

Restored hall returns to its original function

By CONRAD WILSON

St Cecilia's Hall—built in 1762 (three years after Handel's death, eight before Beethoven's birth) to accommodate the Musical Society of Edinburgh, but more recently a school, a bookbinding factory and a dance-hall—has returned full circle to its original function. Restored by Edinburgh University as a home for the remarkable Russell Collection of old keyboard instruments, it was the scene yesterday of two private inaugural concerts; a public concert follows tonight.

Among the speeches intermingled with yesterday afternoon's music-making was a delightful account by Lord Crawford of how things were in the heyday of the hall, when concertgoers arrived by sedan-chair and the rubbish on the street caused a parking problem. Today's concertgoers may take a little while to get accustomed to going to the Cowgate for their music, but will surely find the hall an accessible and welcoming one, and a marvellous addition to Edinburgh's musical facilities.

The new facade that has been slapped on to it (people in 1762 entered by a different side, which can still be seen in Niddrie Street) and the newer of the two galleries for the instruments are not perhaps the last word in beauty. But the other gallery, built by the Freemasons during a period of ownership in the early nineteenth century, looks very lovely, with long windows, green walls and deep carpets. And the instruments themselves, many of quite extraordinary beauty and interest, are a treat merely to see, let alone hear (a handsome illustrated catalogue has been published by Edinburgh University Press).

GREAT CHARACTER

The auditorium has been rebuilt to its original oval shape. Like the pillared foyer and "Laigh" room downstairs, it has great character and charm. Though it is too soon yet to say much about its acoustics, one can at least report that it makes a solo harpsichord sound well—warm and clear—from the rear tip of the oval, and that people seated elsewhere in the 240-seat hall also spoke favourably of it (tonight's programme, for voice and instrumental ensemble, will be more testing).

The harpsichordist, both afternoon and evening, was the Dutch musician, Gustav Leonhardt. In the afternoon he played an exquisite pale-green French instrument, one of the plums of the collection, built by Taskin in 1769 and filched by the Nazis during the Second World War. The evening programme was shared between that instrument and a German one, built in Hamburg five years earlier, which between them provided some fascinating contrasts in tone—the French instrument made Mr Leonhardt's Bach playing sound much more alive and delicate and fanciful than did the more sober German one.

Hall and instruments will now undoubtedly place Scotland still more firmly on the musical map. To Professor Newman we all owe thanks for the ten years he has spent in securing the Russell Collection for Edinburgh, and housing them so splendidly.

Assessing the role of St Cecilia's

By CONRAD WILSON

THE first public event in St Cecilia's Hall since it was restored by Edinburgh University was given on Saturday and took the form of a concert party in which Peter Williams played Handel organ concertos with the Edinburgh Quartet and Marie Dare (the quartet were also heard on their own in Haydn's "Bird"). Clifford Hughes sang songs by Purcell and Jacobean composers and Dr Williams was joined by Gustav Leonhardt in some enchanting duets for two keyboards.

More than on the previous evening, which was devoted solely to harpsichord music, one was able to gain an impression of what sounds well in this beautiful oval auditorium and what doesn't. The weight of five strings plus the handsome brown-and-gold chamber organ that will be a permanent feature of the tiny platform is plainly about as much as the hall will hold without sounding dangerously overloaded, even from a seat at the back.

The quartet on their own sounded disagreeably stark and rough-edged—henceforward they would do well to stick to the more open acoustic of the Reid School. But the Hass harpsichord that was used in the songs, and the two spinets in the pieces by Gaspard le Roux, sounded delightful, and the solo

voice came over vividly and lucidly.

On the whole, it looks as if the hall's most useful contribution to our musical experience will be in the field of pre-classical music, and one looks forward to hearing how programmes of trio sonatas, such as those supplied by the Martin concerts, will work there, and whether a small vocal ensemble, such as the Satire Singers, will find it a happier setting than the Reid.

But above all, it is going to be a hall for fine keyboard music from the time of Haydn backwards, and it was no surprise on Saturday to find that the greatest pleasure came from hearing the le Roux pieces played in gloriously sweet-toned duet by Peter Williams and Gustav Leonhardt. Alas, they did not last nearly long enough, and those who had not attended his private recital the previous evening must have felt tantalised to hear so little of Mr Leonhardt, an outstanding Dutch harpsichordist whose visits to Britain are all too rare.

Two more events, a harpsichord recital by Peter Williams and a poetry reading by Edith Evans, lie in store during the Edinburgh Festival. Other plans have yet to be announced. Already the hall has begun to take its place in our lives again—as an inviting setting for special concerts (complete with a beautiful pillared buffet downstairs), as a living museum and as a centre of early keyboard music that will win Edinburgh acclaim all over the world.