



THE INFLUENCE OF MUSIC CULTURE ON CONCERT HALL DESIGN

A comparative study of Het Concertgebouw and Het Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between evolving music culture and concert hall design in Amsterdam by comparing two iconic venues: Het Concertgebouw built in 1888 and Het Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ built in 2005. While both buildings serve as spaces for musical performance, their contrasting designs reflect the cultural, social, and technological values of their respective time periods. By focusing on four specific aspects of design, including historical context and location, typology, acoustics, and programming, this study aims to understand the connection between music culture and architectural expression.

Het Concertgebouw was built as a private initiative to elevate Amsterdam's classical music scene to the standards of European cultural capitals. Its symmetrical layout, formal hierarchy, and focus on acoustic excellence reflect nineteenth-century ideals of prestige and refinement. Despite limited scientific knowledge of acoustics at the time, the hall's design achieved world-class sound quality through imitation of other successful venues. Originally focused on symphonic classical music, the Concertgebouw gradually expanded its programming to include a broader range of genres, showing an ongoing adaptation to cultural change.

In contrast, the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ was conceived as an inclusive and multifunctional space that reflects diversity of contemporary music culture. Located on the IJ waterfront, its transparent design encourages public interaction and urban integration. Designed by the Danish architecture firm 3XN, the building features innovative acoustic technologies that allow the main hall to be adapted for different musical styles and settings. The Muziekgebouw supports a wide variety of performances and educational initiatives, embracing global influences and technological experimentation.

The study reveals that while both buildings place music at their core, their designs mirror the different values of their time. The Concertgebouw represents formality, tradition, and hierarchy, while the Muziekgebouw embodies flexibility, informality, and inclusivity. Both venues made use of the best available acoustic knowledge of their respective periods and have played key roles in shaping Amsterdam's musical identity.

The thesis concludes that concert halls are more than acoustic shells: they are cultural statements that reflect society's relationship with music. As music culture continues to change, driven by globalisation, digital technology, and shifting audience behaviours, architects must anticipate future needs by designing spaces that are flexible, inclusive, and sustainable.

Key words:

Music culture - Concert hall design - Het Concertgebouw - Het Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ

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Introduction

Concert halls are more than just venues for music. They often are reflections of the cultural, social and artistic values of their time and bring cultural prestige to cities throughout the world (Cressman, 2016). However, as these values evolve over time they inevitably leave an impact on the design of concert halls. Changes in musical tastes, performance practices, and audience expectations challenge architects and designers to adapt and innovate. This thesis will focus on how changes in music culture influenced the design of two well-known concert halls in Amsterdam: Het Concertgebouw, completed in 1888, that embodies the traditional (for our time) design of a concert hall and is world-famous for its exceptional acoustics, while Het Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, opened in 2005, used a more modern and contemporary approach, with its design focusing on innovation, flexibility and diversity. By comparing the two concert halls constructed in two different periods of time this research aims to understand how changes in music culture influenced the design to understand the relationship between values in music culture and the buildings that embody it. In doing so, we might be able to get valuable insights to inform future design of concert halls to better align with the evolving values in music and society.

The research question is formulated as the following:

How did changes in music culture in the Netherlands, from the 19th century to the 21st century, influenced the design of Het Muziekgebouw aan t' IJ in comparison to Het Concertgebouw?

Because 'design' is a broad term this research focuses on 4 specific aspects of the design: historical context and location, typology, acoustics and programming. Therefore the sub questions will be the following:

- How did changes in music culture in the Netherlands, from the 19th century to the 21st century, influence the historical context and location of Het Muziekgebouw aan t' IJ in comparison to Het Concertgebouw?
- How did changes in music culture in the Netherlands, from the 19th century to the 21st century, influence the typology of Het Muziekgebouw aan t' IJ in comparison to Het Concertgebouw?
- How did changes in music culture in the Netherlands, from the 19th century to the 21st century, influence the acoustic design of Het Muziekgebouw aan t' IJ in comparison to Het Concertgebouw?
- How did changes in music culture in the Netherlands, from the 19th century to the 21st century, influence programming of Het Muziekgebouw aan t' IJ in comparison to Het Concertgebouw?

There has already been a considerable amount of research focusing on the design of concert halls. For example, van Royen (1988/1989) conducted a study on Het Concertgebouw, while Vercammen (2019) analyzed the acoustics of its main hall. These studies are mostly case studies of individual concert halls, examining different aspects of their design. However, few studies explicitly compare multiple concert halls. Bradley (1991), for instance, compared three classical concert halls, focusing primarily on acoustics but without considering the broader cultural, social, or historical context. By making a comparative analysis and taking into account social, political, and economic changes in music culture over two centuries, this study aims to bridge this gap. It examines how cultural shifts over time have influenced design choices for concert halls, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between music culture and design.

In order to answer the research questions this study makes use of a comparative case study approach. The study draws upon different sources and makes a combination of different research methods. First of all, archival research will focus on gathering original drawings and documentation from Het Concertgebouw and Het Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ. These materials will be primarily gathered from online archives like, Stadsarchief Amsterdam. Second off all, the study will look at firm documentation consulting the architecture firms website of 3xN and the official website of Het Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ for original project drawings and design documentation. These research methods mentioned above mainly focus on collecting primary sources. Besides the use of primary sources this research will also draw upon the use of secondary sources. A literature study will be done in the form of books, articles or publications mainly coming from TU Delft library. Important literature that's not available there will be collected from other libraries or simply online from academic databases like Worldcat, Google Scholar, Scopus or ResearchGate. Finally, I will visit Het Concertgebouw and Het Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ to observe, make notes and possibly ask questions. These observation, can, when necessary, be used to reflect on the literature.

The structure of this thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 provides a general introduction to music culture in the Netherlands, the definition of music culture for this thesis and its evolution from the 19th to the 21st century. The focus will be on the major shifts and their connection to concert hall design. Chapters 2 and 3 present the case studies of Het Concertgebouw and Het Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ. First, both case studies will be introduced, with their historical context and location. Then, we will examine the other three different aspects: typology, acoustics, and programming. Chapter 4 will be dedicated to comparing the two concert halls in relation to major shifts in music culture. Finally, the key findings will be discussed in the conclusion, along with the implications this research may have for future studies.

01

Music culture in the Netherlands.

Evolution from the 19th to the 21st century.

Music culture is the way people create, experience, and think about music in a society. It's not mainly about the music itself, but about the traditions, meanings, social rules and technical innovations that shape it. According to Herndon and McLeod (1982) music defined as a cultural mechanism is perceived through cultural canalization, a process in which general needs become specific preferences, and is mostly defined by groups who participate in particular genres. This means that while music may be universal, every group or society has its own way of shaping and understanding music.

In this thesis we will focus on music culture surrounding classical music. Just like all music, classical music is supported by a specific media that promotes and shapes this genre of music. Concert halls serve as the primary medium for classical music and in this way the building represents the idea of what classical music means and how one should listen to it (Cressman, 2016).

As we spoke about how music culture varies across groups and societies, it is clear to say that its tradition, social rules and meaning also varies for every city or region. Amsterdam is one of those cities that has a rich classical music history, which is reflected in its institutions, composers and practices. The city is home to a world-renown orchestra, the Royal Concertgebouw orchestra and has invested in a lot of different concert halls or spaces over time, such as the Parkzaal, Concertgebouw, Felix Meritis, Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ.

But Amsterdam's classical music culture has not always been as we experience it today. For most of the 19th century, Amsterdam was primarily known as a second-rate music city, and despite the efforts of critics to address its shortcomings, it was difficult to get Amsterdammers to take classical music seriously (Cressman, 2016). Orchestras were undisciplined, and the profession of an orchestral musician was often regarded in a peculiar manner. This was further emphasized after Johannes Brahms visited the Parkzaal, where he remarked that the orchestral musicians were, in general, "liebe Leuten, aber schlechte Musikanten" (Giskes, 1988).

In an article from the newspaper *De Amsterdammer* in 1881, author Hayward pointed out that one should look beyond the behavior of the audience and the quality of musicianship and instead consider the venues that mediate this classical music culture. From his perspective, all shortcomings in Amsterdam's musical culture could be solved by constructing a serious temple for classical music. The reason for this article was the demolition of the Parkzaal and

the realization that, compared to Berlin, Vienna, and Paris, Amsterdam would no longer have a proper concert hall within a few months. However, the demolition of the Parkzaal was also seen as something positive, as despite being the heart of Amsterdam's classical music culture, it also had its shortcomings. With his article, Hayward wanted to convey to his readers that the Parkzaal and Felix Meritis were not merely neutral conduits for the performance and reception of music, but that, by virtue of their material attributes, they mediated a distinct musical experience. By purposely building a concert hall with a higher ideal, he aspired to the disciplined orchestras and audiences that could be found in Europe's musical capitals.

After the completion of the Concertgebouw, other major shifts influenced the classical music culture of Amsterdam. Besides the concert hall as a medium for attentive listening, other forms of media, such as radio, LPs, and later television, invented in the 20th century, led to a greater reach and thus a larger audience for classical music. These technological innovations had a tremendous impact on the way composers and audiences engage with music today (Beirens, n.d.).

Additionally, more experimentation with different musical forms took place. Whereas classical music initially consisted solely of Western classical traditions, by the late 20th century, it began to incorporate influences from other geographical and cultural backgrounds, causing boundaries to blur. Digitalisation and globalisation further intensified this process, leading to the fusion of musical traditions and the emergence of influences from across the world (Beirens, n.d.).

We can conclude that classical music culture has undergone an extraordinary transformation from the 19th to the 21st century. Key factors that have influenced this development include technological advancements and changing listening cultures. Therefore, we can imply that music culture is not a static entity but a continuously evolving process, shaped by social, technological, and political factors. In the following chapters, this evolving process will be examined in relation to its impact on the design and development of two prominent concert halls in Amsterdam: The Concertgebouw and the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ.



Figure 1. *The interior of the Parkzaal filled with people.* Source: Stadsarchief Amsterdam

02

Case study of Het Concertgebouw.

Historical context and location

Het Concertgebouw was constructed in 1888 and designed by leading architect Adolf Leonard van Gendt. But before its design and construction it took a lot of effort for this concert hall to be realized. It all started in the autumn of 1881, when one of the predecessors of the Concertgebouw was demolished. This was the popular Parkzaal, located near the Park at the Plantage Dok- and Parklaan. It was also home to the company Het Park, which would later lay the foundation for the new N.V. of the Concertgebouw. The Parkzaal was beloved by many, as it had welcomed composers from all over Europe for many years (Giskes, 1988). The concerts here were not expected to be of the same level as those in the Concertgebouw today. However, the absence of a dedicated concert hall was soon deeply felt. While there were a few smaller venues, such as the well-known yet modestly sized oval hall of Felix Meritis, access was restricted to members and their guests. The membership fee was so high that many music lovers could only dream of joining this society (Cressman, 2016).

A group of private investors came together in 1882 and established a committee called the 'Naamlooze Vennootschap het Concertgebouw' (N.V. het Concertgebouw). The purpose of the N.V. was to establish and operate a concert hall for Amsterdam. Now that the N.V. was a reality and prominent architects such as P.J.H. Cuypers, who was then the city architect of Amsterdam, were involved, it seemed only a matter of time. Cuypers, whose Rijksmuseum, Central Station, and Vondelkerk were already under construction in 1881, had also made sketches for a concert hall with a garden and a bandstand (Giskes, 1988). The garden was considered an important source of income, and therefore, a location with a venue but without a garden was deemed unviable from the outset.

A long and challenging search for the ideal location for the concert hall followed. Ultimately, it was Cuypers who found a plot of land where a concert hall could be built at a reasonable price. Notably, this land was just outside the city limits of Amsterdam and belonged to what was then known as Nieuwer-Amstel (Cressman, 2016). Although it was surrounded by meadows and difficult to reach from Amsterdam, its location was no more than 100 metres from the planned site for the construction of the Rijksmuseum. The construction of these two buildings marked the beginning of a new era for Amsterdam.

Now that a location had been found, an architect still needed to be chosen. Designing a new concert hall was a prestigious task that attracted many architects. However, the committee decided to hold a closed competition among five well-known Amsterdam architects: A. L. van Gendt, G. B. Salm, Th. G. Schill, C. Muysken, and Th. Sanders. In the end, Van Gendt won with his design, called 'Apollo' (Lansink, 1988).

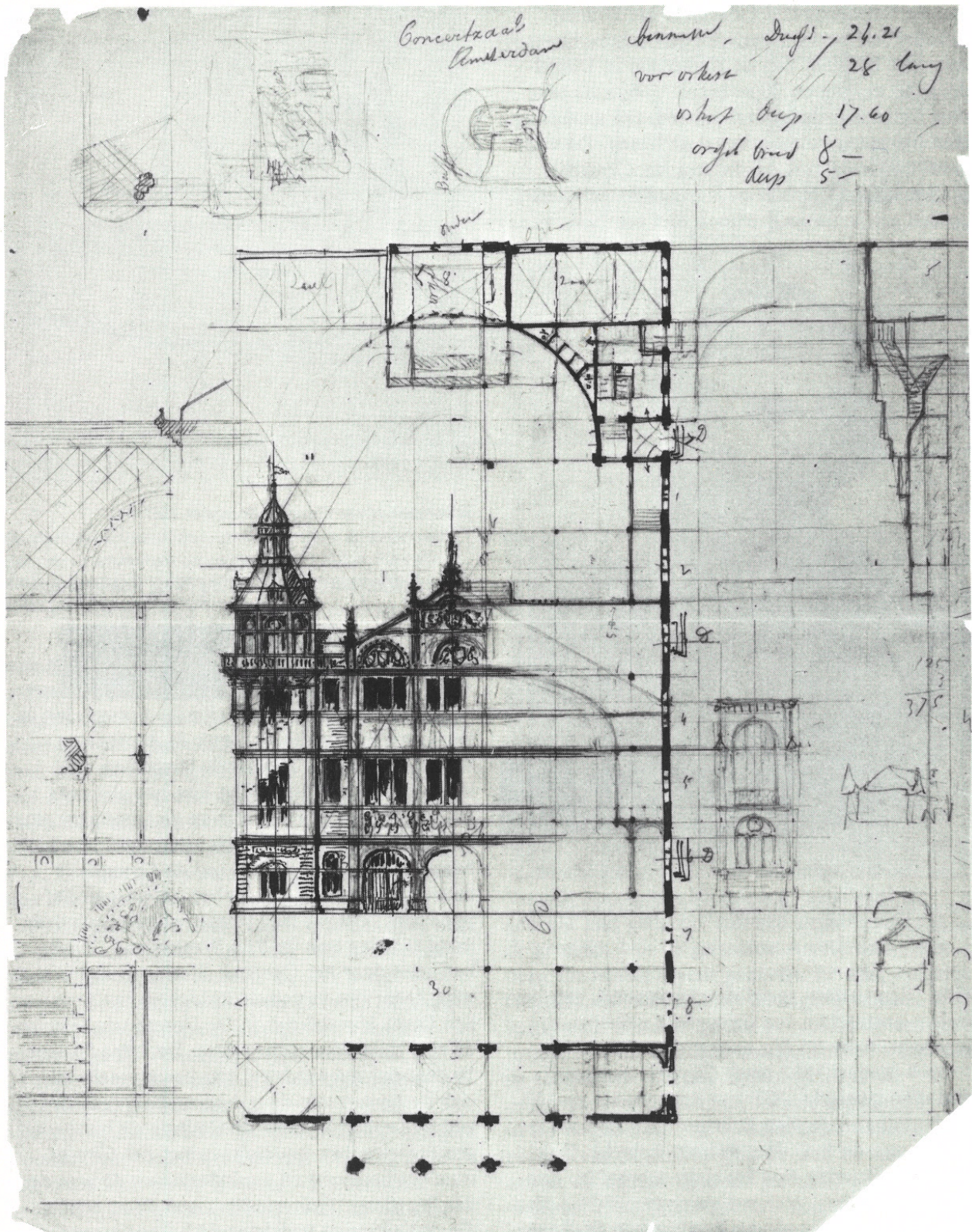


Figure 2. Design sketch for a 'Concert Hall Amsterdam' from late 1881 by P.J.H. Cuypers. Source: Lansink (1988)

Typology

The Apollo design had an almost symmetrically arranged floor plan, making it an easy-to-navigate building following my own visit on 27th of February (see Appendix). The only significant deviation was a separate entrance and access for the small hall. The main hall, designed for 2,000 people and centrally located on the ground floor and is entirely surrounded by corridors. This ensures optimal functional circulation within the building. Behind the main hall is the cloakroom, followed by the coffee room, which is partially extended into the garden. Above this coffee room, on the first floor, is the oval-shaped small hall, inspired by the hall of Felix Meritis (Lansink, 1988). Van Gendt positioned it behind the main hall, drawing inspiration from the Gewandhaus in Leipzig. The vestibules and cloakrooms are located along the corridors, while the stairwells are situated in the corners of the building, leading to the first floor. On this level, the corridors on both long sides are interrupted by choir halls accommodating 250 people.

The building was designed in a Neo-Renaissance style with international influences. The detailing and ornamentation resemble a French style, particularly in the vaulted, dome-like roofs of the central risalit, the staircase towers at the front, and the numerous round window openings (oeils-de-boeuf). With various distinctive elements and multiple roof shapes, along with decorative features like pilasters and statues, 'Apollo' tends to have a festive yet somewhat overwhelming appearance. On the roof of the main hall stands a lyre, the instrument of Apollo, symbolising music (Lansink, 1988/1989).

At the time of designing the Concertgebouw, plans for the Tonhalle in Düsseldorf and the Gewandhaus in Leipzig were circulating among the participants. The jury assessed the dimensions of the various large halls against these examples, also taking into account the Musikvereinsaal in Vienna. Apollo performed well in terms of layout and usability, featuring well-placed entrances, spacious vestibules, and easily accessible staircases. However for example, the jury found Van Gendt's proposed façade to be lacking in taste. Ultimately, the Apollo and G-clef (a design by G. B. Salm) plans were considered the best in terms of spatial layout and organisation but required modifications and simplifications. Some jury members argued that these designs should have been excluded altogether, as they paid the least attention to the available building footprint. After some debate between participants and the jury, it was ultimately decided to entrust Van Gendt with the construction of the Concertgebouw, as he had taken the financial constraints of the Commission the most into account (Lansink, 1988).

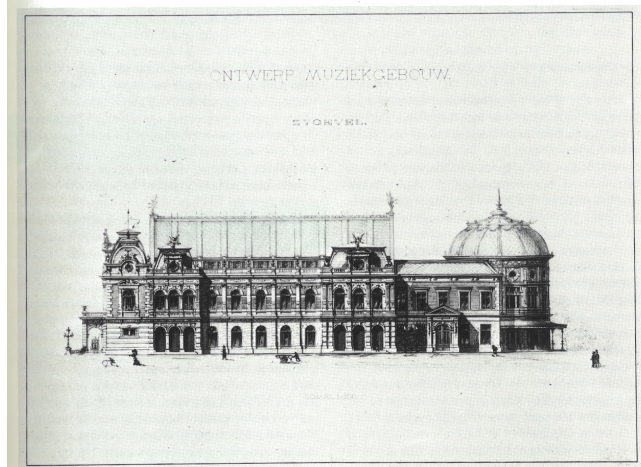
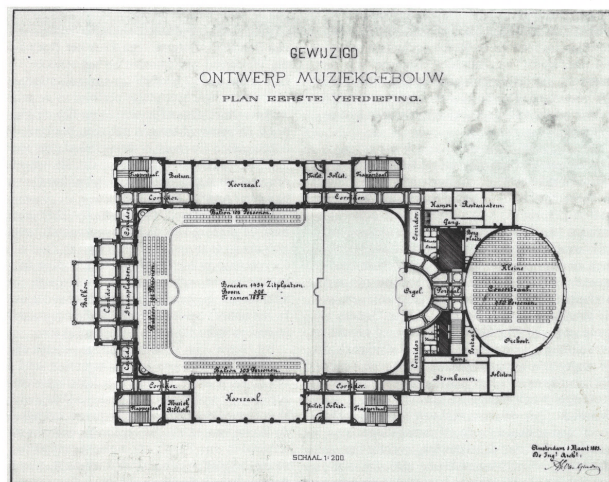
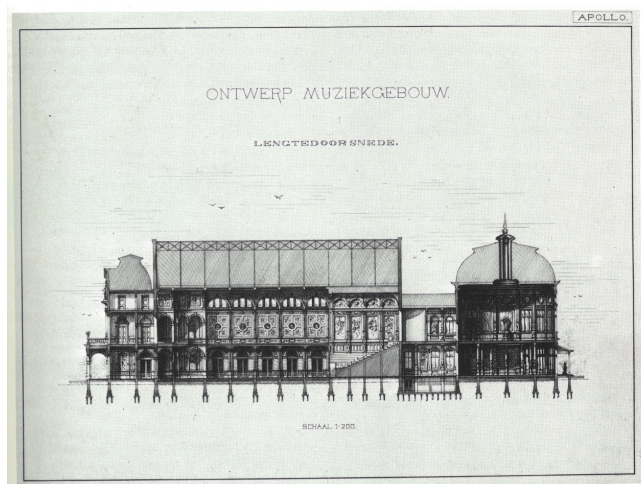
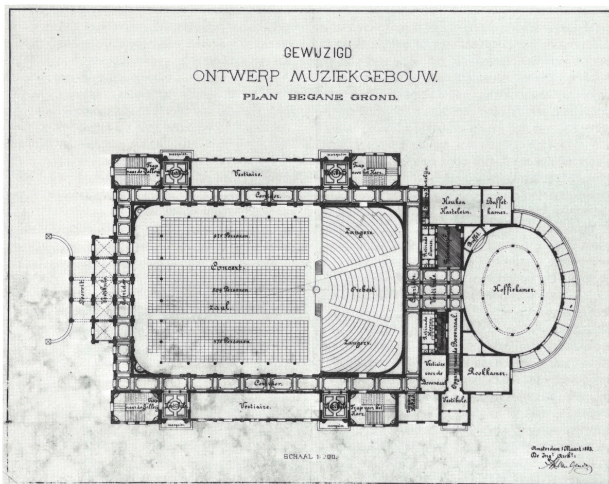


Figure 3. Revised floor plans of the ground floor and first floor of the Apollo design by Van Gendt. Source: Lansink (1988).

Figure 4. Longitudinal section and side elevation of the first submission of the Apollo design by van Gendt. Source: Lansink (1988).



Figure 5. The lyre on the roof of the main hall undergoing maintenance in 1957. Source: Lansink (1989).



Figure 6. Name plate of a renowned composer and stucco ornaments. Source: Lansink (1989)

Acoustics

Despite being built in 1888, the Concertgebouw is still considered one of the top three concert halls in the world today, renowned for its exceptional acoustics (Cressman, 2016). In 1950, Wilhelm Furtwängler, the German conductor and composer, stated that the Vienna Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam were the finest orchestras in the world. Coincidentally, the Großer Musikvereinssaal in Vienna, Symphony Hall in Boston, and the Grote Zaal of the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam were regarded as the best concert halls globally (van Royen, 1989).

At the time of its construction, acoustical science was still in its early stages, making it an uncertain field. It was only in the early 20th century that methods were developed to record, measure, and reproduce sound. As a result, imitation was the safest approach for architect Van Gendt. When the closed design competition was announced, several concert halls in the Netherlands and abroad were known for their excellent acoustics, such as Felix Meritis and the Odéon in Amsterdam, as well as the Gewandhaus in Leipzig. However, since the competition required a hall with a capacity of over 2000 seats, attention quickly turned to larger halls like the Neue Gewandhaus in Leipzig (1700 seats), the Musikvereinsaal in Vienna (1,680 seats), and the Kaisersaal in the Tonhalle in Düsseldorf, which, with its capacity of 2,820 seats, came closer to meeting Amsterdam's requirements.

Initially, Van Thooft, one of the jury members, advised against a rectangular hall for over 2,000 people, as such a space would be too long for optimal sound distribution, and experimenting with balconies was considered too risky. A round or oval hall was therefore recommended, and this was included in the initial competition guidelines. However, in a later phase, participants were given more freedom in their designs. Van Gendt ultimately won the competition, but surprisingly not because of the jury expecting the best acoustic quality (van Royen, 1989). His design was too square, and the ceiling also seemed problematic. His plan was mainly chosen because it was the only submission that closely resembled the Neue Gewandhaus, particularly in its layout, with the Small Hall placed directly behind the Main Hall.

The best acoustic design came from other contestant Th. Sanders, with dimensions of 43 x 30 meters. In collaboration with Van Gendt, his design was later modified to more closely resemble the Neue Gewandhaus in Leipzig. The final dimensions of the Grote Zaal were 44 x 27.80 x 17.50 meters, making it wider in proportion to its length than the halls in Düsseldorf, Vienna, and Leipzig.

Good acoustics, therefore, did not rely on a specific trick, dimension, rounded corners, or corridors surrounding the hall. This is evident from the significant differences between the renowned halls in Vienna, Leipzig, and Amsterdam. Moreover, the brilliance of the acoustics cannot be credited solely to Van Gendt. Cuypers and Gosschalk played a crucial role in refining the final design, contributing valuable elements such as narrowing the Grote Zaal and adding relief to the ceiling (van Royen, 1989). Since then, science and technology have advanced significantly, making it possible to design concert halls in all possible shapes and materials using sophisticated techniques and instruments. Wallace Clement Sabine was the first to develop a method for calculating reverberation time at the end of the 19th century, after the construction of the Concertgebouw. The reverberation time in the Concertgebouw is 2.2 seconds when the hall is full and 2.8 seconds when empty (van Royen, 1989).

Despite the worldwide fame of the main hall's acoustics, it is not suitable for all types of music, and also not an ideal space for conferences or meetings. However, preserving this unique

acoustic quality was, of course, essential. Over the years, multiple renovations have taken place, both in the building itself and in the main hall. These have always been carried out with great care to maintain the exceptional acoustics. Despite these minimal changes, it has been stated that the impact on the reverberation time has been negligible. Only a very slight increase in reverberation time at high frequencies was expected due to the cleaning and dusting of the hall (Vercammen et al., 2019).

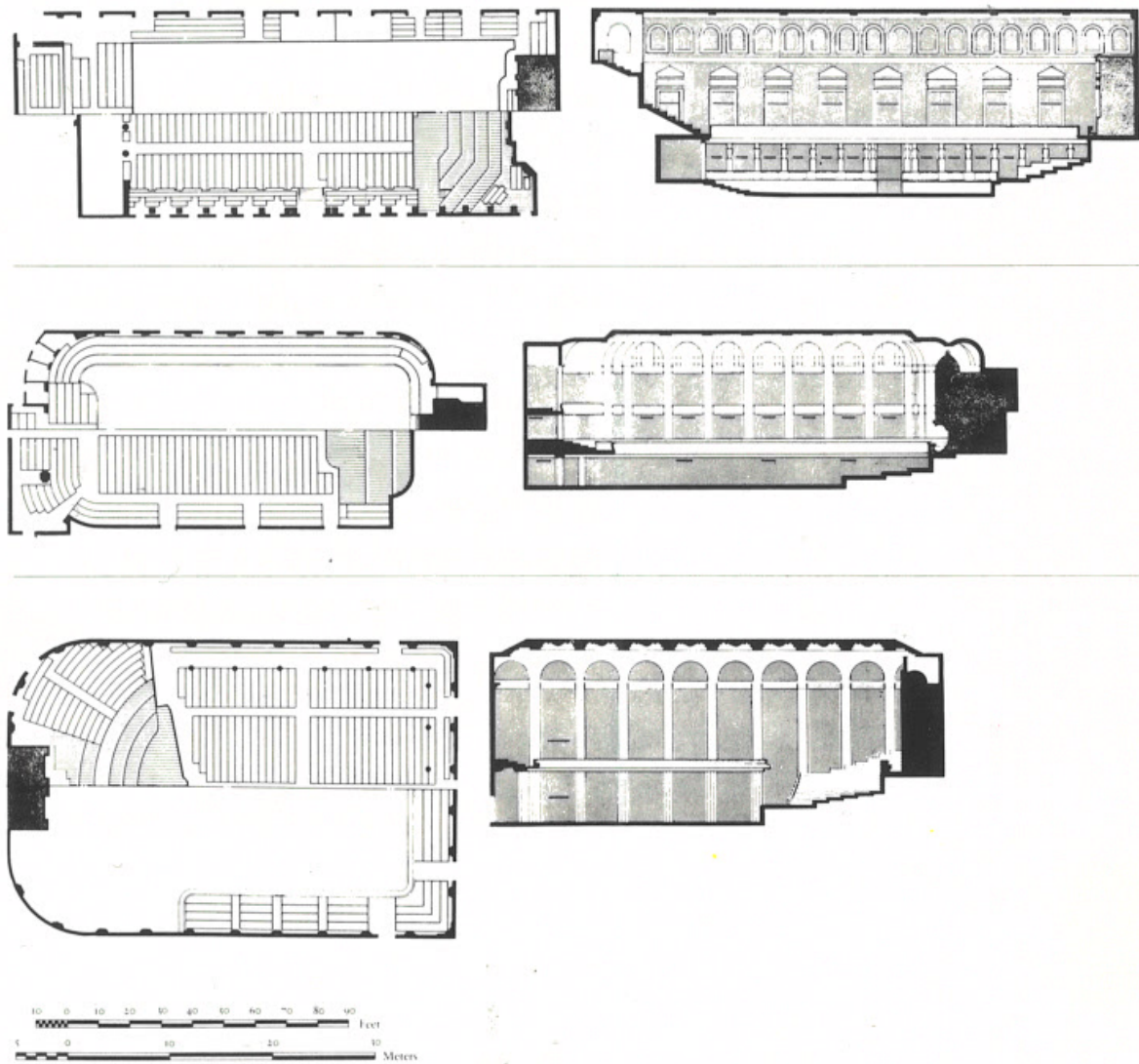


Figure 7. From top to bottom: floor plans and longitudinal sections of the Grosser Musikvereinssaal, the main hall in the Neue Gewandhaus, and the main hall in the Concertgebouw, all at the same scale. Source: Lansink (1989).

Programming

After the demolition of the Parkzaal, the absence of a proper concert hall with a significant orchestra was strongly felt. There was no immediate alternative, despite Amsterdam having numerous theatres, playhouses, and other venues where smaller orchestras regularly performed. The only remaining option for large symphonic performances with choir and orchestra was the Paleis voor Volksvlijt, but its acoustics were not that great (Lansink, 1988). A Concertgebouw was needed, one that would serve as a worthy asset for elevating orchestras, audiences, and repertoires to the level of late nineteenth-century European musical capitals like Leipzig and Vienna (Cressman, 2016).

The Concertgebouw was intended to be a leading venue for classical music, with a focus on large symphonic works. Today, however, the range of genres performed has expanded significantly, including jazz, pop, and film music in the main hall. Yet, in the 19th century, the average Amsterdammer's musical culture was not centred around grand symphonic works of classical music. Amsterdammers were known for having few expectations of concerts, considering them primarily social events as such, talking, eating, drinking, and smoking with an orchestra playing in the background (Cressman, 2016).

Following the construction of the Concertgebouw, a debate arose over how the new venue should be used. On one side were those who believed concerts should remain informal, while on the other were those who argued that concerts should be of high quality and respectable, given the significant cost of the building, should it not serve a higher purpose than mere socialising? Ultimately, the Concertgebouw's management adhered to the latter view. However, based on my own observations, I would argue that traces of the informal concert culture of the 19th century can still be seen today.

The Concertgebouw has a fairly fixed, traditional hall layout, primarily designed for classical music, with some possibilities for alternative stage configurations. It was purposefully built for listening to classical music, placing a strong emphasis on acoustics and experience (Cressman, 2016). However, the institution could not rely solely on classical music, as only around seventy concerts were held per year. For this reason, the management had little objection to a slightly more multifunctional building, unlike the directors of the Gewandhaus in Leipzig.

"The doors were open to all who brought ideal joy." This perspective added an extra dimension to the Concertgebouw's role in society.

Over the years, it has hosted a wide variety of activities within its walls, not only all kinds of music but also exhibitions, conferences, meetings, demonstrations, church services, puppet shows, sports events, theatre, opera, musicals, ballet, cabaret, fashion shows, courses, exams, dinners, balls, celebrations, and even funeral ceremonies. However, as we know, "form follows function," and this diverse use eventually resulted into a necessity of additional facilities. After 1945, it was therefore decided to modernise the building, leading to renovations that were largely cosmetic and influenced by contemporary trends (van Royen, 1988).

Key findings

Het Concertgebouw, designed by A.L. van Gendt and completed in 1888, was built in response to the demolition of the Parkzaal, a significant but informal concert venue in Amsterdam. A committee of private investors formed the Naamlooze Vennootschap het Concertgebouw (N.V. het Concertgebouw) to develop a new hall that would elevate Amsterdam's musical culture to the standards of European capitals like Leipzig and Vienna. After a closed architectural competition, Van Gendt's Apollo design was selected, despite requiring modifications and simplifications.

The Concertgebouw was designed with a near-symmetrical floor plan, optimising navigation and circulation. The main hall, centrally located and surrounded by corridors, accommodates 2,000 spectators, with a small oval hall above the coffee room for more intimate performances. Inspired by the Gewandhaus in Leipzig, Van Gendt integrated various international stylistic influences, particularly French ornamentation, creating a richly decorated but somewhat eclectic Neo-Renaissance façade.

The jury selection was based more on layout efficiency than acoustical expectations, with Van Gendt's proposal resembling the Neue Gewandhaus in its spatial organisation. Despite criticism of his façade design, his plan was favoured for its financial feasibility.

Despite limited scientific understanding of acoustics at the time, the Concertgebouw became one of the most renowned concert halls in the world, comparable to Vienna's Musikverein and Boston's Symphony Hall. Van Gendt initially faced doubts about his rectangular design, as round or oval halls were preferred for better sound distribution. His final layout, adjusted in collaboration with Th. Sanders and other architects, resulted in a main hall with dimensions that contributed to its celebrated acoustic quality.

The reverberation time, calculated only after construction, is 2.2 seconds when full and 2.8 seconds when empty, ideal for classical music. While the hall's acoustics remain unsuitable for all genres and non-musical events like conferences, preservation efforts have ensured minimal alterations over the years. Even cleaning and dusting have had a negligible impact on reverberation time.

Originally conceived for classical music, the Concertgebouw expanded its programming beyond symphonic works over time. In the 19th century, Amsterdam audiences viewed concerts as social occasions, with informal behaviour such as talking, eating, and drinking during performances. A debate emerged over whether the new venue should maintain this casual approach or uphold a more formal, high-quality concert experience. The management ultimately pursued the latter, yet traces of Amsterdam's informal concert culture remain evident today.

To ensure financial sustainability, the Concertgebouw embraced a more multifunctional role than venues like the Gewandhaus in Leipzig. Over the years, it has hosted an array of events, including jazz, pop, and film music, as well as exhibitions, theatre, ballet, conferences, and even funeral ceremonies. This increasing versatility necessitated renovations, particularly after 1945, focusing on modernisation while preserving the building's primary function as a world-class concert hall.

03

Case study of Het Het Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ.

Historical context and location

The Muziekgebouw officially opened in the summer of 2005. Designed by the Danish architecture firm 3XN, it was built alongside the adjacent Bimhuis. As a cultural pioneer, the building holds a key position on the IJ waterfront. The development of these waterfront areas was ultimately made possible through perseverance, great insight, and at times, a bit of luck (Ibelings, 2007).

The realisation of this building is owed to the convergence of two histories: on the one hand, the development of the IJ waterfront, and on the other, the search for a new home for De IJsbreker and, alongside it, the Bimhuis (Ibelings, 2007). This search for De IJsbreker was led by Amsterdam's cultural pioneer Jan Wolff. The IJsbreker was a café that had gained a prominent place in Amsterdam's political and artistic life during the 20th century. From 1979 onwards, the building was rented by Jan Wolff and Maureen Kramer, who transformed it into a concert venue. It was here, largely thanks to Jan Wolff, that the seed for the idea of the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ was planted. The café became a great success after the takeover, with the number of concerts growing from five in 1980 to an annual average of three hundred. However, this enormous growth also had its downsides, and due to the great public interest, the hall soon became too small, with no technical possibilities to adapt to the increasing demand. Something new was needed (Mak, 2015).

Several locations were considered, ranging from a former swimming pool on the Heiligeweg to a newly designed building by Herman Hertzberger. The site of the Westergasfabriek was also thoroughly examined and remained a serious candidate for quite some time. Eventually, attention turned to the IJ waterfront (Ibelings, 2007).

In 1995, the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ was mentioned for the first time in the policy document *Ankers in het IJ*, which outlined the development plans for the IJ waterfront. The long southern IJ bank was to be divided into zones, each assigned its own designer and project manager, guided by a development strategy aimed at gradually reclaiming the IJ. The tip of the Oostelijke Handelskade emerged as a potential location for a cultural cluster of national significance with an international outlook (Kloos, 2015). The Muziekgebouw, together with other major public buildings such as the Science Centre NEMO, the Public Library, and the Conservatory, was intended to serve as a key attraction supporting everyday urban life in the area (Kompier, 2012).

With the eventual realisation of the Muziekgebouw, the building became a new link in Amsterdam's musical and urban development. It stands as a rare example of successful urban

planning (Giannotti, 2021). And beyond music, something equally important: it has become an inviting place for both locals and visitors to enjoy the sun and take in the views over the water.

Typology

The Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ is positioned as a landmark at the tip of the Eastern Docklands Pier and is seen as a catalyst for development along the IJ riverbanks. It was designed to attract public life and create a constant flow in and around the building, independent of its musical programme. The building consists of a base formed by staircases, with two “music boxes” on top: the Bimhuis for jazz and experimental music, and the larger IJsbreker for contemporary classical music. All elements are unified under a large, high-ceilinged roof. As a result, the Muziekgebouw has become a space for everyone, integrating various functions within this urban park (3xN, 2005).

The main hall is positioned slightly off-centre on the ground floor and is surrounded by circulation space, including a large public foyer along the waterfront that houses a restaurant offering stunning views over the water and the city of Amsterdam. The spatial organisation of the building emphasises transparency and openness. This is largely achieved through the large glass façades, which allow passers-by to catch a glimpse of the activities taking place inside. Wide staircases on the sides connect the building to the pier and the water, forming the main access route to the interior. At the rear of the building are the more private areas, such as rehearsal rooms for artists or orchestras and the loading docks.

Before starting the design process, the Nielsens (3xN) attended several concerts to understand its operations, visitor flow, and logistics. Additionally, the Bimhuis consulted its staff about the layout of the hall, sightlines, and the balance between informal and formal elements. When asked what could be improved or changed, the response was often: “It’s already good as it is.” Instead, they suggested focusing on better facilities, comfort, improved acoustics, a recording studio, and a restaurant. Eventually the Bimhuis requested for their hall that the design of the old Schans be replicated, which was ultimately done. The only major change was the large window behind the stage, offering a view on the city (Ibelings, 2007).

The architectural approach to the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ reflects a modernist and minimalist vision by the Danish architecture firm 3xN. Jan Wolff noted: “The building had to be functional, and not aggressively modern or fashionable” (Ibelings, 2007). The primary materials used are concrete, steel, glass, and wood. Much of the concrete and steel structure remains exposed, highlighting the building’s rawness while still conveying aesthetic quality. The design relies on the simplicity and elegance of the details, the natural light entering through the roof and façades, and the roughness and expressiveness of the materials to create a warm atmosphere (Giannotti, 2021).

In this way, the Muziekgebouw sets itself apart from the traditional concert hall design, embracing a more inclusive and adaptive approach. It aligns itself with other modern concert halls that, alongside classical music, focus on innovation such as La Cité de la Musique in Paris. This new typology often emphasises not only technical innovation in acoustics but also in architectural expression (Ibelings, 2007).

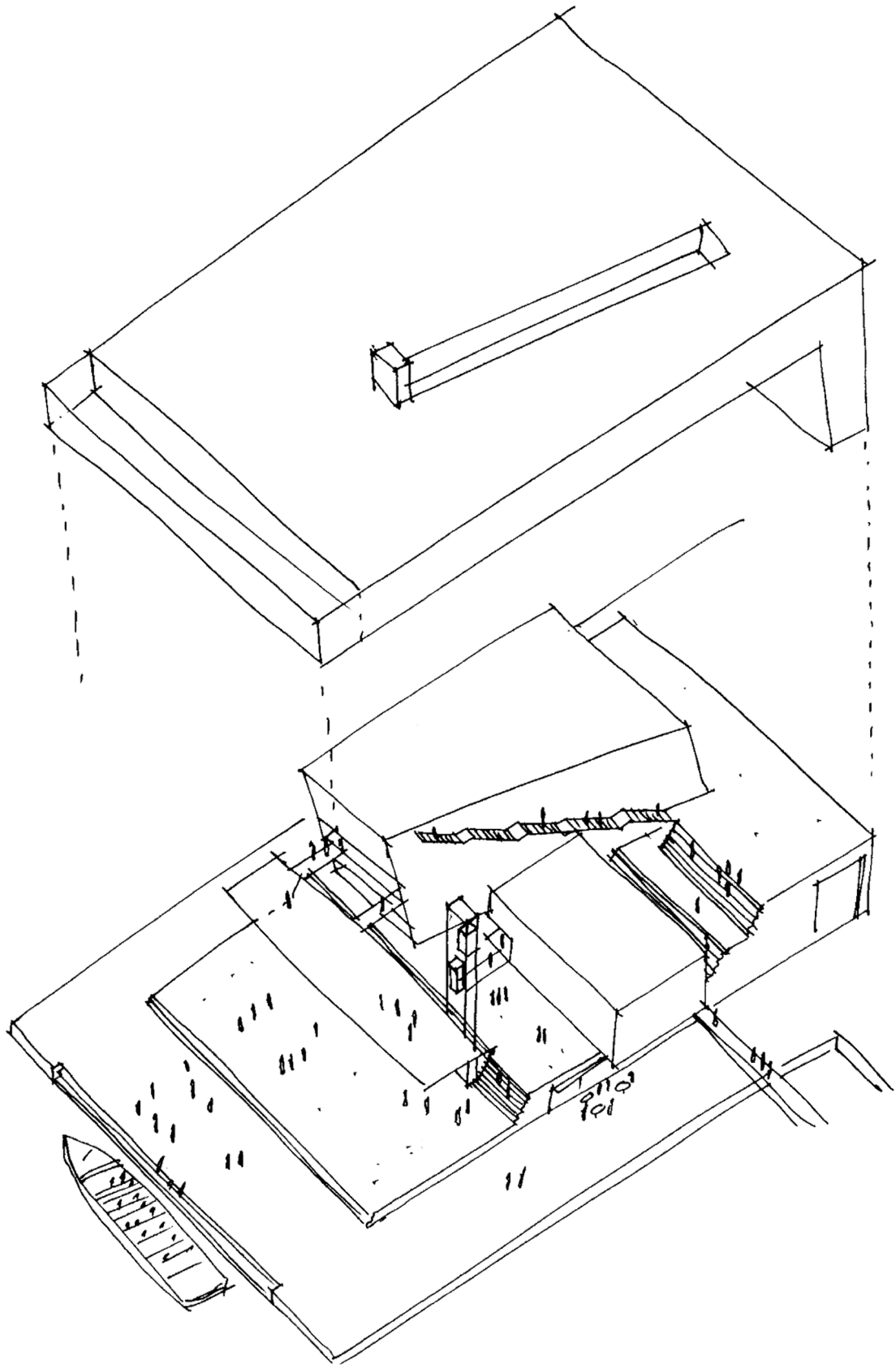


Figure 8. *Sketch of volumes of the Muziekgebouw within it's context.* Source: 3XN (2005).

Acoustics

Acoustics were of great importance to Jan Wolff. For this reason, the acoustic consultancy firm Peutz was hired, as they understood the kind of acoustics required for a hall dedicated to twentieth-century music. They were consulted during many phases of the design process, even when it came to selecting the types of wood to be used in the hall (Ibelings, 2007).

In terms of acoustics, however, the location posed a major challenge for the Muziekgebouw. The building is situated between a major traffic junction, the cruise terminal, and the train tracks. For this reason, the noise from outside had to be practically inaudible within the building. The acoustic quality of the main hall had to be so well isolated and refined that it could even function as a recording studio. To achieve this, a box-in-box structure was designed for the main hall. The outer box is made of concrete, a mass that dampens airborne noise. To keep out contact noise as well, a completely decoupled inner box was placed inside the outer shell. This decoupling extends all the way down to the foundation. As a result, the outer box has a larger volume than the inner one, which makes the concert hall appear smaller from the inside than from the outside (Krijgsman, 2015).

The hall differs from the hall of the Concertgebouw, where the sound blends more. Instead, the acoustics here are much clearer, ensuring that every detail can be heard. The Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ incorporates numerous modern technologies to make the main hall as flexible as possible in terms of acoustics and programming (Luykx et al., 2023). The walls and chairs are all flexible and adjustable, but the most innovative feature is the ability to modify both the floor and ceiling, allowing the hall's layout to be adapted as needed. This flexibility enables adjustments in reverberation time, ranging from 1 to 2.5 seconds. As a result, the hall is truly multifunctional, capable of transforming from an intimate music chamber to a space suited for large-scale performances (3xN, 2005). For instance, a reverberation time of three seconds is ideal for a choir, but if a drier sound is needed, that is also possible. At 1.5 seconds, it is even possible, if one is capable, to distinguish each individual instrument. (Ibelings, 2007).

Jan Wolff: "The concert hall is a chameleon. In the morning there's one thing, in the afternoon another, and in the evening there's a concert. And the outside world doesn't see that, because people who come in the afternoon only see their own reception. We have twelve different configurations and we can completely transform the hall within an hour. We thought it would take half an hour to remove the chairs from the hall, but we've already done it once in ten minutes."



Figure 9. Side stage walls in open position and rear wall closed during a concert. Source: 3XN (2005).

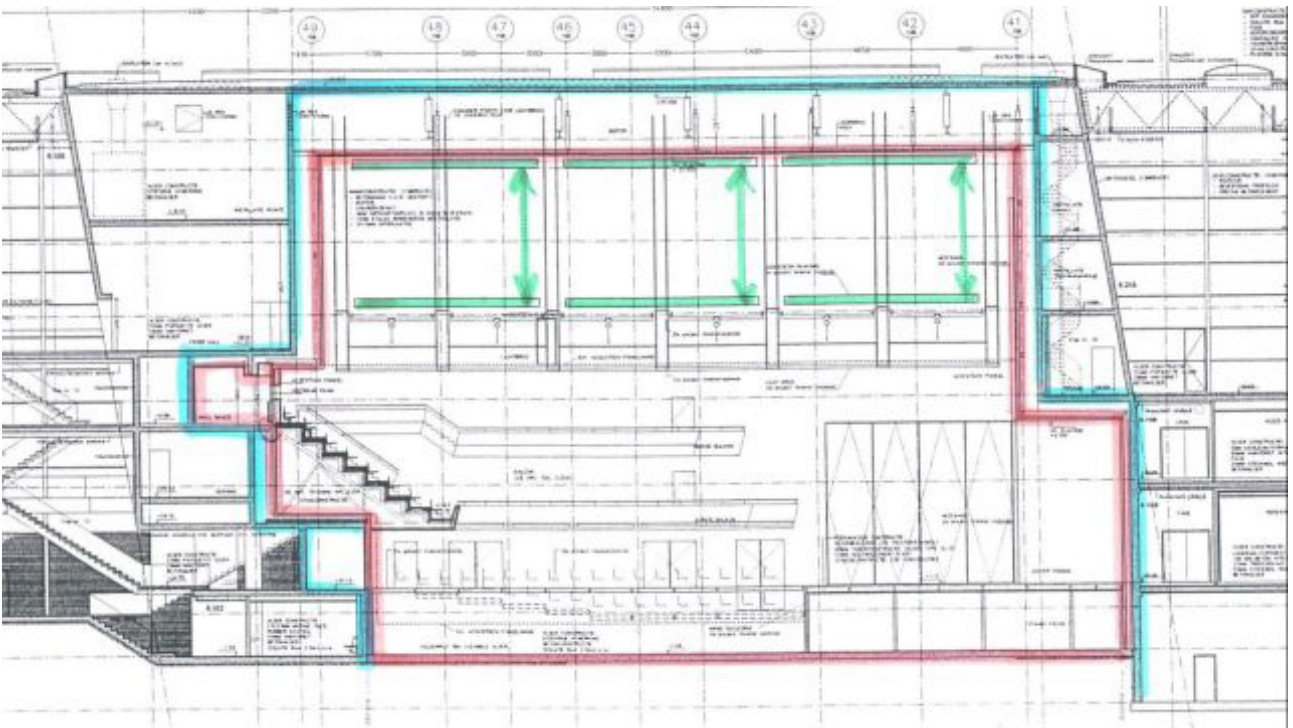


Figure 10. Section of the concert hall showing the ceiling height that can be adjusted. Source: Luykx & Metkemeijer (2006).

Programming

The Muziekgebouw provides a stage for contemporary classical music at its core, along with all related genres. Its aim is to offer high-quality music to the widest possible audience interested in music, across all ages. In addition to the new music practice that emerged in resistance to the sentimental Romanticism music of the 20th century, there has also been growing interest in non-Western music, from Inuit traditions to Australian Aboriginal sounds. As a result, a growing audience has emerged that is open to this kind of music. Jan Wolff remarked, “When you go to the Concertgebouw, you go to recognise. People are beginning to discover on their own that you don’t have to recognise music, you can simply go and listen” (Ibelings, 2007).

The building hosts around 250 concerts per season, featuring a wide variety of genres including classical music, but also electronic music, world music, and pop music with performances taking place in various locations throughout the building. For example the spacious foyer serves as a space for performances for smaller, informal concerts and talks, which I experienced during my visit (Appendix). By having these more informal introductions to the main concert it helps to break down the barriers between artist and audience. The foyer also houses the restaurant Dudok offering visitors the opportunity to enjoy dinner before a concert, further enhancing the overall experience. In addition, the venue offers an educational programme for children and teenagers through the Sound LAB, with more than 400 workshops held at this location each year (3xN, 2005).

As discussed in the previous paragraph, the main hall was designed with a high degree of flexibility, allowing it to adapt acoustically to different musical styles. Due to the wide variation in these styles, a unique configuration of the hall can be created for each type of concert and sound. Thanks to the broad mix of functions in and around the building, it offers something for everyone, making all people feel welcome (3xN, 2005).



Figure 11. Pre-show in the foyer of the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ. Source: own work.

**Workshops voor
kinderen, jongeren
én volwassenen**

Sound LAB

Maak zelf muziek:
Openbare workshops
Verjaardagsfeestjes
Scholen en naschoolse opvang

Muziekgebouw

Figure 12. Promotion flyer of the Sound LAB. Source: own scan.

Key findings

The Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, designed by Danish architecture firm 3XN, officially opened in 2005 and was built alongside the relocated Bimhuis. Situated at the tip of the Eastern Docklands, the building plays a key role in the redevelopment of Amsterdam's IJ waterfront. Its realisation stemmed from the convergence of two trajectories: the city's effort to reclaim and activate the IJ riverbanks, and the search for a new home for the experimental music venue De IJsbreker and the Bimhuis. Cultural pioneer Jan Wolff was central to this vision, having transformed De IJsbreker from a café into a concert venue, where the concept for the Muziekgebouw was born.

Following rapid success and overcrowding at De IJsbreker, various relocation options were explored, including a swimming pool, a new design by Herman Hertzberger, and the Westergasfabriek before the IJ waterfront was selected. In 1995, the Muziekgebouw was included in the municipal policy plan *Ankers in het IJ*, which envisioned cultural anchors along the waterfront. The Eastern Docklands was earmarked as a site for nationally significant, internationally oriented cultural institutions, with the Muziekgebouw joining other public icons like NEMO, the Public Library, and the Conservatory.

Architecturally, the Muziekgebouw is a striking example of minimalist modernism. Its volumes, housing the main hall and the Bimhuis, are unified beneath a single sweeping roof and elevated above a base of stairs and open circulation space. The design emphasises openness and accessibility, with glass façades, wide stairways connecting to the pier, and a public foyer with views of the IJ.

Typologically, the building departs from the traditional concert hall. It is deliberately multi-functional, combining two music halls with rehearsal rooms, restaurants, and outdoor terraces. Its layout prioritises flow and transparency, aligning with a broader trend of concert venues embracing openness and urban integration, as seen in comparable institutions like La Cité de la Musique in Paris.

Acoustically, the location posed significant challenges due to nearby roads, train tracks, and the cruise terminal. Acoustic consultancy Peutz designed a box-in-box structure for the main hall, with a floating inner shell completely decoupled from the outer concrete structure, even at the foundation level. This ensures isolation from external noise, allowing the hall to function as a recording studio. The acoustic design allows for full flexibility: movable elements in the ceiling, walls, floor, and seating enable the reverberation time to be adjusted between 1 and 2.5 seconds. As Jan Wolff described, the hall is a “chameleon,” capable of twelve configurations, with full transformations achievable within an hour.

The Muziekgebouw's core programming focuses on contemporary classical music, along with experimental, electronic, world, and pop genres. It aims to offer high-quality music to a wide and diverse audience. In Wolff's words, the hall invites listeners to discover rather than recognise music. In addition to around 250 concerts per season, the building hosts more than 400 workshops annually for children and youth via the Sound LAB.

In a short time, the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ has become a vibrant, inclusive cultural hub, setting a new standard for concert hall design through its architectural flexibility, acoustic innovation, and social accessibility. It stands not only as a venue for music but as a model for how contemporary architecture can shape cultural life within the city.

04

Comparison and discussion of the two concert halls.

In this chapter I will now compare the two case studies to draw conclusions to try and find an answer to our research question:

How did changes in music culture in the Netherlands, from the 19th century to the 21st century, influence the design of Het Muziekgebouw aan t' IJ in comparison to Het Concertgebouw?

This will be done thematically, starting with historical context and location, then typologies, acoustics and programming. In the next chapter, we will then draw our definite conclusions of the comparison of these two buildings as a whole.

Historical context and location

The Concertgebouw and the Muziekgebouw were both built in two very different time periods. As a result, the historical and cultural context of these two buildings also differs greatly, but both clearly reflect the development of Amsterdam's music culture. The Concertgebouw, built in 1888, was the result of a private initiative by wealthy music lovers in the form of a public limited company called NV Het Concertgebouw. Their aim was to restore Amsterdam's reputation in the field of classical music and to reach the level of cities like Leipzig and Vienna. The Muziekgebouw, on the other hand, completed in 2005, was shaped by the ambitions of pioneer Jan Wolff in collaboration with the City of Amsterdam, and arose from the urban redevelopment of the IJ waterfront.

Although there are fundamental differences between the two concert halls, some similarities can also be found. For example, the search for a suitable location was a long and complex process in both cases. In addition, both buildings have given a significant boost to the music culture of the city of Amsterdam and have also played an important role internationally.

Typologies

The differences in typology between the Concertgebouw and the Muziekgebouw clearly reflect the varying ideas over time about how a concert hall should present itself to the outside world and relate to its audience. The Concertgebouw follows a highly symmetrical floor plan, with the main hall placed centrally on the ground floor, allowing for a very logical and clear circulation. The floor plan of the Muziekgebouw, on the other hand, is less symmetrical and follows a more flexible and open layout.

Nonetheless, there are also clear similarities. In both designs, the main concert halls are located centrally within the building, surrounded by corridors and circulation spaces. Behind these halls are the more private functions, while at the front one finds the more open, public areas. Moreover, it can be said that the Muziekgebouw is much more transparent and open compa-

red to the Concertgebouw, with its large glass façades and flexible spaces. There is a strong focus on interaction with the urban context. The Concertgebouw, by contrast, is more closed-off and inward-looking, with a static form that does not always respond to its surroundings. These differences can be linked to the shifts in music culture and urban development over different time periods. The evolution of architectural styles throughout the years has also played a role in shaping these distinctions.

Acoustics

For both the Concertgebouw and the Muziekgebouw, acoustics were a central focus in the design. However, the approach to achieving optimal acoustics differs greatly, which can be traced back to the contrasting time periods in which they were built. The Concertgebouw, for example, was constructed at a time when scientific knowledge about acoustics was still limited. The technique used to achieve optimal sound was therefore largely based on imitation: copying the design of other successful concert halls known for their acoustics. The rectangular 'shoebox' shape of the hall, its high ceiling, and the use of reflective materials for finishes resulted in a reverberation time of 2.2 seconds with a full audience, which proved ideal for classical music.

In contrast, the Muziekgebouw was designed in a period in which acoustic engineering had become far more advanced and integrated into the design process. To such a degree that the acoustics can be adjusted to suit the type of concert or performance taking place. This is made possible through a movable ceiling, floor, and wall elements, allowing the reverberation time to vary between 1 and 2.5 seconds. As such, the Muziekgebouw places a strong emphasis on clarity and acoustic detail, suited to contemporary and experimental classical music, while the acoustics of the Concertgebouw provide a warmer and more blended sound, ideal for symphonic and Romantic repertoire.

Still, there are similarities to be found. Just like the Concertgebouw, the Muziekgebouw also looked to internationally renowned concert halls as references during the design process. Finally, it can be said that both buildings made use of the most advanced technical possibilities available in their respective time periods.

Programming

Although the Concertgebouw and the Muziekgebouw were built in different centuries, they share the ambition to make music accessible to a broad audience. The Concertgebouw was originally designed for classical music, with a focus on symphonic and Romantic works in a formal setting. Over time, however, this focus has evolved, and the Concertgebouw has developed into a multifunctional venue. Today, in addition to classical concerts, it also hosts jazz, pop, film music, lectures, exhibitions, and much more. This shift in programming clearly reflects broader changes in music culture, where the need for multifunctional and inclusive spaces has become increasingly important.

In contrast, the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ was conceived from the very beginning as an inclusive, diverse, and multifunctional venue. Although it primarily focuses on contemporary and experimental classical music, its programme goes far beyond that, including electronic music, educational workshops, and the use of the hall as a recording studio. This is made possible by the flexibility of the main hall, where the acoustics can be adjusted to suit the performance.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore Amsterdam's music culture and its relation to two well-known concert halls in the city: Het Concertgebouw and the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ. By comparing these two venues, the thesis aimed to understand how shifts in music culture influenced their architectural design. The central research question was:

How did changes in music culture in the Netherlands, from the 19th century to the 21st century, influence the design of the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ in comparison to Het Concertgebouw?

The comparison of the two case studies revealed that the design of concert halls is deeply connected to and influenced by the cultural, technological, and social context of their time. The Concertgebouw reflects a 19th-century ideal of classical music, centred around formality and a prestigious experience, with a design that emphasises symmetry and a clear hierarchy in the organisation of functions. Its warm acoustics suit the symphonic repertoire typically performed there. In contrast, the Muziekgebouw offers a more 21st-century approach, focusing on flexibility, openness, and diversity, both in spatial design and in programming. Its adaptable acoustics and multifunctional layout respond directly to the evolving music culture over time.

Despite these changes, there are also clear similarities between the two. In both designs, the main hall is placed at the heart of the building, and in both cases, the architects aimed to use the best available acoustic techniques of their time. As a result, both concert halls have played a significant role in shaping Amsterdam's music culture and have contributed to its international appeal.

It is interesting how in 1888 the Amsterdammer wrote that the Concertgebouw had become too formal. In a way, it feels as though the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ has taken its place, with an even more inclusive and informal character perhaps as an attempt to bring back a bit of that old, informal Amsterdam spirit. The coziness and sociability of 19th-century concert culture still leave traces today, or perhaps never truly disappeared from Amsterdam's current music scene. The Muziekgebouw, for instance, still includes a restaurant.

These findings demonstrate how concert halls are not merely functional spaces for classical music, but architectural reflections of the social norms and values surrounding music in their time. Compared to the Concertgebouw, the Muziekgebouw has evolved into a space for interaction, experimentation, and inclusivity, not only reflecting the music itself, but also becoming integrated into the social and urban fabric around it. One could even argue that concert halls say something about society and the stage it finds itself in.

It is therefore crucial for architects and future designers of concert halls to recognise the importance of music culture. I would strongly encourage anyone to carry out thorough research, just as was done in the case studies discussed. At this moment, inclusivity and integration with the context are essential to attract a diverse audience. But it is also important to think ahead. Where do we think we will be in 50, or even 100 years? We can already see the impact a century of change has had on concert hall design. With continued innovation in technology, many more tools and techniques will become available for designing these spaces. Digitalisation may also start to play a larger role, with performances becoming increasingly more hybrid. Think about combination of visuals and sound or maybe interactive concerts. Flexibility will likely become even more important, and we may see concert halls not only hosting classical music, but also embracing electronic genres more often, such as techno and house which have gained popularity among younger generations in recent years.

In addition, there is an increasing focus on sustainability. Concert halls are large and complex buildings, and with the growing demand for environmentally friendly solutions, this will become an important issue in the future. It is also wise to consider the potential for repurposing such buildings. Will the Concertgebouw for example still be here in 100 years? Time will tell, and the concert halls themselves will continue to amaze us. However, one thing is certain: the traditional Amsterdam gezelligheid at concerts will always remain.

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Appendix

Notes after visit to Het Concertgebouw in Amsterdam

On Thursday, 27 February, I attended a concert by the Concertgebouworkest at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam for the very first time. Thanks to a special discount available four hours before the concert for people under 30, my ticket cost just €17. I arrived about half an hour before the performance, giving me plenty of time to explore the building.

Although I was already familiar with the layout from online research, the building is quite easy to navigate even without prior knowledge, thanks to its symmetrical design. The Main Hall forms the heart of the structure, with corridors connecting to smaller spaces around it. Behind the hall is the cloakroom, followed by the oval-shaped Mirror Hall, and above it, the Small Hall, which was inspired by Felix Meritis. Unlike the richly decorated halls, the corridors are minimalist and white.

Stepping into the Main Hall, I was immediately struck by its grandeur. The organ, a true architectural feature, immediately draws the eye and serves as a reference point within the space. The names of renowned composers and conductors decorated the interior, adding to its historical significance.

The music and acoustics were absolutely phenomenal, even though I don't have other reference material to compare them to. My only minor criticism was the warmth in the hall, which I found a bit uncomfortable. I also appreciated the opportunity to enjoy a drink and chat before the performance and during the break.

Overall, it was a unique and unforgettable experience, and I would highly recommend it to anyone.

do 27 feb 2025





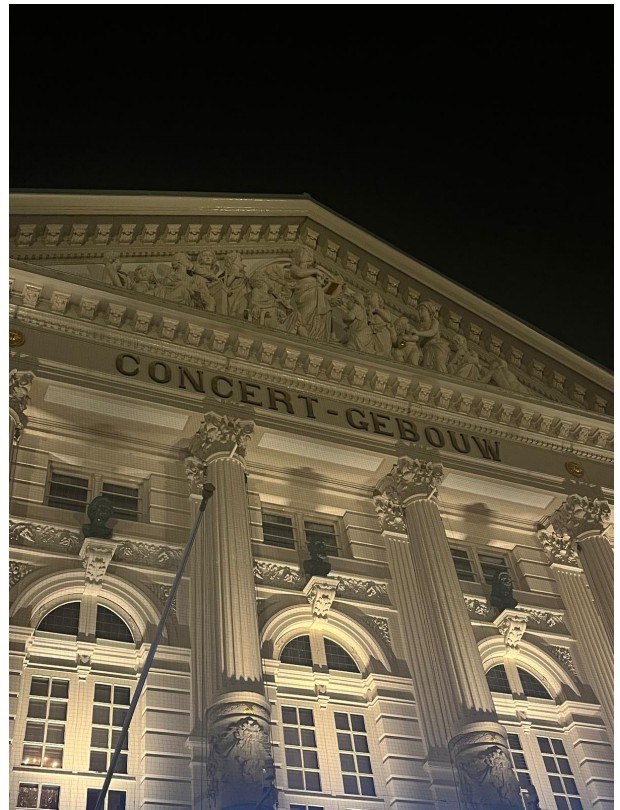
Concertgebouworkest & Renée Fleming: Strauss' Vier letzte Lieder

20:15 – 22:05 | **Grote Zaal** | **v.a. € 20,00**

met onder andere

- Puccini *Turandot* (symfonische suite) (bew. M. Honeck)
- MacMillan *Larghetto for Orchestra*

[→ Meer informatie](#)



Notes after visit to Het Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ

On Thursday, March 27th, my mother and I attended a concert at the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ for the first time. Before the performance, we had a reservation at the Dudok restaurant, which is located in what feels like the foyer of the building itself. The restaurant is well-aligned with the concert schedule and offers a wonderful opportunity to enjoy a meal beforehand, with a stunning view over the IJ River.

We arrived by car, driving along the IJ, and soon after passing Central Station, the Muziekgebouw rose into view. We parked beneath the building in the Piet Hein Garage, and since I was recovering from surgery and had difficulty walking, we took the lift straight up into the foyer of the Muziekgebouw. The building immediately felt open and spacious thanks to the expansive foyer surrounding the concert hall and the glass façade offering a beautiful panoramic view of the IJ. The main hall, clad in concrete on the outside, juts out slightly, clearly marking where the audience needs to go.

We took our seats in the restaurant, which, despite the upcoming concert, was still relatively quiet. This allowed us to get a window seat and fully enjoy our meal, we even finished just in time for the pre-show programme. In the foyer, a small ensemble had already set up, accompanied by students from the conservatory, who performed a short piece as an introduction to the evening's concert. Just before this, there was also an introductory talk held on the foyer deck, but we unfortunately missed it as we were still finishing dinner. The tone for the evening was immediately set, and the Muziekgebouw conveyed a very intimate, informal, and welcoming atmosphere.

After the introduction, we entered the main hall. In terms of size, it can't be compared to the Concertgebouw, but what immediately stands out is how flexible the space is and how it is fully adaptable to the type of concert and audience. All the seating is modular and can be rearranged quickly, and the walls and ceiling reveal extensive technical possibilities. The interior is clad mainly in wooden slats, with soft blue lighting shining through, creating a calm and soothing ambiance.

The orchestra was excellent, with the exception of a short experimental piece that I personally didn't enjoy as much. The acoustics, however, were very pleasant. The hall wasn't completely sold out, and the average age of the audience was on the older side. One thing I also noticed was that the orchestra used tablets for their sheet music, something I hadn't seen at the Concertgebouw, where they still use traditional paper scores.

All in all, it was a very successful evening. After the concert, we briefly stopped by the BIMHUIS, located on the third floor. The atmosphere there was strikingly different from the Muziekgebouw. While the Muziekgebouw already felt informal, the BIMHUIS had more of a cosy, local pub vibe. The concert had just ended, and many people were still enjoying a drink. We managed to sneak a quick peek through the window into the hall, which features a massive window at the back with a breathtaking view of Amsterdam. It definitely seems like a place worth visiting again in the future!



DO 27 MRT 2025 20:15

Dreams and Thunder

LUDWIG + Vincent van Amsterdam

Een klankmonument voor Wim Henderickx

Henderickx, Liszt, Wagner, JS Bach, CPE Bach, Lohse

Grote Zaal

Geweest

