

# NAMM New Horizons Fellowship March 2011 Fellow's Report

Graham Sattler, May 12 2011

## **Introduction and Overview**

On March 4 I embarked on a 5-week musical study tour of North America.

The purpose of the trip was to study a blossoming phenomenon in lifelong learning - a program called **New Horizons**.

The philosophy behind New Horizons, is that you can, indeed, *teach an old dog new tricks...*

The program was started in Rochester NY, by Professor Roy Ernst from the illustrious Eastman School of Music, as somewhat of an experiment in community music education. A class in instrumental music for beginners; but not just any beginners, specifically for retired adults. From that original group of 25 or so seniors who responded to the local newspaper ad in 1991, the movement has now grown to over 180 groups, each one a community in itself; comprising bands, orchestras, choirs and ensembles of pretty well every kind imaginable; but also forming a broad and connected community across North America, and increasingly, beyond.

I was lucky enough to be one of 6 Music Educators from across the globe to receive a \$US2,000 NAMM (National Association of Music Merchants) New Horizons fellowship, to assist with the costs of the trip. The fellowship award inspired the Orange Regional Arts Foundation – a local (Australian) Arts Support organisation to match the award, with another \$AU500 contribution generously donated by an anonymous local supporter.

My 5-week tour took me to 9 communities from Ontario Canada down through New York State, across to Washington State, down to Arizona and then west to California. I spent time observing and connecting with several hundred passionate learners and ensemble directors for whom playing, learning, and contributing to the community via music, has become a major focus of their lives. So much more than just *an activity for seniors*, the broader NH community provides a learning opportunity, physical and intellectual stimulation, a growing social network, health benefits, *and a strong support base for artistic and cultural awareness in communities that are increasingly hurting due to ongoing budget cuts to community and educational facilities across the continent. Of course, revisions to public spending on community engagement and education are commonplace across the western world, and therein lies a key to the broader, international relevance of programs like Hew Horizons...*

### ***Personal rationale and 'fit' for the fellowship***

Having seen the call-out for expressions of interest from NHIMA, via the Australian Society for Music Education (ASME) web bulletin, I immediately saw great relevance for my community, and me personally.

I am currently involved in PhD research in the area of socio-cultural development through group music programs, with a particular interest in community music activity and the non-musical, as well as musical, benefits that can result from such activity.

As Director of a community owned and operated, government supported, music education institution in regional NSW (and Vice-President of the Association of NSW Regional Conservatoriums – the peak body for 17 like-organizations across the state), life-long education and music activity is a key component of my daily professional life.

I have a local, and regional, responsibility for developing community involvement in (and appreciation of) music activity. My experience in establishing adult ensembles, including those involving beginners, contributed to my belief that I was ideally positioned to appreciate, and learn from, what I understood the New Horizons philosophy to be; a good 'fit', I felt, for the fellowship.

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## *Planning*

In initiating the planning stage of the trip, I nominated locations based on the desire to visit a range of community sizes and types, with a mix of organisational structures and ages of programs, and a variety of ensemble types and instrumentation.

The challenge, then, being the formulation of a practical itinerary that allowed for adequate time in each community, with adequate down-time for reflection.

I had visited the United States only once before, in 2006 (and Canada, never), so I was largely reliant on the assistance and generosity of Roy Ernst in guiding the development of my schedule and in connecting me with a host of New Horizons ensemble leaders and/or co-ordinators.

The final list was as follows – London and Peterborough ONT; Rochester and Fredonia NY; Olympia, Tacoma and Spokane WA; Mesa AZ and Carlsbad CA.

The tour would bring me into contact with wind bands, swing, dance and Dixieland bands, at least one orchestra, a choir, various small ensembles, a Klezmer band and a bluegrass program.

Communities would range in population from the 10s of thousands to the millions; and I would experience programs run independently by boards or committees, others as University community programs, and others as initiatives of retail organisations.

There would be plenty of variety, several models, and yet I also expected a significant degree of similarity - a unified commitment to the value of life-long learning as per the journal articles and NHIMA website information I had read in preparation.

The relationships I established, well in advance of departing from Australia, was the first hint of the level of commitment, enthusiasm and, dare I say it...zeal, demonstrated by New Horizon members in each and every location I visited.

## *Pre-conceptions and expectations*

As mentioned above, I had a basic understanding of the NH Philosophy prior to the trip - its history, purpose and function - and I had deliberately made no commitment to the possible application of that philosophy to the Australian Environment. With only one existing NH program in Australia, and that being a modest-sized one from what I could ascertain, I had no preconceived notion of the likely desirability, acceptance or success of such a program 'at home'. Cultural and educational differences between Nth America and Australia do exist; cultural features such as school and college ensemble activity, for instance (historically far more common in Nth America), present fundamental differences in preconditions for returning, as well as first-time, mature instrumentalists.

I was determined to embark on the journey with as open a mind as I was capable of maintaining.

## **Observations**

Although I experienced a range of community sizes and organisational structures, and observed ensembles of varying styles and instrumentation, there were some very powerful consistencies and similarities; and with these, some surprising features of the overarching (New Horizons International) parent body and its articulation with individual programs.

I was not surprised to find that ensemble members were, across all the (31) groups I experienced, committed and enthusiastic.

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## *awareness, self and group esteem*

I expected, and was pleased to find, that participants were, generally speaking, aware and convinced of the broad-ranging benefits of their involvement. In most cases they were happy to talk, at length, about the transformative experience of New Horizons membership.

I was impressed, but again, not surprised, to find that 20 years since its inception, the philosophy, defined by recurrent phrases such as “your best is good enough”, “your seat is waiting for you”, “this is as much about the people as the music”, “these people are retired, they don't want to be tied down (committed) to regular rehearsals” seems to be in tact, with successful branding of being *the* access point for adult beginners, and/or those picking up an instrument after an interval of 30, 40, or even 50 years.

I was surprised to find that, although it seems clear that the New Horizons International Music Association determines and promotes the philosophy, and has an active mentoring, advisory and oversight role; it seems determinedly laid-back in terms of expectations or demands of the NH groups and communities. Even considerations such as financial membership of NHIMA, use of logos etc. are treated casually. No *big brother* discipline.

This seems to me to be unusual, refreshing, and smacks of the wisdom of those with life experience and a reflective, strategic outlook.

## *peer learning and celebrating 'community'*

One highly effective tool for engendering a sense of belonging to the broader, nation-wide community, is the Band Camp.

There are a number of regional camps every year, with the main one held in October.

These intensive, multi-day events are spoken of with great fondness, as both a rich social time and a time of great learning. Typically, the camps will include classes in a range of musical disciplines in addition to large and small ensemble rehearsals.

I was impressed, and inspired, by the work ethic of the groups I observed.

Given some of the comments listed above, particularly those relating to *having fun* and *not wanting to commit to a regular or restrictive schedule*, the rehearsals I observed were focused, effective, well planned and result-orientated. These people were there to enjoy each other's company, sure, but also to learn, to achieve, to develop as a team.

Having said that, whilst again and again I observed strong examples of team identity and group psyche, another fundamental dimension of the NH philosophy-in-action is the space for personal membership meaning. Individuals appear to be supported, by directors and peers, in their intent to either advance through levels from beginner to more advanced groups, or to identify with a particular group, regardless of its standard and technical/musical demands, and stay with it.

Competitive attitudes do not figure as a major consideration for New Horizons communities, with peer support and celebration of participation being a more prominent, and consistent feature across the board.

One NH member in California spoke of the competitive aspect that often comes with new members who are 'returners' to music. ...*they can be concerned with issues such as which part they play, where they fit in the hierarchy - but typically, after a few weeks they "chill out", adjust to NH "reality" where which part you play is just a matter of "which piece of paper you pick up" ...*

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## *...and the surprises*

I have to say that there were, indeed, a few unexpected aspects of the program; and I would preface my outline of these points by saying that it is these that have had the greatest impact on me. They have already begun to reshape my view of life-long-learning as a principle and a practice; they indeed constitute the "Aha" value of the trip.

Whilst there was much to be gained by reading the press and publicity material describing the philosophy of the New Horizons phenomenon, and whilst the significant pre-trip correspondence with community leaders and organizers was a great source of information and insight into the broader NH community, it was only through direct observation and immersion in the communities that I believe I 'got it'.

Not only were there countless casual chats over coffee or a meal, some formal and informal interviews, but I was also honoured in many cases by an opportunity to connect with groups as either a player or conductor (in some cases, both!). For a musician, of course, there is no purer, a human connection than making music together.

So what were the surprises?

Firstly, it was impressed upon me several times, in many different conversations, that New Horizons was a social network. That *the people were at least as important as the music*.

Many members of groups all over Nth America explained that they had developed strong friendships, often through annual Band Camps, with people from right across the US and Canada. These are not just casual acquaintances, but often strong support networks, in many cases replacing social networks that (naturally) deteriorate with aging families and the cessation of work-based alliances.

I was not surprised at the social element of the activity, but that the networks become so strong, are so far-reaching and are actively sustained, even nourished. It was also stressed to me on various occasions that this strong social aspect of the program was unexpected.

A related element of NH membership I had not expected was that many ensemble members spend part of each year in a different community, either following or avoiding the cold or hot seasons, and play either regularly or occasionally with more than one community.

Many players also commented to me that when they travel, they often take their instrument along and sit in with NH groups in the communities they visit. *One big family*.

Secondly, the longitudinal development aspect of membership in a Hew Horizons program was something that had not occurred to me. Many members have now been learning, or relearning, for over 10 years, some now 20. As time passes, and given that the upper ages of participants is well into the 80's, more than a handful in their early 90's, it is entirely possible that New Horizon learners could be intensively involved in practical music education for a 30-year period. This to me was staggering.

*At this point I think it is worth reflecting on the broadly accepted principal that it requires 10,000 hours of practice at an activity to achieve executive capability, and calculate that 6 hours per week over 30 years totals just that.*

I'm certainly not suggesting that such activity carried out by an individual in their 50's and beyond will reap the same results as 10 years of 3 hours practice per day carried out by a youth.

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It is clear, however, that many years of focused, committed, enthusiastic learning will certainly have profound results.

From my experience of NH groups, up to 6 hours per week of instrumental learning activity is not unusual.

Indeed, in what other demographic (with the of exception of those preparing for, then achieving, a career in music) are we likely to find a cohort dedicating 20 – 30 years of their life to honing practical musical skills?

## *playing outside the generational square*

Possibly the major *Aha!* moment for me relates to the intergenerational impact that the New Horizons movement appears to be having in and on communities. I expected to see age group-specific ensembles, impacting largely within that demographic.

What I found in many cases was community ensembles *weighted* towards seniors, but open to younger adults (in one case, a genuinely all-age ensemble), rebuilding and refocusing society's awareness of the value and wisdom of its elders.

I found New Horizons ensembles that share their rehearsal venue with a nursery school. In this case, at various times during rehearsals, pre-schoolers would enter the rehearsal space and dance or sway, responding spontaneously to the music.

In more than one community, where postgraduate university students operate as tutors, the New Horizons participants provide de-facto family networks for the students, attending student recitals and inviting them to gatherings on holidays etc.

Another example of the intergenerational influence is the growing practice of NH ensembles going into schools to demonstrate instrumental music and mentor elementary students. This last example offering a replacement for, or supplement to, diminishing in-school resources.

The final example relates to a recently commenced ensemble that, having advertised as a New Horizons ensemble, had a cross age-group attendance for the first rehearsal. Faced with this possible dilemma, the organisers decided to go ahead with the formation of the group within the NH family, confident in the belief that the awareness of the NH principles and philosophy were sufficient to preserve the integrity of the orientation of the group. Rather than setting up just another all-age community ensemble, this group could well be *the* all-age community ensemble with an explicit orientation towards older members as mentors, elders, community leaders.

Whilst this last example may be the exception to the rule, my feeling is that the broader community involvement in, and influence of, NH practice, as demonstrated in all three of the above examples, may well help to redress the increasingly entrenched western social phenomenon of youth-centric society.

Even in NH communities whose ensemble rehearsals occur during business hours, therefore less accessible to school-age and working folk, I repeatedly heard comments such as:

*...if a 12-year old kid turned up and wanted to play, we wouldn't turn them away... not that it's likely for such a thing to happen given the average age of the NH band members...*

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In relation to the NH ensembles that rehearse outside of business hours, the notable differences between these groups and general community ensembles were more a matter of acceptance and fun versus ambition and exclusivity, than of age parameters.

Several NH musicians I spoke to were also members of high achieving community ensembles and even honour bands. In response to my direct question as to why they continue to play in NH groups, the replies were: "because this is fun" and "(our director) treats us with respect. We are learning all the time and ...(he/she) doesn't treat us like children".

## *the right direction*

It seems clear that the groups that really flourish are those that enjoy mutual respect with their directors (conductors); those who are confident in their director's artistic ability and discretion; those with a director who can drive, cajole, amuse, encourage, inspire, and educate.

For those directors who 'get it', as it was described to me on many occasions, the rewards are rich indeed; and from what I observed, the directors who 'get it' are those who are genuinely there for the members; who take pride in the ensemble's achievements and strengths; who are patient, respectful, inspiring, musical, generous and humble.

To quote one truly inspiring band director from Washington:

*"I was a high school band director for 40 years, and for most of them I was angry!  
...now, I stand up in front of these (NH) folks and think – I've died and gone to heaven...they  
turn up early for rehearsal, no one's mom has forced them to be here!..."*

*"I don't ever have to play at another ball game"*

*"It's about the people more than the music"*

*"I am so lucky...with my modest Bachelor's degree, I'm here working with PhDs and  
professors"*

My final observation is possibly not so surprising, but neither was it something I anticipated. A number of NH communities, I found, were themselves quite significant advocacy groups. It is entirely logical, of course, that intelligent, mature individuals, many of whom are highly educated with esteemed careers behind them - strategic thinkers with a unifying passion for ongoing learning and the joy of music making - constitute a pretty powerful cohort.

Whether applied to supporting a local professional orchestra, fundraising for a particular cause, redressing deteriorating resources for a school music program, or lobbying a university council for resources for that institution's music department; the efforts of such a cohort is a powerful force for social good.

## **Conclusions**

Following my experiences with the 30+ groups across 9 communities, my principle conclusions are as follows:

- The New Horizons 'brand' successfully says: *accessible for older individuals, fun, your best is good enough, and we're here for you* (not the other way around). It clearly represents and communicates the NH philosophy.

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- That clear, recognisable brand is beneficial for existing NH groups and offers an attractive, proven platform for prospective adult-focused ensembles internationally.
- The movement is a positive step for social cohesion and inclusion. It clearly builds, and increasingly replaces (deteriorating) social networks; whilst offering a renewed sense of validity, empowerment and status for older individuals.
- Successful evolution of the NH movement can result in ensembles becoming too advanced for new beginners to join. Programs with an annual new beginner group as part of the ongoing program are best placed to deal with this issue.
- Pivotal to a successful NH program is a confident, qualified, Director. One who 'gets it'.

## *...where to from here*

As stated in the introduction to this report, I undertook the fellowship prepared, but with no preconceived notions of the likely application of the NH model in my organisation, community or region.

Having now immersed myself in the NH culture, and having seen for myself the benefits as outlined above, I am convinced that the model, philosophy, and indeed brand, should be adopted here.

Although we (at the Orange Regional Conservatorium) have an adult ensemble program that accommodates mature-age learners, by adopting the clear and identifiable NH model, with a connection to the broader international NH community, we could reinforce and highlight the sense of validity and empowerment for older Australians in our community.

As far as tangible outcomes are concerned, my organisation has now commenced planning for its first New Horizons (International) Camp, to be held in Orange NSW across the week of January 22-26, 2013.

The plan is for the camp is to generate interest in, and indeed kick-start, the Orange New Horizons program.

We envision stage one of the ONHP to comprise Concert Band, Beginner Concert Band, Percussion Ensemble and Beginner String Orchestra.

In closing, I need to give heartfelt thanks to Emeritus Professor Roy Ernst for opening my eyes to this transformative musical and social phenomenon; to the NAMM for the fellowship; and to all the wonderful folks who hosted my visits, looked after my family and myself, and truly opened my ears and heart to the power of New Horizons.

– thank you.

*I hope to see you in Australia in 2013!*