

Modern Theatres: Matsumoto Performing Arts Centre, Matsumoto, Japan

By Shozo Motosugi



*Exterior
Courtesy of Matsumoto/
Mpac*

Matsumoto is a mid-sized Japanese city of around 240,000 people located in Nagano Prefecture about 220 km East of Tokyo. It is perhaps best known for the extraordinary Matsumoto Castle, one of five castles designated as 'National Treasures of Japan' and with the oldest remaining castle donjon (or keep). Construction commenced in 1592 and the city developed around it as a 'Castle Town'.

The city had one of the first community schools developed in the region, the Kyu-Kaichi gakko (established in 1876 with contributions from the local people). With many famous summer resorts and hot springs nearby, the town has always been proud of its rich culture. Matsumoto is also the birthplace for the Suzuki Method of music education. Invented by Shinichi Suzuki the Method encourages music education from the earliest age and has taught millions to play musical instruments. Matsumoto is also the birthplace for the Suzuki Method of music education. Invented by Shinichi Suzuki the Method encourages music education from the

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The Saito Kinen Festival Matsumoto was started in 1992 by renowned conductor Seiji Ozawa as a tribute to the magnificent musician and educator Hideo Saito. Saito had been a close friend of Shinichi Suzuki since their school days in Germany and was the teacher of Seiji Ozawa. Operas and various concerts are performed at facilities throughout the city during this festival, which lasts about one month each summer. In 2015, the festival was renamed the Seiji Ozawa Matsumoto Festival (OMF), to mark a new stage in its evolution.

Matsumoto has a rich cultural and music heritage that was poorly served by the inadequate civic auditorium which had opened in 1985 with a concert hall seating 693 with pipe organ and various teaching rooms. The hall had poor facilities, a small stage, unsatisfactory acoustics, poor dressing and rehearsal rooms. The inadequacies of the hall and the needs of the Festival increased pressure for a new hall.



*Aerial view
Courtesy of Matsumoto/
MPAC*

The Prefecture decided to construct a new building and an architectural competition was planned. The brief was for a flexible theatre able to accommodate staged performances of opera, ballet or other events along with the capability to present classical music and symphony concerts. The brief also required a second, smaller theatre and the ancillary spaces required for rehearsal, opera production and to support the performance spaces.

*Stairs from entrance hall to
main foyer
Courtesy of Matsumoto*

A site was identified adjacent to the old civic hall. Between the hall and the street there was a small square, and an old pond. However, the



initial site was not large enough and it was a very odd shape. The site is over 200m long and around 30m wide and is further constrained by a huge old tree that public pressure demanded be retained.

Ten practices entered the architectural competition which Toyo Ito won with a bold plan that reconciled both the brief and the site by adopting a highly creative approach.

Theatres and opera houses have traditionally been symmetrical, axial buildings. The front entrance was typically set in the centre of the front façade. Once into the foyers they were often symmetrically arranged around a grand staircase. The foyers and staircase gave access symmetrically to the auditorium which, with the stage sat resolutely on the axial centre line. Post war theatres in Asia, the Americas and Europe have largely moved away from this symmetrical and axial approach.

The site virtually precluded such a rigid axial arrangement and Toyo Ito seized the opportunity to create a unique route into and through the building. In his initial draft, the concept proposed lifting a large floor slab to create a new landform below the slab. He was planning to use that rolling landform to create the auditorium and other spaces where people would gather for various purposes. He presented a multi-layered public space in which any spot could become a theatre. The big upper slab would be a flat roof garden open to the sky, and the small lower ground would be full of variety and linked with the town.

The eventual concept created a sequence; a staircase from the entrance rises to an intermediate level where a wide square called Theatre Park is open to the public for daily use. Usually, this is a quiet contemplative spot. During festivals or other special events shops in the town open stalls and events like street performances are held here. The small hall is also located on this level. The stair continues to rise, passes the stage, enters the foyers and thence to the main auditorium. The main auditorium and stage effectively turn their backs on the public entrance. The staircase continues to a large roof garden and a rehearsal room which can be used for small scale performances. The rehearsal room has an openable wall allowing it to link to the roof garden and events can be presented in both spaces.

The audience route into the auditorium is a journey through the building unlike the linear approach of many theatres. The staircase follows the curving wall of the building around the stage and side stage to the theatre



foyer from where audiences can enter the auditorium.

The logic of public circulation in this theatre is similar to that of the Sydney Opera House. The

stage is located on the approach side so that audiences pass around the stage and stage side, make a detour around the auditorium to the foyer which is found after walking up gentle stairs. Both theatres conceal from visitors the bulk and blank walls of the stages as they pass around and into the foyers. However, the buildings' layouts are markedly different. The stage in Sydney is set about 10 metres higher than the ground level, and the rehearsal rooms, dressing rooms, etc. are arranged below the stage level. In Matsumoto (MPAC) the stage and dressing rooms are arranged on the ground level, and the rehearsal rooms are located above the side stage. The location of spaces in the Sydney Opera House is severely limited by the external shapes "sails" which taper and reduce in size as the building rises. Matsumoto has limited site dimensions but greater freedom in the placement of support spaces. By lifting the public circulation above the backstage spaces Matsumoto solves the conflict between the two differing activities – public and stage.

The auditorium and stage return to a more conventional architectural language used in a more interesting manner. They are symmetrical and axial, and the auditorium has a large stalls or orchestra section with a series of narrow galleries stacked above at

*Photo (left) by
ForgeMind ArchiMed*



*Main auditorium, view from
stage
Courtesy of
Matsumoto/MPAC*

both the rear and down the sides of the room. The auditorium and stage are planned to accommodate a wide range of performances; not only opera, ballet, musicals and concerts but also Japanese kabuki theatre.

The first thing performers want to check in a theatre is the stage. It is quite natural for them to see the physical space on which they will act, sing, or play music but they rapidly look out into the auditorium to check how it "feels". How can architects design a space which makes the performers smile as soon as they look at it, and give them an incentive to perform? What kind of theatre can encourage the performers and make them say "Yes, this is the place? Matsumoto achieves this magic.

Similarly, for the audience as they move from the foyer into the auditorium the space should thrill and amaze them. An auditorium is a place where strangers meet to share a (hopefully) moving and engaging performance. A space where there is a conversation between performer and audience members and between the audience themselves. In a Japanese context a space where audience members can bow to each other or quietly acknowledge the other. A great auditorium should raise audience expectations.

Matsumoto succeeds in creating a large (1,800 seat) theatre that works for both performer and audience. From the stage a performer immediately sees and is embraced by the multiple levels of balcony seating extending down the side walls and almost reaching the stage. The performer would feel at the centre and enfolded by the audience. The balconies are slightly inclined toward the stage. This makes the sight-lines better and hides the ceiling of the balcony seats when viewed from the stage. Thus, the close contact between the audience and the performers becomes more significant. The theatre successfully creates a wonderful auditorium space that does not compromise the performance and draws the audience's attention to the play, whilst providing a stagy and brilliant atmosphere before the performance starts.

From the stage, performers would notice the colour gradation of the seats and walls of the auditorium. The seats are covered with polka-dotted fabric, and the colours gradually change from dark red to bright pink as it goes from the stage side to the rear side of the auditorium. Seen by the audience, the colours become darker closer to the stage becoming almost black near the stage. Ten kinds of patterns are used for the seat fabric

and arranged at random. Another challenge was to find ways to vary the seating capacity. The maximum capacity is 1,800 seats with a need to occasionally reduce to about 1,000 seats for drama productions. The space and acoustic environment must also be suitable for orchestra concerts. The seating capacity can be varied by vertically moving the entire ceiling of the auditorium, effectively closing off and hiding some of the highest balcony tiers and reducing the usable seating capacity. As a result, the horseshoe-shaped auditorium with the five levels of balconies including the seats beside the orchestra pit were created. The maximum distance from the edge of the stage to the rearmost seats in the parquet circle is 30 m, and that to the further most seats are 34m.

Three rows of stage lighting bridges are attached to the ceiling of the auditorium. At the centre of the third row, a followspot room is incorporated. The lighting bridges in the auditorium and side lighting positions are exposed to the auditorium to form part of the acoustic environment.

The orchestra pit can be raised to stage level to extend the stage/platform into the auditorium for classical music concerts and the first lighting bridge in the auditorium is used as an acoustic reflector. This makes the atmosphere more intimate. The orchestra pit lift can also be used as a forestage or lowered to create an orchestra pit. If positioned at auditorium floor level it can carry additional audience seating. The sight lines from the stalls and balconies work to this forward stage edge.

This flexibility works well for western operas and concerts and is also suitable for Japan's traditional Kabuki performances. For Kabuki, about 300 seats in the front area including the orchestra pit are removed, and the visitors are seated on floor cushions. Removing the seats considerably expands the performing area and allows the performers to move into the audience. Although this theatre is large, the audience are brought close to the stage.

The stage is generous, and the theatre has both a left side stage and rear stage. An additional "fit-up" theatre can be created on the stage by utilising the generous stage space. A set of retractable seats are housed in the rear wall of the rear stage. By sliding and pulling them out, a theatre with about 400 seats which uses the main stage from the opposite side appears. All the stage facilities – lighting, flying, sound, etc. can be used in this smaller theatre. On this occasion, the wall in the back



*Glazed wall panels
Photo by
ForgeMind ArchiMed*

of the stage left and the technical gallery contained therein laterally move to surround the auditorium so that a wall surface symmetric to the fixed wall surface on the stage right side can be framed.

To reach the seats in this theatre on the stage, generally, the audience can enter from the main lobby on the second floor and go down the auditorium tiers. For some performances in this on-stage theatre it isn't possible to enter through the auditorium and audience are asked to enter from the delivery entrance and go up temporary stairs to the stage level. Some performances are even held in the foyers. The concept of "any place becomes a theatre" is thus cleverly planned and executed.

Sendai Mediatheque (2001), another project by Toyo Ito, was built three years before Matsumoto. Transparency was pursued in making the structure of Sendai Mediatheque. The concept was realised by weaving tube steel frames into nets to form multi-layered floors and cover them with the glass façade.

In designing MPAC, a different route to achieve transparency was pursued. Panels made of Glass-fiber Reinforced Cement (GRC), are used to cover almost the entire building. The GRC panels are inlaid with glass glazing in seven sizes and shapes. Owing to the variety of size and density of the inlaid glass, it appears as if ground water is bubbling, or sunlight filtering through trees. It seems to be representing the region, which is rich with water, or the place blessed by the trees of a shrine next to the theatre.

The design of Matsumoto places the stage at the centre of the site. Thus, the old tree was preserved and a waterfront space was created

on the south side where the original pond was located. Great public spaces were created all linked by a gentle sinuous stair lit by glass panels set into the façade. Functionally, the scheme has multiple loading docks with good access and circulation is well integrated into the neighbourhood.

Another chapter of Modern Theatres examined the Bunka Kaikan in Tokyo. Completed in 1961 it was one of the first post war theatre buildings constructed in Japan. It was an innovative pioneering building setting out to create a flexible theatre that could be used for differing types of performance. Hundreds of theatre buildings have subsequently been created across Japan many influenced by Bunka Kaikan.

MPAC was completed in 2004 some forty years after Bunka Kaikan. It is probably one of the most successful theatres. A very usable, attractive building with great public spaces achieved on an incredibly constrained site. It departs radically from the traditional formal symmetry of older theatre buildings. Unique public spaces are created both internally and externally many of which can be used as temporary, improvised theatres or meeting places. An extraordinary sinuous wall provides both a sensual external elevation and one wall of the internal staircase penetrated by small irregular windows. It is amazing all this has been successfully realised on such a challenging site.

Modern architecture has sought after homogenisation and transparency. Plane and abstract spaces have been admired. Architects have made full use of geometry and the best combination in functions, accordingly. Functionality has been significantly improved with advice from theatre experts. Theatre people demand ever better theatres. Demands that also produce better buildings for audiences. Rationality is necessary, but I do not think it creates an unprecedented drama, unexpected dramatic interpretation, or a unique stage. If a drama is established through a fight among the script, music, and actors, should the theatre's architecture also have some power to join the fight?

A theatre is not merely a place to present dramas. Too much listening to theatre people makes architecture boring. Too much enthusiastic architecture would spoil dramas. No creative, no theatre. Art can survive with something seemingly unnecessary or impossible. In that sense, theatre architecture should co-operate and compete, with the performance and audience.