

Interview with Nina Stern - by Charles Fischer

Born in New York City, Nina Stern has become one of North America's leading performers of the recorder and classical clarinet. Ms. Stern studied with Jeanette van Wingerden and Hans-Rudolf Stalder at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis in Basel, Switzerland, where she received a Soloist's Degree. From Basel, Ms. Stern moved to Milan, Italy where she was offered a teaching position at the Civica Scuola di Musica.

Nina Stern has performed widely in Europe and North America. She has appeared with numerous ensembles including the New York Collegium, New York City Opera, The New York Philharmonic, Concert Royal, L'Orchestra della Scala (Milan), I Solisti Veneti, The Little Orchestra Society, Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra, and Hesperion XX. She performs as principal clarinet with many of North America's foremost period-instrument orchestras including The American Classical Orchestra, Philharmonia Baroque, Boston Baroque and Tafelmusik.

Her numerous festival appearances have included performances under leading conductors such as Christopher Hogwood, Trevor Pinnock, Claudio Scimone, Kurt Masur, Lorin Maazel, Jane Glover, Bruno Weil, Ton Koopman, Andrew Parrot and Jordi Savall. She has recorded for Erato, Harmonia Mundi, Sony Classics, Newport Classics, Wildboar, Telarc and Smithsonian labels.

Ms. Stern is currently on the faculty of the Mannes College of Music where she directed the Historical

Performance Program from 1989 to 1996. She has taught at the Five Colleges in Western Massachusetts and was twice a Visiting Professor at Oberlin Conservatory. Ms. Stern has been on the faculties of numerous workshops throughout the United States and in Europe. Appointed the Director of Education for the New York Collegium in the fall of 2002, Ms. Stern helped found the The NY Collegium/Ella Baker Project which currently involves over 180 New York City public school students in weekly or twice weekly instruction on recorder and percussion.



According to a recent article in the Washington Post describing her teaching at the Ella Baker school, "She teaches them how to read music and how to improvise, and she breaks down complex melodies to ensure a role in the ensemble for every child. Refusing to give in to the stereotype of the twice-weekly arts class in

which kids relax, she demands excellence." For the full article please go to the following URL:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A54004-2003Nov17.html>

CF - Please tell us about the New York Collegium and the background of your appointment as Director of Education.

NS - After I had played several concerts with the New York Collegium, their Executive Director, Dorothea Endicott, expressed to me her interest in starting an Education Program for the ensemble. In the meantime, I was in contact with Alan Shulman,

Interview with Nina Stern (continued)

an innovative educator working for the Superintendent of Alternative Schools at the New York City Board of Education. Alan had asked me if I might be interested in doing something for the New York City schools. Dorothea, Alan and I met for a “brainstorming” session and began discussing a potential relationship between the New York Collegium and a New York City public school. One thing led to another and the New York Collegium/Ella Baker Project was begun. Dorothea Endicott subsequently appointed me Director of Education for the New York Collegium.

CF - What is the New York Collegium/Ella Baker Project?

NS - The New York Collegium/Ella Baker Project is an ongoing program in which New York Collegium musicians go to Ella Baker classrooms on a regular basis (once or twice a week) to teach recorder and percussion to the students. We also offer special workshops. For example, The New England Conservatory Percussion Ensemble recently came to the school to give a performance and hands-on-workshop with the students. The same week, recorder students from Ella Baker attended a dress rehearsal of the New York Collegium performing J.S. Bach’s Cantata #106.



CF - How many students did you have initially and how many have continued up to now? Have any additional students joined since inception?

NS - Initially we had 100 recorder students and 50 percussion students. We now have 140 re-

corde students and 125 percussion students. All students that began recorder and percussion last year continue to play the instruments this year. Students new to the school this year joined the classes. This year the instruction is offered to more grades: recorder is offered for grades 3-6 and percussion is offered to grades 5-8.

CF - Since the article on your teaching in the public schools was published, has there been any effect on your current project?

NS - We have received inquiries from music teachers around the country about the Ella Baker project. Some have written to me, some have come to observe us in the classroom. Foundations already supporting the program are pleased, naturally, with the attention it has received, and we have been encouraged by some other organizations to apply for further funding.

CF - How long do you see the current project continuing? Do you have any plans for expansion?

NS - We consider this to be an ongoing project with a long future. We constantly discuss new ideas about how to improve and expand the program and about how, in general, to

help these children to pursue their musical interests and talents.

CF -. What books/methods/materials did you use initially and what books/methods/materials do you use now?

NS - I have not used any one method but have gathered ideas and materials from many books. Most of the pieces that I use come from books of folk and traditional music from all over the world, both vocal and instrumental, and from collections of Medieval and Renaissance repertory. I then often transpose and arrange the pieces for my students, often supplying very simple harmony parts that the less experienced students can

Interview with Nina Stern (continued)

play. Some methods that I have gotten ideas and material from are: "Tu, tu, tu, tu, Caribbean Beginner's Workbook for Soprano recorder" by Rosina Christina Moder (I used this wonderful book quite a bit in my first year of teaching.), The "Sweet Pipes" series of methods and recently, from your book, Charles, "The Recorder From Zero"

CF - What books/methods/materials do you plan to use as the students improve?

NS - As the students improve I hope to use more true consort music from the Renaissance repertory and more complex Medieval pieces. I will also continue to rely heavily on sources from Folk and traditional repertories. I have begun doing a good bit of composing and improvising with the children and I intend to go further with that as well.

CF -. Do you envision a phase where new beginning students are coached by continuing, more experienced students?

NS - To a certain degree this has already happened. More experienced or gifted students in a class will often quite naturally lean over to help a classmate having more difficulty. Also, on occasion, I will ask a particularly gifted student to try and teach some of the material to his or her friends in their free time (in the lunchroom, or while waiting for the school bus at the end of the day). My most advanced students are quite young (3rd and 4th graders). As they grow older I can imagine asking them to help with beginners on a more organized basis.

CF - When do you plan to introduce alto, tenor, and bass recorders?

NS - The school owns two alto and two tenor recorders which we lend out to students. Some of the children have already played the larger instruments in performances that we have done. I have begun to introduce the concept of F-fingering, but none of the students are reading F-fingering fluently yet.

CF - What musical development path do you see for your students....early music? Band music? Orchestral instruments? Other early music instruments? Pop music?

NS - I am most interested in their overall development as musicians and as music-loving people. Our plan is for them all to continue with recorder and percussion (which they all study as well) for as long as they are at the Ella Baker School (through 8th Grade). If some go on to study other instruments as well (and some already have) that is terrific.

CF - Have you seen (documented) any general academic improvement in your students compared to the rest of the school?

NS - Classroom teachers have told me that they notice changes in their students because of our program: increased self-confidence, pride in themselves, an ability to focus, and a sense of discipline. Occasionally something that I teach in my class will have a more specific academic benefit, for example, a greater understanding of fractions after we have worked on note values and their relationship to each other.

CF - Do you have any good anecdotes to relate about your experience so far?

NS - Recently we invited the 3rd and 4th grade classes to come watch a New York Collegium dress rehearsal of Bach's Cantata 106 (The Actus Tragicus). Daphna Mor and I were playing recorder. I was concerned that the piece might be a little too intense or heady for the children. Instead, they were transfixed throughout the performance. After the rehearsal was over one of the children asked me "Nina, can you please teach us that song?"

CF - Any plans for expanding the program inside your current school?

NS - We hope to expand the program by reaching more and more children within the school and by providing more opportunity for greater improvement in their musical skills. We begin teaching the recorder in the 3rd grade and now teach the instrument through the 6th grade. As the children now in 6th grade move up into

Interview with Nina Stern (continued)

the 7th and 8th grades, we intend to continue to offer them the recorder. We also hope to create an afterschool program where especially interested students can become more expert and can receive more individual attention.

CF - Any plans for initiating similar programs in other schools?

NS - People at the New York City Board of Education have spoken to us about possibly initiating programs elsewhere. As of now, however, there are no concrete plans as such.

CF - How has your philosophy of teaching music been altered (if at all) by your experience in this program?

NS - My experience teaching at the Ella Baker School has opened my eyes to just how important experiencing music ACTIVELY is to children and that delving deeply into any discipline can change a child's life. I believe that my emphasis in teaching has perhaps changed somewhat from concentrating always a great deal on detail to recognizing the importance of experiencing the whole.

I have certainly expanded my own repertory in preparing for my teaching at Ella Baker and have enjoyed that process a great deal. In the end, as I have always done, I strive for excellence. The children can invariably achieve it and revel in it when they do.

CF - How would you advise other recorder teachers to initiate a similar program at their schools?

NS - It is extraordinarily important to create a strong relationship with the administration and faculty at a school before endeavoring to set up a program such as ours. We try very hard for our program to be an integral part of each classroom. (We will often, for example, choose repertory that relates to a classroom's general curriculum.) The

program's success is in large part due to a strong and ongoing relationship between The New York Collegium and The Ella Baker School's principal, Laura Garcia, the rest of the administration, and, above all, the classroom teachers.

I also believe that for a recorder program to succeed it must be conceived as an end unto itself, not as a program preparing students to move on to other musical endeavors, such as band or orchestra. (As I mentioned before, if students ALSO move on to other instruments, that is a wonderful thing.) The Ella Baker/New York Collegium Project also has, of course, the added component of percussion classes which add a tremendous amount to the program.

