

Benedict Music Tent

Aspen, Colorado

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WITH GREAT FANFARE, HARRY TEAGUE BLENDS TRADITION AND IMPROVED ACOUSTICS IN A NEW TENT FOR THE ASPEN MUSIC FESTIVAL.

By David Dillon

Architect: *Harry Teague Architects—Harry Teague, AIA, principal; John Backman, AIA, project architect; Phil Beck, job captain; Milton Rosa-Ortiz, David Keleher, Ryan Sturtz, Michael Hassig, AIA, Brian Wilson, project team*

Client: *Aspen Music Festival and School*

Consultants: *Kirkegaard and Associates (acoustics, audiovisual); Auerbach + Associates (Theater design, media, lighting); ME Engineers (mechanical/electrical engineer); Schmuser Gordon Meyer (civil engineer)*

Size: *37,480 square feet*

Cost: *\$11.2 million*

Completion date: *June 2000*

Sources

Membrane structure, cables, fittings: *Birdair*

Curtain wall: *AIA Industries*

Tent doors: *McKinney Doors & Hardware, John Truso Hardware, Industria Acoustics*

Carpet: *Interface*

Raised floor: *Mystic Scenic Studios*

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Program

Summer in Aspen means crisp air, sublime vistas, and the sounds of Bach and Beethoven wafting across upland meadows. Ever since Eero Saarinen designed its first music tent in 1949—a canvas “big top” with a dirt floor and log poles—Aspen has been the summer home to hundreds of young musicians and performing artists. The combination of the music festival, the Aspen Design Institute, and the Institute for Theoretical Physics transforms the entire town into a floating seminar in which scholarship intersects with sophisticated play.

Aspen now has a new music tent designed by Harry Teague Architects. It continues the tradition of casual culture initiated by Saarinen’s structure and expanded by a larger octagonal version designed by Bauhaus émigré Herbert Bayer in 1967. The new tent, named for Bayer’s brother-in-law Frederic Benedict, seats 2,050 beneath a swelling white dome reminiscent of a schooner under sail. Patrons sit on long wooden benches that fan out from a sunken stage, or flop on a sloping lawn dotted with birch trees. The skirt of the tent consists of 180 vertical louvers in Bayer blue that open to the lawn and the mountains in good weather and that can be closed against wind and rain.

Contributing editor David Dillon writes for the Dallas Morning News.

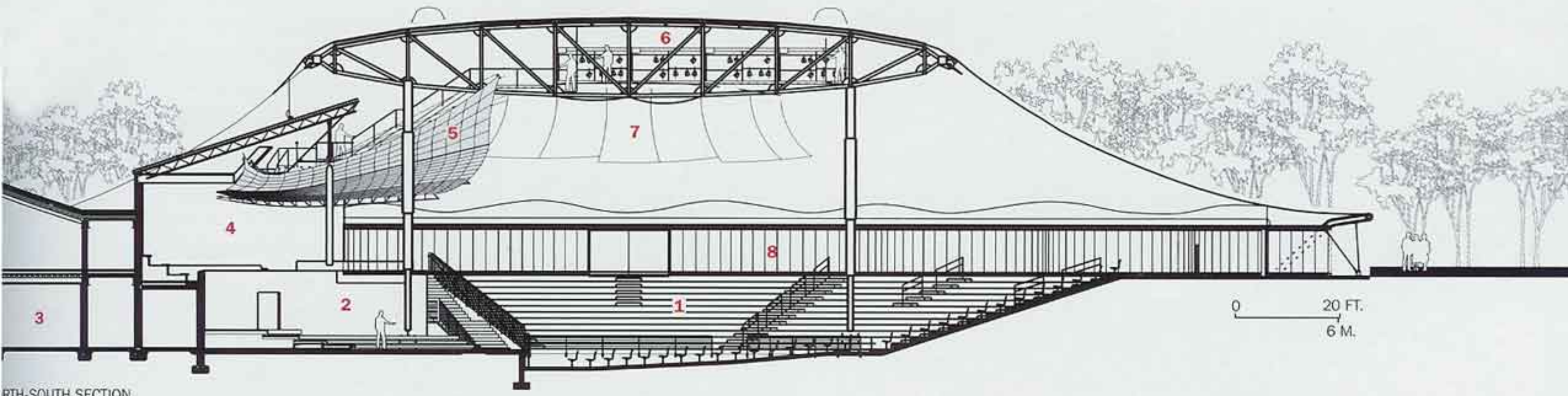
The design of the Benedict Music Tent was driven partly by nostalgia and mostly by the need to solve the physical and acoustical problems of its immediate predecessor. Aspen residents insisted that the new tent be no taller or wider than Bayer’s, that bench and lawn seating be preserved, and that the tent’s friendly relationship to nearby Harris Concert Hall—also designed by Teague—be maintained. The architects met these politically sensitive requirements while improving on most features of the earlier designs.

Solutions/Intentions

Both the Bayer and Saarinen tents were made of canvas that lasted only a few years before beginning to leak and tear. At the end of every season, the tents had to be dismantled and stored at considerable expense. The Benedict, on the other hand, is made of the same Teflon-coated fiberglass that covers the main terminal at Denver International Airport. It has the same transparency and warmth as canvas and the strength to withstand snow loads of 95 pounds per square foot. The fabric is secured by steel cables anchored to massive concrete blocks that could be footings for a small bridge.

The tougher challenge was to approximate concert hall acoustics within the soft embrace of a tent. Bayer’s design had a simple thrust stage and few hard surfaces to





ORTH-SOUTH SECTION

- 3. Seating
- 4. Stage
- Backstage
- Choral balcony

- 5. Stage canopy
- 6. Acoustics, catwalk
- 7. Sound reflectors
- 8. Louvered panels



Concerts have the look of a town meeting, with patrons on benches or sprawled on the lawn.





reflect the sound. Because the musicians couldn't hear themselves or one another, they had to anticipate the conductor's beat to keep pace. "There was no bottom to the music at all," says Harry Teague. "It just disappeared into infinity."

Working with acoustician Lawrence Kirkegaard, Teague designed an acoustical shell to bounce sound back to the stage and out to the lawn. Fabric reflectors swoop above and around the players. The old mushiness has given way to a new brightness and balance; it still doesn't rival the sound in a concert hall, but it's better than anything festival audiences have heard in years. The shell rests on four tapering steel columns designed to sway as much as 12 inches.

Commentary

A tight budget forced a few compromises backstage. While there is space for storage, rehearsal, and services, it is mostly raw and rather grim. The green room, for example, is a painted concrete-block wall. The backstage area, though, is connected by underground tunnel to Harris Hall, which provides more rehearsal and performance space.

These are minor limitations in an otherwise outstanding design. Tradition has been served without retro foolishness. A spirit of relaxed reverence prevails—precisely what the festival founders had in mind. ■



The stage, a wide, paneled semicircle with a choral balcony, holds up to 150 performers (above). Adjustable risers allow for varied configurations, vital to

the festival's diverse programming. Vertical louvers open onto the surrounding lawn or may be closed during inclement weather (left and below).

