

SYMPHONY HALL, BIRMINGHAM

Sir Adrian Boult wrote to Simon Rattle, after the latter had been appointed conductor of the CBSO, telling him he had been promised a new concert hall in the 1920s. He urged Rattle to get the orchestra out of the Town Hall and into “a place designed for making music”. At last in 1983 a feasibility study was undertaken and led to a proposal that a concert hall should be built in conjunction with the planned international conference centre on disused land in Broad Street. The city could not itself afford such an ambitious project but eventually EU funding and a loan from the European Investment Bank ensured that the scheme could proceed.

A leading firm of acoustic specialists in the USA, Artec, were engaged to advise and their chairman, Russell Johnson, came up with a farsighted and radical approach. He realised that a “shoe box” designed auditorium was needed to project direct sound, together with reverberant sound from solid parallel walls, to the audience.

He also came up with the idea of a large wooden canopy, suspended above the stage, which could be lowered by some 10 metres above the platform when there were smaller groups of performers involved, or raised right up into the roof when a large orchestra was performing.

Russell Johnson’s proposals were accepted and found, in the fullness of time, to be correct, so that today (and since 1991 when the hall was opened) the 2,262 seats can receive what is considered to be the best sound quality to be found anywhere.

The backstage facilities are also excellent, as you would expect, and the overall design and colour schemes are very pleasing. Even the fabric of the seats simulates “human texture” so that the sound quality is much the same whether the hall is full or empty. This is particularly important to conductors and performers, who can be confident that the sound they make at rehearsals will not differ from the audience-attended event.

The organ was not installed until ten years later, having been supervised by Thomas Trotter, Birmingham City organist, and with some 6,500 pipes is now regarded as one of the best in the UK.

If you haven’t visited Birmingham, let me urge you to do so, and try and attend concerts at both Symphony Hall and the Town Hall. The latter has been much improved since Sir Adrian wrote his letter and we will never know what he would have made of Symphony Hall and its revolutionary acoustics.

Footnote: after I had become so overwhelmed by Symphony Hall I had to adjourn to the bar while the rest of the group were shown Sir Simon’s dressing-room.

David Elyan