Performing arts facilities never give top billing to their staging platforms and audience seating, but as two facilities in the USA illustrate, this unsung equipment can play vital roles in supporting flexible programming and memorable performances.

"Around 50% of our interior structure is mobile," explains Tom Hamilton, technical operations director at Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts (CCPA), which is located in Cerritos, California, 20 miles southwest of Los Angeles. "It's like a puzzle we can assemble in different ways, including arena, theatre-in-the-round, and cabaret configurations," he adds.

Designed by architect Barton Myers and planned by Theatre Projects Consultants, CCPA is one of the most flexible theatres in the world, following in the traditions of the changeable theatres of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Hydraulic lifts and air casters allow the auditorium to take on five different configurations. Balcony seating is fixed, but floor seating consists of moveable wagons that can be raised, lowered or removed completely. Large towers containing the box seats can be angled to face the stage in a number of positions. Overhead ceiling panels are also moveable to suit different acoustical requirements.

The stage can be transformed into various sizes, either manually or by electronic controls. This unique flexibility is supported by an extensive inventory of Wenger staging – approximately 100 staging decks, both 1.2 x 2.5m and 1.2 x 1.2m in size, with interchangeable legs ranging from 20cm to 100cm.

"The largest setup is our arena configuration, where we build a 15 x 10m stage 100cm high," Hamilton reveals. "We also build band risers for pop and country shows."

Even when in the arena setup, CCPA still owns enough additional platforms to simultaneously serve other areas of the facility. "Because it's so flexible, we also use these platforms in our lobby for banquet head tables or podiums, in our conference room and theatre, or even outdoors in our garden and fountain courts," says Hamilton, adding that the platforms are easy for two people to handle.

Versatile architecture and flexible equipment have enabled CCPA to adapt to changing market and client needs, re-inventing itself more easily and targeting a wider variety of events than would be possible with a fixed configuration.

Most of the performing arts programming is during the autumn, winter and early spring. "Given the realities of our programming budget, we decided to start our summer season a little earlier in order to get bigger pop music acts that are touring," continues Hamilton. Some cabaret-style concerts are held in the more intimate Sierra Room on a 6 x 7m stage.

CCPA is also targeting more rental business, particularly during the spring months. The facility has become popular for high school proms as a result of the flexible configuration options and layout, including large banquet space and dance floor. Twelve proms are already booked during a six-week period in 2012.
Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts in California – interior and exterior shots
In the past, CCPA’s proximity to Los Angeles made it a popular location for TV specials, commercials and Hollywood movie sets. “I don’t know of any other facility our size – less than 2,000 seats – with such flexible configuration options,” notes Hamilton. “We’ve been extremely pleased with our staging and have increased our inventory over the years, which is a compliment in itself. We’ll continue choosing Wenger.”

Adams State College

“Uncomfortable seating was everyone’s biggest complaint – the old seats in Leon Memorial Recital Hall were terrible,” recalls Dr Tracy Doyle, music department chair at Adams State College in Alamosa, Colorado. At this campus venue for recitals by students, faculty and guest artists, along with concerts by local bands, the seating was original from the 1960s.

During a week-long selection process, a team of college personnel sat in sample seats from five manufacturers. Doyle says comfort was the main issue, followed by attractiveness. “Wenger was our favourite from day one and that did not change – it was unanimous,” she explains, adding that she believes the higher seat back contributes to the comfort. “We also liked the sophisticated look – different to a lot of the traditional auditorium seating.”

They selected light tan upholstery with orange accent colours.

Other finish upgrades in the hall’s renovation included new paint, carpets and tiles, along with new lighting and a recording booth. Davis Partnership Architects was the architecture firm. Testing ensured the new seating would not alter the hall’s acoustics; after a recent piano recital, the consensus opinion was that the acoustics had actually improved.

To minimise noisy distractions, seats feature a proprietary lifting mechanism that ensures extremely quiet operation. “The response to our new seating has been overwhelmingly positive,” concludes Doyle. “Everyone’s raved about them – both the comfort level and attractiveness.”

Along with staging and seating solutions, Wenger fits out performing arts facilities across the USA and around the world with a wide range of other equipment, including acoustical shells, choral risers, storage cabinets, music stands, and a full line of music posture chairs.

Leon Memorial Recital Hall in Colorado has opted for light tan upholstery with orange accent colours.
Wenger offers a full line of acoustical shells to fit every performance space.

Whether you have a small auditorium, gymnasium or performing arts center, Wenger has the acoustical treatment for you. The Diva Acoustical Shell is, without a doubt, the most advanced full stage acoustical shell of its kind… visually stunning and audibly superior for your full auditorium needs. Wenger’s newest acoustical solution is the Forte Acoustical Shell, which enhances acoustics for both the ensemble and audience in small-to-medium sized performance spaces. The Legacy Acoustical Shell combines portability and ease of set up with acoustical projection in a variety of venues. Contact your Wenger representative today to design the right shell set for your space.