

# A Sage move — at last

Last February we Novocastrians were honoured by a visit from our Deputy Editor, who informed me that the Sage music centre, on the Gateshead bank of the Tyne, was about to open for business. He was going to the first concert and would we like to join him? This was news to me, but I assumed that he must be better informed than I (after all, it is a Deputy Editor's job to be better informed), and booked tickets for the concert. The Northern Sinfonia Orchestra and Chorus were doing Handel's 'Alexander's Feast', a fine oratorio, but perhaps an obscure choice for the first performance in a brand new concert hall. I was also a bit puzzled by the lack of advance publicity for the great event. Surely by now there should be saturation coverage on *Look North*, with special supplements in the *Evening Chronicle* and *The Journal*? There also seemed, still, to be rather a lot of cranes and workmen around for a building that was supposed to be open in a couple of weeks.

I am glad that, in the event, the Deputy Editor got the chance to attend a concert in the old City Hall on Northumberland Road in Newcastle (and on the way there to see the old tradition of scantily clad Geordie girls unconcerned by a snow storm). This municipal pile holds a host of happy memories for me. I have heard Menuhin, Rubinstein, Anda, Pommier, Szeryng, Schneiderhan, Tortelier, Accardo, Ricci and many others there, and have happily put up with its stodgy architecture, the nauseous ochre and purple colour schemes and the slow service in the bar. Best of all, I have seen the Northern Sinfonia develop into one of the most flexible and subtle musical ensembles anywhere. But there were very few places you could sit to hear them properly, as the hall tended to swallow up the sound, especially if you were poor or mean enough to have to sit under the balcony.

At last, in December, the Sinfonia opened their residence at the Sage with Haydn's 'Creation'. That was more like it. What other work could more aptly represent the progression from chaos to order that we

had seen over the last 4 years, as the site was transformed from a motley collection of shabby old yards and buildings to the gleaming steel and glass vision we see today? 'Achieved is the glorious work', indeed. Opinions on Tyneside are mostly approving of the new building, apart from the occasional curmudgeon who says it looks like a metal slug and one of my elderly female patients who said she thought it looked like a giant condom. I thought: you must have had an interesting life once upon a time. When I first saw the original artist's impressions showing the arc of the building set against the Tyne bridge I thought immediately of the early 1950s film of *The War of the Worlds* where Martians go around in gleaming ovoid metal fighting machines zapping everything in sight. It is now transformed into a scene from Iain M Banks' *Culture* novels, where an ultrasophisticated civilisation seeks its pleasures in elegant hi-tech structures set in stunning landscapes.

You enter the Sage to find yourself on a wide concourse, with the Baltic and Gateshead Millennium Bridge to the east, the river Tyne and Newcastle quayside with its mixture of 19th century grandeur and modernist exuberance to the north, and the Tyne and Swing bridges to the west. The huge plate-glass windows of the north

elevation descend below the level of the concourse, giving the impression that you are standing on the edge of a plateau, with the whole exhilarating cityscape spread around you.

I went in one lunchtime to buy my tickets. In the past I had usually ordered tickets by telephone rather than struggle in to the dingy 1930s-style box office at the City Hall (after driving around for ages to find a parking place — no such problems at the Sage, which has vast parking facilities). I will henceforth go in person to buy my tickets just for the pleasure of spending a few minutes enjoying the view. And maybe getting lunch at the brasserie. There are stands selling various kinds of tat such as notepads, ties, tea towels, chopping boards with music by Chopin printed on them (Chopin — chopping, geddit?). These, and the £6 per head guided tours remind us that the Sage has to pull in considerable revenue to keep going. It is more than a couple of excellent concert halls. It is also an education centre with 25 teaching rooms and ambitions to foster musical talent in all genres from classical to folk to rock. There are also entertainment facilities — those of you who are wise enough to attend the 2005 SAPC meeting (organised by NoReN) will be welcomed in the Sage on the first evening of the conference (13 July) and

**The Sage Gateshead**



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may be lucky enough to hear me play the violin.

Other facilities include multiple bars and, at last, adequate toilets. The toilets are great, but so far the bars are continuing the great tradition of the City Hall by being slow and highly priced — and this despite importing Australian bartenders. The crowd, on the night we went, included familiar faces (I was delighted to meet a retired partner from my practice and old friends I had done my house jobs with) and a younger more trendy group, often with startling trousers and shaven heads.

Haydn's 'Creation' was performed by the Northern Sinfonia Orchestra and Chorus, with soloists Geraldine McCreevy, Thomas Walker and Michael George, conducted by the orchestra's musical director, Thomas Zehetmair. 'Number One Hall', a 1700 seat auditorium, is intimate, comfortable, finished in pale ash and said to be acoustically one of the two or three best in the world. From the opening representation of chaos through to the big choral numbers it was immediately clear that these claims were not exaggerated. Every detail of orchestral texture, from the most risky pianissimo to the most powerful fortissimo was heard and felt vividly, as it should be to experience the full power of the music. The performance was full of life, technically excellent and surprisingly moving. At the phrase 'let there be LIGHT', where the full orchestra and chorus blaze out in triumphant C major after the disturbing tensions of chaos, the release of emotion was immense and I don't think I was the only person to experience a welling up of tears at such beauty and joy.

There is a wonderful programme of musical events to look forward to — classical, jazz, folk, rock, world music (see [www.thesagegateshead.org](http://www.thesagegateshead.org)). I'll be there — try and keep me away. This is a great building with noble ambitions. I am lucky to live close to it, but the building itself and the events planned are so enticing that they are a good reason for making a trip to Newcastle or Gateshead from anywhere in the UK (and I suspect also from other parts of Europe). Anyway, I expect to see the Deputy Editor here again, and this time he can be reassured — the Sage is open!

**TOBY LIPMAN**

### 10 February

MRCGP Examination Preparation Course  
Lyngford House Conference Centre,  
Taunton  
*Contact: John Martin*  
*E-mail: severn@dial.pipex.com*  
*Tel: 01179 596030*

### 14 February

Minor Surgery Course  
RCGP, Princes Gate, London  
*Contact: Hilary Sellers*  
*E-mail: bedsandherts@rcgp.org.uk*  
*Tel: 01582 404088*

### 17 February

Highland Medical Society evening  
Postgraduate Medical Centre,  
Raigmore Hospital, Inverness  
*Contact: Alison Swanson*  
*E-mail: nscotland@rcgp.org.uk*  
*Tel: 01463 705539*

### 22 February

Ian Innes Annual Award and Lecture  
East Riding Medical Education Centre,  
Hull Royal Infirmary, Hull  
*Contact: Linda Newell*  
*E-mail: humberside@rcgp.org.uk*  
*Tel: 01482 335805*

### 23 February

Cardiology for Primary Care Course —  
Module 2 of 2  
JJB Stadium, Wigan  
*Contact: Amanda Penney*  
*E-mail: apenney@rcgp.org.uk*  
*Tel: 01925 662351*

### 25 February

MRCGP Exam Preparation Course  
Weetwood Hall Conference Centre &  
Hotel, Leeds  
*Contact: Amanda Lakin*  
*E-mail: yorkshire@rcgp.org.uk*  
*Tel: 0113 343 4182*

### ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST

Without the fanfare that accompanied its birth, the idea of the NHS University quietly faded away as 2004 drew to a close. It was always a barmy idea (this column, December 2001) that everyone from cleaners to consultants would be trained, if not under the same roof, then by the same organisation. The *Guardian* described the NHS University as a 'brainchild' of Alan Milburn, and the death of this child will, according to the *Guardian's* headline, be part of the health service's savings of £500 million per year. Which is all very well, but even more money would have been saved if sense had taken precedence over ill-judged enthusiasm in the first place. Other 'savings' will come from the axing (the *Guardian's* word) of the NHS Modernisation Agency. I visited the Agency's headquarters in Leicester a couple of years ago. They were impressive. Airy, smart, nice carpets, the latest computer publishing equipment: everything you could need for getting out the government's message. I was given a glossy booklet full of examples of how we could learn from examples of good practice. I was stirred by the story of a group of specialist diabetic nurses, who realised they would be more efficient if they had more than one blood sugar monitor between the eight of them.

Every political party in opposition draws up plans to 'cut red tape'; only the government can create its own bureaucracy and then claim credit for cutting it. The remnants of the Modernisation Agency and the University will be incorporated in a new body, the NHS Institute for Learning Skills and Innovation. This body, lovingly known as NILSI, comes into being in July 2005. It will also subsume the NHS Leadership Centre, a body that I didn't know existed.

Are any of these bodies needed? I just don't know. But it does not give me confidence when health minister John Hutton, speaking of what NILSI will do, talks of 'implementing the concept of the skills escalator'. Why only implement the concept? Why not implement the actual escalator? And I presume he means the up-escalator.

While we all want (though might phrase it differently) 'a health service where everyone is allowed to learn, develop and progress to the best of their potential', there is no getting away from the need for menial tasks. No matter how many degrees and NVQs our staff have, floors need cleaning and patients need moving. And those staff too must be valued, not made to think that, for them, it is progress or failure.