

Saratoga Performing Arts Center Festival Site:

A Luxurious Summer Home For Ballet, Symphony

THE SARATOGA PERFORMING ARTS CENTER, home of the first annual American Song Festival, was officially opened July 9, 1966 and since then, has made a name for itself as an outstanding venue for the presentation of musical events.

But the history of the Center actually began three years prior. In 1963, the press reported that the New York Philharmonic was looking for a summer home in Stowe, Vermont. A group of people, knowing of the natural amphitheater in the Saratoga Spa State Park and wanting the orchestra to stay in New York State, initiated the idea for the center. As it turned out, the New York Philharmonic decided to stay in New York City. But the wheels were already set in motion. The New York City Ballet immediately wanted to make Saratoga its summer home and soon after The Philadelphia Orchestra agreed.

Ground was broken for the amphitheater on June 30, 1964 by Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller. The site was cleared during the ensuing summer months. So were parking areas—large enough to accommodate 5,000 cars. Construction of the amphitheater was initiated in October, 1964. The Center was dedicated by the governor on Conservation Day, June 16, 1966 and then on July 9 came the opening performance with "A Midsummer Night's Dream" danced by the New York City Ballet.

In August came The Philadelphia Orchestra who, on the very first night of their inaugural season, performed the overture "The Consecration of the House." The City Center Acting Company which performs in the Spa Summer Theater became a part of the Saratoga Festival with its first appearance on July 3, 1972—then under its old name of the Juilliard Acting Company.

The Saratoga Performing Arts Center has since become the Company's summer home, as is also true of the New York City Ballet and The Philadelphia Orchestra. The film festival was incorporated as part of the Festival in 1968. Both classic and contemporary films are shown at the Filene Hall on the Skidmore College campus.

The Saratoga Performing Arts Center, an autonomous non-profit organization with the State of New York as its landlord, is situated on 150,000 square feet within the 1,500 acre Saratoga Spa State Park. Albany, Schenectady, Troy, and

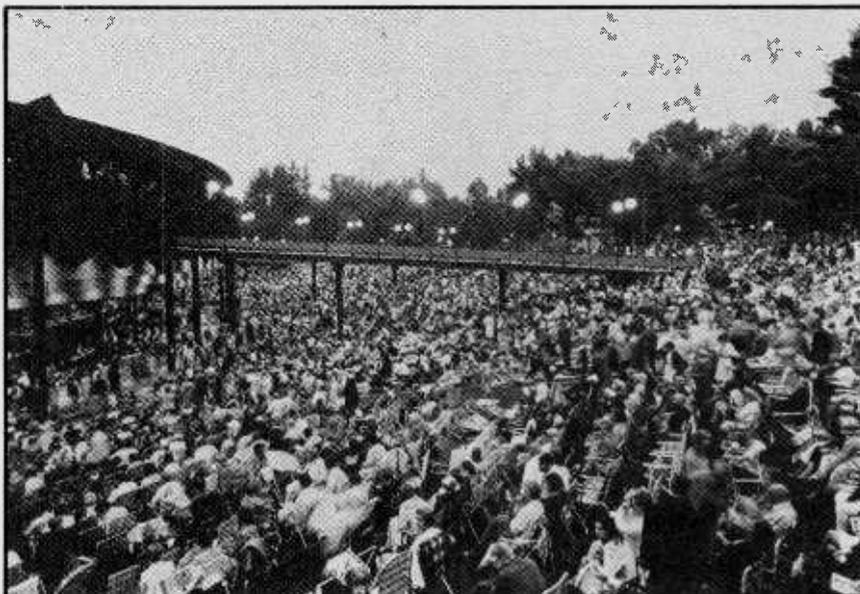
Glens Falls are approximately 30 minutes from the Saratoga Spa. The combination of the Thruway and the Northway brings approximately 25 million people within comfortable and scenic driving radius.

The amphitheater, with its shape and color those of nature, was designed by Vollmer Associates of New York City and built in 410 days. The Saratoga Performing Arts Center with complete ballet and concert facilities was completed for less than \$500 per seat as compared to equivalent winter facilities costing at least \$7,000 per seat. Including site development and construction, the overall cost of the Center—raised mainly by contributions—was approximately \$4 million. The amphitheater seats 5,103 and the sloping lawn, which forms its outdoor mezzanine, has accommodated as many as 30,000.

The stage was specifically designed for the New York City

Ballet. It floats freely by special construction techniques. This main stage is 100' x 60' and above it hang 104 set lines to hold scenery and backdrops. Backstage, there are rehearsal rooms—one is the same area as the main stage so that the dancers' steps do not have to be altered for the actual performance, and a second room of half the main stage size.

Also backstage are the wardrobe and dressing rooms, located in easy proximity of the stage. Star dressing rooms, located next to the Green Room, are used by orchestra conductors, New York City Ballet directors and special event performers. The Green Room is the official reception room of the amphitheater, where The Philadelphia Orchestra's Maestro Eugene Ormandy has a tradition of meeting guests after performances. Performers often relax in this room before and after performances and Saratoga Festival executive meetings are also held there.



Under a warm summer sky, music lovers gather on the lawn of the Performing Arts Center (above). E. Craig Hankerson (right), the facility's general manager, keeps attuned to all the arts.



Mal Klein

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such a song competition but that they trust this festival's management. From one test series of nine TV spots on KHJ-TV in Los Angeles on one weekend, the festival drew more than 725 responses by mail and phone. On one recent Thursday entries were up 50 percent over the previous Thursday. They're coming in from everywhere. On February 22, for example, the festival drew entries at the rate of 107 from California along and entries from nearly every state in the nation, plus Spain, England, Colombia and Ireland. In Hawaii, the famous air personality Hal (Aku) Lewis is the official spokesman and entries are coming in from there.

"Wolfman Jack and Don Imus of WNBC-AM, New York, are also official spokesmen. Sammy Cahn, president of the Songwriters Hall of Fame and Al Kasha, winner of last year's Academy Award also speak regularly on behalf of the festival.

"We have something very worthwhile to offer—the opportunity for people to let their music be heard. And a potential start on a lucrative career in the music business."

TV Show

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"On this special," he continues, "I want to show that the record industry is interested in the average guy, through the use of star names singing the entries. And I want to show the importance of the record industry. Using this format over the next five years, I want to help to bring the record industry and the TV industry much closer together. Let's have the stars talking to the participants as well as singing their material. Let's get the audience to know the writers as well as the singers. And let's give the recording star the same kind of rapport with a mass audience that a Gary Moore or an Arthur Godfrey had 15 years ago or that a Johnny Carson or a Merv Griffin has today."

The fact that the song is back as a song has been a major help, Cossette feels, with lyric and good melody being more important than ever.

But he sums up what he would really like to achieve with the special with a specific example. "The Partridge Family characters had a musical relationship with the mass TV audience," he says, "but for the most part, these were actors put into a musical role by television. I want to do just the opposite. I want to take record stars and make them television stars as well."

Sterling Execs

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This career begins in 1957 with a staff producer-director's post with the CBS Radio Network. From 1953 until 1956 he was the producer of the daytime "Tennessee Ernie Ford" show on NBC-TV.

From 1957-58 he returned to radio as a staff producer with CBS, but was back in TV with the "Ernie Kovacs Show" on ABC from 1959-1961. From 1961 until 1964 he produced the "Steve Allen Show" which was syndicated by Westinghouse from a small studio adjacent to the Hollywood Ranch Market.

Hoffman then left syndicated entertainment TV to go with Universal as director of tape development, a post he held for two years and then joined RKO General's KHJ-TV as executive producer.

While with KHJ-TV (channel 9) he developed the "Tempo" show which eventually won an Emmy. Leaving RKO General in 1969 he joined National General Corp. as vice president in charge of TV production, a post he held for two years. Then in 1971 he joined Filmways TV where he was executive producer for its special of the month series.

In that post one year, Hoffman left to form his own TV production company, People Production.

Hoffman joined the American Song Festival organization in 1973.

Tad Danz, the song festival's business affairs vice president, knows how to apply his MBA from Columbia to the field of preparing a new musical extravaganza.

He's in charge of preparing the processing system for ensuring that all song entries are protected, logged and listened to in a totally professional manner.

Tad Danz

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Most of the screening will be done in Los Angeles, but New York and Nashville will also have screening panels set up. Screening begins at entry deadline of June 3 and will be finished as close as possible to July 15 so work on orchestrations can begin.

A predetermined percentage of the best songs at each session will go on for further screening. It is only the song being judged, not the musical performance on the audition cassette.

Thus the American Song Festival has taken all possible steps to give the would-be songwriter the best breaks and utmost safeguards for becoming a big prizewinner.

Milt Hoffman

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Perhaps the most sensitive spot of the entire promotion was overcoming any ill will that may have been generated by the failure of the festival to come off last year after a great deal of publicity. Hoffman is the first one to admit that this was a problem, but in a methodical yet sincere way, he has apparently overcome what might have been a major disadvantage.

"We did have some problems because the festival didn't materialize last year," Hoffman says, "but most of these have been solved."

"All the people who had entered last year were contacted and offered the option of remaining in the festival or having their money refunded. To our pleasure, the majority decided to remain contestants."

"A few newspapers were a bit wary of taking ads after the failure last year, but once they found out that Sterling was a major part of the operation and that we had already posted the \$128,000 prize money in a bank, that problem was solved. We also had the advisory board list to show them, which consists of a number of industry leaders and we found quite a turnaround in attitude."

"There are other things that have helped, too," Hoffman adds. "For one thing, we are making it very clear that we are not a publishing organization and that each person who enters retains the rights to their song. For another, the kit that we send to the entrants is very comprehensive, including a songwriter's handbook written in layman's terms and describes copyright law, and how a publisher operates."

Hoffman is convinced the festival will work, and he feels the human interest aspect of it is as important as anything else. "Imagine having Helen Reddy or another superstar sing your song to a national TV audience," he says. "We're selling fun, credibility, money and the opportunity to enter the music business."

Top Artists

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The final night all performers will appear on a TV special. A special LP will also be taped of performances from this evening.

Mike Post, the festival's music director, will select the orchestra for the competition. He'll coordinate the arrangements with the guest artists and eventually produce whatever LP comes out of the competition. Post's credit's include a Grammy for "Classical Gas" by Mason Williams.