestanding buildings beneath the facility's arched, glass roof. Comprising four levels of seating, the cello-shaped Verizon Hall can accommodate 2,500 people.

Macore wood fins comprise its exterior, and mahogany covers its interior surfaces, including each tier's ceilings. Perelman Theatre features a metal construction and an interior finished in various light-colored woods and fabrics, with metallic highlights to compliment the room's gold interior. The cube-shaped theater seats 650 patrons.

Russell Johnson, founder of New York City-based Artec Consultants Inc., acoustically designed Verizon Hall to accommodate the Philadelphia Orchestra. His acoustics for Perelman Theater cater to various types of music, as well as dance and theater performances.

The Kimmel Center also houses Peter Nero and the Philly Pops®, American Theater Arts for Youth, the Chamber Orchestra of

Photo credit: Roman Vĩňoly

process. After compiling a "short list" of potential fabricators, project leaders interviewed these individuals to learn more about their expertise and project-management skills. The team eventually awarded the job to AGS, an Exton, PA-based company that, like other shops, strongly pursued the long-awaited, high-profile job.

Orchestrating sign fabrication

A 38-year-old company that specializes in wayfinding, environmental-graphic design, sign standards programs and donor recognition, AGS began fabricating the Kimmel Center's sign components in late 2000.

Neil Jacobson, the company's executive vice president, says, "We had plenty of time to complete this project's signage — almost a year. Unfortunately, because signage is at the bottom of the food chain, we're usually not called in until the end, meaning, we don't have a lot of time and are pushed to meet deadline. But this wasn't the case with the Kimmel Center."

In addition to working closely with the project's construction manager, Bala Cynwyd, PA-based LF Driscoll Co. (LF Driscoll and Philadelphia-based Artis T. Ore Inc. Building Enterprises jointly managed the project's construction), AGS formed a close working relationship with the facility's sign designer. According to Neil, his company had never worked with Tom before. However, the AGS team was aware of his reputable design work. Neil recalls no major challenges or disagreements in the collaboration.

"We've been working with designers for years and know what to expect from them, just like they know what to expect from us as fabricators," he says.

In addition to fabricating directional and donor-recognition components, AGS produced the Kimmel Center's building-identification signage; directory displays; evacuation and stairwell signs; room-identification plaques with changeable inserts; box-office-window, changeable-message signs; and box-seat

Photo credit: Tom Crane Photography Inc.



Six-in.-tall, fabricated, stainless-steel letters identify Verizon Hall's seating divisions. To achieve a smooth surface, AGS ground the .090-in.-thick letters and then spray-painted them bronze.

tags. The shop also created the graphics for the temporary, fabric banner but subcontracted the digital-print work.

The building's high-end sign components comprise sandblasted glass, fabricated brass with oxidized finishes and fabricated stainless-steel letters. According to Neil, although it's common for AGS to produce large quantities of signs for a given project, the shop doesn't routinely fabricate components as exquisite (and costly) as the Kimmel Center's signage.

"Most places don't install bathroom signs made of glass," Neil jokes.

For AGS, sandblasting the center's interior, granite wall posed the biggest challenge because the sand projected from the compressed air would interfere with the facility's heating and cooling system.

"The HVAC system is incredibly sophisticated," Neil explains. "Therefore, we had to set up a temporary, plastic room that would extract the

dust caused by sandblasting the center's 25-ft. granite wall. Both the temporary room and sandblasting equipment contained vacuum systems to eliminate the mess. This type of setup is rare because a granite wall this size is usually part of a building's exterior, not interior."

Neil notes that another challenge arose when crews began installing the sign components. "Installation was cumbersome due to numerous construction workers and production people trying to meet deadline," he says. "In fact, some workers left and came back at two in the morning to complete a job. However, it was amazing how well it all came together in the end."

Not surprisingly, AGS is proud to have contributed to the construction of a visually amazing, majestic place where performance art can dwell and thrive.

"The Kimmel Center is spectacular. It's cutting edge. And we're excited to have been a part of its building blocks," Neil concludes. ■



Photo credit: Tom Crane Photography Inc.

The center's 25-ft. granite wall features sandblasted, hand-chisled and gilded "Board of Directors" names.

sions about design parameters. There were also a few sketch-review meetings with Rafael Viñoly. Even after the preliminary design was approved by the client and architect, several design-development presentations were scheduled as new information came in."

In particular, creating the center's donor-dedication system became a monumental task as public interest steadily grew and donors of all levels emerged. Board of directors' and founders' names were slated to be carved into the center's 25-ft. granite wall, while dark-bronze panels with etched, gold-filled lettering were planned to depict the names of mid-level contributors. In addition, the project team intended to screenprint the names of small-gift supporters onto glass-paneled, handrail supports.

The Kimmel Center leaders postponed carving the granite wall to solicit more major donations. However, they needed to recognize existing donors at the facility's grand opening. As a result, the Wojciechowski Design team proposed hanging a temporary banner that would not only depict the names of established supporters, but entice other people to make donations as well. The 18 x 40-ft., digitally printed, scrim-fabric banner was hung in front of the granite wall.

By year's end, the soft sign will be removed, and the names of the

facility's major contributors will be sandblasted and hand-chisled into the granite. Completion of the bronze plaques and glass panels depicting the names of other Good Samaritans is also underway.

In addition to a donor-recognition wall and panels, the center's sign program called for identifying/wayfinding components. Tom says, "One consideration was

whether the client wanted visitors to wander freely and solely depend on signage to reach their destinations or allow staff members to take the lion's share of responsibility for wayfinding assistance." Because the client opted for the latter, the center's wayfinding system became less dutiful and more visually impressive.

By designing each wayfinding component as a glass panel with bronze mounting brackets and reverse-carved, bronze-colored copy, the team not only created an aesthetic system, but also, a group of signs that complemented the center's glass-constructed, barrel-vault roof, bronze elevator doors and trim, brick piers and stone floors.

Despite no major design restrictions, tentative plans for an illuminated zipper sign outside the Kimmel Center were rejected due to budget constraints and uncertainty about architectural compatibility, Tom says.

He also recalls that receipt of numerous sign-fabrication bids created a time-consuming selection

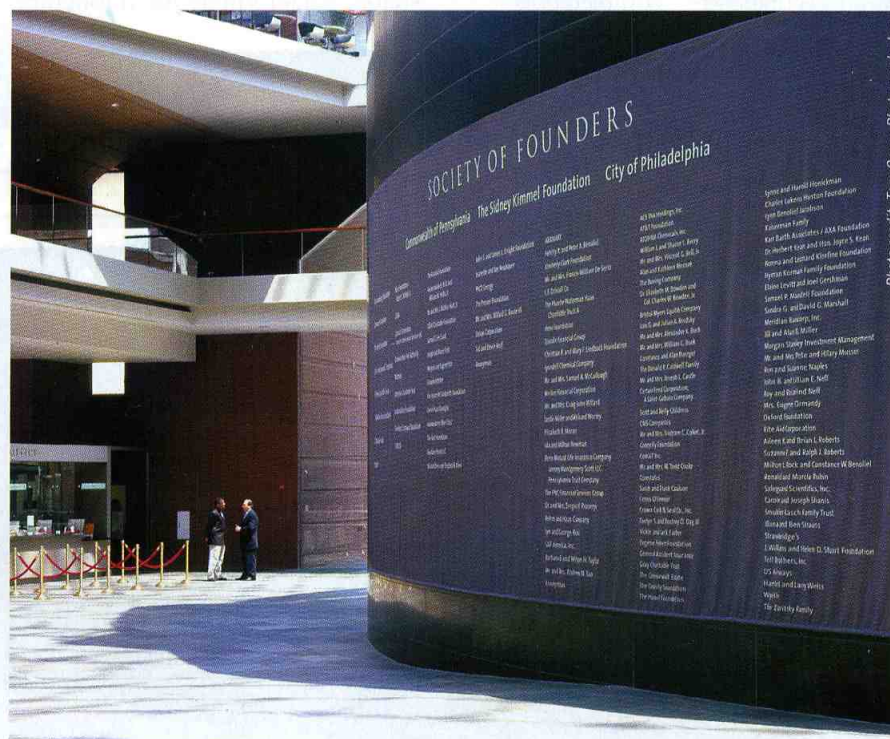


Photo credit: Tom Crane Photography Inc.

In the near future, the "Society of Founders" temporary, scrim banner will be removed so crews can begin carving major-contributor names into the granite, donor-dedication wall. The Kimmel Center postponed the carving to solicit more major donations.

Philadelphia, PHILADANCO and the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society. The center's neighbor, the historic Academy of Music (the Philadelphia Orchestra's former venue), is home to the Opera Company of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania Ballet.

In 1996, two factors conceived the idea to build the Kimmel Center: the Philadelphia Orchestra's desire for a new orchestral home and former Mayor Edward G. Rendell's plan to provide a performing-arts venue for local and touring companies. The Philadelphia Orchestra, which acquired property at Broad and Spruce Streets, melded the two plans under the supervision of the Regional Performing Arts Center (RPAC), a nonprofit organization established in 1996. Today, RPAC operates both the Kimmel Center and Academy of Music.

In 1997, RPAC hired Rafael Viñoly Architects PC (New York City) to design the new facility. The internationally recognized architectural firm — which specializes in building design, urban planning and interior design for new facilities, renovations and restorations — completed its



Photo credit: Tom Crane Photography Inc.

The building-identification components featured here comprise .062-in.-thick, fabricated stainless-steel letters with smooth, silver-spray-painted surfaces. "The Kimmel Center" and "For the Performing Arts" letters measure 11 in. tall and 7½ in. tall, respectively. New York City-based Wojciechowski Design designed the center's sign components; AGS of Exton, PA, served as the project's sign fabricator.

preliminary design of the Kimmel Center in the spring of 1998. By fall of the same year, construction crews broke ground.

Sign design takes center stage

In mid-1999, the project's sign program earnestly began to take shape. Rafael Viñoly hired longtime

business associate Tom Wojciechowski of Wojciechowski Design (New York City) to design a sign system that would not only assist visitors, but enhance their visiting experience as well.

According to Tom, "There were a few programming meetings with the client and preliminary discus-



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