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## On Time, On Budget: Bochum's New Concert Hall Might Be A Better Model Than Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie



Jens F. Laurson, CONTRIBUTOR

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Photo courtesy Bochum Symphony, © Mark Wohlrab

*Bochum Music Center, Hall without Bochum Symphony*

A new concert hall. On time; on budget. Wouldn't that be nice. Hamburg is rightly excited about its Elbe Philharmonic Hall ("Elbphilharmonie") that rises from the sea of the town's harbor like a sail (with a dose of Saruman's tower), and opened in January. (See Forbes reviews: [Hamburg Elbphilharmonie Opening And First Impressions Of The Great Hall](#) and [Elbphilharmonie Chamber Hall](#)) But don't ask about budget or timing. The anticipation for that hall had been high on my part ever since attending a fundraiser concert at Carnegie Hall almost a decade ago. (See: [Music as Propaganda in Washington and New York](#))

Munich, too, after initially trying its best to spoil an opportunity (see also: [Munich Bungles Concert Hall Plans](#)), seems to have figured it out by now: There was now a competition for architects to submit plans for new 1800 seat concert hall in the east of Munich. (This was immediately followed by a lawsuit from an architect who wasn't considered but that seems settled now, too.) London – in a

similar if not worse situation than Munich, at six times Munich's size – isn't so far but looking for a solution, but desperately needs one to add a good concert hall to the present selection of eyesore-misfits (Barbican), ho-humishness (Southbank) or high-school-auditorium-flair outdatedness (Cadogan). All these cities are cultural metropolises with world class orchestras; all found it or are finding it difficult to properly serve their cultural gems with adequate venues and balance the public interest and public financing in a politically expedient way.



*Simon Rattle checked out the Bochum Hall even before it opened.*

And meanwhile, all the way out west of Germany, in a coal town about 350,000, and an unemployment rate of umpteenth percent[1], the job got done. Quietly, without a lot of fuss (I'm sure they should have liked a little more fuss about it), and practically within the budget. Bochum is the little town that could and it now rocks a little nifty concert hall which is – arguably in analogy to the city itself – an unassuming little gem. On a 34 Mill proposed budget and coming in under 40. No, I didn't forget a zero. And less than 10M public funds were spent.

## **The Story of Bochum at 2 AM**

Wikipedia would tell you that “Bochum dates from the 9th century when Charlemagne set up a royal court at the junction of two important trade routes”. Don't you be fooled. The story of the town, as told to me in the wee hours of the morning as I was gathering impression among the untamed natives along the “Bermuda Triangle” zone of late-night pubs and kebab stands, is that a bunch of hooligans from Dortmund one late night had too much to drink and went and stole one or several of Count Engelbert's cows. A few salt-of-the-earth chaps from Bochum, out on a stag-night (and probably just as moist behind the gills) said: “What's this? Graf Engelbert-Schmengelbert is our main man; wicked!” Absolutely went over to Dortmund, swept the floor with these fools, and restored the cow (or several) to its rightful owner. Engelbert, much pleased, granted them the

right to cut down one oak, once a year, in his forest around the corner, which was named “Bockholt”. That, and something about a swineherd “Jörgen” who discovered coal and brought status, wealth, and eventually black lung to Bochum. Even if scrupulous historians might wish to add or amend a detail or two of these tales, it goes to show: Bochum is no town of posh, champagne-swilling, oh-isn't-this-kale-juice-just-divine-darling kind of folk. At least around 3 AM after a beer or seven, they will insist charmingly on that version.

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And there, of all places, a new concert hall has opened its doors to the public? Yes, the “Anneliese Brost Musikform Bochum”. Not without hitches, not without some grumblings (my newfound friends weren't quite convinced, for starters), but yes, as of Thursday, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016, after about a century of having to do with make-shift venues for the venerable Bochum Symphony, which will turn 100 next year, the city had a proper music center at its hands and the band has a much-deserved home.[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#)



Photo courtesy Bochum Symphony, © Mark Wohlrab

Bochum Music Center, Foyer (St. Mary)

## The Sorrows of the Young Bochum Symphony

Orchestral music had a tough stand in Bochum for quite a while, not just for the lack of a really nifty venue or proper rehearsal space, but also because in the more or less immediate vicinity (Bochum lies dead-center in Germany's most populous greater metropolitan region, the Ruhrgebiet)

most populous greater metropolitan region, the *Ruhrgebiet*) there were plenty other orchestras to which detractors could point as being within easy listening-distance. (Dortmund Philharmonic, [Düsseldorf Symphony](#), the Duisburg and Essen Philharmonics and arguably the North West German Philharmonic where Andris Nelsons was once the MD.) So rather than build a hall for the local band, why not just abolish it altogether and fund a public swimming pool, instead? Local music lovers and the orchestra withstood that sentiment with all the stubborn pride that is second nature to the people of that region. From the outside, it's an unassuming pale brick building with a low profile that bows to the sight-lines of its surroundings before running into a red brick church building, the de-consecrated church of St. Mary which now serves as the impressive foyer to the large and the small, flexible-use chamber hall of the Bochum Music Center.

Early on in his tenure, which began forever ago (1994), the American conductor Steven Sloane began calling for a purpose-built hall for the orchestra. Known for good, innovative programming and, as any lover of post-romantic Germanic orchestral music knows, [a cycle of recordings](#) of the music of Joseph Marx on ASV, he delivered some early important arguments to that end. Twenty-some years later, and a little beyond the natural end of his (still continuing) tenure, and after much lobbying and working toward that goal, he finally sees and gets to experience the fruits of that labor. At the Bochum Music Center's opening, which took place under strict exclusion of everybody who couldn't bother with little Bochum while waiting with bated breath that the Elbphilharmonie finally opened, the hall showed a lot of potential.

Only partially on the first night, because during local composer Stefan Heucke's slightly hokey orchestral cantata *Baruch ata Adonaj – Gesegnet seist du, Herr* (and the following, capable Mahler First), there was a howling noise – gusts of wind? draft? a winch? the ghost of Anneliese Brost objecting to Mahler? – coming and going and it created a might ruckus of embarrassing proportions out left where I sat on the second of four opening nights. I forgot what the problem was, but by the third night which featured Stravinsky, Shostakovich, and Bartók, it had been fixed.





Photo courtesy Bochum Symphony, © Christoph Fein

Bochum Music Center, Hall with Bochum Symphony and Steven Sloane

### **Stefan Heucke Premiere & Mahler 1**

Off-kilter singing from the choristers and the soloists made Heucke's work sound involuntarily more modern than it was ever intended to be. The whole thing was cast as a Haydn "Farewell" Symphony in reverse, with two musicians starting out and evermore and more joining them on stage and in the musical proceedings. It seems appropriate for a hall – especially one with a church as an antechamber – to open with a religious work, even if it is slightly forgettable, mainly consonant music, with just enough dissonance in it to show some influence of the last 100 years of music history. It was good to hear on this occasion, sufficiently rousing towards the end, and the bookkeepers are giving good odds on it ever being performed again. I'm not taking them up on it.

Mahler is *de rigueur* for musical events, these days, and no different here. So Mahler's First it was (not actually in the earlier "Titan" version, though the program note suggested so much), and it tested the relatively cozy hall for its powers of handling such music. The hall handled it well – better than more famous halls in Vienna (Golden Hall) or Munich (Herkulesaal), and proved generous to accurate woodwinds and merciless to softly errant trumpets (replete with transposing errors) and croaking horns. The third movement lilt was lovingly, notably well shaped by Sloane, and the entire string section earned merit badges.

There was little mixing of the sound that I heard going on in the hall, which gives it an analytical touch. Despite its ability to accommodate Mahler with ease, it also sounded immediately suitable as a chamber music hall, which isn't surprising since it's not much bigger, capacity-wise, than the Vienna Konzerthaus' Mozart Chamber Hall. A nice touch for a 21st-century hall is that it gives sufficient leg room to

persons of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the seats are comfortable.

## The 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The lack of howling-wincing-squeaking noises made it easier to focus on the music the next day, which was in any case more ably performed than the day before. With the combination of Shostakovich, Stravinsky, and Bartók, the menu featured three giants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century looking east. The flaw: Shostakovich's Festival Overture is an obvious programmatic fit if the Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* and the Bartók Second Violin Concerto had been decided on first, but it is also one of the worst works Shostakovich has written. Then again, DSCH knew what he was doing even then, because the overture – I'll grant it that much – is not ineffective in its circus-romp populist banality donned with a few DSCH compositorial tropes. Perhaps if we imagined it, fancifully, as a romp actually celebrating Stalin's demise (it was written, hastily, in 1954), it could go down the hatch more easily. But the music doesn't get better for it all the same.

In the *Firebird Suite* and the Violin Concerto (Frank-Peter Zimmermann was the excellent soloist), the Bochum Orchestra got do more viz. showing off some of its ambitious quality and quality-ambitions that must come with having a new hall in which not only the audience can hear the orchestra very clearly but in which the musicians can also hear themselves. Zimmermann imbued the concerto with a lovingly viola-like burnished sound and the orchestra – again with the string sections leading the way – engaged in impressive piano and pianissimo work. In the Stravinsky, finally, it all came together; the sprightly Firebird was exciting, tense, and colorful, and the trumpets were on clear redemption-course from the Mahler-mess. At peak volume, it gets a bit loud in the hall – rarely a problem and in any case playing softer would always be a, however difficult, option – and the balance shifts to woodwinds, brass, and percussion... but not by much.





Photo courtesy Bochum Symphony, © Mark Wohlrab

Bochum Music Center, Hall without Bochum Symphony

## The Acoustic

As I wandered around that evening, to get an impression from different angles, I was more and more impressed with the honest, transparent, not overly dry, and immediate acoustic which proved very good and very consistent at just about every imaginable spot. It had absorbed Mahler's gigantic work with dryish ease; it accommodated the colors of Stravinsky's Suite even better, and I could readily imagine (though I wasn't able put the suspicion to the test yet), that the hall would also be superbly suited for a piano recital or even an evening of string quartets. (All assuming that enough people would show up for such an event that use of the big hall would be called for.) Going by respective first impressions, I certainly got the notion that the Bochum hall – much smaller and less ambitious than it is – has the more homogeneous, predictable, and workable acoustic. At least out of the box.

*¶ Jens F. Laurson writes about classical music and has contributed to "Surprised by Beauty - A Listener's Guide to the Recovery of Modern Music". You can follow him on Twitter @ClassicalCritic.*

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Just as impressive as the acoustic is the fact that the town was able to pull it off at all. Hamburgers might find it natural to add status-enhancing concert hall to its skyline to add prestige to the town, especially if it is very ambitious and even with cost-overruns. In Bochum, the same cannot be assumed. A few citizens started an initiative to stop the project, unwilling to let the much-indebted city of Bochum spend money on the project when elsewhere it was cutting budgets they deemed more important. The particular locals, with which I was hobnobbing over beers and kebabs, had been against the project, too. Trying to sound out why I arrived at a mix of deeming the hall (and presumably the orchestra) unnecessary when there are plenty halls and orchestras in the region (as mentioned), but more notably I hit on vague fears that the character of that part of town might change... that the hordes of posh, tuxedo-wearing classical music snobs would invade the Bermuda Triangle, after all, and that the pubs serving beer and fries and beer would be replaced by chic places serving oysters and champagne. Fear, in short, of change, away from the character (or cliché) of a humble, down-to-earth coal-mining town – even if the very proprietors of the pubs for which they worried presumably welcome any uptick in business, no matter how the customers are dressed.

## By the People, For the Music

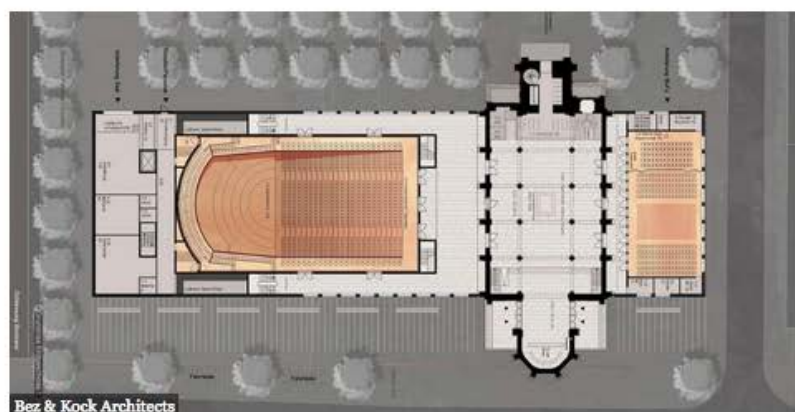
In any case, even more notable than the level of criticism and skepticism about the new music center were the number of Bochumers who put their money where their mouth was, as far as support for the venture was concerned. With over 20,000 individual contributions amounting to about 7M, the



hall is one of the most publically spirited such buildings in Europe and certainly Germany, where the public coughers are usually the trough of choice. Even Hamburg, which is a fairly publically minded town, which eschewed federal subsidies and which had plenty, very notable private contributions to its concert-hall cause, can't boast such a wide public foundation of contributors... and certainly not relative to size, wealth, and reputation of the two towns and ventures.

This new hall is obviously great for the Bochum Symphony because of all the immediate benefits in comfort, convenience, quality work environment, and morale. But one very notable advantage is the considerable bonus potential this hall has as dowry when courting their next chief conductor. Not only with the future chief conductors have a wonderful home to make music in, they will also be the music director of the Bochum Music Centre, having considerably greater creative control than any Bochum chief conductor prior to Sloane.

If there's one compromise that was necessary in building this hall at this price in this time, it's the lack of an organ. Neither does Geffen (aka Avery Fisher) Hall, you might say, nor did Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie have one planned initially, before a concerned patron from stepped in with a large purpose-bound donation, but that's not to say that organs have become superfluous. Asked about it, Steven Sloane suggested that the omission was intentional, that he never wanted one and doesn't deem it necessary, but in focusing on his role in this he unwittingly raised the question: What about future MDs? It's not the Steven Sloane Hall, even though the two are mutually dependent on each other: Without Sloane there wouldn't be a hall and Sloane would have left the orchestra earlier, for sure, if the new hall hadn't been a realistic possibility.



*Plan for the Bochum Music Center (Anneliese Brost Musikforum Ruhr)*

[1] 10,4% as of June 2017, which sounds like not much but is among the highest in what's former West Germany and is 2% higher than the highest average of any state. In short, it's a

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higher than the highest average of any state. In short, it's a lot for a very spoiled, fortunate country.


[2] Lest I give the idea that Bochum isn't a city of culture, I should point out that the Schauspielhaus Bochum has been one of Germany's foremost theaters for most of its 110 years; and especially in the post-war years after the new building was finished in 1953.

[3] Bochum Symphony Large Hall facts: 960 seats (+ 10 wheelchair spaces), 14k m3 space (12k of which are visible). Initially proposed budget: €32,73m. Total cost €38,94m (18% above budget; €700k had to be added to the official bill this January, due to a late bill coming in - and possible a few more coming) of which €16,5 came from grants [€9,5 city-planning grant; €6,5 EU; €0,5 cultural funds], €14,6 from donations, €7,1 from the city council. The city of Bochum grants €650k annually, to cover the "Anneliese Brost Musikforum Ruhr"'s overhead.

Additional reading: Alex Ross, *Germany's New Concert Temples*, The New Yorker.

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