

Musicians Hear Heaven in Tully Hall's New Sound



Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Musicians gave the new acoustics a test drive on Tuesday at the renovated Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center. [More Photos >](#)

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With giddiness and glee, musicians tested the acoustics of the newly renovated Alice Tully Hall on Tuesday, less than a month before it reopens after a \$159 million, 22-month upgrade, a major milestone in [Lincoln Center](#)'s \$1.2 billion remaking.

"I'm already so jazzed," said David Finckel, a cellist and co-artistic director of the [Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center](#), Tully's main inhabitant. "It's the greatest new toy I've ever had."

The musicians, acoustical experts and Lincoln Center officials in attendance all proclaimed the hall much more present, alive and reverberant than the old Tully, which had been widely faulted for its dry sound. That was the initial impression, but a highly provisional one. A hall reveals its true nature only with a full audience in the seats.

“Oh my God, it’s heaven,” said [Anne-Marie McDermott](#), the pianist, after playing a Steinway on the stage. “You can do anything: the clarity, the range.” She called the sound fat, rich and buttery, and unfamiliar from prerenovation days. “I wouldn’t have recognized it,” she said.

The renovation has transformed the hall, which had been largely unchanged since its opening in 1969. A vast new glass-enclosed lobby, almost 10 times larger, juts like a ship’s prow toward the corner of 65th Street and Broadway, with an extension of the [Juilliard School](#) forming the roof. An offstage warm-up room was added, and the green rooms and dressing rooms were spruced up.

The hall’s interior is simple, stripped of “visual noise” to create a more intimate sensation, said [Elizabeth Diller](#), the architect whose firm, Diller Scofidio & Renfro, did the design in collaboration with FXFowle Architects.

The inside walls are sheathed in an amber-colored veneer about the thickness of two sheets of paper, cut from a single log of an African moabi tree. Behind the veneer are panels 1 to 1 ½ inches thick, most made of heavy wood composite, some of resin.

The resin panels form a band around the front part of the hall, starting on the side walls and running around the back of the stage. LED bulbs are mounted behind the panels, so that with a button’s touch, a variable amber glow emerges in a diffuse band. Ms. Diller said that such a light effect was a first for a major concert hall. It has yet to be determined to what extent, if any, the lighting effect will be used during performances.

Gray suedelike fabric covers the seats, which have the same generous leg room demanded by Alice Tully, a former opera singer who became a major musical philanthropist and paid for the original hall. (She died in 1993, and her portrait will be returned to the lobby.) The seat bottoms, made of dense foam, are firm, designed to keep the public alert but comfortable.

There is still no center aisle. (Adding one would have been structurally impossible, the architects said.)

The most significant addition is the adjustable stage. It can be extended twice, reducing the audience capacity at full extension from 1,087 to 923 seats. The lip has a novel shape: the center bulges toward the audience like a camel’s hump. As changes made during the acoustical testing showed, adjustments take only 20 minutes.

Subway noise has been eliminated, Lincoln Center officials said. Ron Austin, the executive director of the development project, said the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) welded down the train tracks, which are 2,000 feet away, and installed rubber pads to absorb vibrations.

From the start critics have complained about Tully's arid sound. Shortly after its opening, Harold C. Schonberg, music critic for The New York Times, said, "Clarity rather than warmth is its main characteristic," although he added that the hall revealed "a strong bass characteristic and plenty of presence." With 1,096 seats, it was also large for a chamber hall, failing to turn chamber concerts into intimate affairs, Mr. Finckel said.

"This is a whole different ballgame," he said. What's more, he added, while the music sounded good along the sides, there was a dead zone in the middle before the renovation.

To improve the sound the acousticians, JaffeHolden, lined up flangelike panels along the front of the side walls to bounce sound inward. The panels resemble shark's gills at a quick glance.

The interior angle of the walls also has been smoothed out.

The session on Tuesday was mainly an attempt to fine-tune the hall's variables before an inaugural concert on Feb. 22.

The musicians who played also included Mr. Finckel; the Escher String Quartet; Wu Han, a pianist and co-artistic director of the Chamber Music Society; and Anthony McGill, a clarinetist who is a principal of the [Metropolitan Opera Orchestra](#). The music excerpts ranged in size from a Bach solo cello suite to the Brahms Piano Quintet. The musicians played standing and sitting, with the cello on and off a platform, to the front or middle of the stage and with slight adjustments to tilting ceiling panels above the stage.

Stagehands changed the stage configuration by automatically dropping a platform containing the first six rows of seats, sliding them under a cavity beneath the fixed stage and raising a platform that fit flush with the curvaceous lip of the fixed stage. The musicians tried all three positions.

Ms. McDermott said that there seemed to be more resonance in the middle position than in the unextended position. But by the end the dizzying number of small variables seemed to have the musicians flummoxed in detecting differences.

Meanwhile listeners in the hall filled out questionnaires, grading how well they heard, with grades of 1 to 5, according to positioning and categories like individual instruments, ensemble blend, tonal balance, background noise and other qualities.

A JaffeHolden principal, Mark Holden, said the goal was to create a reverberation time of 1.4 to 1.5 seconds, the time it takes for a sound to die out. Drying and cracking of the old interior's Brazilian mahogany surface had deadened the sound over the years, he said.

Measures have been taken to deal with amplified sound and movies. Eight floor-to-ceiling doors that pivot 360 degrees flank the stage. One side of the doors has black sound-absorbing material that will face outward when amplified music is played. Banners can extend downward along the side walls to absorb amplified sound further or recreate the quality of a movie theater for showings by the [Film Society of Lincoln Center](#). And the ceiling panels will be angled differently.

In other changes the refurbished organ will be placed behind movable doors at the back of the stage. It is expected to be in place next year. A new screen for movies or projections can be dropped in three minutes, instead of the six hours needed for the old screen.

Many elements of the renovation have donor names attached to them, and there was a poignancy to at least one, even before the building's opening: the Citi Balcony, named for the banking company that has announced huge losses and plans to break up.

“ ‘In the Nick of Time’ is the name of our fund-raising campaign,” said Jane S. Moss, Lincoln Center's vice president for programming.

One major alteration has already been open to public view for a time, the three-story glassed-in lobby, with a planned cafe and bar. The hall's southern exterior along West 65th Street has also been turned into a glass wall, creating what the designers said would be a closer connection to the rest of Lincoln Center. Outside, a concrete grandstand will face the glass wall. People can sit on the steps, and some outdoor performances may take place there. Monitors behind the grandstand will provide information about events at Lincoln Center.

“The effort has been to make this a much more open, contiguous space,” Ms. Diller said. “Tully was just hermetic. It didn't have an identity.”