

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). 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.