CASE STUDY: SAN FRANCISCO OPERA
CUSTOM SEATING RISER

In February of 2016, the San Francisco Opera opened the new Diane B. Wilsey Center for the Opera. The Center was part of a 40,000 square foot renovation to the 1930s era Veterans Building, located just north of the 3,146 seat Opera House. Reconstructing the Veterans building had been an unavoidable task since a 1996 seismic assessment deemed the building unsafe after a major earthquake. The Opera used the retrofit to their advantage by having the foresight to consolidate inefficient Opera activities that were spread throughout the city onto one campus, adding office space, an archive, and the state-of-the-art space now named the Dianne and Tad Taube Atrium Theatre.

The 299-seat Taube Theatre is located on the 4th Floor of the Wilsey Center, and was previously occupied by the Museum of Modern Art. They wanted a space that would offer the ability to push performance boundaries, inspire a new generation of audiences, and be relevant for decades into the future. The space was to be dubbed ‘The Lab’.

The list of challenges was long. The Opera needed the equipment and technology to make the space flexible for the experimental performance styles and acoustical techniques that future performances may dream up. They also needed to modify the historic fourth floor space to handle the weight loads of an audience, and have the ability to control the lighting and acoustics for professional performances. One of the most important elements considered was the ability to manipulate was the audience configurations and sight lines. Staging Concepts was selected to build flexible audience risers and stages that would meet two primary configurations, but would allow for many variations.
Every design detail, material, and finish was meticulously considered. The riser had to seat 299 people in an end stage and corner configuration, yet tuck away into the limited storage space of the 1930s building. Our engineers achieved this by ensuring we had the least amount of unique parts and pieces needed to make the two configurations.

The understructure of the risers are powder coated black to disappear in the darkness, and are also closed off with custom steel mesh closure panels. The panels transition seamlessly into custom raker guardrail engineered to meet the loading criteria of the International Building Code, but can also be installed quickly using a minimalist design by allowing the rail to lock directly into the platform frames. The closure panels, guardrail, handrail, platform frames, and stairs are all powder coated gray to blend into the gray walls of the performance space. The custom gray carpet was selected to match the room aesthetics as well as dampen performance reverberation and footfall. The carpet is two-toned with black accents to ensure audience members can see stair edges at egress. LED lighting was integrated into step units to mark aisle ways.

The venue required fast set up and tear down so choosing something more sophisticated than the traditional stick-built understructure for the seating riser was needed. The Opera chose the high performance SC2000 understructure, which is an accordion style understructure which folds in and out for the nine tier seating riser system. Custom chairs for the riser were purchased from an Italian manufacturer, and are designed so that empty chairs would have the same acoustical characteristics of an occupied chair.

The riser had to be approved by a team of acousticians to ensure it would complement a state-of-the-art sound system. The sound system in this room has a network of integrated microphones and speakers connected to a computer system; this allows users to apply algorithms to the sound which has the same effect of changing the room shape and materials.

Staging Concepts was thrilled to be a part of this cutting edge performance space and jumped at the fantastic challenge of turning the burden of a seismic retrofit into an advantage by consolidating spread out facilities into one centralized campus. The benefits of the Opera’s vision will extend far into the future as audiences will be a part of performances in which producers have full creative control of a high-tech, flexible space with equipment designed to last for generations.