

FOUR years ago, Limerick got a fine Concert Hall out of nowhere.

Most people didn't even know it was being built until it was opened and operating.

Now, as it has firmly established itself as one of the few truly great cultural locations in Ireland.

But it now wants to spread itself to all the people of the Limerick region.

MARTIN BYRNES spent a fascinating afternoon inspecting everything, from the foyer to the flies, and from the gods to the gantries. This is his report.

LIMERICK has one of the finest concert venues in the world, but next week it will become Limerick's "parish hall".

The University Concert Hall will fling its doors open to children, parents — everyone, as it hosts half of Limerick's week-long Charter Fest, to mark the 800th anniversary of Limerick's foundation as an official city.

King John's Castle is to become a concert venue too, and will stage the other half of the week's events.

Bus Éireann is kicking in, also, to provide free shuttles to the Castle from the various car parks, which will be made available through those nights.

The link between the Concert Hall and the Castle is the logical extension of the successful TV tie-up of the two venues during last New Year's Eve. That was the opening event of Charter 800, and next week will be the highlight period of the year.

The intention now is to bring the Concert Hall to more of the people more of the time, and not allow it to be regarded as some stuffy high-brow place for operas and Shakespeare only. The place is designed for all kinds of events — it is probably one of the most adaptable halls imaginable, and it is intended to use it to its fullest potential.

The other idea is to give the Castle back to the people. It was a gloomy, oppressive edifice for long enough. Now it is to get life, and Shannon Development is fully behind moves to open it up as a venue for events.

Charter Fest week will start this Sunday with a family open day, which will resemble a huge garden fête, with bouncing castles, carnival rides and all the fun of the fair — and with all kinds of musical events, both outdoors and in the great hall itself. One admission fee covers everything.

The Air Corps will bring a pair of Dauphins and an Alouette helicopter for quick chopper-rides.

On Wednesday, 18th, the Concert Hall is throwing its doors open to young people, with a concert by the Cork Pops Orchestra and Pat and Marion Ingoldsby — this event is already nearly fully booked up with arranged school tours.

That night, the band of Southern Command is to be joined by their colleagues from No 1 Army Band and the band of Curragh Command for a night of merriment, and there will be a military display on campus too.

Events switch to the Castle on Thursday with The Chieftains. The following night, the same venue will host Finbar Wright, and on Saturday there will be a country music extravaganza with Gloria, Louise Morrissey, Larry Cunningham, Paddy O'Brien and many more.

Back to Plassey on Sunday, 22nd, for what is being unofficially billed as Der-

— how could it, when the National Concert Hall itself is merely a hundred-year-old converted exam hall in what used to be part of UCD?

If the Government started giving cash for a proper concert hall here in Limerick, Dublin would kick up a right rum-pus.

So the UL Concert Hall was a bit of an accident, really. It certainly wasn't an idea imposed by Dublin.

At that time, the biggest lecture theatre in UL was the Jean Monnet (named after the French economist who was the first head of the European Coal and Steel Community, one of the precursors of the present EU).

Jean Monnet was used for conferrings, but was too small for a growing university.

So they began to plan another, bigger hall for the soon-to-be-built Foundation Building, plans for which were on the drawing board.

"Make the main theatre a bit bigger," said one planner, and another had some other ideas to be incorporated, and so had the next, and the next, until they suddenly realised that they were creating something not unlike a concert hall.

"So let's go the whole hog and build a proper concert hall!"

The idea was so obvious, when they thought about it, that they were surprised that they had not thought about it earlier.

"Why not?" they said; so they built the hall. But what a hall ...

The entire Foundation Building cost £15.3 million; the Concert Hall alone cost £6 million of that. How could such a huge sum have been spent on just one hall?

To begin with, it takes 1,000 people, but you wouldn't think that to look at it. This is because the seats are fanned out to give best view and for nearness to the performance platform. There are 23 seats in the front row, but this gradually widens to reach a spread of 43 at the



The wonder-hall that almost built itself...

Savoy in Cork — then the biggest theatre in the country — was being remodelled, a group of friends came together and bought, for a song, its old 12-rank Compton organ, which had been in use since 1932. They crated the bits and put them aside, waiting for a suitable home to emerge.

Amazingly, that is almost exactly what happened with the Boston Festival Organ, now housed in a purpose-built theatre in Methuen, in northern Massachusetts.

When plans of Limerick's Concert Hall became known, the friends rang fellow-Corkonian, Dr Ed Walsh, president

day, for example, Aer Rianta celebrated the fact that Duty Free shopping was invented at Shannon 50 years ago, by inviting the world's duty free managements to a big day at the Concert Hall.

In addition to the bare hall, of course, there are back-up facilities. The first of these is ease of parking and access.

Two other lecture theatres, 250-seats apiece, flank the main hall, and these come in handy for opt-out sessions during conferences, or can be used as top-up halls into which the business from the main hall can be video-beamed.

There is a handy restaurant (as well as all the other eateries on campus), and there are two floors of art galleries. The first of these is the National Watercolour Collection, and the upper level contains the National Self-Portrait Collection.

Also in the great space that is the atrium of the Concert Hall, hangs a startling wooden sculpture of a man hang-gliding. But that is not a sculpture. It is an exact physical representation of Leonardo da Vinci's design for a flying machine, drawn by him in the late 1400's.

Tony Ryan bought it for the foyer of GPA in Shannon when he was in charge there, but gave it to UL when plans for the GPA building were changed.

Where it now hangs, it bridges, as did Leonardo, the world of science (postgrad block) and the arts (concert hall and galleries).

Everything to do with the Concert Hall is leading-edge technology. For

APPLICATION TO PLANNING AUTHORITY

Limerick County Council: Application is being made to Limerick County Council by Tom and Suzanne Sparling for permission to erect bungalow and garage with septic tank and front boundary wall and entrance at Toomdeely South, Askeaton, Co. Limerick. (t14-6125)

APPLICATION TO PLANNING AUTHORITY

Limerick County Council: We are applying to Limerick County Council for planning permission for bungalow, entrance gates, front boundary wall, domestic garage and septic tank at Garryduff, Newcastle West: Signed William and Mary Dineen. (t14-6122)

APPLICATION TO PLANNING AUTHORITY

Limerick County Council: I am applying to Limerick County Council for outline planning permission for dwelling house, entrance gates and septic tank at Garryduff, Newcastle West: Signed Mortimer Madden. (t14-6122)

NOTICE TO PLANNING AUTHORITY

Limerick Corporation: Take notice that I, Maria McCarthy, am seeking planning permission to erect a three bedroom dormer type bungalow and ancillary works at Bloodmill



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...right, and on Saturday there will be a country music extravaganza with Gloria, Louise Morrissey, Larry Cunningham, Paddy O'Brien and many more.

Back to Plassey on Sunday, 22nd, for what is being unofficially billed as Dermot Morgan's official apology to Peter Clohessy, to round off the week.

Interval suppers are available at all evening events — talk to the Concert Hall, Savin's or the Castle.

But the Concert Hall at Plassey is now a year-round venue, even if it has a problem with geography. It is out of the city, and is therefore out of mind for many people.

The fact is that most Limerick people have never been in it, and even those



Where would one be without an efficient staff? Niamh Barry is one of the eight full-time people employed in the running of the Concert Hall. There are 40 temporary on-call staff as well. (LL)

who have, do not realise just how exceptional a venue it is.

Exceptional in many ways!

Michael Murphy, is a chartered accountant, which is just as well, because the State hasn't given a brown copper to UL Concert Hall since it opened in September 1993. Michael is the managing director of the company which runs the hall on a day-to-day basis, and he is a little bit pessimistic about its future, unless it can get its long-term finances in order.

Michael, as we shall see as we go along, is exceptional too.

At the start of this decade, three things happened together to cause the Concert Hall to come into existence.

Firstly, the university was outgrowing its facilities (again), and space was needed for postgraduate study and research, as well as for further undergraduate lectures.

Secondly, an organisation called the University of Limerick Foundation had been formed among UL graduates (mainly in America) which would qualify them for favourable US tax conditions if they contributed to new educational facilities at Plassey campus.

They raised £10 million for the project. That is why that whole block is called the Foundation Building.

Thirdly, the college itself had the necessary thinkers and planners to realise the potential and to get the job done.

The Government gave £5.3 million alright, but that was for the specialist postgraduate suite, which is a part of the Foundation Building, in the rest of which the Concert Hall, the art galleries and the public facilities are situated.

The State money came as it would for any set of lecture halls, libraries and labs in any college. Nothing came from Dublin for the creation of a concert hall



The personable managing director of the Concert Hall, Michael Murphy, treats his job with breath-taking enthusiasm.

Picture: ADRIAN BUTLER

back — 23 rows to the rear.

And, of course, there are steep side-galleries, and even seats behind the stage.

One would imagine that, in a university full of engineers, that the acoustics would be spot-on, and so they are. Not only is there no echo, but there are movable deflector panels and hidden mufflers to make sure that everyone in the hall gets a perfect listen.

And legroom is greater than in most theatres. Remember, this is a lecture theatre by day, and lots of students have fairly long femurs to be accommodated.

There is no air conditioning. Instead there is an ingenious system of air exchange, which Michael Murphy proudly showed to me. Every molecule of air is extracted and replaced in total silence and without a hint of draught every 17 minutes.

The only problem occurs on a couple of evenings a year, when the air outside is still too warm and is brought in — but mostly the hall is kept at a very comfortable temperature.

While they were building, somebody had a brainwave and asked this question: "Suppose you're in a wheelchair — theatres usually send you down to the front, where you sit alone, while your companion is left on their own up the back. Why not have a companion's seat beside each wheelchair space?"

"Why not?" they said, and they did that, and put in a little stair-lift to ease wheelchair people to what, all agree, are the best places in the house. For example, Adare's Lord Thady Dunraven, and his wife, Lady Geraldine, are frequent attenders.

Nearly twenty years ago, when the

of UL, and offered him the organ. He accepted and, with renovation work by restorers Wells/Kennedy, they got it working perfectly again.

But you can't have a big, heavy organ console on stage all the time, if you want to stage symphonies, comedy shows or the like. You can't put it on wheels either, because that would dig ruts in the stage. So what did the planners do?

"Why not put it on a hovercraft?" said one of the brains.

"Why not indeed!" they all agreed, and now, when one wants to move the console on-stage or off-stage, its under-base is electrically pumped with air, the whole lot rises a few centimetres, and it could be pushed along by a kitten.

The organ pipes, including some odd sound effect devices, are hidden from view behind a large panel high above the stage.

The Concert Hall also has a Steinway D grand piano, a world-class instrument.

As a university, UL has a lot of musical involvement, not least of which is in the person of the inspirational Professor Micheál Ó Suilleabháin. In addition, there is the fact that the National Chamber Orchestra is based at UL.

An advantage of having such a hall here means that great international names, such as Vladimir Azhkenazy, can now come here as part of a Belfast-Dublin-Limerick-Cork tour.

"I want to bring the best the world has to offer to the people of Limerick," says Michael Murphy.

But the Concert Hall remains a lecture hall by day and, as such, is also ideal for conferences. Fine Gael, Labour and the PDs have all held national conferences there, as have many of the bigger trade unions, such as the teachers. This Mon-

the GPA building were changed.

Where it now hangs, it bridges, as did Leonardo, the world of science (postgrad block) and the arts (concert hall and galleries).

Everything to do with the Concert Hall is leading-edge technology. For example, it was built for television. All the links are already in place, and all RTE or an offshore TV crew have to do is arrive with their cameras and mikes and just plug in.

There are four separate systems of visual display in the hall (it has the biggest cinema screen in Ireland, for example).

Even the ticket booking is top of the range. So sophisticated is the software that booking for concerts and shows up to Christmas is now open. In fact, of the 24,000 tickets available for the 24 events between now and the end of August, half have already been sold.

Care was given to the dressing rooms — they even have bathrooms en-suite.

Many of the events at the Concert Hall are not high-brow.

"People often look at a full hall here and think we are making a fortune, but many of the bigger acts are not promoted by us — they approach us and all we get is an agreed rental for the hall," says Mr Murphy.

Very much encouraged too are such things as the Ard Scoil Rís annual school concert, and the participation of Féile Luimni, because Michael Murphy believes that young people perform better "than in a freezing hall somewhere, looking an an adjudicator whose head is down and is still wearing an overcoat and scarf".

Michael Murphy is proud of the success of the hall, so far — full houses for such as the Corrs, Lenny Henry, Gene Pittney, the Hollies, Frank Patterson, and, of course, the National Symphony Orchestra, the RTÉ Concert Orchestra, and many visiting orchestras and ensembles, as well as whole operas and plays such as John B Keane's "Sive".

Michael, from Farranshane, is a knowledgeable fellow — particularly on music. He believes that the human voice is Limerick's specialist instrument.

But then, he would, wouldn't he? His sister is Limerick's own Suzanne Murphy, principal diva with the Welsh National Opera, and international recording star.



A general view of the hall, as seen from the left side of the stage, facing the audience. (LL)

NOTICE TO PLANNING AUTHORITY
Limerick Corporation: Take notice that I, Maria McCarthy, am seeking planning permission to erect a three bedroom dormer type bungalow and ancillary works at Bloodmill Road, Ballysimon, Limerick. (114-6109)

APPLICATION TO PLANNING AUTHORITY
Limerick County Council: Eugene Heavey intends to apply to Limerick County Council for permission to erect a bungalow, entrance, septic tank and percolation area at Ballinahawn, Croom, Co Limerick. (114-5426)

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