

## ORCHESTRA OPENS A NEW HOME

**S**AN DIEGO—The posh Civic Theater, which has housed the San Diego Symphony among other attractions for the last two decades, was dark Thursday night. The marquee heralded an upcoming rock concert.

A few blocks away, at 7th and B streets, the San Diego Symphony was busy inaugurating a glamorous new home: the erstwhile Fox Theater. It is the first home the orchestra can call its own in its checkered 74-year history.

The Fox, which opened in 1929,

By MARTIN BERNHEIMER,  
*Times Music Critic*

had witnessed the heyday of vaudeville, the flowering of the talkie and the ultimate decline of the downtown movie palace. Now, painstakingly refurbished for a mere \$4.75 million and renamed Symphony Hall, it has regained respectability as the impetus for a \$149-million development that eventually will include a 33-story office building and a 450-room hotel.

The official, hopefully gala, presumably spectacular re-opening took place a week ago. On that televised occasion, the top ticket in the 2,251-seat emporium fetched \$1,000. There were, unfortunately, a lot of empty seats.

For the inaugural brouhaha festivities, the Symphony and its excellent conductor, David Atherton, had been demoted. They played third fiddle, as it were, in a variety show that enlisted such names as Toni Tennille, Ben Ver-

een, Oscar Peterson, Diahann Carroll, Hal Linden and Joel Grey. The token "classical" performer—and he apparently did not find himself in a particularly "classical" mood—was everybody's favorite tootler, James Galway.

The first-night extravaganza in the ornate quasi-new showcase may have been fun. Reports vary. It did, however, convey a rather unsettling message regarding the artistic priorities of the San Diego management and its constituents.

The first bona-fide symphonic concert in Symphony Hall took place this Thursday, and not a moment too soon as regards image-saving. It was, in some ways, a promising occasion, in others a troubling one.

The friendly smell of fresh paint greeted the visitor at the entrance. The house, a magnificent art-deco-nouveau-renaissance-roccoco monstrosity from a forgotten age, is inviting.

The proscenium looms high and proud. The seats afford ample legroom. Generous row placement facilitates the traffic of passers-by, and, although we are trapped in the awful era of so-called European seating, there are aisles here. Blessed aisles.

Artec Consultants Inc. have made the crucial acoustical decisions. The stage has no conventional shell. Sound reflectors at the rear and side of the playing area are masked by thickly settled strings of beads masquerading as curtains. The stage apron has been extended before the proscenium, causing something of an illumination problem for the performers at the front.

The naked light towers flanking either side of the stage must be a stopgap solution.

In general, the hall looks terrific, especially if one has a high tolerance for crazed, brash, gargantuan kitsch. The sound, unfortunately, seems to be cause for some concern.

The acoustic is very reverberant. That is better than being very dry. One can tone down resonance if there is too much of it, but one cannot create resonance if there isn't enough. Still, the degree of possible adjustment remains to be ascertained.

From a seat in the third row of the grand tier, a.k.a. first balcony, one can be disturbed by chords that linger in the air long after cut-offs, encouraged by the mellow shimmer of sustained pianissimos. The string tone is warm, loud and mushy. The brass lacks bite and the winds lack presence. It is unlikely that the players deserve the blame.

From a seat at the side of a row half-way to the back, downstairs, one encounters similar frustrations. Here they are aggravated by the maddening basso ostinato of a motor hum that may emanate from a heating or air conditioning unit.

Under the circumstances, it is easier to listen to sound than to music. Nevertheless, one has to acknowledge that Atherton put together an interesting concert.

It opened bravely—to the obvious discomfort of an unprepared, less-than-capacity audience—with Igor Stravinsky's ear-stretching arrangement of the National Anthem. Then came the feisty, 30-second "Fanfare for a New Sym-

ater" which Stravinsky created for the New York State Theater in 1964.

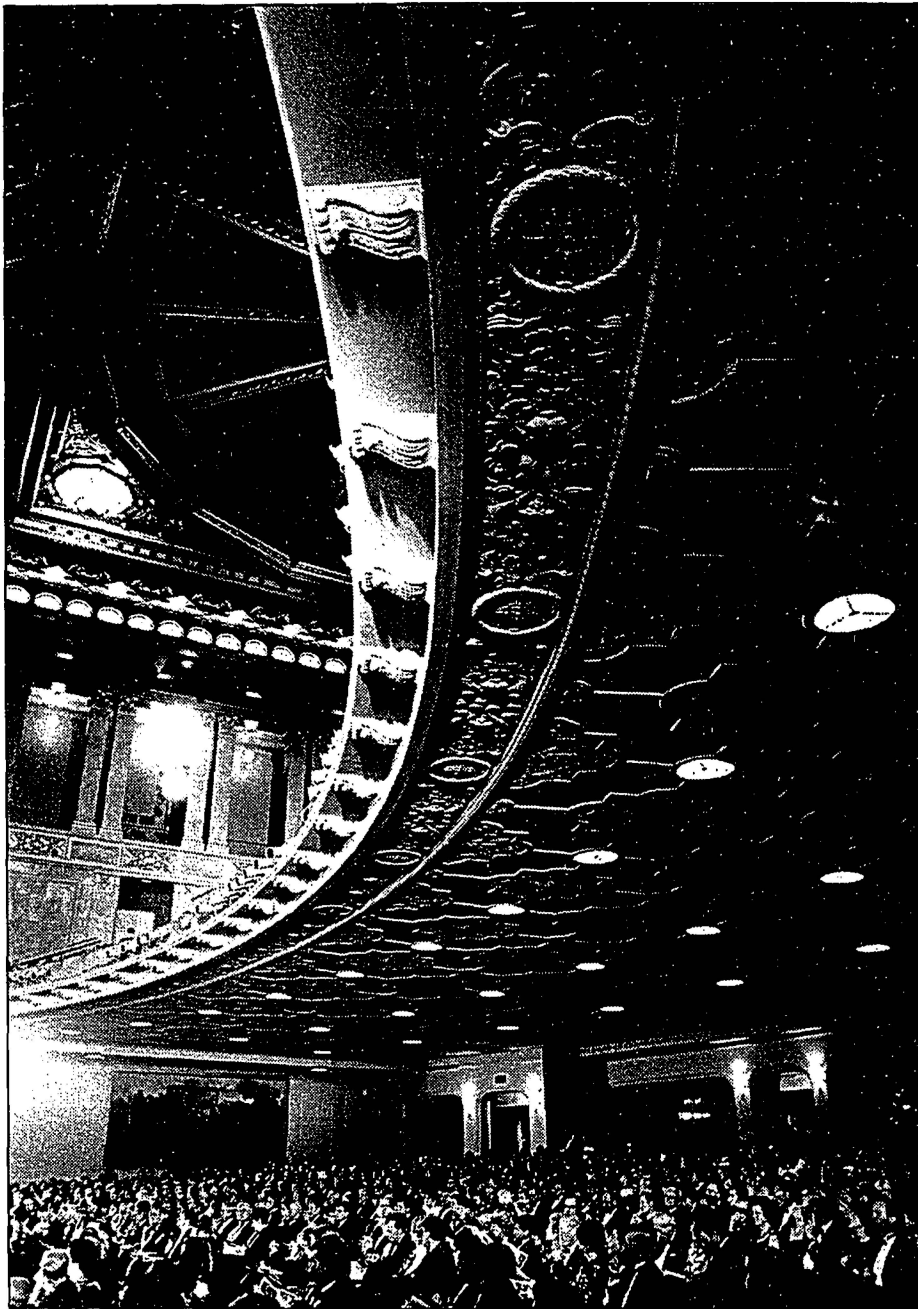
It is worth noting that the two trumpeters at the Lincoln Center premiere had to ignore the composer's instructions and stand together in order to hear each other. In San Diego at least they could be positioned, as intended, at opposite sides of the stage.

Bernard Rand, the resident composer-in-residence, took the podium for the premiere of his "Ceremonial for Orchestra." It turned out to be a carefully gauged, revealing, unabashedly theatrical demonstration of wide-ranging instrumental textures and dynamics. The San Diegans played the 12-minute *piece d'occasion* with transparency, tension and poignance.

Atherton returned, together with an uneven solo quartet from the orchestra, to introduce Robert D. Levin's idiomatic reconstruction of a Symphonie Concertante for flute, oboe, horn and bassoon that may be—but probably isn't—by Mozart. (Koechel numbered the mysterious opus 297b.) The British maestro presided over a stylish, affectionate reading of this spurious curio.

After intermission, he examined the sure-fire pathos and pizzazz of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony. He conveyed the overwrought rhetoric with uncommon elegance, mustered ample bravado where needed. The faithful subscribers went home happy.

It was a beginning.



Audience awaits downbeat in new home of San Diego Symphony, an ornate 1920s movie palace.