

Arts centre draws acclaimed artistes

With acoustics designed by celebrated sound scientist Russell Johnson, the Esplanade is expected to attract world-class performers

By **ALICIA YEO**

SINGAPORE'S national arts centre is expected to draw not just arts lovers and tourists, but also acclaimed performers.

Several, including New York's Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, have added Singapore to their itineraries, so they can perform in the 1,800-seat concert hall designed by American acoustician Russell Johnson, 78.

Other fans of this scientist of sound include Korean violinist Sarah Chang and American drummer Peter Erskine. Both will perform at the hall during the Esplanade - Theatres On The Bay's opening festival in October.

Esplanade chief executive officer Benson Puah said: "Clarity, flexibility and adaptability are the hallmarks of a Russell Johnson hall. Artistes are even more interested to come here and perform at the Esplanade."

After all, the acoustics for the concert hall and the centre's 2,000-seat theatre were crafted by the same man who made Bee-

thoven's Triple Concerto in C Major sound so good that Yo-Yo Ma fell out of his seat.

The renowned cellist's chair slipped from its platform while he was performing last December at the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts in Philadelphia, in the United States. Joking about the fall later, he blamed it on the hall's "incredible clarity of sound".

The Philadelphia hall is one of over 20 designed by Mr Johnson and his team, Artec Consultants. Others include the Symphony Hall in Birmingham, Britain, and the Culture and Congress Centre in Lucerne, Switzerland.

He has more than 50 years' experience designing symphony-hall acoustics. In a phone interview recently, he said: "I developed a basic design 25 years ago. That design has been used for all the halls Artec has done."

"The same model was used for the Esplanade. The only major changes are what the architects did for the aesthetics of the hall."

But he still chooses the material for the curtains and even the



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seats, as these affect his concert halls and demand flawless performance.

Said Dr Chang: "I visited the hall that did in Lucerne, and an orchestra off nic

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The orchestra main concert series made from next year at the \$600-million





JOHN COSGROVE

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seats, as these affect the acoustics. Because of the sound clarity, his concert halls and theatres also demand flawless performances.

Said Dr Chang Tou Liang, 35, one of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra's (SSO's) directors: "I visited the hall that Mr Johnson did in Lucerne, and it really shows an orchestra off nicely.

"Every mistake can be heard. A third-rate, lousy orchestra cannot escape. SSO can prove to the public how good it really is."

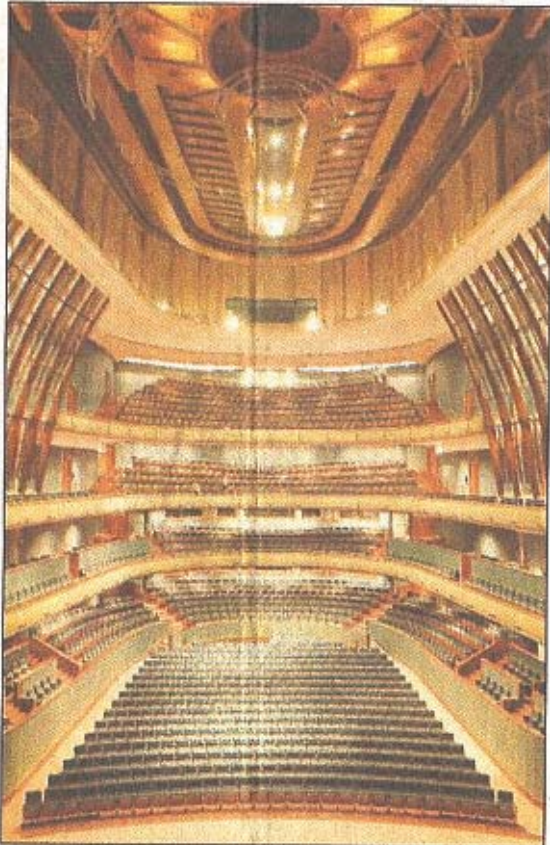
The orchestra will hold its main concert series at the Esplanade from next year, and perform at the \$600-million centre's inau-

gural concert on Oct 11, a day before the building's launch.

Said pianist and National Arts Council Board member Goh Yew Lin, 42, who is also executive director of GK Goh: "Good acoustics are critical. In some halls, musicians on stage often have difficulty hearing each other.

"Russell Johnson is a legend. But it remains to be seen how appropriate the Esplanade's hall will be for small ensembles."

Still, classical music critic Phang Ming Yen, 35, said: "This is Singapore's first concert hall built purposely for music. It's a landmark in itself."



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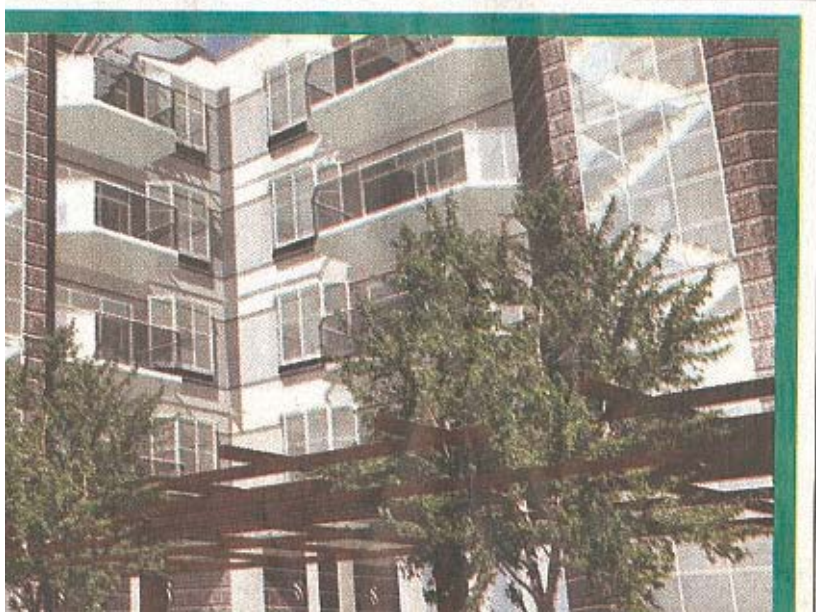
Interior lines help ensure acoustic clarity.



More than 20 halls have been designed by Mr Johnson and team

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— Dr Chang Tou Liang, an SSO director



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