

Theatre



JOAN LAU



Sounds GOOD

ARTEC Consultants tunes up concert hall
at Singapore's Esplanade to perfection

I always thought wood had something to do with the acoustics of a room. Walk into any good concert hall or theatre and you're bound to see a lot of wood on the walls, floors, stage and so on.

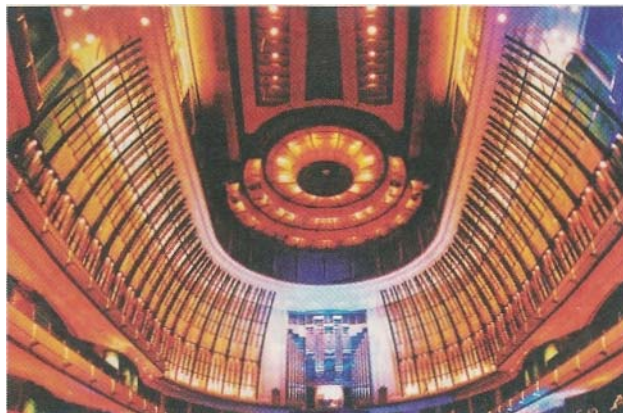
No wonder we "think" wood gives a room a "warm" sound. "It's not true though. The wood is purely for aesthetic purposes," says Tateo Nakajima, 31, vice-president of ARTEC Consultants.

World-renowned acoustician Russell Johnson, who founded ARTEC, designed the acoustics in the concert hall at Singapore's Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. So if it's not the wood, what makes for good acoustics?

"Quite a few things, actually. For example, the concrete floor beneath the wood. The challenge is to design a hall that has adjustable acoustics," says Nakajima. "Orchestras play a much wider repertoire these days. It is difficult for one room to be suitable for all the different types of music. "You have to remember that Baroque music was traditionally played in small rooms in people's houses." So, the acoustician works not just with the architect but also musicians when designing the acoustics in a hall. At ARTEC, which has its office in New York, it is not unusual to find quite a few musicians on the staff.

Even Nakajima - I notice he likes to hum to himself - is a conductor. And when they tested the hall before the opening, he had the pleasure of conducting the Singapore Symphony Orchestra.

That evening we were to hear maestro Kurt Masur lead the London Philharmonic Orchestra. I didn't feel it was a particularly large hall, even though it can seat more than twice the number of people our Dewan Filharmonik Petronas can. But then, I look towards the



back of the hall and see the balconies rising up. And the gallery behind the performing stage can accommodate people when a choir is not using it.

Earlier in the day, Nakajima had pointed out some of ARTEC's signature acoustic features: a three-piece canopy above the stage, acoustic curtain, which is basically cloth panels around the sides of the hall, and reverberation chambers.

The canopy you can see but you'll probably think its purpose is to look good. While it does look like an interesting piece of art, its function - it is motorised and can move up or down - is to control the acoustics in the hall. The cloth panels - in the same soothing green shade as the seats - is not as noticeable. You'll think they are just part of the wall but these Thai silk panels can help change the acoustics atmosphere in the hall.

Finally, the reverberation chambers. You cannot see them because basically it's just a big empty room around the sides of the hall. Here's how it works. "If the orchestra needs to play in a larger space, the doors - there are 26 double doors and 32 single ones - can be opened to make the whole hall bigger," explains Nakajima. It's a simple idea really... more air, more room, bigger space.



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ARTEC was also mindful that the hall could have other uses. "Esplanade might want to rent it out for other functions and not just concerts, so it has to work for that as well. We had to make sure the hall worked for speakers."

The other thing I noticed were the "layers" one had to go through to enter the hall. If I remember correctly, three doors. This reminded me of recording studios that do this so all outside sound is kept out. Same theory here.

"When designing the hall, we made sure it was insulated from exterior sounds... as well as the dome which is above it," Nakajima says. At Esplanade, the two spiky domes each house the concert hall and the theatre. So when you are at the concert hall, you can be sure noisy raindrops hitting the dome roof won't disturb you, should there be a storm.

So how did the hall sound? Well, I thought the London Philharmonic Orchestra sounded pretty good. And that's the thing about acoustics, you only notice it when it's not good. Well, that's how it is for me anyway.

And how does it stack up against Dewan Filharmonik Petronas? I think our hall is prettier and I, personally, prefer a hall that is smaller. Sound-wise, one's pretty much as good as the other.

But at dinner the night before, the guy who reviews classical music concerts for one of the local Singaporean papers told me he preferred Dewan Filharmonik Petronas. "The sound is warmer." So there you go. (Maybe he's influenced by the fact that our hall has more wood!)

Still, it's good to know that Singapore now has its own world-class concert hall. Now the job of those at Esplanade is to make sure people come.

It's just the **beginning...**

The first thing that impressed me about the Esplanade's Opening Festival was the bamboo structure that was being built outside, by the waterfront. When told it was an installation piece by a group called Bambuco, I thought they'd be Japanese or Koreans for sure.

Talk about stereotyping. Well, Bambuco is Australian and they specialise in doing bamboo installation pieces. The other striking thing is the "builders" are rock climbers!

You just have to be athletic (and not be afraid of heights, obviously) to do the work. I noticed they were all buffed... and tanned. What Bambuco does is also to try and work with local "artists" (of course, they also have to be rock climbers) when they can.

And the interesting thing I found out is that nearly half the crew are women. According to Simon Barley, who is the artistic director of Bambuco, this is a deliberate decision because he learnt from experience that an all-male crew simply does not work — something about too much testosterone.

The visual arts part of the Opening Festival also captivated me, mainly because its curator was Malaysian Valentine Willie. A lot of the work was "set loose" around the main Esplanade building.

Gu Wenda's *188 flags*, made of human hair, were kind of creepy but arresting. They are in the building's main foyer and you see them every time you go for any of the shows at either the concert hall or theatre.

Then, there were Yue Min Jun's *Silly Smiling Men*. These were almost life-sized "dolls" scattered all over Esplanade. They were Chinese men, dressed in what could be a Pagoda brand T-shirt and black pants... and they were grinning.

I found them quite bizarre but people seemed to like them. Every day, I would see someone having their picture taken standing next to these silly guys. When I read the curator's notes, it said something about how these "mindless, silly laughing men... can cause great visual disturbance".

When I got to "Jendela" — a space dedicated to displaying paintings — I was disappointed. I had thought it would have been bigger, but it seemed more like an afterthought.

The exhibition, called *Installing Memory*, had a good idea behind it — an examination of changes to the Singapore River — but it felt inadequate. Maybe it had something to do with the "bigness" of the idea and the "smallness" of the space.

I did like some of the work and the use of poetry on the walls in between each work was a nice touch. But wait, there's more. Up on the rooftop was an installation piece by Malaysian artist Yee I-lann.

I badgered the Esplanade people to let me see it even though the space was closed (some function or other). Called *Matching Patterns*, it was vinyl linoleum! True, it covered the rooftop and the notes said, "... have memory of this type of floor covering... it makes us different from the Swedes. This is our platform, stage and flooring. This is us, and it keeps us grounded."

Huh? Wasn't that a tad literal? I've always enjoyed I-lann's work but this time, my emotions weren't stirred or my funny bone tickled... I was speechless.

But this is just the beginning for the Esplanade... if the art is not everybody's cup of tea, it has got people talking about art! At the very least, the folk at the Esplanade are steering things in the right direction.

