



Making music: Visiting musicians enjoy performing in the WFMT studios

The Windy City wonder

Among America's radio stations, WFMT has proved to be a beacon for classical music – and not just for its home audience. Tom Brown previews the new season's outstanding shows

Chicago's WFMT 98.7 has long been a shining light when it comes to classical music radio in the United States – a world not always rich in enterprise and innovation. Boasting a proud history, including being chosen as the first station in the world to broadcast from compact disc in 1982, the channel's pre-eminence has been reinforced lately by a string of high-profile successes.

Prime among these was the Peabody Award-winning *Leonard Bernstein: An American Life* – an 11-part 2004 documentary, produced by WFMT (or, more precisely, its sister company, the WFMT Radio Network), which encapsulated the kind of in-depth programming for which the station is rightly renowned.

With its survival partly ensured by those who appreciate its wares – as a commercial, not-for-profit operation, WFMT relies as much on the kindness of music-loving strangers as the revenue generated by advertising – the joy of the Chicago channel's set-up is that, broadly speaking, success breeds success. It should come as no surprise, then, to find the station's autumn schedules throwing up not just one but two highly recommendable new shows.

The Heartbeat of a Nation: The Israel Philharmonic at 70 has been in the works for more than two years, the fruit of a collaboration between the WFMT network and the American Friends of the IPO. Narrated by no less a luminary than Itzhak Perlman, the weekly series of 13 two-hour episodes mixes concerts from the orchestra's 2005/06 season with neatly packaged interview segments. The aim is to paint a comprehensive portrait of a remarkable

institution – its music, history and pivotal place in Israeli culture – and should prove to be a rich, rewarding offering.

The list of contributors is trademark WFMT, for whom copiousness really does seem to be the watchword. Headed by such names as Zubin Mehta, Yoel Levi and Pinchas Zukerman, a first-rate supporting cast includes players, critics and concert-goers, some of whom offer valuable memories of the orchestra's earliest days.

Musical highlights are plentiful, too. There's the Venezuelan hot-shot Gustavo Dudamel conducting Mahler's First Symphony – a performance greeted with great acclaim in

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July – plus Levi at the helm for Berlioz's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Maxim Vengerov playing Beethoven's Violin Concerto under Mehta, whose ubiquity throughout the series is a fair reflection of his importance in the orchestra's history.

Despite its focus, *The World of Robert Schumann* – WFMT's other major new acquisition – may aptly be described as a documentary of Wagnerian proportions. More than 20 years in the making, it consists of 13 hour-long episodes, playing weekly, to mark the 150th anniversary of Schumann's death.

Though the epic span implies plenty of musical padding, what's really special about this feat of radio craftsmanship is how its creator, Kansas University Professor John Tibbetts, weaves his raw materials into a unified whole, refusing to let any significant time pass without some insight into Schumann's life and times. Naturally, the music is there, and abundantly so, but only rarely does it dominate the soundscape. Instead, it becomes part of an aural tapestry of interviews, dramatisations and critical comments, and biographical and historical analysis with plenty of musicological insight.

It's some achievement, and Tibbetts should be applauded for the care he has so zealously lavished on this, his life's work, evident above all in the list of musicians lending their voices to his cause (Emanuel Ax, John Eliot Gardiner and Thomas Hampson provide just three examples from a bewilderingly long list). "Definitive" is an over-used word but would surely find a home here – were it not for the fact that Tibbetts plans to return to his extraordinary labour of love and expand it still further.

If all this appeals, and you don't happen to reside in or around the Windy City, then fear not: the WFMT network is syndicating both series to other US classical stations until March while the Schumann is slated for worldwide syndication from January. Alternatively, international listeners can hear all WFMT's output – which also includes the excellent daily series *Exploring Music*, as well as a season of 2005/06 Vienna Philharmonic concerts – by subscribing to its audio stream for \$100 a year: details at www.wfmt.com. ☉