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Woman Around Town: Neeta Helms - The Class Act Behind Classical Movements

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by **Charlene Giannetti** on **Woman Around Town**

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We've all heard that old joke: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice."

But how do you get a world renowned orchestra—with more than 100 musicians and their instruments worth millions of dollars—to Carnegie Hall or to any number of other famous musical venues around the globe? You count on Neeta Helms. Her aptly named company, Classical Movements, has been transporting orchestras and choral groups on international tours for 20 years. "We do 50 to 60 tour

projects a year and we have never done the same project twice,” Neeta said. Each tour is unique and requires a minimum of six months of planning, more often a year to 18 months.



Classical Movements is not just a travel company for musicians, but an organization that is helping to keep classical music vibrant worldwide. Six years ago, Neeta began commissioning works for orchestras and choral groups. Twenty works have been commissioned so far with several more in the pipeline. “We feel this is an excellent way to give back; it’s a living gift,” Neeta said. “These composers are very talented and their music lives on. But it’s also a way of giving back to people because it’s important to have new music written for choruses and orchestras.”

When the Yale Alumni Chorus traveled to Mexico in 2009, Classical Movements commissioned a work from Mexican composer Jorge Córdoba Valencia that had its premiere at the group’s concert in Mexico City. “That was a very big story in Mexico,” Neeta said. In 2010, Classical Movements worked with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and its conductor Marin Alsop to benefit the program OrchKids, which places instruments in the hands of inner-city children. “OrchKids is a project that is very near and dear to our hearts,” said Neeta. “We were glad to be asked to commission a full orchestral piece for the entire symphony orchestra that had its world premiere last March and these excited kids participated, maybe about 60 or 70 of them, along with the entire orchestra on stage.”



Classical Movements also produces what are true cultural events through its musical festivals—*Rhapsody!* in Vienna, Salzburg, and Prague, *Melodia!* in South America, and *Ihlombe!* in South Africa. Each festival attracts choruses from all over the world that come together for the opportunity to participate in concerts alongside talented local groups celebrating that area’s musical tradition.

When Neeta isn’t traveling—she takes at least 20 trips a year—she can be found in Classical Movements’ office located in an historic home on Cameron Street in Old Town Alexandria. The office is warm and welcoming with pale walls, dark wood, and oriental carpets. Two floors are occupied by the company’s employees, many of them musicians and between them speaking eight languages besides English, and all of them sharing Neeta’s passion for classical music and a knowledge of many parts of the world.

Neeta was born into a musical family in India. Her father, Eric Daniel Helms, was a “natural” musician who taught himself piano. He also passed along to Neeta his love for classical music and she has named her company’s initiative to commission music after him. Neeta began taking piano lessons when she was four, but said that when she was growing up in India in the 1960s and 1970s, access to Western music—sheet music and recordings—was limited. “It was very challenging because you couldn’t make it a career,” she explained. “Growing up 40 years ago was very different.”



She has lived in the U.S. since 1986. Top sales and marketing positions with the Taj Group of Hotels gave Neeta an understanding of travel and in 1992 with Jacques Vallerand-Parisi, whom she would later marry, she formed a company, Blue Heart Travel, to arrange tours to the Soviet Union.

“The Soviet Union was turning into Russia; it was a very exciting time, not just because the country was changing but it was also collapsing,” Neeta explained. “It was like the Wild West. You never knew what was coming.” Russian hotels previously filled with tourists from the other Iron Curtain countries—Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Poland—were now empty. With travel restrictions lifted, Eastern Europeans wanted to see Paris, London, and New York. The Russian airline, Aeroflot, was allowed to fly into the U.S., but the planes were empty flying back to Russia.

So Blue Heart began to take Westerners to Russia. “If you look at our itinerary, it was a full day at the Hermitage, it was the Tretyakov Gallery, the icons, the Bolshoi Theater,” she said. “Everything was oriented towards culture, whether it was Dostoevsky or where Tchaikovsky was buried.” For less than \$1,000 at peak season, the tours included airfare, hotel, all meals, concerts, even the Moscow Circus. “We sold it like hotcakes.” The editor of the travel section of the *Washington Post* went on one of the tours, came back, and wrote “this massive article,” she said. “We were very lucky.” In 1993, Blue Heart took more than 2,000 people to Russia.



Blue Heart didn't start out with a musical orientation, but soon musical groups, eager to experience Russia's rich musical tradition, approached Neeta asking her to arrange concert tours. Mstislav Rostropovich, the famous cellist and conductor, defected from the Soviet Union in 1974. In 1993, he was invited back to his dramatically changed homeland with his National Symphony Orchestra of the Kennedy Center and they took with them an excellent choir of 190 singers. Neeta arranged the tour with only two months' notice. Apart from important concerts in legendary concert halls, Rostropovich conducted a concert in Red Square with hundreds of the world's leading TV and press in attendance. "It was probably like touring the United States with the Beatles, that was what it was like going to Russia with Rostropovich," said Neeta. "The mobs of people! It was so exciting. The world was changing. People could not believe that there was a concert in Red Square as all that had ever been allowed in the past were military events."

Excited with the company's success in Russia, Neeta began to explore other travel destinations. In 1994, Nelson Mandela was elected president of South Africa. "We said, 'All right. We'll go to South Africa,'" said Neeta. "I was also very interested in Turkey. People knew Greece, but they didn't know Turkey, and it's the most fascinating country. So we added Turkey and soon China." Blue Heart printed up attractive brochures and took out ads in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. "[Our clients] were people who had traveled everywhere and they had gone on their own and they didn't need us for England and they didn't need us for Italy, but they wanted us to plan their trips to rather more challenging, interesting places," she said.

During the Clinton Administration, Blue Heart was asked to take special interest groups to Cuba ("we had to get licenses, and it wasn't easy") as well as Vietnam and Croatia. "We chose these destinations because they are extremely old and fascinating and very interesting musically and culturally," she said.

“That was our orientation and, even as we were adding all of these countries, rapidly because people wanted to go to all of these places, we also were getting more and more musical groups.”

In 1995, Neeta renamed the company Classical Movements to better identify the company’s mission. “I needed a name that sounded like an artistic name, so I could say: ‘I am here representing this chorus and I’d like you to engage them in your festival.’”



This year, Classical Movements marks its 20th birthday, having fun with the celebration, conducting surveys to identify the 20 greatest concert halls (all continents were included) and the 20 greatest choral countries that people have never heard of (Samoa made that list). They also listed the 20 idiosyncrasies of travel—volcanoes erupting, unreasonable airline rules—that require Neeta and her team to remain flexible and vigilant.

On September 11, 2001, Classical Movements had the entire New York Philharmonic on tour in Europe. “By the time they took off from Hanover and landed in Frankfurt, the travel world as we knew it was changed forever. It was impossible to get anyone on a cellphone,” she said. All flights were grounded in and out of a devastated America for four days. “We could not get the orchestra back home for four days. We got them back on the first aircraft that left Frankfurt for New York.”

In 2006, British airport authorities learned that a terrorist was plotting to take down a plane with a liquid bomb. Classical Movements arrived at Heathrow with a symphony orchestra whose members were returning home to cities in the U.S., Canada, and South America. Security was tight and passengers were only permitted to take one see-through plastic bag on board. Everything else had to be checked including precious instruments. “Have you ever been on an airplane when you had nothing?” Neeta asked. “You couldn’t even take your handbag on board.”

Days later Classical Movements had the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Minnesota Orchestra on tour to Europe including many stops into and out of the UK. Everything had to be re-thought and changed with all night planning. The star soloist who had defected from Russia, leaving her Stradivarius violin behind, refused to be separated from her second Stradivarius. Classical Movements had to reroute her through other European cities so that she could take her violin on board.



“We once had our tour disrupted when the Pope [John Paul II] showed up in Cracow and all the roads were closed,” she said. How does she deal with all the pressure? “Nerves of steel,” she said with a laugh. “I don’t know. I love it. You are dealing, in our business, at all levels. We have dealt with many of the classical music stars of the world, but we also deal with the maids and crews in hotels, porters and cargo handlers in airports.” Besides English and Hindi, Neeta speaks basic German and French and a smattering of Spanish. “You only raise your voice when it’s effective,” she said.

In addition to her talented staff in Alexandria, Neeta has “exceptional people” in countries around the world who have been “tried and tested.” She added: “You know when you’re going to do a tour of Russia that it’s much nicer to have Anastasia or Lena take care of you rather than one of us. It’s much

more valuable to have the person who lives there and really knows where to shop and knows the city and can talk about what life there is like.”

Classical Movements’ clients range from famous orchestras to children’s choruses. Each tour is tailored to the interests and needs of that particular group. An adult chorus traveling to Brazil, for example, might enjoy sampling the local cuisine and spending off hours in museums. A boys’ chorus would have different needs. “You don’t want to serve them hamburgers and rubbish food, but you still want the menus to be authentic,” she said. “You can’t drag them around museums because they’re young, but, at the same time, you must show them something that is educational. We never forget that for each group, it may be the first time they are going to Israel or Salzburg. It needs to be a perfect trip.”



Jacques Vallerand-Parisi died in 2008. Neeta is now married to Johan van Zyl, who is from South Africa and serves as the company’s director of international projects. Neeta said that South Africa is a “miraculous country, a rainbow nation, beautiful beyond imagination.” She has no plans, however, to leave the U.S. “I love America,” she said. “I’ve lived here 26 years, so this is my home. I was born in India, but I’m not going back to India. I’ve built up this company for 20 years. My life is here, my children (Remy, 14, and Maxim, 10) are here. And I really believe in the promise of America. America’s been very good to me. So I like to visit places but I’m not moving anywhere.”

Classical Movements has had a busy year. This past February, the company commissioned a series of famous composers for concerts at Carnegie Hall. They had the National Symphony Orchestra on its 25th tour, this time to South America. All in all, Neeta and her staff worked with 55 different groups of every kind, from bands to choruses to youth orchestras to the company’s own choral festivals and, of course, world class symphony orchestras. In May, Classical Movements will travel with the globe-

trotting Yale Glee Club to China. Recently, Neeta received a call from another musical group asking her to arrange a tour for 2017. She laughed. “That’s too far ahead even for me to think about right now.”

For more information, go to the website for [Classical Movements](#).

Photos from top:

1. Neeta in Australia at Ayers Rock, Uluru.
2. At the Transient Glory Symposium at Carnegie Hall with renowned composers and conductors Grant Gershon, Janet Galvan, Doug Cuomo, John Corigliano, Francisco Nunez and radio personality John Schaefer and the wonderful children who performed all the new music commissioned.
3. At Classical Movements’ Ihlombe! choral festival with South Africa’s leading choral conductors at the Linder Auditorium, Johannesburg. From left, Michael Dingaana, Richard Cock, Sidumo Jacobs, Neeta, Themba Madlopa, Johann van der Sandt, George Mxadana.
4. With Gil Shaham, the Israeli-American violinist.
5. With Christoph Eschenbach, Music Director of the National Symphony Orchestra and Artistic Director of the Kennedy Center in Seoul, Korea.
6. Neeta with Australia’s Sydney Opera House and Harbor Bridge in the background.
7. With Yo-Yo Ma.
8. On safari with her family in South Africa, 2009, from left, Johan, Neeta, Remy and Maxim.

Woman Around Town’s Six Questions

Favorite Place to Eat: The Inn at Perry’s Cabin restaurant in St Michael’s, Maryland and Restaurant Eve in Old Town Alexandria

Favorite Place to Shop: Farmer’s markets for fresh produce, Georgetown or Old Town Alexandria boutiques for clothes. I dislike big departmental stores.

Favorite Washington Sight: Blockbuster sight has to be the view from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Small scale but very special to me is a toss-up between The Bishop’s Garden at the Washington National Cathedral, the Bonsais at the National Arboretum and the National Botanical Garden’s Conservatory at Christmas time

Favorite Washington Moment: The beauty of the Potomac and the fresh air and view of the Washington Monument from the Kennedy Center terrace just before the thrill of a coming concert.

What You Love About DC: The fine combination of beautiful buildings, museums, cross cultural people and restaurants, plenty of theaters, parks all in a manageable, peaceful setting. Most of all the long spring and fall seasons.

What You Hate About DC: Traffic