

The Midwest Clinic: Wow. Just, wow.

Victoria Brown

My journey to The Midwest Clinic (affectionately termed “Midwest” at the conference) began almost a year ago when I contemplated submitting an application to KBB Music for a scholarship that would pay two-thirds of the total trip to Chicago, IL, USA.

Upon application it would be fair to say I had no idea of the full scale of this event. However, I decided to put the paper work in, keep my fingers crossed, and hope for the best.

What an unreal moment it was to receive the phone call from Fung Lim and be advised that I had been successful in gaining the 2010 KBB Scholarship! What ensued from here was a busy two terms at school (including a couple of musicals to MD and organise, a handful of concerts, a nine day Performing Arts Festival and the normal end of year School Celebrations and performances) and the planning and preparation for this trip.

Before I knew it School had finished, and I had a week to pack and get ready to get on the big bird!


USA – here I come, ready to be totally inspired and excited.

Of course, I was heading to the Northern Hemisphere...to the middle of one of the coldest winter snaps seen in a while in North America. It was crazy that we were in the middle of a drought in the Waikato, and on arriving in Chicago, the city was blanketed in white fairytale snow.



Victoria Brown

Is in Chicago!!! -13 and snowing... Looks glorious in the evening with all the trees lit in the city with fairy lights. Wow, spectacular!

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For many of you, you may not be fully aware of what The Midwest Clinic actually is. This International Band and Orchestra Conference exists exclusively for educational purposes.

The goals of this major event are:

- To raise the standards of music education;
- To improve the methods employed in music education;
- To develop new teaching techniques;
- To disseminate to school music teachers, directors, supervisors, and others interested in music education information to assist in their professional work;
- To examine, analyze and appraise literature dealing with music;
- To hold clinics, lectures, and demonstrations for the betterment of music education; and in general,
- To assist teachers and others interested in music education in better pursuing their profession.

Midwest definitely achieves these goals. There is nothing else like this in the world, and with so much energy, passion, talent, experience and stunning music under one roof only great things can happen.

Held at McCormick Place, Chicago (you HAVE to check it out – the facility is incredible, and like nothing in NZ <http://www.mccormickplace.com/>) Midwest is attended by a plethora of music geeks and band nerds. I was one of 15,000 attendees, and what a mixed collection we were! You can't even begin to imagine the sheer numbers and the diverse range of musicians in attendance. To say the size of the entire event was overwhelming would be an understatement.

Almost every musical walk of life was represented, including School Band and Orchestra Teachers, Instrumental Music Administrators, Professional Musicians, Military Musicians and Conductors, College and University Teachers, Students and Administrators, Music Industry Representatives, Composers and Arrangers and Grade School and High School Music Students. All 50 American states were represented in attendance with representatives from more than thirty countries – including Aotearoa New Zealand!

To keep adding to the size, imagine an exhibition hall with over 350 Exhibitors who are only displaying musical wares (!!) in 565 booths. It was a musician's shopping heaven.

In four days there were over 30 concerts and performances staged by thirty organizations from around the world. Grade school, middle school, high school, college, military, adult, and professional groups all presented concerts of the highest standard. 90 Clinics were held by more than 70 clinicians who offered guidance and inspiration covering all facets of instrumental music.

Knowing that this was going to be HUGE (and most likely incredibly scary to begin with) I decided to register the evening before the official program began. I figured this would give me a chance to see what the facilities were like, and get some bearings.



Victoria Brown

Has registered out at McCormick West, and is ready to soak up the music!! This is going to be UNREAL...

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On arriving in the evening at McCormick Place, I felt my eyes fill with tears of excitement as I could hear groups rehearsing and warming up. I knew at this very instant that I was in for the most incredibly rewarding few days.

Think for a moment about your average conference pack. Now multiply the conference handbook five-fold. A 260 page, A4, colour, bound book was going to be my partner in crime for the next few days. The book not only had the schedule of events, but also notes on all the lectures and clinics, and profiles of each of the groups that were performing. With so many options (up to 5 things running during any one session) consulting the handbook was going to be the only way to make decisions about what to see.

I made the choice early on to see as many concerts as possible, while hearing quality lectures too. I wanted to see what the "cream of the crop" sounded like here, and over the course of the conference I was moved to tears on more than one occasion by the power of the music performed by school students and professional musicians alike. I was hungry to know how the school groups

performed with such professionalism, and one of the first clinics I attended gave me some great food for thought.

Getting the best from our students is a constant challenge. In New Zealand there are not many school orchestra conductors who can exist only as that, with their primary focus being the development of the orchestra, weekly rehearsal programmes, and performances. We are all aware that we are also instrumental teachers and classroom music teachers (read: musical jacks and jills of all trades), and our time is frequently torn, making it a challenge at times to really give our musical groups the time, attention and care they need to grow and develop significantly.

I believe that as musicians, educators and conductors it behoves us to inspire our students. Emily Freeman Brown's presentation entitled ***"The Way to a Dynamic Performance: The Conductor as Teacher, Artist and Performer"*** was engaging, motivating, and had me nodding and agreeing in my seat. It is so important for us to remember that we can do so many things to inspire our students, while giving them fun and meaningful musical and educational experiences.

One of the first points Freeman Brown made was in regard to music/repertoire selection.

"The key to success in creating a dynamic performance is choosing pieces that you love and believe in completely."

As orchestra and band directors, this means knowing the good from the bad, or the "not so good". It also means being artistically ambitious, whereby pieces are selected that allow us to teach aspects of artistry, interpretation and musicianship. Our repertoire selections must allow us to keep our practical pedagogical goals at hand, and planning the year's repertoire with long-term goals in mind can be a powerful strategy to employ. Of course, the music needs to be fun and exciting for our students.

"Make sure the musical rewards of each piece are powerful enough to warrant the work you and your ensemble will put into it! The privilege of playing great music is reward enough in itself."

We all know that our students will tell us quickly whether they love or loathe the pieces we choose for them. Our enthusiasm, knowledge and passion for the works we choose will help them to love works that they may not have otherwise considered. Our encouragement for them to be open to new and different music will help to shape more well-rounded musicians. As Freeman Brown pointed out, "none of us should listen in a vacuum." She also commented that our ensembles seek our inspiration. We need to believe in the ultimate ability of the ensemble, and this in turn will influence our repertoire choices.

Freeman Brown also outlined a series of points and guidelines to consider (as conductors and directors) in rehearsal. These are as follows:

In Rehearsal:

1. Empower your musicians and treat them with respect.
2. Make a realistic rehearsal plan and don't waste time.
3. Instil a sense of potential and responsibility simultaneously.
4. Demonstrate confidence with your musicians
5. Be demanding with a positive attitude
6. Keep the pace of each rehearsal quick without it feeling rushed
7. Balance each rehearsal between working details and playing longer passages

8. Never let one section sit in silence for very long. If you find yourself doing this, you need sectionals!
9. Set realistic goals for each rehearsal, and acknowledge what has been achieved
10. Be clear about what the goals will be for the next session, and be specific about what to practice before the next rehearsal
11. Don't be afraid to tell your ensemble when something isn't good
12. Know how well each individual in your ensemble plays. Use this knowledge to "push" them to do their best
13. Don't get into the habit of always being the "bad guy", the one who just says what is wrong
14. Try a different approach. If they miss a dynamic, say: "Please note the dynamic in bar...". Wait a moment, in silence, and play the passage again using your gestures to show (or emphasize) the dynamic.
15. To fix balances, ask members of a particular section who has the most important part. Did they hear it well enough? Invite them to adjust and play it again.
16. To correct rushing, have a section with a steady rhythm play while everyone else listens. Then repeat the passage with everyone, including the "rushers". This helps develop more attentive listening.
17. When intonation is a problem: in the case of a single line, have them sing in a comfortable octave and tempo until they can do it correctly. Play it again slowly at first and then increasing the tempo. If it is a chorale-like passage, have them sign the parts first and then play it. Doing this often, beginning with simple parts develops basic reading skills in addition to a greater sensitivity to intonation.
18. When rehearsing longer passages, it usually works to mention up to three things at a time that need improvement, but not more. When you do this, take the time to review what worked and what still needs improvement.

I believe that one of the most exciting things we can do as music educators is **Dare to be Musical. Take the risk.** We are all passionate about music, and music education. One of my goals for 2011 is to challenge myself and my students to make music – not play notes, but make music. I want to motivate, engage, and inspire the young musicians in my care, just as I have been motivated and inspired at Midwest. I'm going to challenge them to take musical risks, be adventurous, branch out – even if initially that only means choosing a different pop musician, or a new classical composer to listen to.

So... first impressions of Midwest?



Victoria Brown

Wow. Just, wow.

16 December 2010 at 08:10 via iPhone · Like · Comment · Share

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Hamish Davies hope yo havin a blast! sounds it! keep those stati coming! haha It's really cool and interesting to hear whatchu up to! Let it Snow Let it Snow Let it Snow! :D

16 December 2010 at 08:11 · Like · 2 people

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