



# Benaroya Hall, Seattle

Our monthly guide to North American venues

**Year opened** 1998

**Architect** LMN Architects

**Capacity** S Mark Taper Foundation Auditorium: 2479 seats;

Illsley Ball Nordstrom Recital Hall: 536 seats

**Resident ensemble** Seattle Symphony

Founded in 1903, the Seattle Symphony was already approaching its first centenary before it could claim a custom-built home of its own. The inauguration of Benaroya Hall on September 12, 1998, propelled a major transformation in the orchestra's identity and international reputation.

Occupying an entire block of prime downtown real estate – anchored on either end by a chandelier dyad designed by Dale Chihuly – Benaroya Hall comprises two main concert halls. Together, they host more than 450 public and private events each year and serve dozens of cultural organisations as well as music education programmes (with a total annual attendance of more than 460,000). The 2479-seat S Mark Taper Foundation Auditorium resounds each season with nearly 220 concerts by the Seattle Symphony, which manages but does not own Benaroya Hall. At the opposite end of the complex, in the 536-seat Illsley Ball Nordstrom Recital Hall on the second floor, the Seattle Chamber Music Society presents winter and summer seasons.

A recent development was the unveiling in March 2019 of a third venue – the 150-seat capacity Octave 9: Raisbeck Music Center, which can be reconfigured through state-of-the-art video and audio technology for more experimental endeavours and close-up encounters between visiting composers and performers and Seattle Symphony musicians.

Benaroya Hall offered the Seattle Symphony a desperately needed way out of a dead-end situation. Since the early 1960s, it had shared the Opera House (since renovated), whose poor acoustics and crowded schedule severely limited prospects for growth. The real-estate developer and philanthropist Jack Benaroya and his wife Becky donated \$15 million to seed the building of a new concert hall (total cost: \$118.1 million).



Benaroya Hall opened under the baton of music director Gerard Schwarz (now Conductor Laureate) with a gala programme featuring the late Jessye Norman.

Designed by the Seattle-based firm LMN Architects in collaboration with the acoustician Cyril Harris, Benaroya Hall sits atop a transit station yet is effectively insulated from traffic and urban noise. Indeed, since 2014 the Seattle Symphony has been releasing recordings on the orchestra's in-house label made from its performances here.

Despite its size, the Mark Taper Auditorium radiates a surprising intimacy and warmth, enhanced by the dark wood lining the hall (made from a single African makore tree). With its cylindrical shape and vast windows, the lobby conveys the feeling of looking out over an urban sea from a luxury liner.

A massive Robert Rauschenberg mural welcomes concert-goers, while the signature intermission chimes were composed by David Diamond for the opening. Etched on to the limestone north facade is a quotation from Aaron Copland: 'So long as the human spirit thrives on this planet, music in some living form will accompany and sustain it and give it expressive meaning.'

**Thomas May**