Fuuga: inside Finland’s striking new concert hall in Turku - Gramophone

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Turku’s new music centre is a major addition to northern Europe’s musical landscape, but its concert hall doesn’t resemble any other

Move over Royal Concertgebouw – there’s a new European concert hall in which the conductor enters the stage via a steep staircase behind the orchestra. John Storgårds negotiated those stairs on Thursday night, on the way to lead his Turku Philharmonic Orchestra in the opening of an impressive new music centre for the city, Finland’s sixth-largest and former capital.

Delivered on-time and within its €90.5 million budget, Fuuga is the latest infrastructure project in a culture-focused growth strategy instigated by the City of Turku, which paid for the building. It will provide a home for the Turku Philharmonic, Finland’s oldest orchestral ensemble, which from this week will present its subscription season in Fuuga’s 1350-seat principal concert hall.



Fuuga's main concert hall (Photo: Marc Goodwin, Archmospheres)

In the first of three opening concerts, Storgårds conducted his orchestra on

November 12 in Sibelius's *Lemminkäinen Suite*, a new work, *Eirene*, by Ukrainian composer Victoria Polevá, Wagner's Prelude to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and songs by Sibelius and Alban Berg, sung by soprano Karita Mattila who was born in Somero to the east of the city. The concert can be viewed for free via the catch-up service of Finland's public broadcaster YLE, underlining the building's operational set-up for recording and broadcasting.

At the repeat concert on Friday, the distinctive acoustic properties of Fuuga's principal concert hall were obvious (there is also a 330-seat black box for chamber music, jazz and electronic genres). Yann Jurkiewicz of Kahle led the acoustic design of the hall, based on shoebox principles of a 'strong, impactful' sound 'capable of enveloping the audience', as he told assembled journalists on Friday.

On the evidence of Friday's performance, the sound of the hall contrasts strongly with that of comparative 21st-century buildings in Helsinki, Copenhagen, Hamburg and Paris – even that in Stavanger (Norway), whose acoustic was also designed by Jurkiewicz. In an unusually resonant sound for a contemporary concert hall, it was at times possible to hear Mattila's voice echoing back on itself while some mezzo-forte chords in Sibelius's 'Lemminkäinen in Tuonela' took over three seconds to decay into silence. In the Wagner, Jurkiewicz's acoustic delivered on its promise to envelop the audience with a large, blooming sound.



The opening concert (photo: Jussi Virkkumaa)

'It will be a project for the orchestra to learn to play in the new hall and a really big

change,' commented Nikke Isomöttönen, CEO of the Turku Philharmonic Orchestra, on Friday. 'It was different last night, it was different tonight and it will be different tomorrow,' said Storgårds after Friday's concert, outlining how, even after three weeks of acoustic testing (though without an audience), he and his orchestra are still exploring what is possible in the new space.

Despite the sound ideals, Fuuga's concert hall is neither a shoebox nor a vineyard – its series of weaving balconies giving the impression of a fluid rectangular form. In a conscious contrast to the dark wood of the Musiikkitalo in Helsinki, the interior of the hall is notably light and bright, finished in specially-treated spruce, oak (for the stage) and elm (for the seats).

Civic pride is fierce in Turku, Finland's capital until 1812, when Imperial Russia handed that status to Helsinki. 20,000 individuals had visited the building since its soft launch on October 26 – almost 10 per cent of the city's population – while 85 per cent of tickets for planned concerts are already sold. A public vote settled the name of the building; Fuuga is the Finnish word for 'fugue' and one of the only words in the Finnish language to include the letter 'F'. 'The people of Turku are proud of it [the building], and that is the biggest prize to me,' said Tuomas Silvennoinen of PES, the project's chief architect, on Friday.



Fuuga sits proudly on the banks of the River Aura (photo: Marc Goodwin, Archmospheres)

That is not altogether surprising. Fuuga sits proudly on the banks of the River Aura,

the centrepiece in a trilogy of cultural buildings including the city's theatre and modern art gallery. As at the Oslo Opera House, visitors are invited to clamber onto Fuuga's roof – where there is also a wine bar – and explore its public spaces whether or not they hold a ticket to an event. The foyer spaces are particularly warm and alluring, echoing the weaving form of the concert hall's balconies.

Storgårds, a prolific recording artist, has been Chief Conductor of the Turku Philharmonic Orchestra since 2024. His predecessors Leif Segerstam and Olli Mustonen recorded extensively with the orchestra, with Segerstam laying-down a Brahms cycle for Alba (the symphonies paired with Segerstam's own) while for Naxos, recording Sibelius's complete theatre music and an exploration of rare Beethoven. Mustonen recently recorded his own music and that of Rodion Shchedrin with the orchestra for Ondine, while Ari Rasilainen has recently made recordings of music by Rautavaara and Melartin with the orchestra for CPO. The far superior acoustic conditions, sound isolation and technical facilities at the new hall – in comparison with the orchestra's former home dating from 1952 and with a fundamentally flawed acoustic – are likely to attract further recording projects.

Watch to opening concert: areena.yle.fi