



Michael Houstoun's CMNZ 60th birthday speech

Good evening, everyone.

Well, first of all, Happy Birthday, Chamber Music New Zealand - and, more importantly, Many Happy Returns! My life and Chamber Music New Zealand's are almost the same length, but while I don't mind passing on, I hope CMNZ lasts forever.

I won't presume to speak for my colleagues, but I hope they might agree with some of what I have to say about how I see Chamber Music New Zealand's value to performers. Because, although I may be Advocate, my experience of CMNZ is almost entirely as a wandering minstrel who for 40-plus years has toured and performed under their auspices.

In my late teens CMNZ gave me my primary introduction to New Zealand audiences, audiences from Kaitaia to Invercargill. And what began in those early tours has never gone away. So it's natural that I put great value on Chamber Music New Zealand's identifying and sponsoring our best young talent. Because of CMNZ music lovers all over New Zealand know and hear our most promising young musicians, and the young musicians in turn are encouraged and strengthened by this contact. They learn how to tour - how to cope with playing night after night, often travelling and playing on the same day; how to adjust to different halls and different pianos; how to be productively alone; how to budget - a range of skills that they will use for the rest of their performing lives.

More subtly, they learn to live with the music they play. Unless you are something of an international touring star your musical life will be a matter of preparing programmes which you may only play once or twice, and those performances perhaps months apart. This is tremendously stressful as first performances of anything are always the hardest, the most nervewracked and knocked about by too much adrenalin. Even if you do a really good first performance, the greatest desire afterwards is to do another one.

So a tour is bliss. To be able to play the same programme night after night is a great luxury, and any artist worth their salt will grow exponentially throughout a tour. As you relax and confidence sets in the music will show ever more of itself to you. We may be exhausted after a Chamber Music New Zealand tour, but we will be better musicians for it, and I don't know any colleague who does not feel grateful to CMNZ because of this.

My tours with the Michael Hill International Violin Competition winners have shown me with great clarity and power the benefits of touring to young artists, and not just New Zealanders. Bella Hristova and Josef Spacek began their tours in great form, fully practised up and ready to play. But night after night I heard their playing gradually expand, and in a mere fortnight their whole beings were changed. I'll never forget Bella coming into my dressing room midway through our tour and telling me that she "got it". She understood why we would want to play Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' sonata again and again, that its greatness is unfathomable, and that we could never tire of it.

For the groups that come to New Zealand from overseas who already have an active touring life it is still a special thing to tour for Chamber Music New Zealand - indeed it would seem to be unique. I have never heard a colleague compare CMNZ to anything - you are much more likely to get a comment like 'there's nothing like this where I come from'.

The typical CMNZ tour of 10 concerts in two weeks is just about perfect, strenuous but not killing. Distances are short and travelling is easy. But not only easy - it is also unbelievably beautiful, to the degree where beauty becomes nourishment. The most jaded touring professional will have their batteries recharged in New Zealand.

And there are many wonderful halls, halls where we can sound like we want to sound.

And there are the most wonderful friendly hospitable people who look after the musicians - committee members, volunteers, concert managers - providing hospitality that visitors never forget. Of course, for me, and Helene, Gillian, Doug and Rolf, I am talking about people here who are dear friends of many years - and I think we all feel that we are part of some larger somewhat scattered musical family.

And finally there are the audiences. Many visiting artists have spoken of their enjoyment of the New Zealand audience, particularly mentioning the openness and lack of pretention. They feel that they are properly heard and appreciated here, and it draws them back. Personally, I couldn't begin to tell you how much I love the audience here.

I know there is always concern circulating about the numbers of young people going, or rather not going, to concerts. But, strangely enough, it is nothing I have ever worried about. The audience in New Zealand has given me an unshakeable faith in the power of music.

The only thing that needs to happen is that the music be heard. Chamber Music New Zealand makes sure that it is heard and that's why I hope it keeps going forever.

Still, 60 years ain't bad.

Happy Birthday Chamber Music New Zealand!!