The impact of Parker Thomson on the Miami Music Community

By Julian H. Kreeger

Music was not in the air. But it is there now. And it is much more than a 'music area' — it is the result of the vision and commitment of a single individual, Parker Thomson. In the early 1980s, when Miami's need for a first-class performing arts center was being discussed, Parker was instrumental in structuring the Miami Music Project (the "MMP"). Parker became a key member of the Board, which has enabled the MMP to obtain tremendous credibility with the Knight Foundation and the City of Miami. A lack of music courses and programs in the Miami-Dade schools was a serious deficiency. In 2008, when Maestro James Judd arrived, there was no financial support for education in the cultural arts. Parker's strong belief that education in the cultural arts enhances overall student performance led him to conclude that the Miami-Dade public schools needed to acquire musical instruments and establish an Il Sistema program. Parker's leadership was instrumental in helping him develop an association with University of Miami's School of Music, where he ultimately became a full-time professor. Parker's commitment to education and the arts was exceptional. He was a brilliant lawyer, a brilliant composer, and a brilliant musician. Parker was an indispensable participant in the debates about the shape and execution of the buildings. At the time, Miami had no significant downtown. Parker recalls that John McMillan, the Miami Herald's Executive Editor, would describe Miami's downtown as the "center of a doughnut!" Ted Arison, Carnival Cruise Lines founder, was advocating that the Performing Arts Center be located on Miami Beach. Parker was instrumental in persuading him to place it in downtown. (See www.arshtcenter.org/About-Us/Facts-History)

The County had to make difficult choices among three major architects and firms: Cesar Pelli, Arquitectonica and Rem Koolhaas. Parker insisted that the County should not only choose an architect but should also have an acoustician. Ultimately César Pelli was chosen to be the architect and Russell Johnson to assist with the acoustics. The County asked César Pelli to design his best work. They wanted a great concert hall. The concert hall (now known as the Knight Concert Hall) should be designed that would not compromise the acoustics. Moreover, it was decided to exceed 1,800 seats — the size of the best concert halls in Europe, and even possible to adjust side panels in the hall for reverberation. Russell Johnson created adjustable reflectors over the stage so that it was ultimately decided that a 2,200-seat hall could be designed that would not compromise the acoustics. The intent was to enable young students in the Miami-Dade Public Schools to obtain musical instruments and to develop an Il Sistema program. Russell Johnson created adjustable reflectors over the stage so that it was possible to adjust side panels in the hall for reverberation. It was there that the son of a history professor at Russell Sage College in Troy, New York, Parker had attended many concerts at the Troy Savoy, was an indispensable participant. He was a prominent participant in the discussions. When I was later selected as Assistant Director of the Miami Herald, David W. Johnson, the Miami Herald's Executive Editor, would describe Miami's Downtown Arts District as "a cultural oasis in a musical desert." When I first met Parker in the early 1970s when I was Assistant to Richard F. Wolfson, General Counsel for Wometco Enterprises, the owner of WTVJ, Florida's first television station. At the time, Parker represented the Miami Herald. Parker was a brilliant lawyer. 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