

TEXAS ORCHESTRA DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION CONVENTION 2005

by Deb Sittko

As a person with very little tolerance for summer heat, the prospect of going to San Antonio during the last week of July — especially after several weeks of 90-degree weather — was, truly not a little unsettling. However, I really wanted to check out the TODA (Texas Orchestra Directors Association) Convention. After years of hearing great things about it, I really wanted to go. And what a great convention it was.

Probably the single most prominent component of this 4-day convention is the Texas take on New Music Reading Sessions. What distinguishes them from others I've attended is the studious and intentional approach. Rather than being a sightreading session for all — including the conductor — each session is carefully prepared by a chosen conductor. This person is assigned a grade level. He or she then studies all the works in that grade level and does an analysis and brief write-up on each piece played. Facts given include length of piece, style, challenges, key signature, outstanding features or considerations. The conductors did this in a variety of formats, but the end result was always a very thorough and handy guide to the works played in that session. This was invaluable for the participants to use in guiding them in their own analysis of the worthiness and timeliness of each work for their program the next year. Then, since the conductor knew the works, he/she was ready to lead the group in a meaningful way. Conductors would also know what

to skip to best use the time. So, the works usually had a very accurate, guided reading. In addition, those who would benefit most from listening rather than playing did so during the sessions most pertinent to their school assignment.

I personally found this to be a terrifically satisfying and useful approach to studying the new music for the year. Not only did I come home with a good idea of what was available, but also have solid documents to refer to when my needs change in this or future years. This approach impressed me very favorably. Another component of this experience is that by just going up the escalator of the Convention Center I could go to the Exhibition Hall where there were huge stacks of all the works performed ready for teachers to buy on the spot or have shipped to their school. Most of the directors would buy all of their music for the whole year right there. In addition to the new music, most vendors had exhaustive libraries of educational and standard repertoire on site. For anyone interested in perusing literature that is not kept in stock at most Minnesota stores, this is like walking into a gold mine. One could quite easily spend all 4 days in these stacks and still have much to look at.

There were 4 graded string orchestra sessions and one full orchestra session. All of the music used is raffled off. If you are a lucky winner you receive a bag of perhaps 5-6 different sets of music of several grade

levels — a great door prize for 10 people at each session.

In addition to the reading sessions and the exhibitions, there were a number of very useful and well-prepared sessions addressing a variety of current and perennial needs. Among those I attended, the most interesting, helpful and useful were the ones discussing all of the newest electronic equipment/instruments and techniques unique to them, another concerning nitty gritty details of getting winds in tune, and one discussing "The Tuning CD."

As it turned out, I was outside just long enough to fall in love with the most beautiful and enchanting Riverwalk. Meandering through it, I couldn't help but think "wouldn't it be great to be here in, say, February." The next day a Texas director told me about the "really big" convention they have there in, wouldn't you know it, February. "It makes the Midwest Clinic seem very small." But, of course, this is Texas.... Perhaps I won't fit it in any time real soon, but I was intrigued. I personally find it very stimulating, refreshing and most educational to step out of my little cocoon on occasion just to see what's out there. I encourage you to do the same. There's always a lot going on. Check it out!

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