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A Hall Renovates and a Music World Copes

By [DANIEL J. WAKIN](#)

LONDON, Feb. 5 — Under a vast thicket of metal scaffolding, a workman scrapes grout between concrete slabs. Any scraping of a violin bow inside Royal Festival Hall lies a long way off.

The hall — London's rough equivalent of Carnegie Hall, with more than 340 performances in a typical year and a reputation as the city's flagship auditorium — has been closed since June for a major renovation and is not scheduled to reopen until June 2007. The shutdown has sent ripples of change across the rich classical music scene here.

The displacement of the hall's two major resident orchestras, the London Philharmonic and the Philharmonia, has put a financial squeeze on them while stimulating new programming. A six-month delay, partly caused by the discovery of an unexpectedly large lode of asbestos, has worsened the bite.

The uncertainty over a completion date has also caused foreign orchestras to cancel visits, including the New York Philharmonic. At the same time, the hall's already ascendant rival, the Barbican, has received a boost in prestige.

But there is also a sense of anticipation.

"We're all waiting with bated breath to see what the outcome is going to be," said Ralph Kirshbaum, an American cellist who lives in London and has played in the hall often. "Festival Hall has been a problematic hall, certainly for the 35 years I've lived in this country."

The problem, mainly, was the acoustics. Musicians long complained that they could not hear themselves onstage. The sound was uneven in the audience, dead in many areas.

The \$160 million renovation of the hall, which was hastily built in 1951 for the Festival of Britain amid postwar scarcities, will try to solve those problems, guided by the American acoustician R. Lawrence Kirkegaard. The side walls near the stage are being re-angled, the canopy over it replaced and a sound-absorbing space between the main walls and surface walls eliminated.

Air-conditioning is being added, as are three inches of new legroom, an acknowledgment of a taller average population 55 years later. The stage will have a greater number of adjustable sections. Already a new level of shops and cafes facing the Thames River has been added. A glass structure extending under the arches of a nearby railway bridge is being built for offices. The foyer areas are being renovated, and an education center carved out.

How London's music world deals with the closing could provide a road map for what will happen in New York when Avery Fisher Hall undergoes renovation, forcing the temporary displacement of the New York Philharmonic.

The plans are still in the early stages, and Fisher Hall is not expected to close before the 2009-10 season. But the Philharmonic is already trying to figure out what to do. A temporary home at the Seventh Regiment Armory on Park Avenue, which is being transformed into an arts space, is a definite possibility, said Eric Latzky, an orchestra spokesman. The orchestra is likely to do more touring and concerts in nearby cities and to play at other unspecified places in New York, he added.

The closing of the roughly 3,000-seat Festival Hall — a regular stopping point on the Famous Performer circuit (from Callas to Hendrix to Karajan) — was traumatic, said Michael Lynch, the chief executive of the South Bank Center. The center comprises Royal Festival Hall, the smaller Queen Elizabeth Hall, the even smaller Purcell Room, the Jubilee Gardens and the Hayward Gallery. The renovation, more than 20 years in the making, is part of a revitalization of the complex.

About 180 employees lost their jobs because of the extended closing, Mr. Lynch said. Many had worked there for decades.

The resident orchestras moved their concerts to the Queen Elizabeth Hall, which at 900 seats has about a third of the capacity. To make the renovation financially bearable for the orchestras and to keep them — and their audiences — on the South Bank, Mr. Lynch said, they are not being charged rent.

"The audience does seem to have followed the orchestras," said Nicholas Kenyon, the director of the BBC Proms concerts.

But a smaller hall means smaller receipts.

"Financially it's obviously a massive blow for us," said David Whelton, the managing director of the Philharmonia.

The Philharmonia made up most of the \$2.8 million shortfall through the rent abatement, extra appeals to donors, a salary freeze and reduced fees for conductors and soloists. But the construction delay added an additional \$700,000 gap, Mr. Whelton said. The Philharmonia, he said, is looking to the government's Arts Council for help.

The orchestra has not changed its programming much, having recently crammed its forces onto the smaller Queen Elizabeth stage for big works like Bartok's "Miraculous Mandarin" and Stravinsky's "Firebird." It already plays many concerts in regional halls. And it has halved the roughly 45 programs it played at Festival Hall, but will play each program twice at Queen Elizabeth Hall.

The London Philharmonic, with [Kurt Masur](#) as its principal conductor, has taken a different tack. It has programmed more smaller works, as in a recent bill of [Mozart's](#) Symphony No. 34, Stravinsky's "Dumbarton Oaks" and Strauss's "Metamorphosen." In the spirit of chamber music, the conductor, Mark Elder, had the strings play standing in the Strauss and placed the woodwinds in front of the podium for the Mozart.

"It's an opportunity for us to do repertoire we wouldn't normally do," said Timothy Walker, the London Philharmonic's artistic and executive director. The orchestra has also established a chamber music series at Wigmore Hall. All the small-scale playing is expected to improve the morale and quality of the orchestra, Mr. Walker said.

Others agree. "Although the musicians initially looked at it with a certain amount of horror, they've actually gotten a lot out of it," Mr. Kenyon said.

At the same time, the London Philharmonic decided to find homes away from home. The orchestra goes on a 22-day American tour next month, which takes it to Avery Fisher Hall on March 20 and 26, and it visits Carnegie Hall next fall.

The South Bank's temporary loss appears to be the Barbican Center's gain. The Barbican, which opened 24 years ago, has slowly built its standing. Now, with the Royal Festival Hall closing, it has the pick of international orchestras and artists. And its resident orchestra, the London Symphony, is staying comfortably at home, where it has even more independence than the Festival Hall orchestras and a prominent new principal conductor, [Valery Gergiev](#), starting next year.

"It's obviously worked for the Barbican," Mr. Lynch said. "They're the only 2,000-seat hall in London that can bring in major international orchestras." He pointed to the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam and the Vienna and Berlin philharmonics, which, though often booked at Royal Festival Hall, are at the Barbican this season.

Graham Sheffield, the Barbican's artistic director, disputed that characterization, saying that those orchestras would have come to the Barbican anyway. But he acknowledged that the lack of competition allowed the Barbican to have its pick in programming a Shostakovich cycle this season, during the composer's centenary. A beefier roster of piano recitals is another result: Maurizio Pollini and [Daniel Barenboim](#) are at the Barbican this year.

"I'm sure Festival Hall will come back," Mr. Sheffield said. "But an element of competition is quite healthy."