

From *Cleveland*
to

Kolkata



An audience of young women from St. Teresa's School

*How a **CIM** alum brought Western classical music
(and a lot of Clevelanders) to the Eastern world*

Imagine you're a classically trained pianist about to perform in front of a crowd that can't wait to hear your first note. But instead of seats, your audience sits on the floor. Instead of a Steinway, you're playing on a keyboard you've brought with you. And out of the corner of your eye, you can see a herd of water buffalo saunter by. This was reality for alumna Jennifer Heemstra, who has spent the last year performing classical music all over India. She and her colleagues have performed in everything from the slums and poverty-stricken villages to ballrooms and 1,500-seat theaters packed to the brim. The one thing that these concerts have in common? Her audiences can't get enough.

Unexpected Generosity

How did Heemstra, a graduate of CIM and newcomer to India, create a wildly successful concert series featuring Western classical music in the Eastern world? The answer is, with a lot of help—the kind of infectious generosity that continues to surprise and amaze Heemstra even today.

Heemstra moved to Kolkata about a year and a half ago after her husband got a job there. She quickly came to realize the city was teeming with culture. The arts, music, theater, literature; it was revered and sought after. Having spent the last 10 years in Cleveland after receiving her master's degree in music from CIM, she was ready to take on the challenge of bringing classical music to a brand new audience. Her mission was simple: bring Western classical music to everyone in India.

The conditions were just right. She was in a city that appreciated the arts, but hadn't been exposed to classical music of the West. There, Eastern classical reigns supreme, the twangs of the sitar familiar. When Cleveland Orchestra cellist and CIM faculty Brian Thornton performed there with Heemstra for an audience of schoolchildren, he remembers how he started with the basics. "I had the school kids raise their hands in the audience, asking how many had seen a cello before in person," says Thornton. "Three people raised their hands of about 1,500."

Heemstra had her work cut out for her; but she was excited to bring her passion to an "untapped" market. "Essentially I got together with a group of locals who are passionate about music, as well as those who don't necessarily have the background in music but who want to enrich their city and give back to their community," she says. "Our idea is that music should be available to the masses, regardless of socioeconomic status." After countless hours of planning with her team, they were ready to launch the concert series, Kolkata Classics. They had planned to start in March 2015, but an unexpected patron, Suresh Somani, got wind of the project and offered to kick-start the program, paying to bring in the first artist over the holiday season.

The generosity didn't stop there. Heemstra was connected with one of the top patrons for the arts in India, Manjushree Khaitan of the Birla family. Mrs. Khaitan donated a 1,500-seat theater for the



Marla Berg's performance with Heemstra on piano

performances and offered to pay for the flights of the artists. "Through her sponsorship we have been very, very blessed," says Heemstra. "She is working with us to promote Western classical music here in the city of joy." Donations and support for the project ranges from the local fashion designer Radhika Singhi who tailormakes traditional Indian outfits for each performer; to the only music store in Kolkata that donated its piano for the concerts, to radio stations and billboards that give free airtime and ad space for the series. And "the big one," as Heemstra says, is the artists, all of whom donate their time. The support has resulted in Kolkata Classics becoming fully funded for its first year.

The Cleveland Contingent

The formula was set. Heemstra invited each artist to perform three concerts for schoolchildren, one public concert and one private concert in the five-star hotel, The Oberoi Grand, which donated its ballroom. The school concerts comprise children from private schools, orphanages, charities and NGOs working in various capacities—including bringing young girls out of sex slavery.

Of the six performers invited in Kolkata Classic's inaugural season, five were alumni from CIM. "Of course, I leveraged my friends and colleagues from Cleveland to come because, frankly, I think they're the best musicians," she says. "I need the best musicians to represent Western classical music here, to spark people's interest. I lived in Cleveland for about 10 years. I made a lot of really good friends and long sustaining relationships and met very, very talented people. I'm just pulling from that pool of people—some people that I met 15 years ago—and luckily, we've had such great relationships that they are agreeing to come and perform in uncharted territory."



Thornton and Heemstra perform in the ballroom at the Oberoi Grand

Thornton performed with Heemstra this past spring. "It was really special for me to play for the different types of audiences. From the school kids to the people in real poverty to the very wealthy people—everyone was very interested and very welcoming," says Thornton.

Along with the performance circuit, Thornton and Heemstra explored some of the culture of India. "We traveled around different areas and met classical music supporters—those who were working in India who had helped get the word out about this project. It was really about me meeting people associated with the series," says Thornton.

Heemstra is dedicated to ensuring the concerts are mutually beneficial for every artist she invites, many of whom are university professors on tenure track. "I tell them, 'Whatever you want, I'll get for you. You want to do a masterclass? I can do that, do you want to do a lecture? We can make that happen.'"

With vocalist and CIM alum Susan Williams, Heemstra played a Christmas concert in the town square, performed for the French Ambassador and for children and families in the slums; with pianist and alum Douglas Jurs she performed in an isolated steel town several hours by train from Kolkata; and with alum and vocalist Marla Berg she went into the Himalayan mountain range to perform

Susan Williams and Heemstra serenade the Jungle Crows NGO and water buffalo in the slums of Kolkata



for four thousand students at secluded private schools. "They had never heard Western classical before. So they were a bit shocked!" says Heemstra. Western classical music began to permeate throughout the country.

Engaging at Any Age

Beyond the right performers, the perfect number of concerts and the right amount of funding, you also need fans. And you don't get an audience by simply playing music at them. Heemstra and her artists strove to make every concert interactive. "My goal is to play no more than 10 minutes without having some type of interaction with the audience, whether that's explaining something, asking them to listen for something or giving them some historical context," says Heemstra. "I want them engaged, and this holds true regardless of age. They could be first graders or they could be 70 years old."

The techniques ranged widely and included call and response, building stories together or listening for a certain motif that enters and exits throughout a piece. "It's hard for young kids of any age to just jump up and participate. They deal with peer pressure," says Thornton. "But they were very courageous. They came up with story lines and were very willing to chat and to interact. It was awesome." Seventh grader Jane Ha, who attended the concert, says, "It was one of the best occasions in my life to date."

Sparking an Interest

Heemstra reports that the series is garnering a solid fan base, recalling a conversation she recently had with a woman who has made a habit of keeping the concert programs and studying the music at home with her husband and young children. "They study the programs for two months until the next concert," says Heemstra. "I was totally floored and honored that the concert sparked interest in classical music for them."

From seventh graders to young parents to the media, Kolkatta Classics is making a splash throughout the city and country. Fauzia Marikar, arts critic for the *Telegraph* newspaper in India, said of Heemstra, "Presenting professional musicians in recital and concert to avid listeners here, especially young people from the less-fortunate walks of life, her presentations are musically brilliant, and her short descriptions amusing and articulate."

What's Next?

The series continues through November. Then, she and her colleagues will gear up for another year of fund raising and music making. Heemstra has already made a lasting impression on the city and hopes to continue this work for more years to come. For more photos and information about this concert series, visit facebook.com/KolkattaClassics.



This year's performance cycle included several alumni, faculty and Cleveland-area performers

- **Dr. Susan William** (DMA '09, Schiller)
- **Douglas Jurs** (MM '03, Shapiro)
- **Brian Thornton**: CIM Cello Faculty, cellist in The Cleveland Orchestra
- **Marla Berg** (MM '83, AD '88, Vassos) CIM Voice Faculty
- **Cynthia Watson**: CIM Oboe Faculty
- **George Pope**: Flute Faculty at Baldwin Wallace University
- **Carrie Pierce**: Cello Faculty at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi