

Midwest Side Stories #3

Concert Highlights from the 2009 Midwest Clinic

By Hamish Arthur, Winner of the 2009 KBB Midwest Scholarship



Eastman Wind Ensemble

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One of my personal highlights for 2009 was being able to send the above text message to my wife on Friday December 17 while I was attending the 63rd Annual Midwest Clinic in Chicago. The translation of the text message is as follows:

I'll call you later. I'm going to see concerts by the Ellis Marsalis Quartet and the Eastman Wind Ensemble

To be able to see artists of the caliber of legendary jazz pianist Ellis Marsalis (Wynton's Dad) and the world renowned Eastman Wind Ensemble within the same evening gives you some idea of the calibre of musicians that were performing for the entire week of the clinic – over 40 band and orchestra concerts selected from middle schools, high schools, colleges/universities, military organizations and community-based music groups across America as well some international guest ensembles from Belgium and Spain.

Of course it was impossible to attend all of the concerts on offer as many were occurring concurrently. It was important, therefore, to work out your daily schedule well in advance to ensure that you didn't miss the groups you were interested in hearing. It's actually quite similar to attending the Big Day Out except that you don't have to contend with all the slam-dancing, "interesting" aromas,

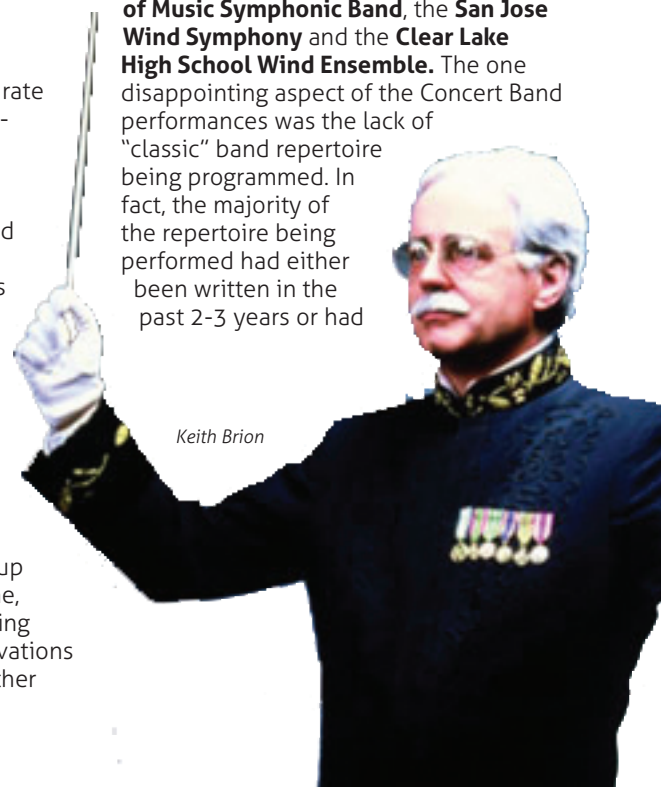
obscene t-shirts and sullen looks from angsty teenagers muttering "what's that old guy doing here?". Despite the timetabling clashes and other logistical obstacles I was able to attend 20 performances from a variety of concert bands, jazz bands, orchestras and chamber ensembles – the highlights of which are presented below.

CONCERT BANDS

Naturally, it would be hard not to rate the performance of the aforementioned **Eastman Wind Ensemble (EWE)** as one of the highlights of the clinic. This is a group that has been at the forefront of wind band music since the 1950's under the direction of legendary conductors such as Frederick Fennell and Donald Hunsberger – the latter of whom led the group for 37 years. The current conductor, Mark Davis Scatterday, was appointed in 2002 and based on his performance with the group at the clinic it is clear that he is a highly gifted musician who has maintained the legacy of this group most notably in their glorious tone, impeccable intonation and stunning dynamic control. The same observations could be made for many of the other

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Concert Bands who performed at the Clinic with equally impressive performances from the **VanderCook College of Music Symphonic Band**, the **San Jose Wind Symphony** and the **Clear Lake High School Wind Ensemble**. The one disappointing aspect of the Concert Band performances was the lack of "classic" band repertoire being programmed. In fact, the majority of the repertoire being performed had either been written in the past 2-3 years or had



Keith Brion

been commissioned especially for the Midwest Clinic. Many of these new works were interesting and very challenging, however, a number of the compositions were rather generic and would have provided more ammunition to the critics of concert band repertoire such as Stephen Budiansky (check out his entertaining article "The Kids Play Great, But That Music..." at www.budiansky.com/music.html). This was definitely not the case with **Keith Brion** (pictured at bottom of previous page) and his **New Sousa Band**, however, who performed an entertaining selection of traditional band works finishing with "The Stars and Stripes Forever" complete with the tuba section (5 players) coming to the front of the band to perform the famous piccolo solo.



FROM TOP: Jose Antonio Diaz - Caliente; Mark O'Connor; United States Air Force - Airmen of Note

JAZZ BANDS

As expected, the standard of the Jazz Bands performing at the Clinic was equally impressive with every group displaying great ensemble work, rhythmic intensity, stylistic integrity, wonderful soloing and tremendous stage presence and energy. Nowhere was this more evident than in the performance by **Caliente** – a youth ensemble from Houston specializing in Latin music and led by renowned educator José Antonio Diaz. I was fortunate enough to hear this group twice as they happened to be staying in my hotel and one night after returning from the Clinic I heard a noise coming from the basement that sounded like a great party was going on. Upon investigation it turned out that Caliente were rehearsing in a cramped storage area and like the pied piper they had summoned a considerable audience from my fellow guests keen to discover where this amazing sound was coming from. The following evening I was fortunate enough to see the band present their programme at the Midwest Clinic and it was, quite simply, stunning. I have never seen a jazz band play with such energy and many audiences members responded by dancing in the aisles. One of the highlights of the performance was hearing the band play easy grade 1-2 arrangements of "Cubano Chant" by Ray Bryant and "Rumba Latina" by Victor Lopez with the same passion and commitment that they performed their more challenging repertoire such as "Frenzy" by Mario Bauza and "Café Cubano" by guest flute soloist (and Latin Grammy winner) Nestor Torres. Honorable mention should also be given to the impressive performances by the **Las Vegas Academy Jazz Band** (featuring guest saxophone soloist **Tom Scott**), the **Willis Junior High Jazz Band** (featuring guest trombone soloist **Dean Sorenson**) and the **US Airforce Airmen of Note** who performed selections from their "Cool Yule" CD - a collection of Christmas Carols arranged in the style of big band classics (download some free samples from their official website - www.usafbnd.af.mil).

ORCHESTRAS/CHAMBER ENSEMBLES

Unfortunately being a "band person" I didn't get a chance to see many of the string based ensembles on display but I did manage to see memorable performances by the **Murica Youth Symphony Orchestra** from Spain performing an exciting programme of music from their homeland ("Luis Alonoso's Wedding" by Geronimo Giménez featured two castanet players to reinforce it's Spanish-ness – Olé!) and from a chamber perspective I was captivated by violinist and educator **Mark O'Connor and his American Spring Celebration** which featured a small 8 piece ensemble of violins, viola, cello, guitar and bass playing joyful and expressive renditions of American folk works together with original compositions such as O'Connor's beautiful "Appalachia Waltz" – a highlight of the entire Clinic.



Of course an article such as this only scratches the surface of what is on offer in terms of the concerts at the Midwest Clinic. The lasting memories I have are of stunning performances, great music, huge ensembles (several groups between 80 -100 members) and incredible musicians of all ages playing with utmost con-

viction and commitment to continue the Midwest Clinic legacy. The one glaring omission from my review is the concert put on by the **Chicago Symphony Orchestra Brass Section** – a performance so memorable it will receive its own article in the next issue of Random Notes.

For a full list of the performances (and concert video footage) from the 2009 Midwest Clinic visit the 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.

