

# *The Halls*



# of Music

After a 17-year wait,  
the performance phase  
of Catlett Music Center  
opens to rave reviews.

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE  
PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

**T**he halls are alive with the sound of music, and what glorious halls they are.

The performance spaces within the newly completed second phase of Catlett Music Center—the Grayce B. Kerr Gothic Hall, Paul F. Sharp Concert Hall and Morris R. Pitman Recital Hall—resonate with architectural beauty. They also amplify the harmonious musical activities that already have begun to define the three halls as the grace notes of the School of Music.

Architecturally, the \$14 million addition, begun in March 1995 and completed in August 1998, falls into the stylistic category of Contemporary Collegiate Gothic. With its brick blend of muted reds, its contrasting cast stone accents and its skyward thrusting angles, Catlett Center softly echoes the visual sounds of Evans Hall, a classic Collegiate Gothic building, while at the same time trumpeting forth its modernity. *continued*

The dramatic lighting of the Grayce B. Kerr Gothic Hall welcomes concert-goers to the new Phase II of the Stanley B. Catlett Music Center.

“The architects for both Phase I and Phase II—a partnership between Ohio’s Bauer, Stark and Lashrook and Norman’s Kaighn Associates—worked with then-President William Banowsky on the feel of a contemporary version of Collegiate Gothic,” senior staff architect David Nordyke explains. “Catlett Center picks up the brick colors and the cast stone accents of Evans Hall, which has gargoyles and intricate designs; Catlett is a sharper, cleaner version of that look.”

**A**lso Contemporary Collegiate Gothic in style is Phase I of Catlett Music Center, a project conceived in 1981. Sitting on the corner of Boyd and Elm, Phase I was begun in March 1984 and completed in March 1986, costing \$7.6 million. Nordyke says that in 1998 dollars that would be approximately \$10 million. When the oil boom went bust, plans to march ever onward to complete Phase II were shelved. As faculty and staff stepped into the completed building of Phase II in late summer, many of them were ending a 17-year odyssey.

While the second phase houses the administrative offices for the School of Music and other functional spaces for practice, storage and meetings, its gems are the three spaces designed for making music. Because the building itself is complex and performance space requires not only sound design but also design for sound, Nordyke says the project was never easy.

“It’s a complicated building,” he says. “Instead of a bread and butter, cut and dried type structure that doesn’t have much interest, this has complex spaces that are filled with interesting elements, some apparent and some not.

“We have quite a few floors in the building we call ‘floating’ concrete floors. You build a basic concrete structural floor, then you lay out sheets of plywood on top of rubber pads and pour a second concrete floor on top of that. The second floor floats; that is, it doesn’t touch any walls. You don’t want vibrations transmitted from floor to wall or wall to floor or ceiling to wall. Constructing acoustical spaces is much more complicated and costly.”

Entering this overtly and covertly complicated building, patrons of the musical arts step into a space in which sound,



A bequest from one of the country’s great professors of organ, Mildred Andrews Boggess, has placed the finest instrument of its kind in the Grayce B. Kerr Gothic Hall, the showcase feature of Catlett Music Center’s new performance phase.

**INSET AT RIGHT:** The first marquee artist to appear during the gala opening of Catlett Music Center was the world-renowned mezzo-soprano, Marilyn Horne, who performed with her accompanist, Brian Zeger.

## *“The Gothic Hall space is acoustically perfect for an organ. The glorious music will linger in what is very much like a cathedral setting.”*

as well as architectural tradition, endures. The brick walls and floor of Grayce B. Kerr Gothic Hall anchor a soaring space whose vaulted ceiling reaches 75 feet at its ridge line.

Gothic Hall's primary acoustical characteristic is a reverberation time of 4.5 seconds. That ability to draw out sound makes the area a perfect setting for the \$750,000 Mildred Andrews Boggess Organ, designed by C.B. Fisk Co. especially for Gothic Hall.

“It really is the Cadillac of musical instruments, the finest of its kind,” School of Music Director Kenneth Fuchs says. “This particular one is a first-rate concert organ for which we plan an inaugural concert series next fall. This instrument was delivered in August in hundreds and hundreds of pieces spread out all over the place. You look at it now, and it's hard to believe that it was ever just in pieces everywhere. The organ was assembled in Massachusetts, disassembled, brought here on a truck, then reassembled. It took workers almost three weeks just to put it back together.

“Fisk employees have been in Norman since the end of September, voicing, that is, tuning, the organ. They will continue tuning it to the acoustics of Gothic Hall until the end of February or beginning of March. The Fisk Company has a rotating team of two to three technicians who are in residence in Norman several weeks at a time working on the instrument.”

Nordyke, who works in OU's Architectural and Engineering Services, explains that the organ—standing 30 feet tall, weighing 14 tons and containing 2,466 pipes—was first planned as a central component of Paul F. Sharp Concert Hall. Architects designed that venue's north wall backing the stage expressly for the instrument; however, the sound quality in Gothic Hall was so much more in tune with the needs of an organ that everyone involved decided to pull out all the stops and relocate it.

“As we were beginning the process of installation, we realized that for it to be a dual-purpose instrument, to double as one that could be played with the orchestra would require compromises,” Fuchs says. “We felt that since we had committed so much money and had the potential of creating a truly great concert instrument, we should. The Gothic Hall space is acoustically perfect for an organ. The glorious music will linger in what is very much like a cathedral setting.”

Subtle and blatant references to cathedrals abound in

Gothic Hall's architectural feel. The 75-foot ceiling's fretwork of beams suggests a classic vaulted stone ceiling; its soaring height is balanced by the hall's width of 60 feet and length of 110 feet. Concert-goers enter the space in the middle of one of its long sides; they face doors leading to the concert hall, a ticket booth, concession areas and a coat room.

**T**he wonder of the space, however, is that when patrons turn to read the building lengthwise rather than widthwise, everything changes. No longer merely functional, it is now grand in its evocation of a long, narrow, European cathedral. The floor-to-ceiling windows of the long east wall are touched with blue and green stained glass accents that create a subtle cross pattern. The wall of glass floods the hall with graceful light patterns in the morning and opens it up to the starry heavens at night. In addition to organ concerts, this nigh-on-to-holy space will showcase Early and Baroque music performances for audiences of at least 100. They will sit on removable chairs.

To step from Gothic Hall into Sharp Concert Hall is to be taken into a different aural world.

“The architects designed the building acoustically so that Gothic Hall's hard surfaces would be loud and lively to get people excited before a concert,” Nordyke explains. “Then they bring the audience into the concert hall vestibule, where noise is almost deadened. When audience members step into the hall itself, the sound gets stronger to

allow the music to create an emotional response.”

While different acoustical experiences please different ears, the response to the sounds of Sharp Concert Hall has been universally positive. With seating for more than 1,000, Sharp is the largest formal assembly area on campus, Nordyke says.

This is a pure concert hall, not an auditorium as is Rupel Jones Theatre with its proscenium and fly loft for theatrical presentations,” he says. “This could function as a large lecture hall, of course, but it is made for music.”

And by what achingly lovely music the space has already been christened. In a series of inaugural musical events called President's Concerts, members of the University community and others heard renowned mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne, concert pianist Van Cliburn and premier classical and flamenco guitarist Ruben Romero. As the series coda, Accademia Filarmonica, an instrumental ensemble of faculty and students, joined with the University



# Catlett's Gala Opening



Oh, what a night. Actually, what a series of four fall nights from September to November in Catlett Music Center.

To breathe musical life into the inert materials of the just-completed musical showcase, the School of Music and a variety of corporate sponsors presented an inspiring inaugural season featuring some of the brightest stars in the musical firmament. Heavenly is not too lofty a word to describe the four musical events composing the President's Concert Series.

The first star in this constellation was world-renowned mezzo soprano Marilyn Horne, who performed with accompanist Brian Zeger. Her September 14 concert began with President David L. Boren's dedication of the Paul F. Sharp Concert Hall. In his remarks noting the importance of music nurturing the human spirit and the cultures in which they thrive, Boren recalled an inscription found at New York's Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts: "A nation is known by the laws it obeys and the arts it cherishes."

Audience members found much to cherish in Horne's program, which included challenging modern pieces from Samuel Barber's "Four Songs" as well as the more familiar work of Leonard Bernstein and the crowd-thrilling Irving Berlin. Although Horne announced that she was entering her final year of concert performance because her vocal instrument was no longer as supple and strong as it was in her youth, the notes pouring forth from that instrument were powerful enough to move many to tears.

Perhaps most moving of all her choices was the simplest: her signature rendition of the traditional "I Dream of Jeannie With the Light Brown Hair," which she sang during her third and final encore. As the plaintive notes of this song of longing and loss filled the air, tears filled many an eye. The power of music to move emotional mountains was everywhere apparent.

Horne returned to Catlett Music Center the following evening to provide graduate students in voice with the rare experience of working with her in a master class. As student performers sang, Horne listened critically. With judicious praise and careful criticism, she coaxed ever-better work from her students. Audience members were as transfixed by Horne's commentary and vocal illustrations of the passages as by the ear-pleasing work of the singers.

Pianist Van Cliburn's September 26 sold-out concert began with the superb University of Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra performing Ludwig

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van Beethoven's "Overture to Egmont" and Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings." Cliburn then joined the orchestra for Sergei Rachmaninoff's "Second Piano Concerto," always a crowd pleaser.

This tall, slender Texan with curly gray hair kept audience members spellbound as they hung on every thrilling note. He was called back to the stage seven times and also provided three encores.

Cliburn's consent to performing with a university orchestra was a compliment of the highest order and one he rarely extends. Equally gracious was his insistence on sharing each response to his audience's enthusiastic applause with Conductor Allan Ross and the obviously elated student musicians.

The tone and feel of the series became a bit less formal when guitarist Ruben Romero took center stage along with the OU Symphony Orchestra and the OU Guitar Ensemble. Sporting a suit rather than more formal evening wear, this master of classical, Spanish and flamenco style guitar neverthe-

less commanded attention. With fingers flying at impossible speeds and notes seeming to form even more rapidly, he opened his set with the popular "Classical Gas," composed by Oklahoma's own Mason Williams. Romero's fingering was so complex that his music seemed to be in layers with multiple pairs of hands pulling notes from the burnished wood of his guitar.

Before being joined on stage by second guitarist Roberto Gonzales, Romero showed his range by playing everything from traditional pieces like "Granadina" to Antonio Vivaldi's "Concerto in D." With Gonzales he played "Four Seasons of Love for Flamenco Guitar," a suite of his own composition, and a variety of other pieces. He closed the planned portion of his concert with a stirring version of E. Lecuono's "Malaguena," for which he was joined by the University of Oklahoma Guitar Ensemble.

To complete the star-studded series, OU's own Accademia Filarmonica performed the music of George Frederick Handel with the University Chamber Ensemble, the University Chorale and soprano Jennie Olson. The concert opened with "Water Music-Suite in D/G," which conductor Dennis Shrock explained had been performed first in 1717 for King George I at a party on the River Thames. The king liked the piece so much that he commanded the orchestra to play it three times. This resulted in a party that lasted until 3 a.m. The OU audience settled for one performance but applauded enough for three. The concert also included "Laudate Pueri Dominum: Psalm 12" and "Judas Maccabaeus: Act 3."

Beginning September 28 in the more intimate but no less impressive Morris B. Pitman Recital Hall, the 20-concert Sutton Series featured OU ensembles and soloists ranging from the University Jazz Ensembles to oboist Sally Faulconer to the String Faculty.

In fall 1999, Grayce B. Kerr Gothic Hall will be inaugurated with a series of organ concerts featuring the Mildred Andrews Boggess Organ, a \$750,000 C.B. Fisk instrument. —KJW

Steven Harris, a piano performance major, practices in the 130-seat Morris R. Pitman Recital Hall, a smaller, more intimate venue for both teaching and performance.

BELOW: Concert hall manager Jason Scoggins demonstrates the state-of-the-art equipment in the recording booth overlooking the Paul F. Sharp Concert Hall, where students can obtain CDs of their recitals within 10 minutes of their performances.



Chamber Ensemble and the University Chorale to present an evening of the music of George Frederick Handel. Sublime experiences, all.

**O**n a more practical note, the maple-floored stage in Sharp is designed for a full philharmonic orchestra. With its steep rake, the audience area provides unimpeded views from all seats. The soaring height of the hall's gridded ceiling allows music to swell upward, filling it without overwhelming concert-goers. Red cedar paneling with a natural finish lightens the room's hunter green color scheme.

Next door to Sharp Concert Hall is its burgundy-colored, smaller sibling: the Morris B. Pitman Recital Hall. This space is more schoolish than Sharp, given its dual function as both teaching arena and performance venue.

"This is an intimate space," Nordyke says. "It's used as a classroom many times a day and has seats with retractable tablet arms for notetaking, but the primary use will be as a setting for faculty and student recitals. It has a grid ceiling that provides interest on a much smaller scale than the one in Sharp, but it echoes the look. This space is fairly reverberant, but not so much that you have trouble with speech. Its walls are the same brick as on the exterior of the building, and it has the same cedar paneling seen in Sharp."

Behind the scenes, Catlett Music Center is as much high tech as it is high art out front. Lance Drege, assistant to the



director of the School of Music, says that the equipment hidden from view in a series of sound booths and rooms provides new opportunities for both students and faculty.

"In the recording booth for Sharp Hall, we have state-of-the-art equipment," he says. "We are able to do in-house recording of all our events. We can record CDs directly during a concert, then have them duplicated. We'll have a recording technician monitoring all concerts.

"Right now, we can provide students with CDs of their recitals within 10 minutes of their completion. They can go to the listening lab and request duplicates. Last week, one enterprising student asked for 15 copies; she wanted to give them as Christmas gifts."

While the recording booth for the performance space creates excitement, the recording studio down the hall engenders near ecstasy in music techies.

"This is a professional studio," Drege says. "Its three rooms contain \$100,000 worth of first-rate equipment provided by an anonymous donor. Since June, almost eight months, Ford Audio has been here doing nothing but working on the building's sound systems. The area has two sound booths on either side of the big control room. The smaller of the two isolation booths will hold one to two performers while the larger will hold six to eight.

"This space will be used by theory and composition people but also for classes in recording techniques, which



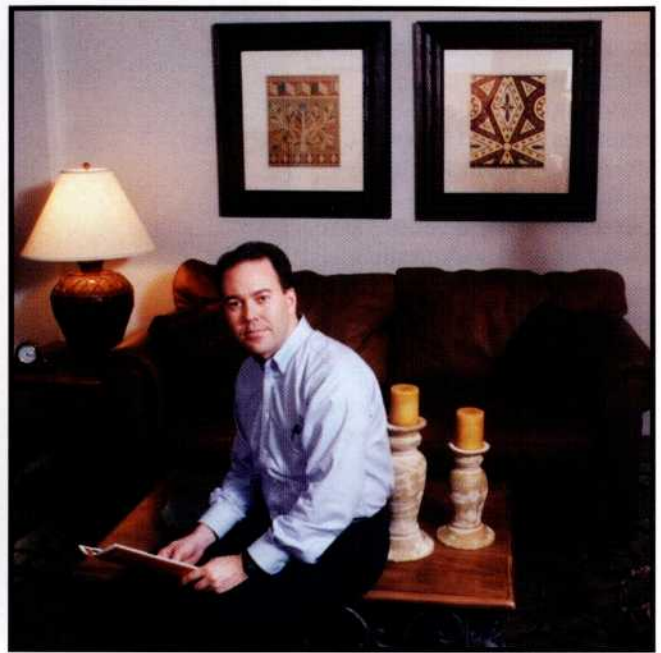
The new School of Music director, Kenneth Fuchs, likens Catlett's acoustically perfect Gothic Hall to a "cathedral setting," an ideal concert site for the Mildred Andrews Boggess Organ.

we've never been able to offer before. Not many universities have on-site recording studios. This area puts us in a different league and allows faculty to teach classes like one that has just been proposed: Techniques in Non-Linear Digital Audio."

Fuchs, who came to OU July 1 from his eight-year position as dean of students and academic studies at Manhattan School of Music, celebrates Catlett Center's educational enhancement as well as its performance potential.

"It's been a lot of work since I arrived, but to see President Boren's commitment to the College of Fine Arts, to walk into the middle of this and be handed such an incredible facility has been thrilling," he says. "It doesn't get any better than this. It's a gorgeous concert hall and a wonderful recital hall. Of all the educational facilities I've been associated with, I can't think of any better. OU students have a first-class facility.

"What we have done this season in presenting world-class artists in performance has been enriching for the musical community and the larger campus and Norman communities. We will continue with that, but I wouldn't want it to be our central focus: That is and should always be training young musicians. We want to recruit excellent students and faculty; this facility will allow us to do that. We want to have the best student ensembles we can: orchestra, wind, marching band, choral, etc. That kind of



Assistant to the music school director Lance Drege is shown in Catlett's beautifully appointed "green room." Opera star Marilyn Horne described this facility, where artists await the beginning of their concerts, as the loveliest she will visit during her year-long farewell tour.

experience is really the lifeblood of any educational institution."

Fuchs, whose area of specialization is composition, finds the potential for program growth via Catlett's technology particularly exciting.

"We have many opportunities to work with our colleagues within the University on interdisciplinary ideas," he says. "Clearly, technology in music and music education will continue to grow as a central component of music making. My philosophy is based on training young artists for careers in music as performers or educators or business people or technicians. We have an opportunity now to create programs with the School of Engineering, for example, in audio engineering, or with the School of Business in, for example, business in the music industry, concert management or the manufacture, sale and distribution of music.

"I want to see not only wonderful music making but also the manifestation of creative ideas we have dreamt about with other members of our community. The Catlett Center gives us the resources to create those kinds of relationships and then present them to the public. In many ways, a facility like this is a window on the University."

When people peer into this particular window, Fuchs wants them to see the musical soul of OU. That core of being he hears as one "Hallelujah Chorus" of voices ranging from those just beginning to pipe out a career to those sounding their final, full notes. The majesty of the Catlett Music Center space provides a perfect setting for the glory of that sound.

German author Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe once called architecture "frozen music." No better or more apt description exists for the bricks and cast stone that compose Catlett Music Center.