

Orchestra Hall at Symphony Center

For nearly the first fourteen years of its history, the Chicago Orchestra performed at the [Auditorium Theatre](#) (completed in 1889). Orchestra Hall—the long-standing dream of Theodore Thomas—was designed by CSO trustee and Chicago architect [Daniel H. Burnham](#) and completed in 1904, at a cost of \$750,000. The dedicatory concert, led by Thomas, was held on December 14 of that year.



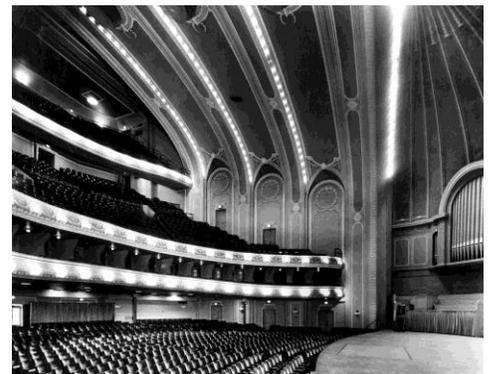
Orchestra Hall, ca. 1910

The symmetrical façade of the Hall is of deep pink brick, complemented by white limestone quoins (the wedge-like pieces of stone used as keystones), lintels, and other decorative elements characteristic of the Georgian style. Above the second floor of the façade are inscribed in a limestone band the names of five prominent composers (Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner). The cornice is classical in design and is surmounted by a limestone balustrade that hides the ninth floor (added in 1907), which was until 1995 the home of the [Cliff Dwellers](#).

The high second floor contains the ballroom used for receptions and chamber music concerts; this room is expressed on the exterior by a row of three two-story windows surmounted by Georgian style fanlights. On either side of this row of windows, a smaller window capped by a classical pediment completes the symmetrical arrangement of the second-floor façade.

The first-floor entrance leads to the vestibule and main lobby, which leads into the auditorium, designed in Beaux Arts style. The original pipe organ, created by [Lyon & Healy](#) (the largest instrument the Chicago-based company ever built), was installed early in 1905 and rebuilt by Frank J. Sauter and Sons in 1946.

In 1950, Daniel Burnham, Jr. was selected as the architect in charge of a \$75,000 redecorating, which consisted of painting the Hall's walls soft gray, the proscenium white, and the back wall of the stage Wedgwood blue. The foyer walls were painted muted green and the ceiling terra cotta. Gray carpeting also was added on both the main floor and box level.



Orchestra Hall interior, ca. 1953–1966

The first significant renovation (by [Harry Weese](#) and Associates) occurred in 1966, at a cost of nearly \$3 million. The project included the installation of new heating, air conditioning, and modern elevators; increase in lobby space on three floors; expansion of musicians' lounges and dressing rooms; and replacement of plaster ceiling with acoustically designed aluminum panels. The auditorium and lobby décor was brightened with a new color scheme of gray walls with ivory trim, and the seats were reupholstered with deep red mohair. During the summer of 1967, plans to restore the original organ were dismissed when it was discovered that damage had occurred during the previous years' renovation of the Hall. An Allen electronic organ was pressed into service as a temporary solution.

During the summer of 1981, [M.P. Moeller](#), Inc. installed a new pipe organ, which contained more than 3,000 pipes (45 independent stops and 74 ranks, controlled through 71 registers and 25 couplers). The organ installation was the catalyst for an extensive renovation and remodeling of Orchestra Hall (by [Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill](#)), costing more than \$3 million. The project included enlarging the stage and rearranging main floor seating; new lighting set into the stage shell; remodeling Orchestra members' lounge facilities; complete repainting of the Hall's interior, following the original design concepts of architect Daniel Burnham; and other electrical/mechanical adjustments.



Orchestra Hall at Symphony Center, 1997

In June 1993, the Board of Trustees approved a plan to significantly renovate and expand Orchestra Hall. The \$110 million project (led by Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill) resulted in the completion of Symphony Center, the Orchestra's new music complex featuring Buntrock Hall, a new rehearsal and performance space; a multistory rotunda with skylit atrium; [tesori](#), a stylish restaurant; new administrative offices; and a beautifully restored and acoustically renovated Orchestra Hall. Work began during the summer of 1995 and Symphony Center was completed in October 1997.

At the beginning of the Symphony Center project, the Moeller organ was removed and delivered to the workshops of [Casavant Frères](#) in Quebec, where it was overhauled and expanded. The new instrument (Casavant Frères [Opus 3765](#); 44 stops, 59 ranks, 14 couplers, 3,414 pipes) was installed during the summer of 1998 and rededicated on February 18, 1999, marking the conclusion of the Symphony Center project.

In 1978, Orchestra Hall was added to the [National Register of Historic Places](#), making it a national landmark.

The Rosenthal Archives provides free reference services for requests that can be answered quickly using existing finding aids and the online catalog; extensive research may be subject to an hourly fee. The Archives' staff will gladly assist those who wish to conduct research onsite; advance appointments are required.

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