

Recital Hall ready, now just add musicians

Robin Usher

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The new Melbourne Recital Centre will see music-making flourish across the city.

MUSIC-making is set to take flight early next year with the opening of the Melbourne Recital Centre, presenting 14 concerts in its first week.

Southbank is likely to become much busier after the February 8 opening. The \$74.5 million venue will host about 250 concerts a year, up from the 90 now presented in Melbourne.

"It's a great building, but it is not much good without a lot of music-making going on inside it," says the recital centre's chief executive, Jacques de Vos Malan. It is hoped audiences will grow in response to the variety and range of music being presented.

The opening week celebrations will see two concerts a night in the centre's 1000-seat Elisabeth Murdoch Hall and the 150-seat Salon.

The artistic director of the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra, William Hennessy, who has already played in the hall, says the sound is better than London's Wigmore Hall. "It is the most dramatic thing to happen to music-making in Melbourne," he says.

Dr Malan says the aim is to demonstrate the recital centre's suitability for many different musical genres. It will open on the 100th birthday of Dame Elisabeth Murdoch with a new work by Australia's pre-eminent composer, Peter Sculthorpe.

Dr Malan describes the piece as a bridge between a ritual Aboriginal ceremony to be held at Birrarung Marr and the Western-style music that will follow in the hall.

It will feature the renowned Latvian violinist, Gidon Kremer, who will also perform three more times during the week with his group, Kremerata Baltica. "A chamber orchestra like this will be a very good test of the hall," he says. "We will quickly find out what it can do."

The all-acoustic venue is the only one of its type in Australia, floating on 38 spring-based blocks to insulate it from traffic and other outside noise. It is also rare in world terms in being built for only a single purpose.

Later in February, Europe's Arditti Quartet will present a five-day residence focusing on 20th-century and contemporary works. The concentrated opening period will last until April 30, during which there will be more than 70 concerts and workshops.

The appearance of Kremer, who was described as the world's greatest violinist by conductor Herbert von Karajan, is a partnership with one of the hall's key presenting partners, Musica Viva, which will be transferring its Melbourne concerts from Hamer Hall.

"It is the most dramatic thing to happen in music-making in Melbourne." William Hennessy, Artistic Director, MCO

It will now present two concerts of each program in Melbourne. Another partner, the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra, will also perform during the opening week.

The recital centre, with its honeycomb-like facade of glass, steel and concrete, was designed by Ashton Raggatt McDougall with Arup acoustic engineers.

Its sophistication is the result of developments in computer technology that allow precise acoustic mapping of existing recital halls with engineering technology that allows the desired sound to be provided within the architectural design.

With a \$3 million annual budget, Dr Malan is hoping to attract more than 100,000 visits a year.

The Melbourne Symphony's chief conductor, Oleg Caetani, will conduct the MSO performing music by Wagner and Schoenberg in the opening night's second concert. "From the music I have heard there, it is already a great success," he says.

"Some music, such as works by Bach, Monteverdi and Telemann, will be much more appropriate there. Lute music gets lost in Hamer Hall so we can't play it. Even Shostakovich's 14th (song) symphony would sound better."

Caetani will also conduct the MSO in a performance of Bach's *St John Passion* in Elisabeth Murdoch Hall in March, in collaboration with Leipzig's Thomanerchor from St Thomas Church, where Bach served as cantor.

The Arts Centre's chief executive, Tim Jacobs, welcomes the increase of chamber music the new recital hall will bring to Melbourne. "The market should develop in response to it. I think it will expand, rather than substitute current offerings."

He plans to position the 2700-seat Hamer Hall as Melbourne's premier music venue after its redevelopment in 2011. "We will mix up the programming more, with symphonic music just one of a range of performances," he says.

Musica Viva's artistic director, composer Carl Vine, is thrilled to be moving to the Melbourne Recital Centre. "Everything is going to be better at the centre, with an intimacy of sound that has been missing in Melbourne."

He predicts its opening will herald a golden age in chamber music, and is supported by the co-founder of the Brandenburg Orchestra, Bruce Applebaum.

"We have been waiting for this for many years," Applebaum says. "Melbourne will now have the finest chamber-music hall in the country and we believe the audience demand is there."

The Brandenburg Orchestra, whose musicians come from every state, does not perform regularly in Melbourne because of the lack of a suitable venue for its baroque repertoire.

The recital centre will provide it with the complete keyboard range it needs — harpsichord, forte piano and chamber organ tuned to baroque pitch.

But the internationally acclaimed Australian Chamber Orchestra will continue to perform at Hamer Hall and is looking to transfer to Melbourne Town Hall during the Hamer Hall redevelopment.

The acting general manager, Steve Davidson, says the ACO's Melbourne audience is too big to transfer to the recital centre. "We make a big commitment to Melbourne and our passionate and loyal subscribers are happy with what we do," he says.

Ticket packages and memberships to the Melbourne Recital Centre are available at melbournerecital.com.au or by ringing 9699 3333.