

Big-League Music Hall in Wine Country

By [ANTHONY TOMMASINI](#)

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ROHNERT PARK, Calif. — Most of the important music centers at American universities resulted from an academic imperative. A school's thriving music program could no longer be served by its buildings, so new and expanded facilities simply had to be created to foster further growth.

Not so with the Joan and Sanford I. Weill Hall here at Sonoma State University, an inviting new 1,400-seat concert hall that was inaugurated on Saturday night with a recital by the pianist Lang Lang. Sonoma State, one of the smaller universities in the California system with just over 8,000 full-time students, is acknowledged for its programs in the liberal arts and sciences. But music has not been a focal point of its offerings; there are only about 150 music majors. The department oversees a wind ensemble, chamber music groups and choruses.

Yet Sonoma State, a university that does not even maintain a student symphony orchestra, now boasts a \$145 million complex, the [Donald & Maureen Green Music Center](#), dominated by the impressive new Weill Hall and including music classrooms, rehearsal rooms, studios and a nearly completed 250-seat recital hall. Still to come is a large outdoor pavilion suitable for dance and popular music performances.

How did this happen? In the mid-1990s, the university's president, [Ruben Armiñana](#), visited Tanglewood and was deeply impressed by [Seiji Ozawa Hall](#), which opened in 1994. Such a place belonged in California's wine country, he believed. He had a vision of making Sonoma State a center for music and a public resource.

At the time the university had modest plans for expanding its music facilities to include a new hall for choral performances. But Dr. Armiñana had bigger plans. To design the hall, he hired the architect William Rawn, of [William Rawn Associates](#) in Boston, and the acoustician [R. Lawrence Kirkegaard](#), who had collaborated on Ozawa Hall. He brought in Jeff Langley to be the center's artistic director.

It took Dr. Armiñana 15 years to carry out his vision. Along the way, he faced intense opposition from faculty members, especially during the last decade of budget cuts at California's state universities, and survived a vote of no confidence. Why, many asked, did Sonoma State need this center?

As recently as a couple of years ago, completing the project as envisioned looked iffy. Then Mr. Weill, the former chairman and chief executive of Citigroup, who has a home in the area, got involved. He galvanized the center's board and helped secure corporate backing, notably from MasterCard, now a major partner in this public and private project. He brought in Carnegie Hall, and beginning next year alumni from the Academy (the development program run by the Juilliard School, Carnegie Hall and the Weill Music Institute) will have yearlong residencies at Sonoma State to coach and perform. Mr. Weill brought the board around to the idea that if the Green Music Center was to play in the big leagues, then big-name performers had to appear there. Hence Lang Lang.

Oh, and Mr. Weill and his wife donated \$12 million to the project.

If the splendid new Weill Hall were going to be just another tour stop for celebrity artists, then it would be a curious venture for a state university. But area institutions are now involved. The Santa Rosa Symphony Orchestra, an adventurous regional ensemble, which had been performing in an inadequate multipurpose hall in Santa Rosa (about a 20-minute drive away), has made Weill Hall its new home and began its 85th season there on Sunday afternoon with an ambitious program. The San Francisco Symphony will have a presence as well, playing four concerts in Weill Hall this season.

Whatever its future turns out to be, Weill Hall is a beautiful space. Not surprisingly, it resembles Ozawa Hall. Its rectangular auditorium (160 feet by 68 feet) has two balconies that surround the stage. The walls, railings and stage and orchestra floors are all built of warm woods. Unlike Ozawa Hall, with large windows only above the stage, Weill Hall has them on all sides but the west (adjoining the lobby), so you can see vistas of the Sonoma hills from all seats. As with Ozawa Hall, the rear wall opens to a grassy outdoor area. But this one is terraced. People can buy seats at tables, to wine and dine during performances. At the back of the terraced area is ample lawn space for picnicking.

On Saturday, speaking to the audience before he played two encores, Mr. Lang said that it was an honor to inaugurate "this beautiful hall," and revealed that for the occasion he chose works new to his repertory: three Mozart sonatas (Nos. 4, 5 and 8; K. 282, 283, 310) and the four Chopin ballades. "Each one a first-time performance," he said.

Mr. Lang, a pianist with astounding technique, can be a self-indulgent interpreter. But his Mozart was delightful, especially the two early sonatas (No. 5 in G and No. 4 in E flat). He orchestrated these piano works in a sense, bringing different colors and textures to various themes, inner voices and harmonies.

But I lost patience with the Chopin ballades. There were passages of melting lyricism and rhapsodic sweep, but too many moments of contorted expressivity. Mr. Lang's playing of the tempestuous coda of the Ballade in F was so fast and loud as to be incoherent. In his final encore, Chopin's "Minute" Waltz, he had the audience giggling at coy little things he did to the music. I found it tasteless.

The Santa Rosa Symphony opened Sunday's program with a spirited account of Beethoven's "Consecration of the House" Overture, conducted by a former music director, Corrick Brown. Then [Bruno Ferrandis](#), the current music director, conducted Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto with the pianist [Jeffrey Kahane](#) (the orchestra's music director from 1995 to 2005) as soloist. Mr. Kahane played beautifully, balancing spontaneity and crystalline sound with rhythmic brio and refinement.

After intermission came the premiere of "Sonoma Overture" by Nolan Gasser, a Sonoma-area composer: a 10-minute easygoing and energetic piece in a Coplandesque vein. For Copland's "Canticle of Freedom" the orchestra was joined by the Santa Rosa Symphony Honor Choir. And to show off the acoustics of the hall, the program ended with Ravel's "Boléro."

How are the acoustics? For Mr. Lang's recital the sound was rich, clear and true. For the first half of the Santa Rosa Symphony program I sat in the middle of the orchestra section. During the overture the sound was warm and full-bodied but a little indistinct. Mr. Ferrandis drew greater clarity from the players during the concerto. Still, the orchestra seemed a little muffled compared with Mr. Kahane's bright, lovely piano sound.

For the second half I sat in the top balcony. Though more detail came through, the orchestra sounded a little distant. Often new halls need adjustments. With some tweaking Weill Hall should be acoustically first-rate.

Sonoma State now has a music center that many conservatories would envy. For me, the proof of the venture's success will not be whether Mr. Lang and other superstars perform there regularly but whether the Green Music Center will spur enough growth in the university's music program so that Sonoma State will one day have a student orchestra to play in its expensive new hall.

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