

KIMMEL CENTER
Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts
Academy of Music
Merriam Theater
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Academy of Music

An Historic Landmark

Philadelphia's Academy of Music is both a celebrated historical landmark and a current focus of cultural life in the city. Opened in 1857, the Academy is the oldest grand opera house in the United States still used for its original purpose. It remains one of the busiest halls in the world and hosts a myriad of community functions and cultural activities, including performances by the Opera Company of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Ballet. The Academy is owned by The Philadelphia Orchestra Association and is managed by the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts. The main hall (capacity 2,897) is constantly in use for concerts, operas, ballets, and other events. The Ballroom (capacity 350), was inspired by the design of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles.

A New Opera House

As early as 1839, attempts were made to build a grand opera house in Philadelphia. It was not until 1852 that a stock offering was tendered for what is known today as "the Grand Old Lady of Locust Street." To make it official and as an appeal to the public, the "Charter and Prospectus of The Opera House or American Academy of Music" was published in 1852. This document set forth the features of construction, the details of management and the advantages of investing in the proposed endeavor. An architectural competition for the Academy's design was announced in October 1854 and was won by the Philadelphia firm of Napoleon Le Brun and Gustavus Runge. The groundbreaking ceremony was held on June 18, 1855.

At that time, the center of Philadelphia was at Fifth and Chestnut Streets. The residential area at Broad and Locust Streets was chosen as the site for the new opera house, partially because it was free from traffic noises. Due to budgetary restrictions, the architects decided to concentrate most on the design of the interior while leaving the exterior "perfectly plain and simple like a Markethouse." It was expected that, at a later date, the exterior would be faced with marble. Bronze gas lanterns, which were donated by the Philadelphia Gas Works and were installed in 1968, were reproduced from pictures of the originals which were installed in 1885 and later removed.

The Academy Today

From 1994 to 2002, The Philadelphia Orchestra Association undertook the "Project for the 21st Century," a \$40 million campaign to restore, renovate, and modernize the Academy of Music. The renovations included asbestos removal; basement excavations; new steel supporting trusses above the auditorium; restoration and renovation of seating, seating areas, and surfaces throughout the auditorium; backstage renovations; a new stage floor; a new stage shell for concerts; electrical and mechanical upgrading, replacement, and refurbishing; raising of the building's roof by 10 feet; and a state-of-the-art cable and counterweight system to replace the outdated hemp rope-and-sandbag rigging.

For the first time in its 150-year history, the Academy's crystal chandelier was removed from the building in June 2007 for a 13-month period of renovation. The restored chandelier was returned to the Academy of Music and unveiled at a public ceremony in September 2008. In continuation of its commitment to the historic restoration of the building, the Academy of Music closed its beloved Ballroom in July 2008 for an extensive 11-month renovation that will return the space to its original glory. A highlight of the current restoration project is the reclamation of the Ballroom's five large windows overlooking Broad Street. The restored Ballroom is scheduled to be reintroduced to Philadelphians in summer 2009.