

SEPTEMBER 22, 2016 8:00 AM

UC Davis music department enters new stage with Ann E. Pitzer Center

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Piano technicians Dan Dannenfelser, left, and Dale Erwin work on a rebuilt grand piano on the stage inside the 399-seat Ann E. Pitzer Center at UC Davis. **Randy Pench** rpench@sacbee.com

BY CHRIS MACIAS

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Take a stroll down Hutchinson Drive, on the eastern edge of UC Davis' leafy campus, and the scene looks like a tale of two time periods.

On the south side of the street is Temporary Building 9, a funky shack of a studio that was built in the 1960s and served as the artistic home of Wayne Thiebaud and Robert Arneson. And next door to it, in a space that previously housed a utilities facility, is a building that represents the UC Davis of the 21st century.

The Ann E. Pitzer Center, a new \$16.8 million recital hall, classroom and concert venue, is poised to become the modern heart of UC Davis' music department, which serves more than 1,000 students annually.

The 17,500-square-foot building is loaded with high-tech sound equipment and high attention to acoustic detail, similar in spirit to the Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts.

ADVERTISING

While the center mostly has hosted a cacophony of construction sounds over the past two years, its 399-capacity recital hall now will be filled with the sounds of music, including choral works, Indonesian pieces and even a classically inspired piano duo interpretation of Radiohead's "Paranoid Android." A string of shows start Friday, Sept. 23, as the inaugural performances there.

"For students, this (building) is a way to feel like their craft is being valued," said Phil Daley, the events manager for UC Davis' department of music. "For the community, it's very important to be a part of that. You have an acoustically rich environment and get to experience the music for the music's sake."

The building's benefactor, the late Ann E. Pitzer, was a UC Davis alum who earned a home economics degree in the 1950s. She remained a staunch supporter of the campus, previously serving on the UCD Foundation Board of Trustees, and donated \$5 million toward the building. Pitzer spent her career in the hospitality industry and also in the computer industry, where she was a software developer for Science Applications International Corporation.

The building's concert space will double as a classroom. Along with being a venue where students will hear lectures for Music 10 – a widely attended "introduction to musical literature" course – the recital hall will be used for classes in environmental toxicology, history and other academic disciplines.

But music will remain the center's prime focus. The recital hall essentially replaces Room 115 of the main music department building, a 126-capacity lecture room with drab '70s-style furnishings.

To hold larger student recitals, the music department previously would have to book the 200-capacity Vanderhoef Studio Theatre at the Mondavi Center, which operates as a separate entity from the music department. Now, the music department will be able to host many of its recitals and other public performances under one acoustically treated roof, and with plenty of space for musicians and audience alike.

"Room 115, we outgrew that about 30 years ago," said Laurie San Martin, a UC Davis music professor who specializes in theory and composition. "We now have more flexibility to hold larger classes. The experience is so much richer."

The Ann E. Pitzer Center is also geared as a place where music students can practice in peace. The building houses 11 rehearsal spaces, including teaching studios that are outfitted with baroque organs and a variety of percussion equipment. The rooms are fitted with high ceilings and acoustic padding to promote the proper resonance of sound. These rooms are definitely a step up from where some music students tend to practice, including the patio areas surrounding the music department and the nearby arboretum.

Once it is time to perform inside, or listen to other musicians, top-notch acoustics await. The concert space is outfitted with a draping system and other facets that can be controlled to dial in the amount of resonance around the room. The combination of polished cement floors, carpeting and wood walls around the room also help enhance the overall sound, which is sent through a quadrophonic sound system and 13 speakers around the venue.

“It’s like going back in time 20 years to when you had better hearing,” said San Martin. “It enhances both the experience of playing and listening.”

Some facets of the Ann E. Pitzer Center’s sound system are even more high-tech than what’s found at the Mondavi Center. The center’s music rooms, from the main stage to the practice studios, are connected to a digital audio network. For UC Davis sound engineer Stephen Bingen, making a recording from any of the rooms requires just a simple click of a computer mouse.

And it’s just about time to put all this technology to use. The music department’s events calendar is packed for the remainder of 2016, including the flamenco guitar trio Terceto Kali on Oct. 27, an afternoon of Zimbabwean music from Erica Azim and Fradreck Mujuru on Nov. 20, and a long-running free concert series every Thursday.

“It’s going to take years to really understand how much impact (the Ann E. Pitzer Center) will have on the community,” Daley said. “It’s a beautiful place.”

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ANN E. PITZER CENTER

The new recital hall and UC Davis concert facility will be commemorated with a series of events and performances.

Where: 144 Hutchison Drive, Davis

Highlights:

- Courtyard Jazz Session with UC Davis jazz combos, 3 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., Friday, Sept. 23, free
- Anderson & Roe Piano Duo, 7 p.m. Friday, Sept. 23, \$10 students and children, \$20 adults
- Screening of the experimental film “Koyaanisqatsi,” 2 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 25, free (tickets required to be reserved in advance)

Information: (530) 752-7896, arts.ucdavis.edu/pitzer