

Episode 5: Midwest Clinic Adventures

Intro

Hello and welcome to Tonal Diversions. I'm your host, Lori Archer Sutherland, and this is my journey as a multifaceted musician. I'm a composer, clarinetist and more who is navigating the world of is classical music, and I'd love to share my adventures with you.

Episode proper

Hello and welcome to Tonal Diversions. I had a great time at Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic. It was my first official venture as a self-employed musician, and it was so nice to be among my people with music everywhere.

You know it's Midwest when seeing a marching band walk down the hall is nothing unusual. I actually tried recording some thoughts each day, but the sound quality was beyond my audio enhancement skills, and so I decided to scrap that and turn this into a regular episode instead of a live-on-site type of thing. So maybe next year.

John Mackey & Friends Booth

So the biggest news out of all of this conference was my experience in the John Mackey and Friends composer booth. This was a lot of fun, and I'm so grateful I got to do it. And again, big thank you to John for sharing his booth, to refresh or for those who didn't get a chance to hear episode four, I had the honor of being part of composer John Mackey's exhibitor booth every year he shares his booth with other composers. And I'm so grateful I had the chance to be there.

There were eight of us, including myself, and we took approximately two hour shifts each day. It was really nice to meet all the other composers as we're all in different points in our careers, and we have different focus points for our compositions. And while there was some overlap, we all seemed to write for slightly different things. So there was some orchestral work, there was some band work, there was some chamber work, and it was interesting to chat with the others about what they focus on and why.

We all got a chance to meet up with John for dinner one night and had a great time. It was so nice to just be away from the conference and just sitting and chat just as normal people. And we got to answer perhaps the best icebreaker question I've ever heard for a group of composers. What's the worst piece of music you've written?

So I suppose I should let you know my own answer to that. Back in college, I wrote a solo piece for unaccompanied violin for my composition lessons, and it just wasn't great. And my teacher helped me and he was very kind about it. But I think we both knew that it wasn't a great piece of music. I imagine I still have the manuscript somewhere in this house, but I don't even know where it is, and I really haven't written for strings since. I did take a melody fragment from the piece and used it in something else. So it wasn't a complete loss. And maybe someday I will dig it back out and see if there's anything else I can salvage from it.

A Different View

It's a different view on the other side of a booth table, but it was a lot of fun. I enjoyed talking to the people who stopped by, and our most frequent conversations were “No, we're not John Mackey.” And “No, we don't know when he'll be back.” And that was fine. It was all part of the fun. And actually one of the other booth composers just started saying, “Oh, yeah, I'm John Mackey!” But it was a good icebreaker, especially for me as someone who's rather shy around new people and is not good at just going up and saying hi. And another benefit of being in the booth with someone else each time was that since we have our own strengths and weaknesses, I think we helped each other talk to everyone who came by, and it was easy. For example, I mentioned, I don't really write strings and orchestral stuff. And so if someone if an orchestral director came up to the table, I was able to say, “Well, I don't write for that. But here's one of the other composers and they write for it.”

A really nice surprise that I appreciated was that people know that John shares his booth and they came back frequently to make sure that they had met each one of us. And I thought that was really touching. It was so nice of them to do, because with conferences, it's so easy to just go onto your next thing and to have people actually come up and say, “Oh, I haven't met you yet. Let me get your card.” It was really nice. We talked to a lot of college students, which I really enjoyed talking to them because they're at the beginning of their careers. They're excited about what they're going to do. And it was just nice chatting with them. Of course, we had band and orchestra directors of various levels—high school, community college, university—stopped by because, well, they are the target market for this conference. So of course, we had a lot of them stop by, too.

Sessions and concerts

So what are some of the things I learned and heard? Unsurprisingly, I went to a few sessions that talked about composing. And even the ones that were focused more on the band director or orchestra director side of it, as opposed to the composer side, were still very valuable to me as a composer.

Eric Whitacre

So one of the most crowded events that I went to was “Conversation, Questions, and Answers with Composer Eric Whitacre.” I know a lot of you know that name. He's very well-known composer, probably most known for his choral works and his virtual choirs. And he was doing those even before COVID hit and forced us all to start recording ourselves. Anyway, he's also written a lot of other pieces. I know I've played a few band pieces of his et cetera, so he's not only known for choir, but I think that is one of his specialties.

I really enjoyed hearing some tidbits on his composing process. And if you were with me in episode three, that's what that episode was about with my own composing process and how I'm still figuring that out. And so it was interesting to hear yet another composer's take on it and what he does to start a piece or et cetera. And of course, it was fun to hear some of the anecdotes that led to his pieces that were for his career and how he started getting commissions and all that kind of stuff. So that was fun to hear, too.

Jamming With Your Ensemble

Next up in this category was “Jamming With Your Ensemble,” and this was presented by my teacher and friend Joseph Sowa and his colleague Benjamin Taylor, and they were accompanied by the North Harden High School Wind Symphony. This was a fun session as we got to witness this process of creation by an ensemble in real time.

They played several musical games, such as “Copycat,” which is just like it sounds where someone plays a three- or six-note melody and the rest of the group has to play it back to them. There was also “Grow a Melody,” which the presenters likened to the old “I’m going on a road trip: car game where you have to remember certain things that you’re taking on this road trip in order, and everyone adds an item and you have to be able to recite back those items. So it’s that concept, except with musical notes instead of items to take on a car trip. There was also “Call and Response,” which is pretty much how it sounds. One person would play a short little musical snippet, and then their partner would respond back with their own musical snippet. And there were a few other games like that.

And then the ensemble actually took a few of those games and specific parameters and made their own real-time composition. It was a really neat program, and I’m glad I got to go to that one.

Commissioning a Piece

And then finally Stan Maudlin and Leroy Osmond with the Cleveland High School Band, talked about commissioning pieces for your ensemble. This one was definitely interesting to me, especially because they had both the composer and a conductor talking about the process. So it really helped to hear both sides of how the process works.

I’ve had some informal commissions over the years, and I wouldn’t mind dipping my toe into the water to do some formal commissions, and it was neat to hear some thoughts on how to go about the process.

Conducting, Leading, and Performing

The next group of sessions had to do with conducting, leading an ensemble and performing these all gave good food for thought on engaging ourselves, our performers and our audiences. They all provided slightly different ways of thinking about what we do and why as musicians and how to connect with each other and the people who are listening.

The Impact of Artistry

I went to Eugene Corporon’s session on “Storytellers and Guides: the Impact of Artistry.” Now I’ve heard Corporon’s name for many years and I’m pretty sure I have some CDs of him conducting whatever group is on the CD. I think he’s in Texas, but don’t hold me to that. I’ll have to check. But he talked about attributes beyond technical ability that lead to artistry, and some of them were imagination, hope, compassion, and others. He really didn’t talk much about the technical aspects of music at all.

Audience Engagement

Next up were Craig Kirchhoff and Shanti Simon, and they talked about audience engagement. Now Kirchhoff is another name I've heard over the years, and I don't exactly remember what context if, it was from college or whatnot, but I know I've heard his name before. They talked about using both our head and our heart to make music and connect with our audience. Music isn't just about the performers. It's as much about the listeners as it is about us who are performing. And while we may perform pieces of music for certain reasons for ourselves, the audience brings their own feelings and interpretations and memories to those performances. So one of the examples was an ensemble played "Elsa's Procession to the Cathedral," and it was a powerful performance. But after that performance, the conductor actually heard a lot of people coming up to tell them about the first time they heard "Elsa" or something like that. It wasn't necessarily about the performance that just happened.

Ensemble Awareness

I enjoyed Matthew Dockendorff's session on ensemble awareness when we think about the world's great ensembles, what words do we use to describe them? That was a question he posed to all of us, and it was interesting to hear different answers from the audience. The words people were using to describe these ensembles had to do with passion and intensity and that kind of thing. And no one really specifically talked about some of the technical stuff, but it also drives home the point that we can work on musicality from the start and that it doesn't have to be notes and rhythms and then put the musicality into it. And I think that's something that we all could stand to remember as musicians.

The Conductor as Architect of Sound

And the last one in this group is "Conductor as an Architect of Sound" by James Jordan. He really stressed empathy as such an important aspect of music, and I do happen to agree with him. He even had us try Gregorian chant as an example of getting out of our own heads and connecting with the others in the room. It was a rather cool experience, and especially as someone who's never really tried seeing in Gregorian Chant. So it was a lot of fun.

Eastern Wind Symphony Concert

And then there were the performances. Sadly, I only made it to one concert, but it was worth it. There's just so many good groups playing that it's hard to make it to all of the performances, or even a lot of them. I attended the Eastern Wind Symphony concert. They're based in New Jersey, and they were an excellent group. I'll confess this was a last-minute decision to attend because it was an 8:30 a.m. concert. But I found out that one of my fellow composers from the booth was having a work premiered, so I decided it was worth it to get up and listen. Allison Loggins-Hall had her piece, "The Loop," performed by the group, and I truly enjoyed that and the rest of the concert. And it was cool that several of the composers who had pieces on that concert were in attendance and they got acknowledged. I'll admit it would be really neat to have a peace of mind performed at Midwest someday, just throwing it out there into the universe, just in case!

Can't Do It All

There were so many more sessions and concerts that sounded interesting, but unfortunately, like any conference really on any subject, you just can't do it all. But I downloaded what PDFs I could from the sessions I couldn't attend, and I'm looking forward to reading through those. And I also want to have a refresher on the sessions. I did attend and look through my notes and read the PDFs again, because I know that there's stuff I missed and there's stuff that I didn't fully digest in the moment, and I might try some of the things out that I learned. So if anyone in the Knock on Wood Clarinet Choir is listening to this, you've been warned. There's a chance I might try a couple of these things in rehearsal.

Old and New Friends

One of the best parts of this conference is the people. Along with some local friends, I got to see and meet quite a few folks. Some I've met before at other events and some I've been working with online but never met in person. And some I got to meet for the first time. So pardon me as I do some name dropping, but I will link to all of these folks in the show notes so that you can check out their work if you're not already familiar with them.

John Mackey

Well, it kind of goes without saying, but of course I met [John Mackey](#). I followed him on Facebook for a while now, and so I finally got to meet him in person and have dinner with him. And he's a cool guy. And we all had a lot of fun together as booth composers.

Michael Lowenstern

And someone I got to re-meet is Michael Lowenstern. Some of you may know him as an extraordinary bass clarinet player and all-around cool guy, and he has his famous [YouTube channel](#) and his site, called [Earspasm](#). His YouTube channel has a ton of great educational videos for bass clarinet and clarinet, and he has a lot of good music videos up there, too. I stocked up on several supplies from him, such as mouthpiece cushions and that kind of stuff and just got to chat with him for a minute. We took a selfie, so very cool.

Joseph Sowa

Then someone I finally got to meet in person, and I mentioned earlier, was [Joseph Sowa](#). In an earlier episode, I talked about taking a composition class online, and Joseph was my teacher. So he runs the Wizarding School for Composers, and I spent four months in that class. And it was so nice to actually meet him in person, as opposed to just seeing each other on Zoom every week.

Matt Johnston

Another person I ran into is [Matt Johnston](#), who does a lot of excellent arranging, especially for clarinet choir. And my own group has played any number of his arrangements. If I see his name on one, I feel pretty safe in buying it because I know it'll be quality. And so it was neat to see the face behind all these pieces of music we've played over the years.

Jessica Harrie

And at that same booth I got to meet [Jessica Harrie](#). She is the Executive Director of the [International Clarinet Association](#). I know her from working with her for the past year as part of the Clarinet Enthusiasts committee, and she's on pretty much every other committee as well, but I specifically know her from the Enthusiasts Committee. That's been a fun committee to serve on, and it's a great group of people, and I would like to do a future episode focusing on them. I don't know when that's going to happen yet, though.

Garrett Hope

And then someone I've heard but had never met is [Garrett Hope](#). He does the *Portfolio Composer* podcast, and I'd highly recommend listening to it if you're a composer. Even if you're not, it could still be interesting. And he also helped found and is running the [Ultimate Music Business Summit](#). It's a virtual summit that premiered online last year, and I attended and learned some really great things about being a freelance musician. They've added more content for this year, and I know this was kind of cutting it close, but the day after this episode is released is when the summit is so you may still be able to get into it. If you're someone who listens to the show right away, it's happening January 6th through 8th.

Johan de Meij

And then I had a bit of a fan girl moment because I was in the booth on Friday, I think it was. And [Johan De Meij](#) walked by and I got to meet him and take a picture. For those who don't know him, he's most famous for composing a wind symphony based on *The Lord of the Rings*, and that was in the 80s. It was before the current movies, and the music is excellent and so much fun to play, and it was so cool to be able to tell him that I enjoy his work. And he has a lot of other great compositions out there, too, so I recommend you check him out. What's kind of funny is, I didn't realize it was him at first until one of my fellow booth composers happened to notice he had a really cool blazer on and actually called out and said, "Hey, cool blazer!" And then when he turned around and stopped and I read his name tag, I jumped out of my seat and went to go meet him.

The & Friends Group

Last, and certainly not least, are my fellow "and friends" composers who shared the booth. It was such a pleasure getting to know everybody and find out what all everybody is working on and hearing people describe their worst pieces at dinner, et cetera. And it was just so much fun. It was such a good time to connect with all these new people, so I will link to all of them in the show notes as well. But I do want to call them out by name here: [Minoo Dixon](#), [Henry Dorn](#), [Jeremi Edwards](#), [Jordan Jinosko](#), [Gabrielle Liriano](#), [Allison Loggins-Hull](#), and [Lauren Spavelko](#). It was just so nice to meet all of you and I look forward to seeing what everyone does with their careers in the future.

In Closing

Thank you for tuning into my recap of an amazing few days at the Midwest Clinic. I highly recommend this conference if you're able to go. It is such a great time and you learn so much, and you see so much, and you hear so much. My favorite part was probably just being

surrounded by music and musicians—my people and my passion. And I look forward to hopefully going again next year. Take care and I'll see you next time.

Outro

Thank you for listening to Tonal Diversions subscribe wherever podcasts are found and share with a friend until next time. Bye!