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A portrait of Nina Stern, a woman with long, dark, curly hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a light-colored top and a gold earring. The background is dark.

FREE SPIRIT

**Nina Stern on the majesty of
the recorder and the power of
reaching people through music**

FREE SPIRIT

Nina Stern on the *majesty of the recorder* and the power of reaching people through music

Interview BY BOB PAWLO
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NINA STERN has carved a unique and astonishingly diverse career for herself as a world-class classical clarinetist and recorder player. A member of Local 802 since 1985, she performs widely as a soloist and as a principal player with the finest orchestras, including the American Classical Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Apollo's Fire, Opera Lafayette and New York City Opera. Stern's latest projects include performances and recordings of traditional music of Eastern Europe, Armenia and the Middle East as a soloist and with her ensembles Rose of the Compass and East of the River (with co-director Daphna Mor). Recently, Rose of the Compass has collaborated with conductor Kent Tritle and the Choir of St. John the Divine in creating programs for the "Great Music in a Great Space" series. That collaboration resulted in the release of the album "The Four Quarters of Jerusalem" on the Pro Organo label. In 2015, Stern released a solo album "Amaryllis" with percussionist Glen Velez, for MSR Classics. Stern was appointed to the faculty of Juilliard's Historical Performance program in 2012 and has served on the faculties of the Mannes College of Music, Civica Scuola di Musica (Milan) and Oberlin Conservatory. She founded S'Cool Sounds, an award-winning music education project in New York City public school classrooms, and has traveled throughout the U.S. and the world to introduce her innovative instrumental program to schoolchildren and their teachers. Nina Stern recently sat down with Local 802's Bob Pawlo to discuss her life in music.

Bob Pawlo: How and when did you get started in music?

Nina Stern: The very first lessons that I took were on piano, and my piano

teacher just happened to be the composer Joan Tower, who at that point was teaching private piano lessons in Manhattan. I was really young, but I remember loving the lessons. I recall that she would play ear training "guessing games" with me. Then in third grade, we all played recorder in school, but I really took to it. I also picked up the clarinet and a little oboe, but I loved Baroque and Renaissance music and I loved the repertoire that the recorder played. I was offered the recorder solos in all of the various holiday concerts and just began playing a lot. I would record one part of a recorder duet on my tape recorder, then play it back and play along with it. I would bring my recorder to my piano lessons. Finally, my parents got me a recorder teacher – actually a clarinet teacher, who also played the recorder. I ultimately got a teacher from the New York Pro Musica ensemble. At that point, I started going to recorder workshops and festivals. I was still a teenager: everyone there was quite a bit older!

Bob Pawlo: Did you get to study recorder in college?

Nina Stern: Well, I went to Harvard College, where I majored in the history and literature of the Renaissance, which I loved. But in my sophomore year, I decided to make a go of studying music full time, and there were very few places at the time where you could study early music seriously, and really you had to go to Europe to do it. So I went to the Schola Cantorum in Switzerland. It was wonderful. I got my degree as a soloist in recorder, but I also took up the historical clarinet.

Bob Pawlo: What was it like training there in Switzerland?

Nina Stern: My fellow students were studying recorder, harpsichord, violin, cello, viola de gamba, cornetto and other instruments. We practiced four or five hours a day. We all had to take sing-



PHOTO: LYDIA CHEN

ing lessons. We all learned how to play some harpsichord and learned how to improvise the continuo part using the bass line and numbers. We learned early notation. We had classes in Gregorian chant and counterpoint. We learned music history from the Medieval up until the Baroque. Most classes were taught in German, through there were many English-speaking students there, so classes occasionally lapsed into English. I had taken a semester of intensive German at Harvard so I could already get by when

I first arrived. My German improved, of course, while I was living there. Also, I was already fluent in French and Italian, so speaking in a foreign language perhaps came more easily to me. My mother was born in Venice and my grandmother was very much a part of our household when I was growing up.

Bob Pawlo: And what did you do after graduation?

Nina Stern: Being fluent in Italian, I got a teaching job in Milan at the Scuola Civica. At the time, every small

town in Italy had a concert series in either some beautiful church or beautiful old theatre. There was a lot of government money for that kind of thing, so there were a lot of opportunities for performance. I had several ensembles that I was performing with and many early music orchestras were beginning to form. So I was invited to play with orchestras in Holland, France, Germany and all over Europe. I spent almost five years in Milan teaching at the conservatory. It was a wonderful job, and I was loath to leave it, but at that point I'd been in Europe for almost ten years. It was a risk to leave, but I felt that if I was going to start a career back home, it was a good time for me to do it.

Bob Pawlo: What kind of luck did you have when you came back?

Nina Stern: I was immediately appointed to the historical performance faculty at Mannes College of Music, which at the time had the only historical performance department in New York City. I later went on to direct that program for a few years, but at that time I was just appointed to teach recorder. I played with some of the orchestras that were beginning to perform Mozart and Beethoven on historical instruments, like the Smithsonian Chamber Players, Classical Band, Philharmonia Baroque out in San Francisco and Apollo's Fire in Cleveland.

Bob Pawlo: How did you become involved in music education and outreach?

Nina Stern: Well, I've always taught. I was teaching in conservatories from the time I graduated. But I felt that I wanted to do something more for my community. I started a music education program with the New York Collegium, and the first thing we did was simply go into schools in New York where there were no music programs and teach the kids how to play an instrument. My instrument was particularly adept for that, because the recorder is relatively easy to learn in the beginning stages. I also brought in percussion, because by that time I had become very interested in traditional music from other parts of the world, and I've yet to hear a musical tradition that doesn't have some form of



Recorder students in Kenya celebrate their victory in a nationwide music competition. Their music school uses a system founded by Nina Stern called S'Cool Sounds, which uses music for outreach, joy and communication with other cultures.

flute in it and some form of percussion. So all of this became the educational program that's now called S'Cool Sounds. We have three things that we focus on. One is teaching children who wouldn't otherwise have that opportunity. Another focus is having them play music together. And the third thing is teaching about other parts of the world through music. We travel all over the world with this program. I've gone to East Africa to work with really impoverished children in the slums of Kenya. We've started programs in five schools there now. One of the schools recently won first place in a nationwide music competition against much wealthier schools, so it was incredibly empowering for these children. We've started programs in Jordan working with Syrian refugees. We started a program in Burundi and we often partner with humanitarian organizations that are building schools. Based on the music we've learned and taught all over the world, I put together little ensemble pieces for recorder and percussion in a collection called "Recorders Without Borders." When we're teaching in another country, it's very important to us that we highlight how wonderful their own musical traditions are. So we use the recorder as a tool for students to be

playing their own music and also to be learning about music from other parts of the world. We're working in parts of the world where there's a great deal of suffering and a great deal of desperation, so it's incredibly powerful to lift their spirits with music in addition to giving them the opportunity to express themselves and be creative through music.

Bob Pawlo: That's wonderful. Pivoting back to your own work, can you describe some of the performing projects that you're involved with?

Nina Stern: I love playing with orchestras on early instruments or replicas of original instruments. For instance, I'll play A or Bb or C clarinets or basset horn. I play the Mozart Requiem or Beethoven's Ninth and other major repertoire on historical instruments with orchestras all over the country. I also have a couple of my own ensembles. One of them is called *Rose of the Compass*, which collaborates with Kent Tritle at Saint John the Divine. Every year we do a program which celebrates intercultural and interfaith programs. We have a program based on the period of time in Spain when the various faiths lived together in relative harmony and there was a huge amount of communication between communities. We did one program called "The Glory of

Constantinople" where we played Turkish folk and classical music as well as Western classical music about Constantinople. The other ensemble that I perform with quite a bit is *East of the River*. I co-direct that group with another recorder player named Daphna Mor, and we do programs of Balkan, Sephardic and Middle Eastern music together with Medieval repertory from Western Europe. We collaborate with a lot of different musicians - with percussionists, kanun players, oud players, accordion players. New York is such a gold mine when it comes to musical talent. If you're looking for an oud player or a kanun player, you can find one of the best in the world. And what I really like to do is take folk music from other traditions written for other instruments and play them on recorder. I'm really fascinated by Armenian and Balkan music. I love all of those great compound rhythms and I perceive similarities in spirit and function between these dance forms and Medieval estampies.

Bob Pawlo: What advice would you give musicians who want to find opportunities in early music?

Nina Stern: Probably the same advice that I would give any musician. In early music, it's very unlikely that you are going to get one job that's going to sustain you, unless you're lucky enough to get an academic job. My advice is to be creative, not only to look to be a freelance musician but to create your own opportunities in outreach, if that's your thing. Outreach can be to children; it can be to older people; it can be to refugees. It can be to any number of communities. Prepare yourself to have a career that includes many different interests. Also, there are academic possibilities and many freelance possibilities, but I think the most interesting careers are when people are creating their own opportunities in addition to those that are being provided for them. Being a musician is a learning experience. I'm constantly inspired by my colleagues and by the music that I hear in this great city and from the people who I meet in traveling the world. It's a great privilege to be able to make music my life and my career and to be able to share it with other people.

“I’m constantly inspired by my colleagues and by the music that I hear in this great city”