October 2016 marked the opening night of Bochum’s 950-seat concert hall, and a performance from the Bochumer Symphoniker conducted by Steven Sloane.

The Anneliese Brost Musikforum Bochum demonstrates that excellent acoustics can come at a moderate cost.

Founded in 1919, the Bochum Symphony Orchestra is in the top league of German orchestras, yet the ensemble had never had a home concert hall. Since its inception, the orchestra had performed on the stage of the local theater (the Schauspielhaus), in the Audimax lecture hall at the University of Bochum, and in the converted factories and warehouses of the Jahrhunderthalle in Bochum.

Pushing forward

After decades of failed attempts to identify an appropriate site and secure funding, the appointment of music director Steven Sloane in 1994, and the resulting increase in audience numbers, generated the impetus to push forward for a purpose-built hall. In spite of the fact that the city was officially bankrupt, the Federal State of North Rhein Westphalia and the European Union promised sufficient backing for the project as long as stringent criteria were met – facilities for the local music school had to be included, and the project had to have a maximum cost of €33.2m (US$36.3m), of which €14.3m (US$15.6m) would come from private donors.

An architectural competition in 2011 sought designs for a 900-seat concert hall and a 300-seat multipurpose performance venue on the land surrounding the deconsecrated St Mary’s church in the city center (which also dated from 1919). The winning design – from Bez + Kock of Stuttgart with acoustics from Müller BBM – went against the brief to place the multipurpose venue in the church and instead brought the church into the heart of the scheme as the foyer, flanked on both sides by the performance venues.

During the early discussions between the client, design team and client acoustician Kahle Acoustics, Sloane expressed a wish for a more intimate room, with the audience surrounding the musicians, rather than the strict, straight-lined shoebox that had been proposed in
and expanding cultural activities was considered to be an investment priority for the city and the state. Now named the Anneliese Brost Musikforum Bochum, the new performing arts center finally cost a total of €38m (US$41.6m) – a relatively small overspend for a public project of this kind, and exceptionally good value for the delivery of a new concert hall venue of such exceptional quality.

The key to achieving such value for money was the simple idea that good acoustics and beautiful buildings do not require expensive finishes and high-tech equipment, but are the result of careful design, detailing and construction. When this is achieved, the result is a concert hall that the orchestra and local audiences can be proud of, and one that is flexible enough to adapt in the coming years and decades. In a city of 365,000 inhabitants, the Musikforum Bochum received more than 20,000 individual donations and more than 37,000 visitors during the opening weekend – one tenth of the population!

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