

MIDWEST SIDE STORIES #1 - OVERVIEW

Highlights from the 2009 Midwest Clinic by Hamish Arthur

"It was a cold and wet December day when we touched the ground at JFK".

U2, *Angel of Harlem*

Actually, it wasn't "wet" – it was overcast. And, it wasn't the "day" – it was the night - 2am in the morning to be precise. And, it wasn't "JFK" – it was O'Hare International Airport. But, it was however "cold" and "December" and I was excited to be attending the 63rd Annual Midwest Clinic in Chicago, Illinois. After a mere 23 hours traveling time (including 6 movies – I can recommend 'It Might Get Loud' and '500 Days of Summer') I staggered into my hotel room and collapsed on the bed when an exciting thought suddenly sprung into my head – not "Wow! In a few hours time I will be attending one of the biggest band and orchestra festivals in the world" but "Wow! I get to have uninterrupted sleep for the next 7 days without being woken by any pre-schoolers demanding food, drink, company, nappy changes or all of the above." – Thank you KBB Music!



After successfully sleeping through my alarm I managed to catch the last morning shuttle to McCormick Place West (the venue for the Clinic) where I registered, picked up programme and went hunting for coffee. Unfortunately, all I could find was a Starbucks where the smallest drink size is "tall" and the coffee comes in a cup that rivals the "longest drink in town" milkshake containers. This over-sized coffee cup did serve, however, as a rather good analogy for the Midwest Clinic itself – it's very, very, very BIG!

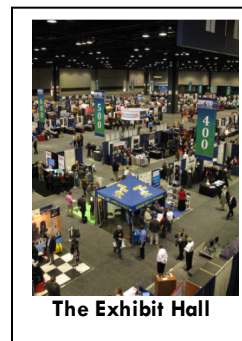
Firstly, the Clinic venue itself is huge. McCormick Place West (pictured left) is an enormous multi-level conference facility that makes the Aotea Centre look like an old clapped-out practice room (the one you make your rock musicians practice in). This is the first year that the Clinic has been staged here and having all of the concerts, seminars, rehearsal labs, exhibits and food courts in one place was very convenient as it meant you didn't have to brave the weather or expose yourself to pesky natural air or light for hours at a time.

Secondly, the Clinic programme is somewhat overwhelming both physically (the official programme is over 250 pages long and weighs the same as a small child) and logistically (73 seminars, 45 concerts and 7 rehearsal labs in just over 4 ½ days). This latter issue raised a few dilemmas as to what you should attend as there were often 2 or more fantastic events running simultaneously. For example, do you go and see a Q&A session with legendary wind band conductor Donald Hunsberger or do you go and see the Ellis Marsalis Quartet? (I went to Ellis – sorry Don, maybe next time?). Do you go to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Brass concert or the renowned Northern Illinois Jazz Ensemble concert directed by the outstanding jazz educator Ronald Carter? (I went to the CSO Brass – sorry Ron, maybe next time?). Timetabling clashes such as these, while frustrating, are indicative of the standard of events that are on offer throughout the week and the organizers do schedule repeat clinics to help avoid some of these problems.

The other major attraction of the Clinic is the impressive Exhibit Hall (pictured right) which housed over 350 exhibitors featuring instruments, stage equipment, music software, military band recruitment (all of whom distribute free CD's that are of an incredibly high standard as well as being perfect Xmas gifts for obscure relatives), tour packages and, my personal favourite, music scores. As a band director, it's hard not to feel like Augustus Gloop entering Willy Wonka's chocolate factory as the amount of sheet music on offer is overwhelming. After checking the Exhibitor map I spent the next 2 hours running from publisher to publisher flicking through



scores like a man possessed stopping only to talk with legendary band composers and arrangers such as David Holsinger, Frank Ticheli (pictured left), Johan De Meij, James Curnow and Jerry Nowak – all of whom were very friendly and keen to find out more about New Zealand. This in turn gave me the opportunity to do my best impression of Murray Hewitt from *Flight of the Conchords* ("Yes, you should come to New Zealand...it's just like *Lord of the Rings*"). The positive attitude and friendly manner of these composers was indicative of the entire Clinic with the staff, clinicians, exhibitors and performers all working hard to create a warm and positive atmosphere that celebrated excellence in music performance at all levels. This latter focus on music from across the educational spectrum was another pleasing aspect of the Clinic with several ensembles performing repertoire from Grade 1 –



Grade 6 and it was wonderful to see groups ranging from Middle School (NZ Year 7-8) to High School (NZ Year 9 – 13) to College (NZ tertiary level) as well as community groups and professional ensembles.

By the end of the week a mixture of jetlag, tiredness and bad coffee had kicked in and I have to admit to doing "the nods" a couple of times during the final morning of concerts and seminars ("the nods" is what you do when you're sitting down in a concert/seminar and your head succumbs to gravity as you start to fall asleep giving you a sudden dose of whiplash and then you have to keep nodding your head to pretend that you haven't nearly fallen asleep but are actually just "digging" the music or agreeing with what the lecturer is saying). My spirits were lifted however by a final afternoon exploring the streets of downtown Chicago and reflecting on what had been an amazing week of inspiring performances and seminars. Fortunately, the blizzards that hit the East Coast of America failed to travel west and I was able to look forward to another long haul flight home and the opportunity to watch more movies that don't feature talking animals or princesses (you know you've reached a new stage in your life when you struggle to name the composers that make up 'Les Six' or 'The Russian 5' but you can name all 7 dwarves from 'Snow White' as well as every character from 'Strawberry Shortcake').

As you will have read in these pages before, the Midwest Clinic is the best professional development that a music educator can experience. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Alan Kemp, Jennifer Hsu and all of the staff at KBB Music for helping to make this trip possible and I encourage anyone with an interest in music education to apply for this year's scholarship to the 2010 Midwest Clinic. In my next article I will be going over some of the concert highlights from this year's Clinic. To view selections from some of these concerts and to find out more information about the Clinic visit their website: www.midwestclinic.org.

Hamish's trip to the 2009 Midwest Clinic would not have been possible without financial assistance from Edgewater College, Epsom Girls Grammar, Pakuranga College, Rangitoto College, Sancta Maria College and the George & Glenise Arthur retirement fund – cheers!
Special thanks also, to Simon Hocking from House of Travel who organized all of the travel and accommodation.