

Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra Philippines Tour Report

The Harvard Radcliffe Orchestra (HRO) left for its Philippines and Korea 2015 summer concert tour in a whirlwind of exams, rehearsals, and teary farewells for recently displaced graduates. But from the moment we arrived in Manila, we found a home. At the airport, a woman named Louise was waiting for us with leis of delicate white sampaguitas, the national flower of the Philippines. Their sweet fragrance masked the musk of travel, and soon we were on a boat to Puerto Galera, with the warm sea breeze on our backs. Though we were thousands of miles from home and watching our luggage bob precariously at the stern of the boat, even the wariest of travelers could not look at the lush green islands and the leis around each of our necks without feeling like HRO was beginning some exciting tropical family vacation.

Our time with The Stairway Foundation at Mindoro reminded us that we were not simply a family of friends on vacation, but a *musical* family with a *mission*. After they performed for us a moving theater piece entitled *Cracked Mirrors*, shedding light on child sex trafficking and advocating for the protection of children's rights, we learned a great deal. We were moved by founders Lars and Monica's selfless dedication to a cause so worthy. Whether consciously or not, we felt blessed for the loving support nurturing our comparatively privileged lives. Suddenly, the boys in the intervention program who had eyed us shyly at dinner the first night, made a little more sense to us. And every smile that slipped across their face, every hand they lent doing dishes, every carefree shout as they splashed and played Frisbee with us on the beach—became a remarkable feat of just how resilient the human spirit could be. Their creative advocacy inspired us to share our music with them. The next day, Stairway seemed to transform into a music camp. Music spilled from every corner of its colorful facilities as our students rehearsed diligently for their chamber performances dedicated to Stairway and its surrounding community.

That night, under a full moon, we shared a diverse program including a string quartet, a flute duet, a brass quintet, a piano trio, and a clarinet quintet. Though we usually perform large symphonies as an orchestra, there was something especially intimate and meaningful about the way that the 2-5 performers on stage communicated with one another and the cozy audience that had gathered around Stairway's painted wooden stage to hear our performance. When we learned that many in the audience had never seen or heard Western instruments before, we explained how each instrument produced its sound and the role that it played in the ensemble. The real universality of music became apparent in a moment of magic and spontaneity after the concert. One of our percussionists sat down at the keyboard that had been brought on stage for this special occasion and began to play an improvisational medley of Disney tunes. All pretenses and barriers crumbled to joyful choruses that culminated in a rousing rendition of "Let It Go" by kids, staff, and HRO students alike.

We carried this spirited energy with us to Manila, where we threw ourselves into rehearsals with the Manila Symphony Orchestra (MSO) in preparation for our collaborative concert celebrating the 25th anniversary of The Stairway Foundation. Thanks to the coordination between The Department of Tourism and Southeast Travel, our transportation from accommodations to rehearsals and concerts were timely, organized, and comfortable. Between the luxurious Intercontinental Hotel, open rehearsals at the Greenbelt Gallery, dancing at Club Valkyrie, and charming jeepney tours of the old Spanish city, we quickly fell in love with the city and its people. After numerous rehearsals, meals, and delicious "snacks"

(prepared in quantities more fit for meals), with members of the Manila Symphony, we became fast friends, both on stage and off—perhaps the quickest way to friendship is through food and Facebook.

Before we knew it, the time had come for our final concert at the International School of Manila (ISM). The evening was filled with artwork created by the Stairway students, the laughter of distinguished guests, the soaring melodies of the Brahms Tragic Overture and Dvorak cello concerto. Because Manila traffic delayed the start of our concert, we cut our program a little short in order to catch our flight out of the country after the concert. But we still bade farewell to Manila and Stairway Foundation with a memorable arrangement of “Stairway to Heaven” in honor of the foundation’s 25th anniversary celebration. Humming these melodies all the way to the airport, I relished the memory of our time here. HRO is made up of smart, curious, courageous students; this tour gave us the opportunity to not only learn about a country’s culture and problems, but also to bridge some of these differences through music and to bring a new, more informed perspective back to our lives.

The Philippines left us a little more inspired, aware, and empowered. We grew closer to one another and to a community different from our own. We became a little less shortsighted, a little more open-minded, a whole lot more willing to think deeply about injustice and vulnerability. We sincerely hope that we left the Philippines the same way that it left us— better than before—knowing that this isn’t really goodbye; it’s just the beginning.