



ERIC PARRY ARCHITECTS | WELLS CATHEDRAL SCHOOL

Publication: The Architects' Journal

Date: 09 May 2018

URL: <http://digitalissues.ajplus.co.uk/2018/05%20Mar/180510/index.html>

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Building study

Counterpoint

Eric Parry's bold Cedars Hall music facility for Wells Cathedral School makes few visual concessions to its historic surroundings

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Following an invited competition in 2007 for a new music facility at Wells Cathedral School, Eric Parry Architects' strikingly modern design was chosen – a brave move in a listed landscape. Cedars Hall provides a recital hall and spaces for teaching, rehearsing, performing and recording. The hall can accommodate more than 400 and is recessed into the surrounding garden. Natural light fills the space during the day, while the building becomes a lantern in the evenings.

Words Jon Astbury
Photography Dirk Lindner

The monolithic, column-like blocks and shifting screens of Edward Gordon Craig's revolutionary theatre sets were clearly preoccupying Eric Parry while he was designing Cedars Hall, a new music facility for Wells Cathedral School in Somerset. Pavilion-like, it makes few obvious visual concessions to its historic surroundings. Its 'screens' – vast 5.5 x 2m sections of Cor-ten steel – are dug in to the edge of the school's sports field, their burnt orange stark against the pruned grass. Pale Bath stone this is not; nor is it modest, with the glass slices between the Cor-ten demanding attention or, at the very least, curiosity. In true Gordon Craig style, these static elements are arranged as if to combine with and supplement the performance within, a dramatic frame for a recital that, to anyone watching from outside, is completely silent.

Put simply, it is not the first thing you'd expect to see in this impeccably well-groomed and auspicious of landscapes. Wells Cathedral School itself likely needs no introduction. The private school is one of the world's oldest, and one of only five in the UK to offer specialist musical education to school-age children. It occupies various structures dating from the 12th to 19th centuries, which have over the years knitted together to create a sense of timeless



harmony that Cedars Hall gleefully disrupts. Astonishingly, the school's regular music venue was Wells Cathedral itself, along with a series of spaces throughout its grounds that still leak music out on to the streets. While this is perfect for the traditional end of the spectrum, it was felt to be lacking in modern provision, and in 2008 funding was secured to contribute to a series of dedicated spaces, which opened in late 2016. A proposal by Eric Parry Architects (EPA) was selected from an invited competition – other submissions included a proposal from Richard Murphy Architects, which took a pale stone Gothic-inspired route – and formed part of a wider series of works that the firm was undertaking, including a cricket pavilion and maintenance block adjacent to Cedars Hall.

The fact that this bold new proposal made it through planning without going to committee is attributed largely to the adoption of the strategies of Colin Stansfield Smith, county architect for Hampshire Council in the 1970s and 1980s, whom Parry describes as the project's 'architectural grandfather'.

While it may not take many stylistic cues from its rich setting, the key to the design's orientation is the axis of Vicars' Close, which connects Cedars Hall to the cathedral's chapter house. Claimed to be one of Europe's oldest residential streets with extant original buildings, this run of Grade I-listed houses was originally built to house chantry priests, and includes the curious feature of narrowing slightly to create the perspectival illusion of being longer than it is. At either end it is pinched; by a gateway off St Andrew Street along the northern side of the cathedral and by a chapel and library at the other end, making this pedestrian approach to the new hall by far the most intimate and effective one. To the west, a new street and junction have vastly improved the ability





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for vehicle access into the more 'working' side of the new build alongside the new maintenance block.

Cedars Hall has two main components: the almost-square Cor-ten form of the recital hall; and an adjacent, slightly lower, timber structure, housing rehearsal, observation and teaching spaces, with a concave southern edge that takes its cue from the listed Liberty Wall which runs into it. Depending on the angle, the combination of the two at times falls short of being

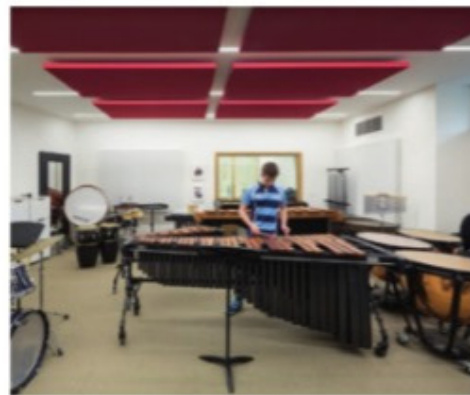
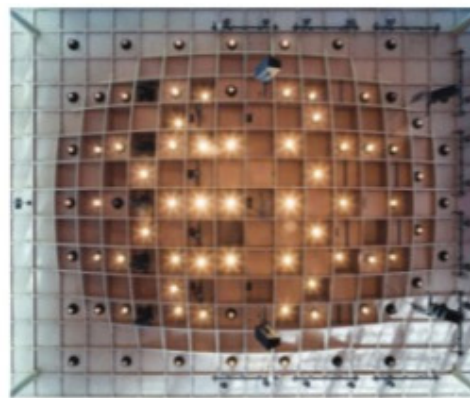
convincing. When set directly against the recital hall's boldness, the wooden element's concession to contextual colour and texture becomes almost meek. It proves more effective to the south, where it appears as an extension of the Liberty Wall, framed by silvery cedars. Internally, where the two merge, this is less of a problem, and extending to the east of the plan Liberty Wall also defines the entrance into the spaces, digging down slightly beneath the field and giving a glimpse of the corner of

the performance hall before leading to a foyer, top-lit by skylights that again take their cue from the line of Liberty Wall. It all feels very topographical at this point, and there is something quite elemental to what appear from a distance as an arrangement of monoliths that have risen from the ground, however trite any association with Stonehenge or even Glastonbury Tor might seem. This condition remains unique to this small entry sequence: once inside, these are clearly back-of-house

working spaces, plainly detailed and crammed with equipment. The school's existing stock of buildings was obviously unable to accommodate any 'wiring-in' of modern equipment, but at Cedars Hall the whole series of performance and rehearsal spaces is connected to a system that allows recording and playback to take place almost anywhere.

It is unique that a concert hall should court such a relationship to the outside, and this is where the project's primary conceptual expression is found. The hall is buried slightly, with the audience and performers sitting cosseted below ground level as light floods in from both the vertical glazed sections and from the clerestory above. This primarily serves to ensure the relationship to the exterior is not too fierce nor distracting; the view out is one of trees and sky, and the view in is of the upper rows of seats or heads, completed when looking back southwards by the cathedral itself looming in the background.

Incorporating such a high proportion of glazing in a space requiring high levels of acoustic performance was not a straightforward decision, and the acoustic

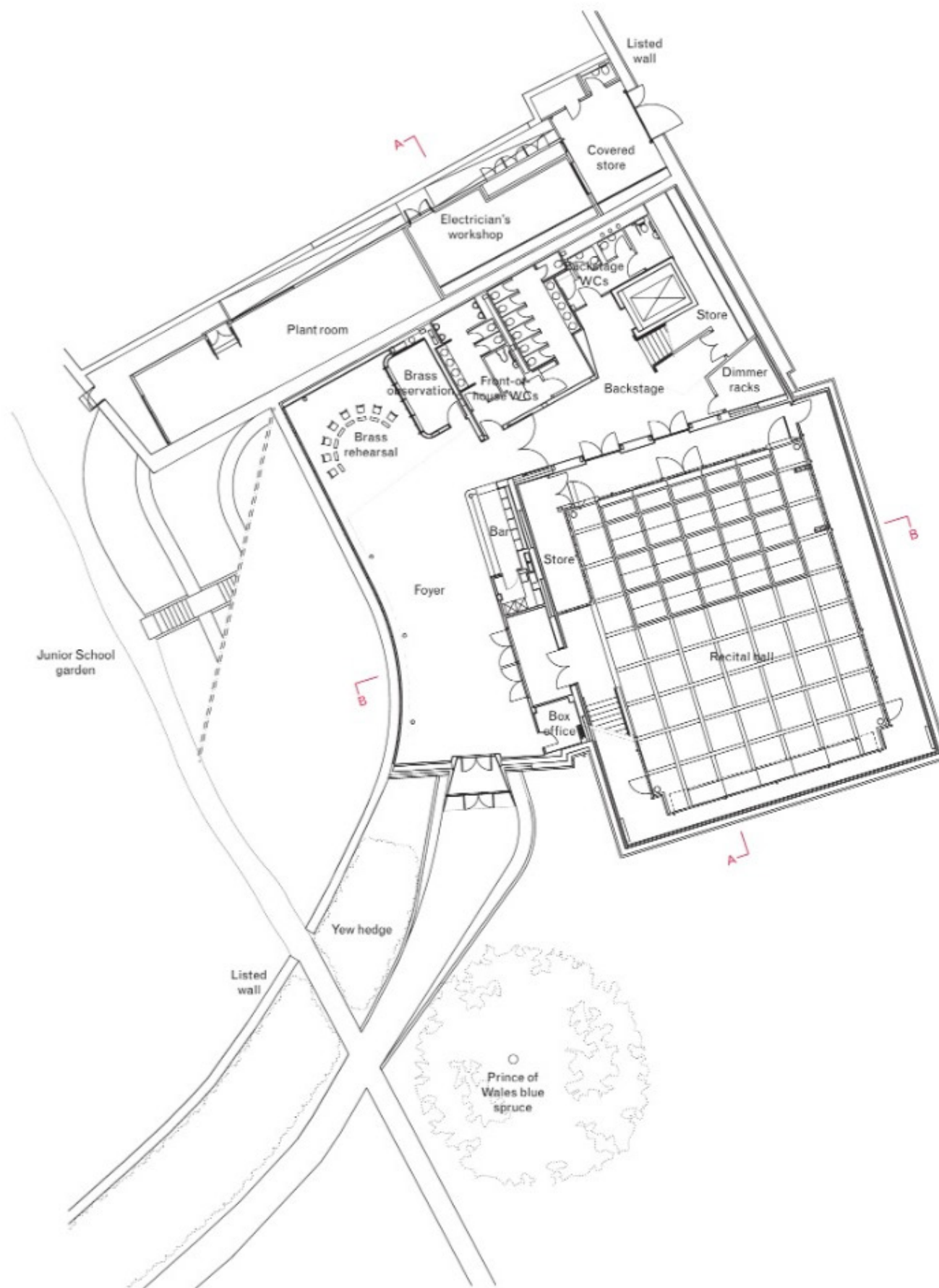


insulation was in fact slightly lowered for budgetary reasons. It is still able to withstand the impact of a stray cricket ball, and the silent observation the glass affords – be it of performers inside or of sport being played on the field – is a slightly uncanny one. As Parry describes it, the desired effect is one where 'people will eventually stop looking at the building, and will look at the gaps'.

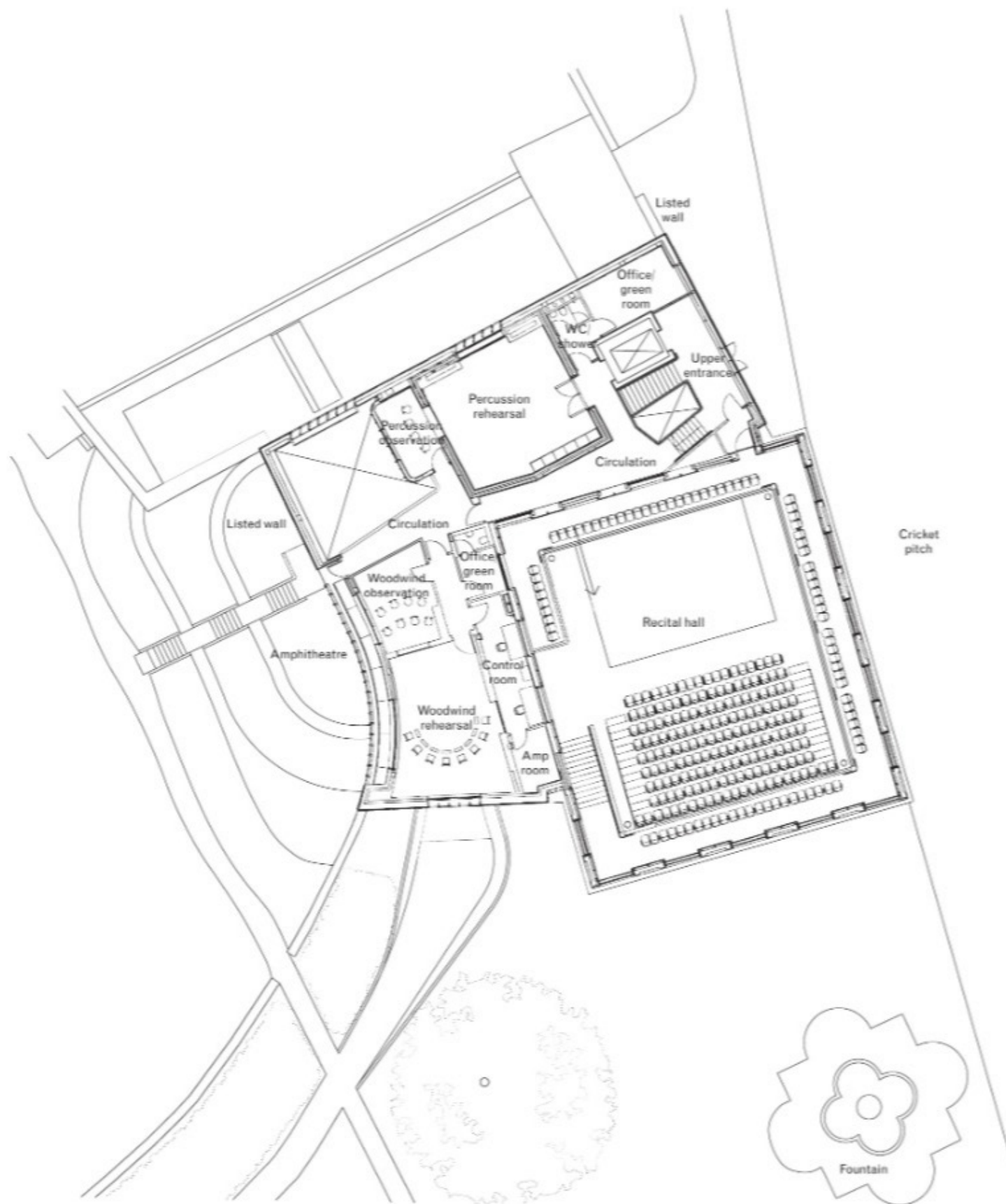
Inside the hall, red panels line the reverse of the Cor-ten sections, still appearing chunky and monolithic. The ceiling structure – referred to as 'pregnant' – bulges out into the hall, Cronenberg-like, designed to increase low-frequency sound diffusion and also helping to lend more intimacy to what is otherwise a very exposed space.

This devotion to pushing the performances front and centre has paid off, even if it comes at the expense of the teaching spaces being relatively hidden, when they, too, would benefit from some of the confident openness of the recital hall. These spatial gripes do not detract from what is a hugely effective new facility for the school, and the message it wants to send is clear: that whatever is going on beyond these vast windows will certainly be worth watching and listening to.





Ground floor plan



First floor plan



Client's view

Eric Parry Architects was excellent to work with; Eric's knack of understanding what lay behind our brief and interpreting it into a remarkable and buildable design was magical. We are thrilled with the result, and were glad to have Eric and his team as allies and friends when, at different stages, things became a trifle hairy.

Our 'music building' or music learning, practice, teaching, coaching, rehearsing and performance building is beautiful inside and out. It sits as a contemporary design with a startling finish and enhances a complicated and heritage landscape. It flatters both a Gothic cathedral and 18th-century domestic architecture, as well as trees and grass and the delightful rural, EPA-designed sports pavilion close by.

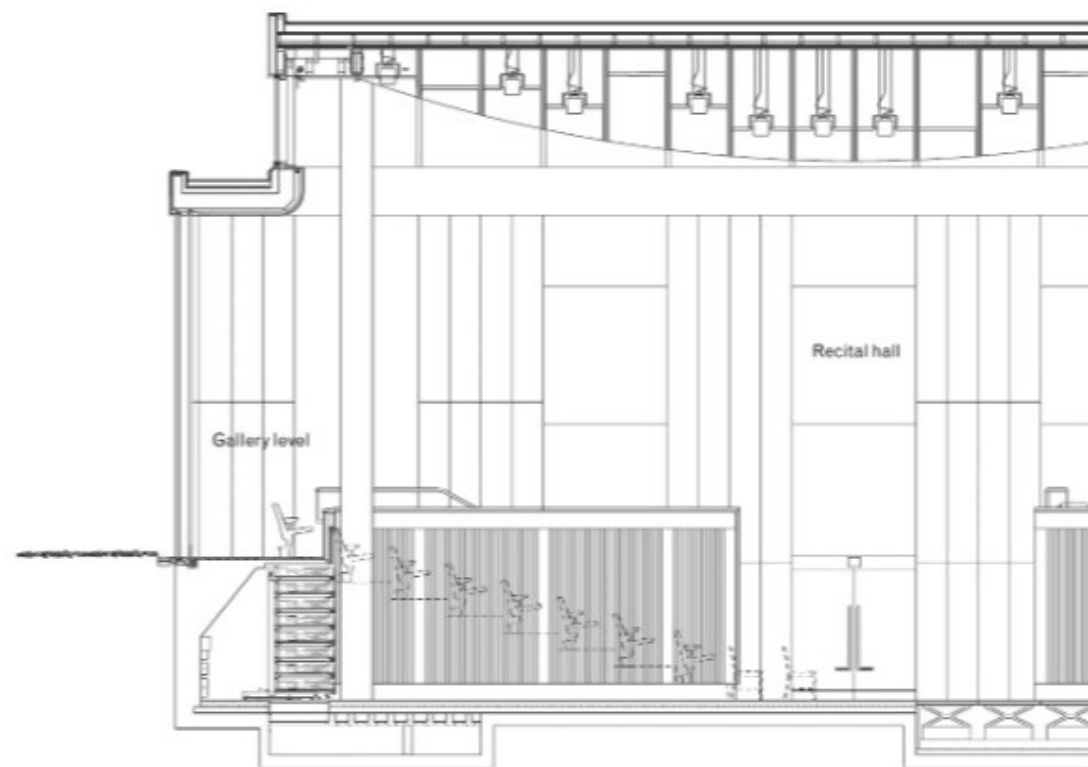
It proves itself daily. It is the first choice venue for almost all activities in the school, including toddler groups, debates, dinners, conferences and art exhibitions. And then there's music, which could occupy the whole of it all day and every day. It has become beloved both in the school community and outside it. Audience members tell us that they have stopped attending concerts in other relatively local venues 'because this is so much lovelier'. Our Friends of Music (a group that provides financial support to the school) love it; they didn't all think they would.

The building is a living being with a wonderful acoustic. We wish it could speak; whenever we use it for something new it seems to say, with a small sigh, 'I've been waiting to be asked to do that; what kept you?' Listening to Cedars Hall is part of my job. The building has always said 'yes'; it has sometimes said 'this way will be better'. It has always been right!

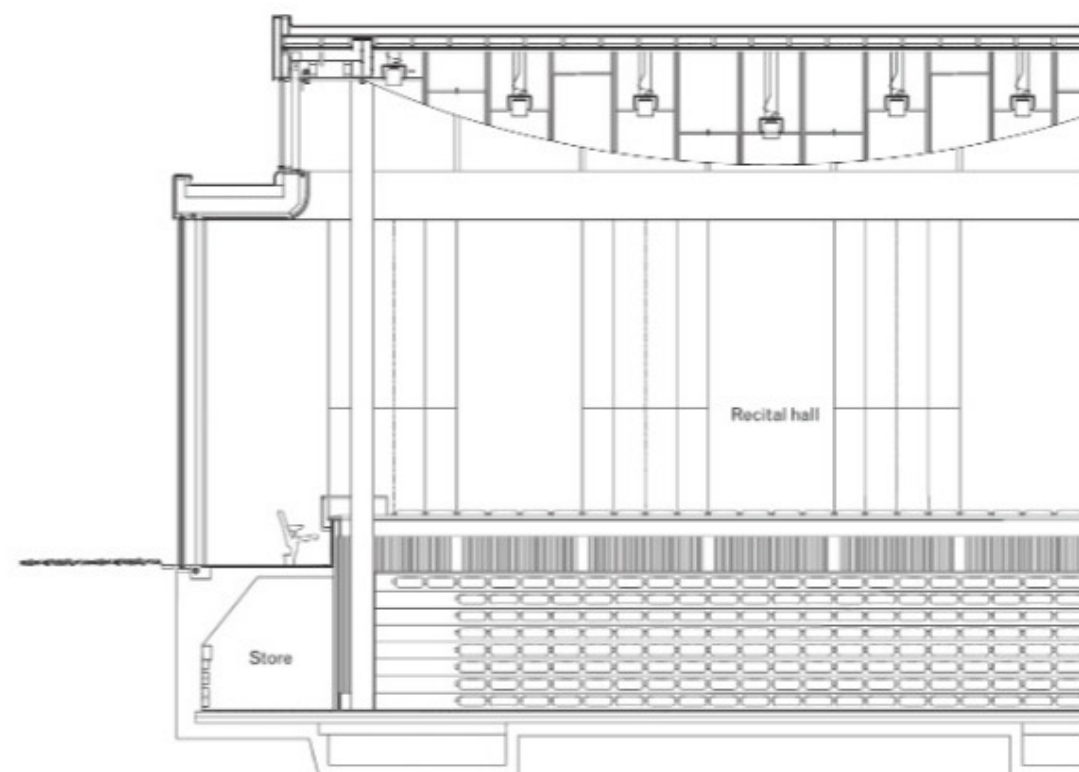
*Elizabeth Cairncross, principal,
Wells Cathedral School*

Project data

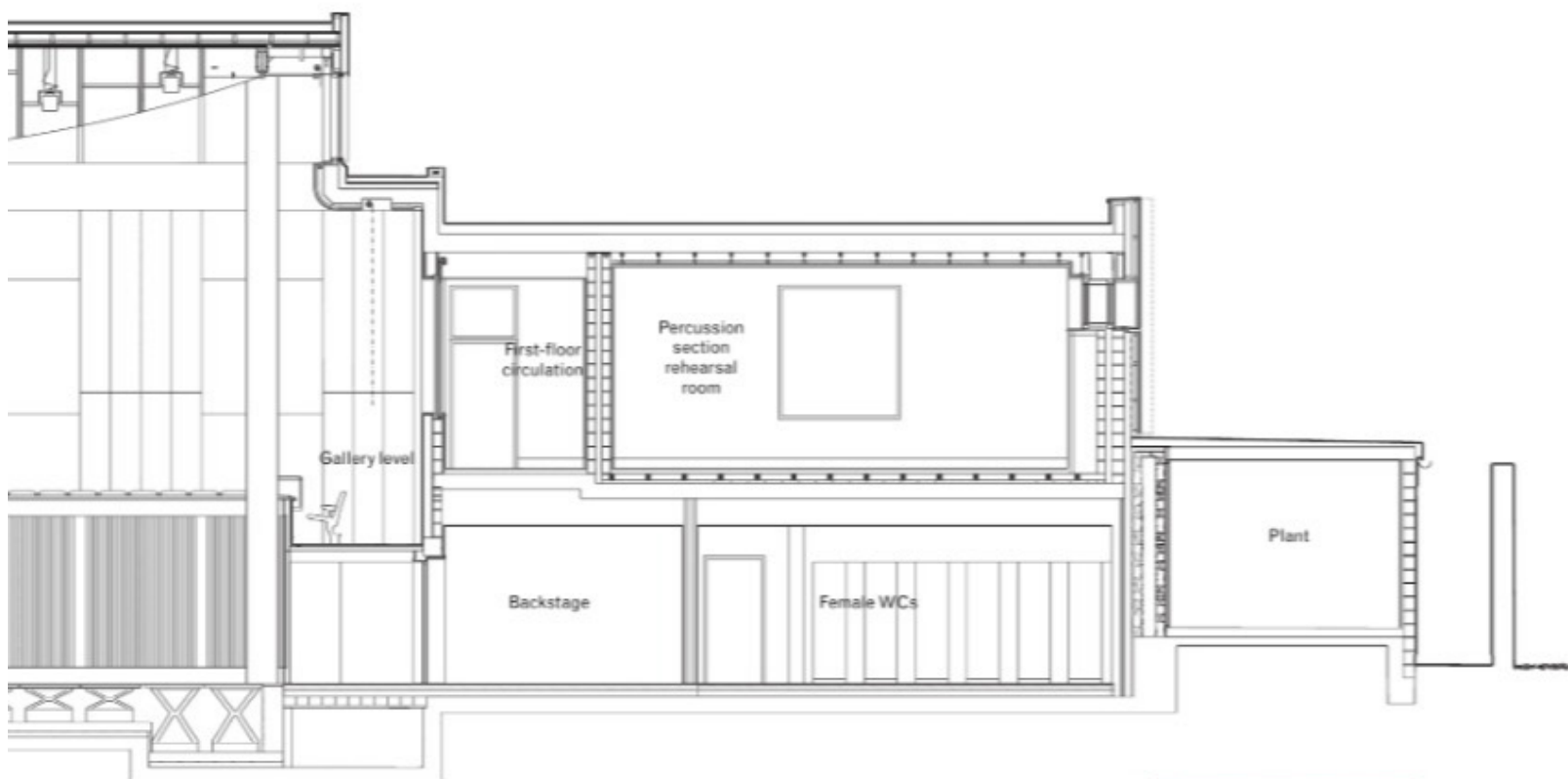
Start on site February 2015
Completion November 2016
Gross internal floor area 1,458m²
Construction cost £6.58 million
Construction cost per m² £4,510
Architect Eric Parry Architects
Acoustic consultant Gillieron Scott
Acoustic Design
Theatre consultant Charcoalblue
Landscape architect Land use Consultants
Structural engineer Momentum
Consulting Engineers
M&E consultant Buro Happold
Quantity surveyor QSPM
CDM coordinator Kensington Taylor
Approved building inspector Salus
Main contractor Shaylor Group
CAD software used MicroStation



Section A-A



Section B-B



Architect's view

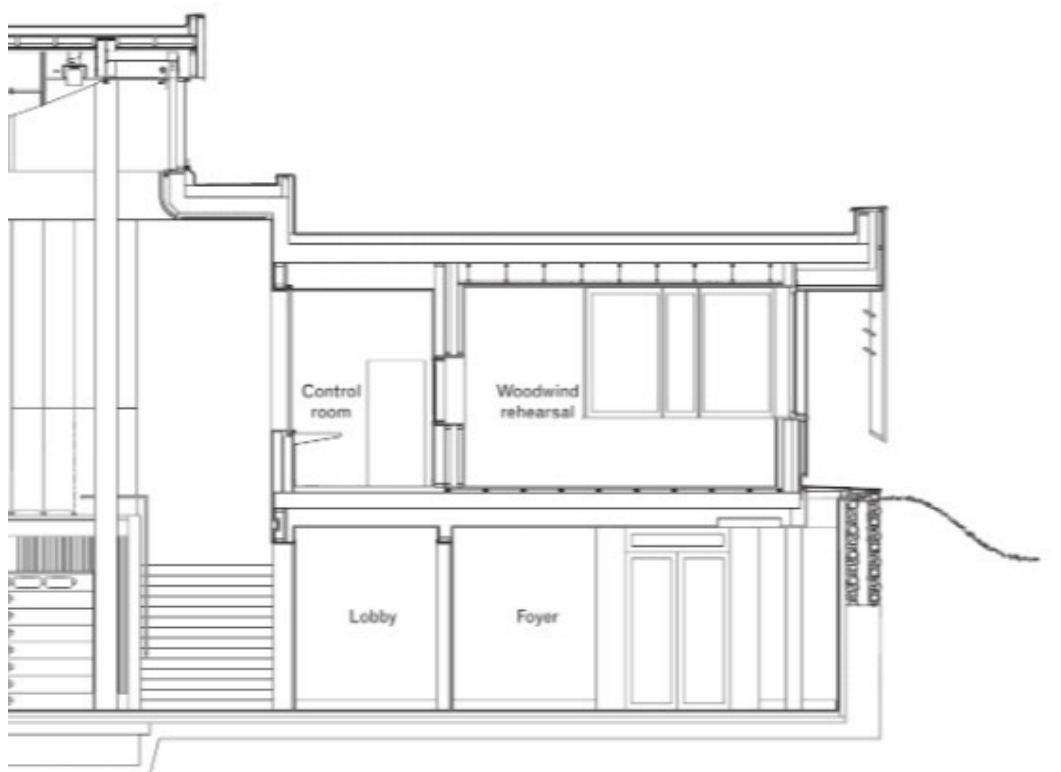
The site is in a listed landscape with the backdrop of a Georgian mansion, mature cedar trees and the silhouette of Wells Cathedral. It was tightly constrained in every orientation and the requirement to create a new recital hall as a focal point for the school community required a large volume to settle confidently and centrally within this setting. We felt a resonance between the project and the school with the role that the chapter house serves for the cathedral's community.

The issue of an overbearing presence was addressed by the tripartite sectional idea: setting the performance level and entrance below the level of the playing fields; creating a surrounding wall of a single large ordered storey; pushing the central section to the full height of the performance area, above the surrounding wall and connecting the two by a clerestory window band.

The expectation was for the building to be in stone, yet the background of ancient yew hedge-wall and cedars, combined with the need for the building to stand alone, brought us to think of the deep russet brown of the weathering steel with its complementary hues and depth of tone. Additionally we wanted to eliminate joints – to have the building made of singular sections to create ambiguity of scale.

While the building's contractual arrangements were protracted, curiously the planning process was remarkably straightforward, achieved with slight adjustments to the height of the upper section, under delegated authority.

*Eric Parry, founder and principal,
Eric Parry Architects*



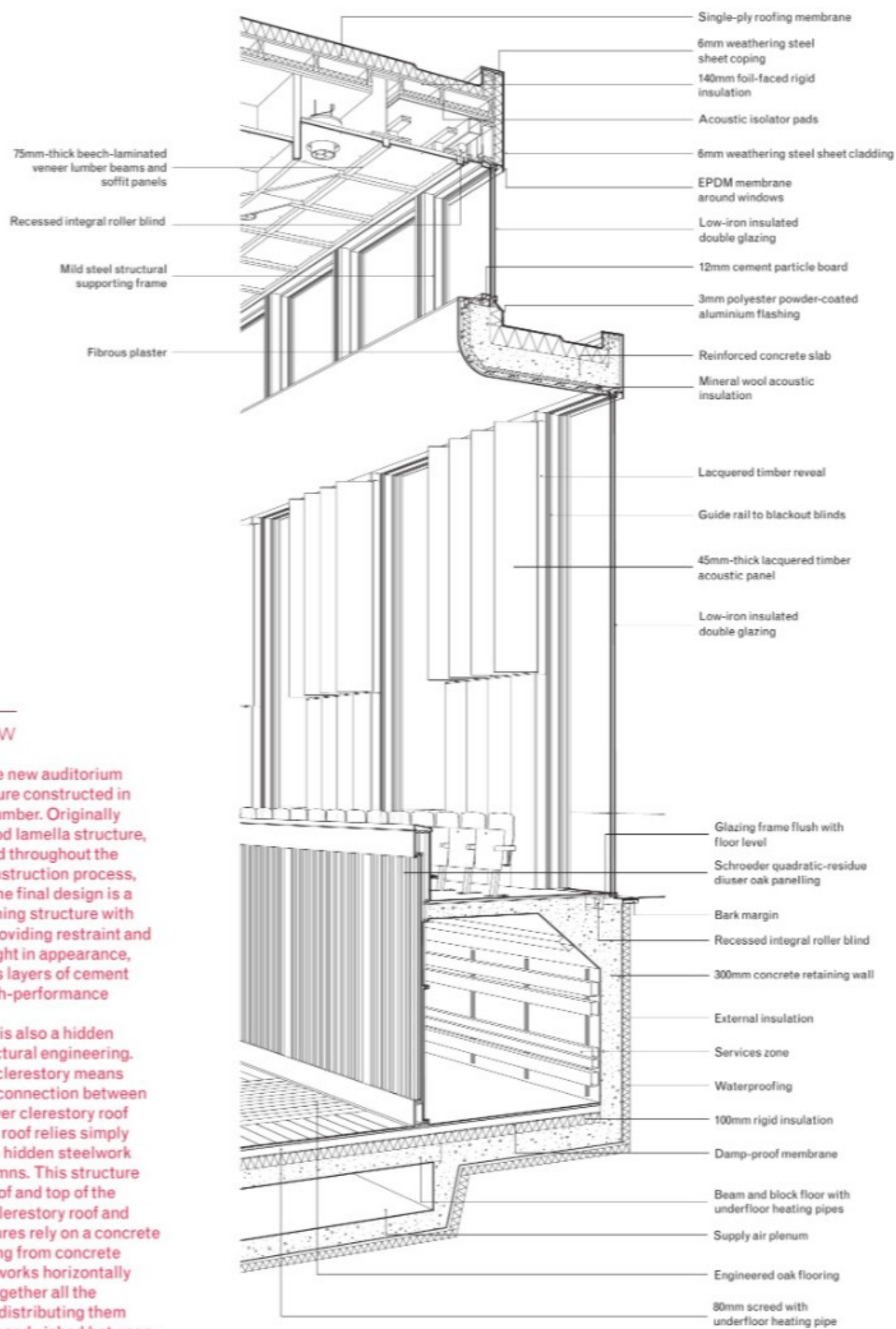
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Engineer's view

The centrepiece of the new auditorium is a timber grid structure constructed in laminated veneered lumber. Originally conceived as a plywood lamella structure, the building developed throughout the project, balancing construction process, efficiency and cost. The final design is a simple one-way spanning structure with the cross members providing restraint and stiffness. Although light in appearance, the structure supports layers of cement board to provide a high-performance acoustic enclosure.

Stability of the roof is also a hidden piece of creative structural engineering. A continuous glazed clerestory means there is no structural connection between the upper roof and lower clerestory roof structures. The upper roof relies simply on portal action of the hidden steelwork and four primary columns. This structure restrains the upper roof and top of the clerestory, while the clerestory roof and perimeter wall structures rely on a concrete ring beam cantilevering from concrete walls. The ring beam works horizontally and vertically, tying together all the horizontal forces and distributing them to the blade columns sandwiched between the 5m windows.

Edward Rice, project manager, Rice Projects



Perspectival section

Buildings
School

Classical descant



28 November 2017

Words: Eleanor Young

Region: United Kingdom

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Designing and building it,
Design construction & technology,
Music, Eric Parry Architects,
Somerset, Heritage, Context

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Eric Parry's Cedars Hall for Wells Cathedral School is a solo performance that harmonises with its medieval surroundings



From across the cricket pitch the importance of sinking the volume of the hall into the ground, and reducing the massing at clerestory level, is clear. Left is the school's reception, right are red timber-clad music practice rooms. Credit: Dirk Lindner

There is a famous photograph of the sun illuminating the worn limestone steps of Wells Cathedral's chapter house. On the similarly worn roots of a cedar tree, within the sound of the cathedral bells, a new home for music in the city was conceived: Cedars Hall.

This Somerset city has music writ through it with the rehearsal and performance spaces of Wells Cathedral School – one of just five specialist music schools in the country – dotted around the cathedral precincts. Foremost among them is the gothic cathedral itself; alongside it the medieval Quilter Hall where smaller concerts take place. Eric Parry Architects' Cedars Hall joins these ancient buildings, giving the school a music centre with a tunable space that is fully geared up for recording and invisibly kitted out with power and data cables, which cannot be inserted into the listed stone structures. And, despite a difficult gestation, Cedars Hall's 400-seat concert space shares a robust materiality and sense of being grounded in its location.



Entering at a lower level (left) takes you into the ground floor of the building, alongside the Liberty wall, which the stone is intended to tie in with. Credit: Dirk Lindner

I walk to the cedar tree with architect Tim Lynch, kicking silvery trails in the deeply dewed cricket pitch. Above us are the Mendip hills but turning towards the city it is the cathedral you see rising behind the school buildings, the historic Liberty wall thrown loosely around it. The concert hall sits on this falling ground. Despite its inevitable bulk, with a minimum 10m internal height required for acoustics, the building secured planning without going to committee. Lynch puts it down to the school's work with its neighbours and strategic planning by advisor architect Colin Stansfield Smith who had identified this site before the competition.

'From outside there is the promise of an inhabitable space, not just an imposition of a building'

But much of the success of the building is the way Parrys has handled the ground plane, digging the volume of the hall into the slope (a little less deeply than originally planned thanks to old mining chemicals contaminating the soil). Unlike most concert halls this has windows, so the meeting of the ground level outside and the gallery level inside has some significance, imparting a sense of the building in the landscape. And from outside there is the promise of an inhabitable space, not just an imposition of a building. Music practice rooms have been pulled out of the main volume with the intention that they are embedded in the Liberty wall, they are conceived as stone continuum. This is hard to read from the cricket field as the sections of wall not obscured by a tall yew hedge have yet to weather into a comfortable backdrop – the new mortar is the same composition as the historic mix so is currently lighter. However, from the playground to the junior school on the north, where the spoil is moulded into a stepped mound to the timber-clad rear of the hall, the building becomes a more convincingly part of the Liberty wall.



The panels of red continue inside. Between them can be seen either the beautiful grounds or their reflection in darkened glass panels. Credit: Dirk Lindner

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Externally, the trunks of weathering steel forming the vertical panels draw on the verticals in the landscape. The height, proportions (they are 5.5m high by 2m wide) and simplicity of them in concert with the glass panels is calm and spacious. You can imagine this steady building acting as a foil to the animation of the pupil orchestras inside. Despite the elegance of the facade, Parrys was assiduous in ensuring details on corners were styled to give a sense of a monolithic material rather than thin sheets, and the red MDF and ply panels bring the intensity and rhythm inside. Many of the panels are affectionately called ‘sharks fins’ as they are moved to tune the hall. Where circulation and tech spaces overlook the hall the clear glass is replaced with black without a break in the rhythm.

The potential problem of landscape views distracting musical concentration is offset by the way the hall’s volume is gathered in by the gallery around the edges – so most of the audience and performers sit cosseted below ground level in a smaller space. The belly of the CNC-cut beech LVL acoustic grid and the inset clerestory also add a sense of enclosure.



The back of the building, in natural timber, picks up the line of the Liberty wall. Credit: Dirk Lindner

The fundamental idea of a high acoustically performing building with windows – especially at this scale of project – sowed the seeds for some of its struggles. Acoustic insulation of 65dB was the original aspiration – higher than any competitor music schools – but required a specialist contractor from the continent to take on the envelope. It would have been a large subcontract for a relatively small building, but by bundling projects together, including a Parry-designed maintenance building and cricket pavilion, the school initially attracted large contractors. However, it gradually became clear that the chosen contractor didn't want to take on the risks. Along the way there was much value engineering, a change to the structure – and after serious consideration whether an extra 18dB isolation was worth an extra million pounds it was decided that no, it was not, when the worst sounds were sportsfield cheering and the occasional jet. So no huge subcontract and the contract for Cedars Hall alone was relet to a smaller contractor, eventually costing £6.2 million, just over £4200/m².

I visited at the dog end of the half term holidays with the builders in for snagging and a Marie Celeste of crushed plastic cups and tangles of chairs in the rehearsal rooms. These rooms, despite the innovation of observation rooms alongside, now being appropriated for other musical purposes, are obviously the back of house school territory. And empty, the foyer has the same sense. However, there was evidence of it in active use as a temporary gallery, if not as a brass rehearsal space, and it has the bones of a welcoming double height gathering space. But it is undoubtedly the concert hall and its place in the landscape that steal the show.

IN NUMBERS:

Contract value £6.2m

Gifa 1,458m²

› [Download section and floor plans](#)

Credits

Client Wells Cathedral School

Structural & civil engineer

Momentum Consulting Engineers

M&E engineer Buro Happold

Acoustic consultant Gillieron

Scott Acoustic Design

Theatre consultant Charcoalblue

QS QSPM

Project manager QSPM

Main contractor Shaylor Group

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