

Abravanel Hall

By Trent Nelson

district" bridging the Delta Center (where the Jazz and Smith's newly acquired National League franchise play) and City Creek Center.

One early draft of Smith's plans suggested Abravanel Hall could be renovated or possibly demolished — an idea that has drawn howls of protest, and prompted an 18-year-old Layton violinist to launch an online petition to save the hall. (The petition has gained more than 35,000 signatures since it was posted on May 4.) Dozens showed up Tuesday night to a Salt Lake City Council meeting to comment, sometimes in song, on the proposed entertainment district, with many advocating for the hall's preservation.

Salt Lake County Mayor Jenny Wilson, in a statement issued May 14, said she is "working diligently on a re-imagined downtown and a district design that allows Abravanel Hall to remain in its present form." Wilson said Tuesday that she has talked with Gov. Spencer Cox and legislators about securing state funding for the hall's renovation.

According to a master plan by Salt Lake County, which owns and operates the hall, retrofitting and upgrading Abravanel could cost at least \$200 million. The plan, first made public on May 17, would include replacing the heating and cooling system, making the building more accessible for people with disabilities, adding bathrooms and elevators, improving the acoustics and expanding both the lobby and the backstage area.

Craig Jessop, who was music director of what's now called the Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square from 1999 to 2008, called Abravanel Hall "an iconic symbol of the musical arts in the state of Utah and for our nation."

The hall, Jessop said in an email interview, "has served the Salt Lake community and the state of Utah beautifully for many decades. It has hosted a Who's Who of the greatest classical artists, Broadway artists and jazz artists of the world."

A warmth and elegance

The acoustics were so important to Maurice Abravanel, the legendary conductor who led the Utah Symphony from 1946 to 1979, that he urged the board overseeing the new hall's construction to hire an acoustician before it hired an architect.

"Some halls are dry or edgy," Adkins said, politely declining to identify any by name. "The sound that (Abravanel) makes ... has an incredibly warm sound — like honey."

The acoustics at Abravanel Hall, Jessop said, "are superb, and have been acknowledged as such since its beginning."

Jessop, now a professor of choral conducting at Utah State University, said the reason for those acoustics "is the generous use of

wood throughout the hall that reflects a warmth and elegance of each section of the orchestra."

The only venue in the Salt Lake Valley that compares acoustically to Abravanel Hall, Jessop said, is Libby Gardner Hall on the University of Utah campus.

"They are both wonderful halls with beautiful acoustics, but differ greatly in size and audience capacity," Jessop said. Abravanel Hall has a seating capacity of 2,766; Gardner Hall seats 680.

"It would be difficult to perform a large orchestral [or] choral work, like the Mahler 8th Symphony, in Libby Gardner," he said, "but Abravanel Hall has handled it beautifully."

Abravanel Hall also has history, Jessop said — even though, as he put it, "I still think of it as a new hall."

"To me, it is most about the people who have performed there through the years, and the people of the state who faithfully supported the Utah Symphony over decades," he said.

Jessop recalled when John Williams, the composer famed for such movie scores as "Star Wars" and "Raiders of the Lost Ark," came to Abravanel Hall to record the composition he wrote for the 2002 Winter Olympics opening ceremonies, "Call of the Champions."

"He was ecstatic with their performance, and lavish in his praise of the Utah Symphony, the Tabernacle Choir and the world-class acoustics of Abravanel Hall," Jessop said. "Over 2.1 billion people heard that special sound from Abravanel Hall, literally around



PHOTOS BY TRENT NELSON

At top: The sign on Abravanel Hall is illuminated after a ceremony in Salt Lake City on May 17. Above: A bust of Maurice Abravanel at Abravanel Hall.

the world."

The hall, Jessop said, is also a tribute to its namesake, who died in 1993, just a few months after the building was renamed for him.

"There are still many of us who knew and remember Maurice Abravanel, and his total dedication in creating a full-time professional symphony orchestra for the citizens of Salt Lake City and the state of Utah," he said. "Abravanel Hall represents his legacy, and our musical past, present and future in our state."

Adkins noted that Utah Symphony officials and musicians have met with Mayor Wilson and representatives of Smith Entertainment Group — which owns the Jazz and the new NHL team — about the downtown district plans.

"We want to work together to make Abravanel Hall a part of this district," Adkins said. The outpouring of support, she said, "is very moving to us, to see how much this building means to people."

Gold ribbons and an impromptu rally

Concertgoers on May 17 gathered outside Abravanel Hall after the Utah Symphony's performance for what was to be a small ceremony, with Carolyn Abravanel, Maurice's widow, switching on lights to illuminate the sign that identifies the building as "Maurice Abravanel Hall."

The concertgoers — still energized by the symphony's performance of two works by French

composer Maurice Ravel with the same title, "Sheherazade" — turned the event into an impromptu rally.

A group of young attendees handed out gold ribbons — symbolic of the gold leaf that decorates the hall's lobby — so music lovers can wear them as a show of support. Others gave out badges that read "Save Abravanel Hall." When the sign was lit up, some in the crowd chanted "save the hall."

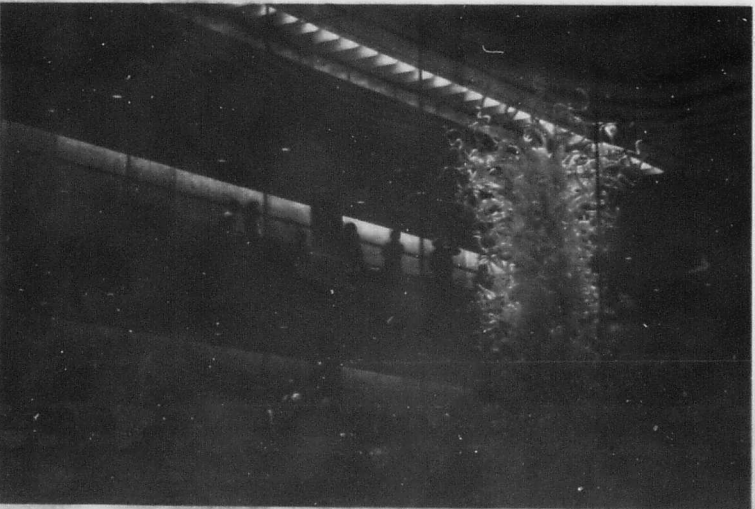
The event "was a really good reminder of what this space means to people," said Yenh Park, from Herriman, a 20-year-old marketing major at Brigham Young University.

Park said that when she played music as a child, "it became my goal, my dream, to play on that stage." That dream has come true for her sister, she said, who's a member of the Utah Youth Symphony.

Salt Lake City music fan Joel Wendel, waiting for the lighting with his wife, Annette, said, "people are energized by [the outcry], and are aroused to do something to prevent" the hall's demolition. "It's not just the music, it's the community that develops around [the symphony]."

Wendel, who played violin in his youth and now plays keyboards, said he remembers when Maurice Abravanel conducted the Utah Symphony in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, and remembers "the work and the sacrifice to build this hall."

"It's a jewel inside the city," Wendel said. "Losing it would be a loss to the community."



Above: "Olympic Tower" — a glass sculpture by Seattle artist Dale Chihuly — is shown at Abravanel Hall on May 17.