



CONSTRUCTION
AND PLANNING

Renewing an Icon: Berry College's Ford Auditorium

BY RICK WOODALL

Berry College is renowned for the beauty of its expansive Northwest Georgia campus—at 27,000 acres the world's largest—but one spot holds particular allure for students and alumni with a love of music: Ford Auditorium.

A Centerpiece of Music Education

For more than ninety years, this beautiful English Gothic structure—distinguished by its exterior stonework, soaring spire, and clock tower, as well as the Bible verses and woodcarvings that adorn its interior—has been the centerpiece of music education and performance on the Berry campus. In 2019, the facility was transformed into a first-class

recital hall combining modern acoustics with restored historic touches that will continue to awe and inspire, just as they have since the earliest days of the school. “Our students deserve a venue that inspires their instrumental and vocal performances and enriches the experience for the listening audience,” says Berry President Steve Briggs. “This renovation achieves that goal while renewing

and celebrating the features that make this such a memorable and venerable place.”

All of this attention would be music to the ears of the man responsible for first breathing life into the Ford Buildings in the 1920s—Henry Ford himself. Ford and his wife, Clara, were among the many noted philanthropists of their day who were captivated by Martha Berry's vision of combining intellectual and practical skills to powerful effect in the lives of her students by offering a distinctive “head, heart, and hands” education that molded graduates known for their work ethic, integrity, resourcefulness, and willingness to serve.



Champions of the School

The Fords became early champions of the school, and nearly a century later, the Ford Buildings are both a testament to their generosity and Berry's most recognizable landmark, recently earning placement on *USA Today's* list of America's "Fifty-one most amazing college and university buildings."

"When I came here in 1956, I was really taken aback at this gorgeous place," recalls Ross Magoulas, a former faculty member and honorary alumnus who returns to Berry regularly to direct the school's alumni choir. "I couldn't imagine that I was going to be working here and living here. It's just fantastic, all these beautiful buildings."

The Science of Acoustics

While its beauty continues to inspire, advances in the science of acoustics exposed challenges presented by the facility's highly arched ceiling and open structure. This architecture diminished the aural experience for all and—in some cases—forced vocalists, instrumentalists, and small ensembles to seek out other venues on campus. In addition,

the previous stage was too small for large instrumental ensembles, further limiting programming potential.

Recognizing these issues, college officials reached out to Kirkegaard Associates of Chicago, one of the nation's foremost acoustics consulting firms, to develop a plan for renewal. Highlights of this work included installation of an all-wood ceiling, wood-carved acoustical paneling, adjustable acoustical banners, and sound reflectors; a 1,086 square-foot accessible stage with curved front; a new arched seating configuration with room for three hundred and sixty-six; a redesigned balcony with improved sightlines; and many other enhancements, including updates to adjacent music department spaces.

A ceremonial "swinging of the sledgehammer" signified that the curtain was rising on the \$6.3 million project, funded with gifts from more than 400 alumni and friends. These donors, Briggs notes, "banded together, each playing a part like the members of an orchestra, to accomplish something beautiful that transcends their separate contributions."

Gifts that Honor Student Expression

Fittingly, some of the most significant gifts honored alums whose lives found expression through their experiences as students in Ford Auditorium and the surrounding Ford Buildings. Those women will now be forever associated with the project through the naming of the Betty Anne Rouse Bell Recital Hall, the Margaret Weaver Faison Entrance Hall and the Ouida Word Dickey Living Room (located in the Berry Alumni Center, which is also housed in the Ford Complex).

Also notable is the M. Bobbie Bailey Performance Stage, named in memory of a generous Berry friend and longtime champion of the arts whose sister, Audrey Morgan, spearheaded earlier efforts to revive Berry's dramatic arts facilities. When completed in 2017, the building was christened Sisters Theatre in recognition of the bonds of love and family the two women shared.

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on the Berry campus. The college’s music program engages as many as two hundred students annually—more than 10% of the undergraduate population—in its seventeen performance ensembles. Many others attend the more than fifty concerts and recitals held each year on the Ford stage.

Balancing Sounds and Maintaining Timing

The facility also provides rehearsal and performance space for the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program—a summer residential experience for more than six hundred of the state’s brightest and most artistically talented high school juniors and seniors—and supports public music education by hosting other statewide events.

Now that work has been completed, performers who grace the Ford stage can hear themselves and each other more clearly, enabling them to balance sounds, maintain timing, and work as a cohesive

whole to deliver higher-quality performances. Just as importantly, the facility is now able to better enhance the cultural life of the campus and surrounding communities by providing an improved audience experience and allowing for a wider range of guest artists.

Leif Atchley, a 2019 Berry graduate, is excited to see his alma mater make such a lasting investment in its students and the arts. “I think this is a really powerful statement” he says, “that Berry believes in the power of music to change the lives of the students who come here.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rick Woodall is director of philanthropic communications at Berry College, his professional home since 2004. He also serves as editor of Berry magazine. The 1993 Berry graduate and former sportswriter has worked in the field of higher education communications since 2001.

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