

The hall of Limerick

Limerick's new, custom-built concert hall opens next Saturday with an extensive musical programme. Michael Dervan talks to the its director, Michael Murphy, and checks out the facilities



Michael Murphy, director of the new University of Limerick Concert Hall, "a multi-purpose venue at which it is proposed to promote a wide variety of music, dance, drama and comedy in the future" — (photograph: Garrett Hurley/Press 22)

THE opening of the new University Concert Hall in Limerick on Saturday is the occasion for one of the fullest weeks of music the city will ever have witnessed. After the National Symphony Orchestra is heard on Saturday and Sunday (in a programme that includes John Buckley's specially commissioned *Rivers of Paradise*) there will be, on successive days, concerts by The Chieftains, Suzanne Murphy, John O'Connor, Luka Bloom, the Irish Chamber Orchestra, London Winds and the Ulster Orchestra.

The comparison with the earliest days of the National Concert Hall in Dublin is an interesting one. In retrospect, the first 10 days of the NCH seem sparse indeed — with just three public concerts, by the RTESO (as the NSO was then called), The Chieftains and John O'Connor. In other ways, too, the Limerick hall is benefiting from more thorough forethought.

UCLH (is that what it's going to be abbreviated to?) is already in possession of a Steinway concert grand, an acquisition that took the NCH a number of months to sort out. The new hall is also beginning life with a hefty stack of PA speakers dangling from the ceiling, a development that took the NCH rather longer than the piano to come to terms with.

These comparisons, however, are not intended to convey the idea that the new hall is proposing itself as an institution to rival the NCH. Limerick has nothing in the way of a musical "anchor tenant", such as the NCH has in RTE, which, primarily through the NSO, promotes at least one concert a week at Earlsfort Terrace. The most regular guaranteed use of the new hall will be by the University of Limerick (on weekday mornings, primarily for lectures). After all it was the University of Limerick which masterminded the building of the hall and, through a university foundation, funded the project.

The new hall is located on-campus in the university's new £15-million Foundation Building. This houses not only the hall and its two, smaller, associated theatres (all three geared up with hi-tech audio-visual equipment for conference and broadcast use), but also the Hunt Museum, the National Self Portrait Gallery, the

Irish Water Colour Collection, a café, a unique, life-size reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Flying Man*, as well as — most importantly from the university's point of view — facilities for postgraduate research.

The feeling of the building, in spite of the spacious atrium and the absurdly loud "background" music that intruded during my visit, is what might be described as university-functional. On an initial viewing, this applies to the auditorium, too, which is modelled like a large lecture theatre (the spartan seats even have plastic flip-over writing tables) and, most unusually for a concert hall, is fully carpeted.

The acoustics have been favourably commented on by visiting musicians, but the acoustic feel of the empty venue is dry enough to remind one more of a recording studio than a concert hall. The reverberation time is lowish at 1.8 seconds — the longer the reverberation time, the more "swimmy" the sound will be. The building has been designed with flexible acoustics. The reverberation time can be taken down to 1.2 seconds for speech, and two of the reflective acoustic panels over the stage are tiltable.

The stage itself looks on the small size but is said to be roomy enough to accommodate a 90-piece symphony orchestra, a claim that will be fully tested on Saturday. Backstage facilities are mod-

est (just five dressing rooms) and for larger events, such as the coming week's orchestral concerts, the ancillary theatres will be called into use. The arrangement of the 1,000 seats — stalls, two side balconies and choir seats — has been achieved at some cost to sight-lines from the balconies.

The loss of vision over parts of the stage is quite severe from

some of the balcony seats, an effect that can be expected to have musical consequences, especially in orchestral works. The range of music being offered next week — three different-sized orchestras, concertos with three contrasted instruments (piano, clarinet and cello), solo piano, voice, and performances that will be amplified — will certainly put the new hall

through its paces from a musical point of view.

The director of the new hall is Michael Murphy, an accountant by profession (previously he was the financial director of Ashling Microsystems in Limerick). His brief is "to make sure that the concert hall operates and runs on a commercially viable basis". This, he says, is going to be achieved "by means of running events which won't lose money", but questions about the size of his annual budget were politely deflected. At the moment he doesn't have an artistic budget and the precise details of the long-term relationship between the university and its new performance space have not yet been fully worked out.

He took up his post as recently as the beginning of June, by which time the launch date had already been decided, and the bulk of the opening week's programme had already been chosen by John Ruddock of the Limerick Music Association. "The biggest task I've had to try and get to grips with is the official opening, which involves eight concerts for the public and one by invitation. That's nine nights, one after another, with only a small staff to organise the whole lot. That has commanded my every moment of attention."

In the early stages, he thinks it likely that outside promotions will predominate. With a hall not

much smaller than the NCH, he's keenly aware that the catchment population within half an hour's drive of the hall is around 300,000, less than a third of the number available to the NCH. He describes the hall as "a multi-purpose venue at which it is proposed to promote a wide variety of music, dance, drama and comedy in the future". The variety of the mix, he thinks, is crucial. "We must be very varied in what we do here in order to try and fill the house on each occasion."

The immediate target he has set himself is to ensure that there events in the hall every weekend, Friday, Saturday, and, when possible, Sunday too. Initially, there's no doubt, the new hall will be attempting to reflect local taste rather than to lead it.

"I would like to think, though, that we would begin to influence local taste once we stabilise and get ourselves on a solid footing. After all, it is the only venue of its kind in this region, so we have a lot of learning and understanding to do, a lot of market research to carry out, to find out what is desired by the population in this region. Then we can take it from there and try and be innovative in what we promote."

A lot of fund-raising has gone on in advance of the opening, he says, and these funds will be kept as a cushion against the unforeseen — and a safety net for a certain amount of risk-taking that couldn't otherwise be countenanced.

The existence of the new hall will obviously have a profound effect on musical and other artistic activity in the Limerick region. The NSO, for instance, will, after a break of nearly 20 years, be putting the city back into its schedule of regional tours, and, early next month, Julian Lloyd Webber and the Glenn Miller Orchestra will be among the first to take advantage of the new facility. On a national level, the existence of a major new out-of-Dublin venue may well enable tours by visiting orchestras or celebrities that would have remained unviable on the basis of a single date. With imaginative management, the new venue could give audiences in Dublin, as well as music lovers in the mid-West region, a lot to smile about.

University Concert Hall, Limerick

Opening programme, Saturday 18th-Sunday 26th

- **Saturday 18th:** NSO (invitation only).
- **Sunday 19th:** Bill Golding, Bernadette Comerford, (speakers), Barry Douglas (piano), NSO/Colman Pearce: John Buckley, Beethoven and Dvořák.
- **Monday 20th:** The Chieftains.
- **Tuesday 21st:** Suzanne Murphy (soprano), Ingrid Surgenor (piano): Wagner, Strauss, Schubert, Dvořák, Brahms, Ravel, Dunhill, Verdi, Puccini, Mascagni, Cilea, and Irish songs.
- **Wednesday 22nd:** John O'Connor (piano): Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy and Prokofiev.
- **Thursday 23rd:** Luka Bloom.
- **Friday 24th:** Hugh Tinney (piano), Michael Collins (basset clarinet), Irish Chamber Orchestra/Stephen Kovacevich: Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner.
- **Saturday 25th:** London Winds/Michael Collins (clarinet): Mozart, Dvořák and Strauss.
- **Sunday 26th:** Torleif Thedéen (cello), Ulster Orchestra/En Shao: Weber, Dvořák and Beethoven.