

Welcome to the first Special Focus issue of the The Ensemble.

These occasional issues (in addition to the usual monthly issues) bring differing, informed perspectives about a crucial topic in our movement. The goal is to stimulate thought and discussion among colleagues to build greater clarity and connectedness. We hope readers will move from the short essays in each Special Issue directly to the online discussion about the topic underway on League 360.

*To join the conversation about any Special Focus Issue topic in the El Sistema discussion group on League360, link to: <http://league360.americanorchestras.org>. After you're logged in, click on "My Groups" and select the El Sistema Network discussion. To respond to this issue, look for the discussion called **Choosing Musical Genres: Continuing The Ensemble Discussion**. If you have any questions about using League360, please contact Rebecca Vierhaus at rvierhaus@americanorchestras.org. If you're not a member of the group and would like to join, please let your nucleo leader know – he or she will submit your information to League360 to have an account created for you.*

Amid the the healthy jumble of opinions and differing practices in El Sistema- inspired work that were aired at the recent Take A Stand Symposium in Los Angeles, everyone agreed on one thing: we need much more collegial discussion of the key issues in our movement. This Special Issue is offered as a way to foster more exchange around the key issues of our field. We have asked colleagues with different views to write short essays describing their perspective; and we invite you to read these, and then respond as described above.

Although the general public assumes that El Sistema-inspired work is always based in classical music, it isn't that simple, even in Venezuela. Folk music and jazz appear in some settings there, and traditional and popular songs often appear in chorus. Indeed, the pattern seems to be that a wider set of genres is used with the youngest and newest students, funneling them into the predominant learning mode in classical music. Then, once students get really good within classical orchestral music, options to explore jazz and other genres appear. And even this general picture varies, as some nucleos invest in folk instrument study.

But classical music is certainly at the center of El Sistema Venezuela. In our opinion, there are some distinct advantages to this choice. The sheer size of an orchestral ensemble affords inclusion of many players, and offers opportunities to integrate newer players with more experienced ones. In addition, classical music poses challenges both rigorous and varied, and an aesthetic depth that invites repeated investigation over years. Its expressive range is uniquely wide. And its sound is so deeply rewarding that the experience of growing up marinated in such beauty can open the hearts, minds, and spirits of young people (and not so young people) in a transformative way.

While it is undeniable that classical music has had a breathtakingly powerful impact on music learning in Venezuela's El Sistema, the question of "Why?" has fueled many a late-night discussion. However, you will find compelling arguments from our colleagues in this issue, and probably online, for the inclusion of other musical genres. How are we thinking about the musical choices in U.S. sites? A colleague at Jazz at Lincoln Center asked recently if a jazz-focused Sistema site could work. What do you think? See you in League 360 to learn your answer to this central question.

Tricia Tunstall, Editor; Eric Booth, Publisher

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Yes, Classical Music is Central

By Isabel Trautwein, Artistic Director of El Sistema@Rainey and Violinist in The Cleveland Orchestra



Rainey student Mahogany with Isabel

Why choose classical music as the core curriculum for a U.S. nucleo? The *main* reason I teach classical orchestral music: I LOVE it! Its beauty transports us to so many emotional worlds. We need a strong connection to our emotions to make life understandable to us. When I see this connection happen in a child through music, it is the greatest joy I feel as a teacher.

Venezuela has given us additional powerful answers to this question. In the words of Maestro Abreu: "An orchestra is a community where the essential and exclusive feature is that it is the only community that comes together with the fundamental objective of agreeing with itself. Therefore, the person who plays in an orchestra begins to live the experience of agreement." At El Sistema@Rainey in Cleveland, we believe that there are a number of supporting reasons to choose classical music. Among them:

Success at every step. For beginning players, classical music learning makes it very easy to measure success. Last week at our program, we recorded our 30 young children (ages 6-10) playing Twinkle Twinkle. They were asked to comment afterward, and we heard: "our bows need to be together"; "some of us did not play the right notes"; "our martele in stop-stop could be better." The second recording was much better, and children left the room very satisfied with what had been measurably accomplished.

Appreciating silence. Classical music is a constant interplay between tones and silence. I believe that sensitizing children to silence is important. This awareness is needed to be an orchestral team player.

Large-scale ensembles. One of the central "excitement builders" in Venezuela is the "seminario," where hundreds or thousands of youths come together to play great orchestral masterpieces in super-sized orchestras. Classical symphonic music allows for the creation of huge symphony orchestras, bringing virtually unlimited numbers of people together under the direction of one person, following one masterful score. I have a dream that someday, all El Sistema programs in the U.S. can share the same repertoire and come together for such large-scale seminars.

Neurological stimulation. Playing an instrument in an orchestra is very complicated, and thus has a uniquely positive impact on brain development. Orchestral playing involves using four skills at once:

- 1) fine motor skills, including different tasks for the right and left hand.
- 2) visual alignment of one's instrument with others and with a conductor's cues.
- 3) aurally matching one's pitch, dynamic, rhythm, and other musical elements to what others are playing.
- 4) reading sheet music.

Recognizing mastery. While we agree that every child should know names of such masters such as Michelangelo, Plato, and Shakespeare, what about Beethoven, Mozart and Bach? These composers spent their lives perfecting musical sound, to a degree that profoundly shaped their times and ours. Regardless of our musical taste, I think we can agree that experiencing the great musical masterworks of western civilization enriches the inner lives of children.

Developing mastery. If children witness professional orchestras from their earliest days of learning an instrument, they will begin to dream of mastery for themselves. (Three children in my program want to become members of The Cleveland Orchestra!) Classical music gives them the inspiration and the clear pathway to developing such mastery.

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A Repertoire of Diversity

by Elijah Wirth, Orchkids Ensemble Director

Selecting music is one of the most enjoyable and most daunting tasks that befall an ensemble director. Criteria such as playability, history, culture and style must all be considered when programming for an ensemble, regardless of age and ability level.

At the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra OrchKids program, we try to emphasize diversity above all else when selecting repertoire. As in any community dominated by one demographic, West Baltimore has a clear absence of ethnic diversity. One of the extra-musical goals at OrchKids is to imbue our students with the ability to navigate through different cultures. The hope here is to develop a healthy curiosity of the cultures beyond the “walls” of West Baltimore and to give students the skills to relate to different people, with different values.

An excellent example of this was our collaboration with a group called The Mash Potangos. The Potangos are a trio made up of an Australian flutist, a bassist from Boston, and a pianist of Asian origin; they specialize in music from South America. This fantastically talented group taught our kids to perform the tango, and recorded a track with several of the older students. We have also performed music from Brazil, West Africa, Cuba, and many other cultures – we have stretched as far as Jewish reggae and the alternative rock musician Matisyahu. Also, our students have performed works by The Beatles, Journey, Oasis, and other rock-inspired music that is not traditionally found in this part of Baltimore.

In an effort to shed any misconceptions of the orchestra medium as elitist and culturally limited, we try to make sure our programming reflects the experience of our students and their community. Hip Hop, Motown, Jazz and Blues styles are all very common in OrchKids concerts. These genres also provide opportunities for improvisation, which is not traditionally emphasized in an orchestral music education. Working on improvisation has led to collaborations with The Archipelago Project, an international brass ensemble who taught Duke Ellington to some of our youngest performers, and with Shodekeh, a Baltimore area beatboxer who improvised rhythms over works by Suzuki. Performing these works has fostered a sense of respect and trust with the parents and adults in the community that has paid off immeasurably.

We do quite a bit of traditional classical music as well. Settings of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Mahler and many others have frequented the OrchKids music stands. In the spring of 2011 we had the pleasure of performing “Orchkids Nation,” with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. This piece was created by composer Dave Rimelis to combine the OrchKids with the Symphony in a subscription concert performance. Our programming also includes classically inspired compositions geared for elementary school age students, by composers such as Brian Balmages, Soon Hee Newbold, and Bruce Pearson.

In programming for our ensembles, we try to uphold the core values of flexibility, experimentation, and risk-taking that we feel should be inherent to every El Sistema related program.

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Photo by John Woo

The First Mariachi Nucleo

by Dr. Judith Hill Bose, Director of Teacher Education, Longy School of Music, and Elsje Kibler-Vermaas, Associate Director of Teacher Education, Longy School of Music and Bard College



Elsje (left) and Judith

At the Paramount Bard Academy (PBA), a grade 6-12 public charter school in California’s Central Valley, the El Sistema-inspired program has chosen to use Mariachi as our basic musical orientation. This choice comes out of careful consideration of the community served by our school.

As PBA and the Longy School of Music began to think together about creating a Sistema-inspired music program, we faced several of the challenges particular to bringing El Sistema philosophy to life here in the US. We started by looking quite carefully at the specific context of our location. Delano, CA, where the school exists, is home to several gigantic corporate farms (such as Paramount Farms). The families of many of the PBA students work for Paramount or for other growers in the valley, and close to 89% of the students at PBA are of Mexican descent. The other industries in town are the two state prisons (one-fifth of the town’s population are prison inmates), so a significant number of PBA students live in Delano to be near incarcerated family members. The Delano area is also no stranger to the dangers of gang violence, as it is the dividing line between northern and southern California gangs – and the presence of gang pressure is certainly felt at the school.

In considering the goals of 1) creating an intensive musical ensemble program for adolescent students and 2) bringing together the PBA community of students, parents and faculty around musical experiences, we decided not to begin with a classical orchestra – but to get there via a pathway that honors the cultural heritage of this community and is built on their own strong musical traditions. Thus, in August 2011, the first Mariachi nucleo was launched in the 6th, 7th and 8th grades at PBA, where all students now study violin, trumpet, guitar, guitarron, vihuela, and singing.

A Mariachi ensemble has been developed in all three grades, and all the 6th-8th grade students have access to learning the instrumental music from a master of the Mariachi tradition. The students gave their first concert in December 2011, after having the instruments in their hands for under 3 months. Five hundred family members and friends turned up at the school to experience the music together – an unprecedented showing of family support in PBA’s history. They came to share the Mariachi experience together, and to show pride and support for the young people who were entering the tradition of performing it.

The longterm plan for PBA is indeed to expand from the Mariachi experience to the orchestral one, by adding instruments, expanding repertoire, connecting with other nucleos, and bringing on an orchestral conductor. But one of the great experiments at PBA is entering the world of the orchestra through a different door – a door that honors and uplifts the traditions of the local community and intentionally aims to build a bridge rather than impose a foreign tradition.

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