

Perth Concert Hall – A History



Perth Concert Hall is owned by the City of Perth. WA Venue & Events (WAVE) took over the management of the venue on 2nd January 2015. The venue had previously been managed by AEG Ogden (Perth) Pty Ltd for 15 years.

In the Beginning.....

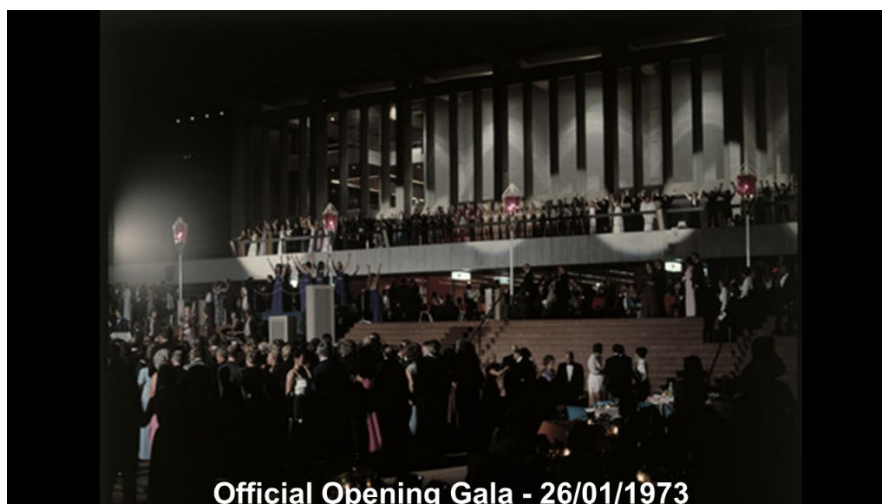
In 1950 the land between Stirling Gardens and Government House was granted to the City of Perth by the WA Government for the construction of a new town hall and in 1955, a contest to design a new town hall for the City of Perth was announced.

In 1961 local architects Howlett and Bailey's concept for an administrative building and an auditorium was purchased by the City of Perth. However, due to financial constraints and design concerns only Council House was built.

In 1968 negotiations between the City of Perth and State Government recommenced and it was decided to build only a Concert Hall. Howlett and Bailey (now Cox Howlett & Bailey Woodland) were appointed to design the hall and construction commenced in 1971.

However, the construction of the hall did not take place without some controversy or delays! Delays were caused by industrial unrest and a steel shortage, which saw the levels below St Georges Terrace redesigned to use concrete instead. The controversy was, that as a result of the redesign, costs crept up from the original estimate of \$3.1million plus an additional \$1.5million for the car park beneath!

On 26 January 1973 the Perth Concert Hall was officially opened by the *Governor General, Sir Paul Hasluck*. The event had the greatest collection of dignitaries since the Empires Games including *Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and Mrs Margaret Whitlam* – who, by the way, were booed by the audience as they made their way onto stage! A concert and midnight-to-dawn ball was held and at this first concert an enthralled audience watched *Tibor Paul* conduct the Western Australian and South Australian Symphony Orchestras and the University of Western Australia Choral Society, in works that included the Choral Fanfare by *James Pemberthy*, which was commissioned for the Concert Hall opening. The occasion also marked the 21st Anniversary of the Festival of Perth.



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The Perth Concert Hall is an example of the Brutalist (late 20th century stripped classical) style of architecture, with solid opaque interior, giant projecting roof, and use of white off-form concrete. Apart from Council House, there are many examples of buildings constructed in the 'Brutalist' style e.g. the High Court of Australia, National Gallery, both in Canberra and the wonderful Southbank Centre in London.



State Library of Western Australia



The Perth Concert Hall is intended as an architectural counterpoint to Council House, and can be read as a modern abstraction of the traditional form of a concert hall, where the public spaces separate the auditorium from the external walls of the building.

The building has three suspended mezzanine floors and a large open-air balcony overlooking the Swan River. It was the Architect's intention that the foyers be used as a continually changing venue for art, which it is and which you can see on the different levels of the venue.

Main Entrance Foyer

The mural in the Main Foyer is 10 metres long and 2.5 metres high. It is a highly glazed ceramic tiled wall mural designed and built by Melbourne Artist, *Tom Sanders* and was created in 1971 and completed in 1972 to celebrate the opening of the Perth Concert Hall. There is a similar mural at the University of Melbourne.



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On this level we also have our food and beverage area called the Wardle Room, named after the Lord Mayor of Perth at the time, *Sir Thomas Edward Wardle* or “Tom the Cheap’ as he was more commonly known. *Sir Thomas* was a businessman and supermarket proprietor and was best known for revolutionising grocery shopping in the state. This small but versatile room can be used for seminars, corporate entertaining and can also be easily converted into a small theatre for jazz or intimate recitals.

Green Room and Orchestral Room

Located in the back-stage area of the venue is the Green Room, which is mainly used as a warm up space but also where VIP Guests can meet their favourite performers.

Does anyone know why these rooms in theatres are called the Green Room? There are a couple of theories behind this. One is that it’s called the Green Room because actors can get nauseous before a performance! Another, and the most likely one, is that during medieval times the acting area used to be outside on lawns or greens, hence the Green Room.

The Orchestral Room is a much larger space and contains lockers, tea and coffee facilities, microwaves and bathrooms/showers and is the area where performers, crew and staff come to relax before, during and after performances.

Nearer to the stage is the Conductor’s Room, which is obviously for the Conductor, and has its own shower and toilet and a **Nespresso machine!**

The area outside the Conductors Room is called the Production Room and is used by tour managers and crew.

Moving to the side of the stage we find ourselves at the Stage Manager’s position Prompt Side. It’s called Prompt Side because this is where the Stage Manager ‘prompts’ performers who have forgotten their lines!

Unusually the PCH Prompt Side is Stage Right as opposed to Stage Left which is the norm in most proscenium theatres (theatres with a square arch) and where the majority of actors enter stage.

From here you can see all the seating in the auditorium. There are 1891 seats in total:

- 1117 in Stalls
- 260 in Lower Gallery
- 354 in Upper Gallery
- 160 in Choir Stalls

Acoustically Perth Concert Hall is considered the best venue in Australia, with design overseen by New Zealand acoustician *Sir Harold Marshall* in association with *Warwick Mehaffey* of the ABC. Computer modelling was used to predict how well patrons would be able to hear in each of the seats. In 2011 *Limelight Magazine* conducted a survey of 200 performers, critics and industry experts and Perth Concert Hall was ranked the best in the Southern Hemisphere!!

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Legendary orchestras who have played at the Concert Hall include Berlin Philharmonic, London Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony and Concertgebouw. **Contemporary artists** include BB King, Wynton Marsalis, Marcel Marceau, Billy Connolly, Rowan Atkinson, Ray Charles, Dame Joan Sutherland, Michael Buble, Dionne Warwick, Michael Crawford, Air Supply, The Veronicas, Don McLean, Gene Pitney, Steeleye Span, Cilla Black, Aker Bilk, Lou Reed, Elvis Costello, Joan Baez, Dizzie Gillespie, Cleo Laine, Don McLean, Crosby, Stills & Nash. A number of **comedians** have also graced the stage including Spike Milligan, Dave Allen, Lenny Henry and Ben Elton. The venue has also hosted **childrens events** such as Hi Five and Mister Maker – Perth Concert Hall is indeed, a very flexible and versatile venue!

All the seating is raked, which means it's at an angle and we have an 'open stage' with an un-raked, polished, wooden floor made of Jarrah. The floor is kept to a high standard by sanding it back and re-staining it, all of which can take up to five days to complete!

The stage is 18.4 metres at the front and angles in to 11.3metres at the back.

The distance from the rear of the auditorium to the front of the standard stage is 30 metres.

The width of the auditorium is 25 metres and the height from the stage to the roof is 16.3 metres.

Did you know that Perth Concert hall also has an orchestra pit? This can be lowered and takes you right down to the level of the City of Perth car park and can accommodate 25 musicians.

For some of the larger rock concerts the venue stages, we install a mixer desk for the sound and lighting within the seating in the rear of stalls. To do this we remove 16 to 20 seats and place a large desk in the gap along with the technicians. The reason for locating the mixer desk in this area is because it gives the technicians a full view of the stage and everything that is happening on it.



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Looking up in the Main Auditorium you will see that the lights in the auditorium are extremely high up in the ceiling and we often get asked 'how do you change the bulbs'? The answer is, the technicians do this by climbing in from the top. Obviously, they wear the appropriate harnesses and rigging equipment, but it can take some time to do. We now have LED lights in the auditorium which saves on our electricity bill enormously!! We have 151 lights and 143 house lights. The house lights are the lights which are on when you enter the auditorium prior to a show, during interval and at the end of the show.

Moving around to the back of the stage various instruments are stored including a harpsichord which was made by Michael Johnson Harpsichords and is strung to a pitch of A. 415. If you were to gently strike one of the notes you would see that the string is plucked as opposed to it being hit with a hammer. The soundboard artwork was designed and painted with Australian wildlife and flowers by *Kyle Turner*.

The Hall has four Steinways pianos. Steinways are very expensive and in 1973 a new Steinway was ordered from the makers in Germany. However, rumour has it that it was due to arrive a few months before the opening in January 1973 but because of bad weather – remembering of course that everything would have been shipped across in those days – it only arrived the day before the opening!!

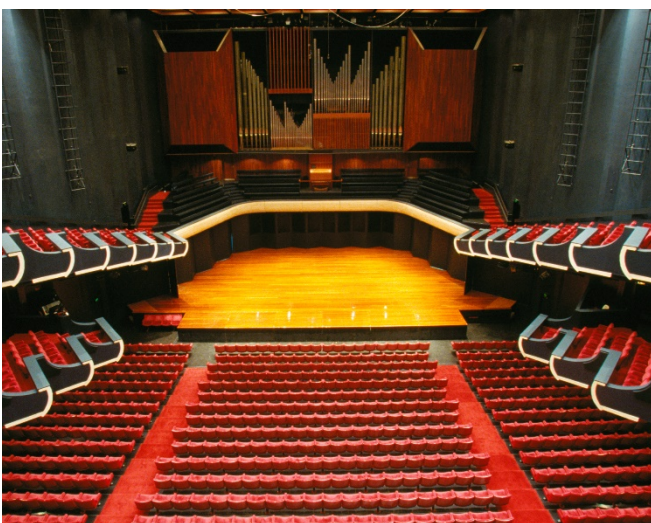
Moving onto the stage we can look up and see the organ.

Built by Ronald Sharp of Sydney, the show pipes – those visible from the auditorium – were installed for the opening of the Hall in January 1973.

The organ contains over 3,000 pipes, of which 66 are visible from the auditorium and are constructed of zinc and tin. The balance are made of zinc, tin, lead alloy and wood.

The control of the stops and the manner in which the groups of stops may be set and operated are achieved by electric and electronic means. The organ is serviced every six months and kept clean by air pumps.

And if you've never been to a concert where the organ is being played we encourage you to come along to the next one!



Either side of the organ you can see there is wooden patina. There are actually rooms behind this. On the left hand side (looking at the stage) is a room we mainly use for storage but on the right hand side is the ABC Studio. This is where the ABC engineers work when they are recording or broadcasting a concert live. You may have noticed that at some of the WASO concerts we have microphones hanging down. These are not being used to amplify the sound but are used when the ABC are recording the concert.

This now concludes our 'spoken' tour and we hope that it has given you some insight into this wonderful building we call the Perth Concert Hall.