

# The Recorder Takes a Stand: Music Connects Students in U.S. and Kenya

By Nina Stern

*The author is one of North America's leading performers of the recorder and classical clarinet. The native New Yorker studied with Jeanette van Wingerden and Hans-Rudolf Stalder at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis in Switzerland, where she received a Soloist's Degree. From Basel, she moved to Milan, Italy, to join the faculty of the Cívica Scuola di Musica. Since returning to New York, Stern has performed regularly as soloist or principal player with prestigious ensembles such as the New York Philharmonic, New York City Opera, New York Collegium, Philharmonia Baroque, Sinfonia New York and American Classical Orchestra. She has played under the baton of leading conductors such as Loren Maazel, Kurt Masur, Christopher Hogwood, Jane Glover, Ton Koopman and Jordi Savall, and recorded for Erato, Harmonia Mundi, Sony Classics, Telarc, and Smithsonian.*

*In addition to her work with S'Cool Sounds, Stern is the author of Recorders Without Borders, a two-volume book of original compositions for recorders and percussion in the styles of traditional music from around the world, intended for use in the classroom (see Music Reviews in this AR). Her latest projects include performing traditional music of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. She recently released an album of world music entitled East of the River.*



On June 18, I flew to Nairobi, Kenya. I had been planning for this trip for months and was very happy to finally be on my way. With me, I had a small suitcase for my clothing and a duffel bag filled with 100 plastic Yamaha recorders for the children of the Drug Fighters' School (DFS) in Kibera.

I had heard about Kibera, the largest slum in Africa. Over one million people live there—in an area about the size of New York City's Central Park—with very little in the way of basic services, including running water and electricity. The streets are open sewers, filled with human and animal refuse and garbage; the air is filled with smoke, soot and dust. Although I had seen many pictures and heard many stories, nothing could have prepared me for the sight and the smell.

As we walked through the streets, we were greeted by every child: "How are you?" they sang, reaching out their hands to touch us. We were a group of 29 volunteers, traveling with Cross Cultural Thresholds, an organization dedicated to school-building projects including DFS, which feeds and educates nearly 300 of Kibera's most at-risk children. I had met a Cross Cultural Thresholds Board member at a recording session in June 2009. I was moved and fascinated by the work she and her organization were doing in Kibera and she became very interested in the idea of sharing my music with

the children of DFS. Exactly one year later, I was there.

The main project of that week in June was the construction of a dormitory for children who,

for one reason or another, were not safe sleeping in their own homes. Many volunteers helped with the building; others initiated activities including tree planting, community clean-up, and various arts and crafts projects. One volunteer, a nurse, helped with medical issues and another, a psychologist, held group and individual counseling sessions with the children. I introduced my "Recorders Without Borders" program—developed in the New York City public schools—to approximately 100 of the students there.

I knew that I had very little time with the children—only four full days—but hoped to at least introduce them to the joys of instrumental music making. The children were wonderful to work with: smart, eager to learn, openly affectionate, and incredibly grateful that we had traveled so far to spend time with them. They were also very musical; not only did they learn quickly from me, but they also shared some of their own beautiful songs and traditional music with me and with the rest of our group of volunteers.

The teaching conditions were, to say the least, challenging. Most often, I worked with the children in a tented area, near the kitchen—a hut from which smoke from a wood fire, used to prepare the children's meals, billowed throughout the day. The noise from the construction was loud and unceasing. Dust was everywhere.

Nevertheless, in the few days that I was with them, I was able to teach the children five notes on the recorder and several tunes, including the chorus to Bob Marley's *One Love*, which we performed, together with percussion accompaniment, at the week's closing ceremony (*photo at left*).

I taught the children entirely by rote. There was no time to teach them how to read music and I was most



interested in their experiencing the thrill of playing music together.

I was also able to work more closely with two of the older students who took to the recorder and learned very quickly. We worked together at every opportunity, snatching 10 minutes here, 10 minutes there, from our busy days. I taught them more notes (a full octave) and more complicated tunes, including *Water Come A Me Eyes*, a beautiful Caribbean song, which we also performed together at the end of the week. I told these two students that I hoped that they would share their knowledge with the younger students after I left. They were happy to be entrusted with that responsibility and were proud to show off their accomplishments—keeping their recorders with them at all times and practicing at every opportunity.

One of the students became my unofficial assistant, helping me to hand out the recorders—we had put names on the instruments, which are still kept at the school, so that each student had his or her own—and helping to translate into Swahili when necessary. Most of the older students speak English beautifully, since they are taught both languages at the school, but the younger ones still occasionally needed help to understand my English.

In the months leading up to my trip, I had worked to create a relationship between students at two schools in the Bronx—the AmPark Neighborhood School and the Fieldston Lower School—and the students of DFS.

The children exchanged letters, telling each other about their families, their homes, and how they spent their days, and shared a musical exchange accomplished through videotape.

Carter Via, the founder and Executive Director of Cross Cultural Thresholds, visited with the children in the Bronx, sharing with them information about Kibera and the children of DFS. The families of the AmPark School raised money to send recorders to the children in Kibera, and the DFS children made shakers (this was one of the arts and crafts projects overseen by some of the volunteers) to send back to their friends in the Bronx.

The differences among the children could not have been greater—and yet, as Tamjeed, a student in the AmPark Neighborhood School said, “We are playing the same song.” This turned out to be literally true when the two groups collaborated on the composition of a new piece, *The Rhythms of Kibera*. This was based on rhythms improvised by the children in Kenya, to which the children of New York City added

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melody and more layers of percussion. (The Kibera students played on camel bones, shakers, and cups and nails. DFS was in the possession of only one or two small drums when I arrived there. I had made a conscious decision not to purchase and bring drums from the U.S. to Africa, where extraordinary percussion instruments are made locally. Before leaving Kenya, I purchased three beautiful Masai drums and had them delivered to the children of the school.)



The impact of the exchange—in terms of increased understanding of people far from home and in such vastly different circumstances—was life-changing for both groups. And for me, the experience was equally powerful. It is my hope that I will continue to connect children through music in this country and from all over the world.

*Get involved! If you would like to help the children of the Drug Fighters' School in Kibera, please go to the Cross Cultural Thresholds web site: [www.crossculturalthresholds.org](http://www.crossculturalthresholds.org). To help Nina Stern continue connecting children in this country and abroad through music, see the S'Cool Sounds web site: [www.scoolsounds.org](http://www.scoolsounds.org). Donations of new and slightly used instruments are also welcome.*