

New El Sistema-Inspired MAT Program

by Karen Zorn, President, Longy School of Music

At Longy, we ask our conservatory students to think critically about their role as musicians in the larger world. Together with Bard College, which has long been a leader in public education reform, we developed a new Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) in Music program that would embody our commitment both to engagement with the community and the highest standards of musicianship.

I had long been aware of the amazing work being done by music educators in Venezuela, and although there was an obvious affinity between their mission and our own, I was unsure at first if the “system” was something that could be transplanted effectively to this country. But as Doctor José Antonio Abreu emphasized recently in Los Angeles, it is not actually a question of *transplanting*—while the work in Venezuela is available to us as a reference and a resource, the underlying principles must be *translated* for our own communities. This translation is exactly the task that Longy and Bard set for themselves in designing the curriculum of the MAT program.

Along the way, we were fortunate enough to discover our mission match with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which was already operating the robust El Sistema-inspired “YOLA” program at the EXPO Center and at HOLA (Heart of Los Angeles) in downtown L.A. It soon became clear to everyone involved that YOLA at HOLA would be the ideal “home base” for the program, serving as both seminar space and practicum site, and immersing the MAT students in the life and philosophical principles of a nucleo.

In any act of translation, some equivalencies are easy to find, and others are more challenging. Perhaps our greatest challenge came when considering the most basic element of El Sistema: the music itself. I haven’t the space to describe all of the conversations we had, or the many stops and starts we experienced, but I can pose some of the questions we asked ourselves. How flexible, exactly, are the principles underlying El Sistema? The orchestra may be an effective microcosm of society, but is it necessarily the best or only example? Is it the orchestra that’s important, or is it the sense of ensemble? And while classical music certainly brings with it a discipline and an aesthetic and spiritual striving, is it the only type of music that



YOLA at HOLA Choir Class. HOLA will be the home of the MAT program, providing on-site access to HOLA staff and students

Photo courtesy of Los Angeles Philharmonic

will provide the students with a deeply meaningful experience? How much translation can safely take place before one begins to tamper too much with the original? (Our current answers to these questions can be guessed at when I tell you that last year we started a Mariachi nucleo at the Paramount Bard Academy in the Central Valley of California.)

I believe strongly in the concept of “teacher as researcher” — as educators, our project is never finished and our own learning does not have a shelf life. Our primary goal for the MAT program is this: in addition to teaching the necessary skills of conducting, arranging for ensemble, and improvisation, we seek to train students who are able to engage with their work in El Sistema not as people who “know” something, but as educators constantly grappling with questions. We believe this is the only way that El Sistema will find a meaningful place among the many distinct musical identities of our individual communities, and it is our hope that this new program will stand alongside other powerful tools for change as we all work to resurrect the critical role that music can play in improving education in the United States.

To learn more about the MAT visit: www.take-a-stand.org or contact Elsje Kibler-Vermaas, Associate Director of Teacher Education at Longy School of Music and Bard College: elsje.kiblervermaas@longy.edu

FROM THE EDITOR

I recently gave a talk about El Sistema to one of my favorite personal posses, the informal association of piano teachers in my community. They were avid to hear about what El Sistema looks like in practice. “Tell us more about how teachers teach,” they asked me.

“Energy!” I said immediately, before I had even thought about it.

It’s one of the most vivid aspects of teaching, El Sistema-style: gales of positive energy pouring from teachers, and flowing back at them as sheer musical gusto. As NEC Fellow Jennifer Kessler wrote recently in her blog from Venezuela, one of El Sistema’s most important elements is “not being tired.” “Even if the teachers are tired,” she adds, “they never let the kids see it.”

Anyone who has ever stood in front of a classroom knows that long and intensive teaching hours can be exhausting. So we can’t help but wonder — how do they do it?

I think it may have something to do with Venezuelan teachers’ strong identification with their students. “We feel close to them, because we were once where they are now,” a Venezuelan teacher told me.

Then, too, Sistema teachers seem never to forget that playing music is just that — play, at the same time that it’s rigorous work. The conductor of the Guarenas nucleo, when asked how he accounted for his orchestra’s huge energy, responded that it comes from having fun.

El Sistema teachers understand that full-out energy can be revitalizing as well as tiring. This understanding is an essential part of what students learn, and we see its fullest artistic expression in the seemingly limitless vigor of the Sistema’s great youth orchestras. As we in the U.S. El Sistema movement go about the process of creating good and even great teacher training programs, it’s important to remind ourselves that pedagogy is most powerful when it’s charged with generous personal energy and joy.

Tricia Tunstall

“We in Venezuela will learn from the U.S. El Sistema movement. You will enrich us, just as our experience enriches you.” — José Antonio Abreu

News Notes

El Sistema Lehigh Valley, a program of the Allentown Symphony Association in collaboration with the Allentown School District, started this past October at Roosevelt Community School with over 70 children, Kindergarten to 5th grade, meeting Monday through Friday for 2 hours a day. Participants receive free access to 8 hours of music instruction, comprised of instrumental, sectionals, orchestra, general music, and choir, plus 2 hours of tutoring each week by De Sales University students.

While the program started with *no* instruments by implementing a paper orchestra, Music and Arts stepped forward as a founding instrument provider with over 90 string orchestra instruments to help initiate the project. Since their first choir and paper orchestra concert, the children were given instruments and gave 3 performances in the next six weeks. Students work with visiting artists from the Symphony, including the conductor and visiting conducting fellow. This project is currently under the direction of Steven Liu, a 2011 NEC Sistema Fellow. <http://allentownsymphony.org/Education/ElSistemaLehighValley.aspx>. Contact: stliu@allentownsymphony.org

The Union City Music Project (UCMP), launched with its Paper Orchestra on March 19 at the Eugenio Maria de Hostos Center for Early Childhood Education in Union City, NJ, the first El-Sistema site in the Garden State. Located just three miles from midtown Manhattan, Union City is the most densely populated municipality in the U.S. and almost 80% of the population is of Hispanic descent. The UCMP application process began the first week of February, and in just five days, received close to 200 applications. The paper orchestra session had been designed for only 30 children, but given the high demand and many requests from parents, the UCMP increased the number to serve 50 children ages 3-6, every Monday and Friday.

This first session of the UCMP is scheduled to finish on June 15th followed by a family recital. Graduating students will transition into real instruments during



Alissa Leonard, singing at the inaugural concert for El Sistema Lehigh Valley

the summer and continue with the program in the 2012-2013 academic year. To learn more, please visit: www.ucmusicproject.org.

Resources

The McCarthy Dressman Education Foundation offers Academic Enrichment Grants of up to \$10,000 per year for three years, designed to develop in-class and extra-curricular programs that improve student learning, and for programs that nurture the intellectual,

artistic and creative abilities of children from low-income households. The Foundation considers proposals that foster understanding, deepen students' knowledge, and provide opportunities to expand awareness of the world around them. Application deadline is April 15, 2012. Contact: <http://www.mccarthydressman.org/academic.html>

A note from Sistema Fellow David France during his Venezuelan residency. "Greetings from Coro, Venezuela. If I don't return from Venezuela, you can find me in a small neighborhood in Coro called Panela. It is the most dangerous neighborhood in town, and here you will find a small music initiative founded less than one year ago by Isandra Campos. Since starting with five kids in her living room, she has moved out of her home and is now living with her mother so that the neighborhood kids can have orchestra rehearsals every day of the week in her former house. Today when I arrived, there was no room for me to have violin lessons, so a neighbor across the street let me and three kids practice in their living room. By the end of our time the entire family was in the living room listening, and a crowd of kids fought for space in the window to listen to the music. At the back of her house Isandra keeps chickens, selling the eggs for one bolívar each to buy music for the students. It has been a profound week."

Isandra Campos with poster of her son who is Principal Violist with the Simon Bolivar Orchestra



"Trickle Down" Musical Inspiration: An In-School Music Teacher's Perspective

by Jeff Lederer, former general music teacher, PS 152 in Brooklyn

Most people associate the phrase "trickle down" with the economic policies of the Reagan years, which directed economic stimulus programs towards the top end of society, with the expectation that those benefits would create even greater benefits for society in general. If you lived through the Reagan years, you know that it didn't work very well.

I was the in-school part-time music teacher at PS 152 (a large public elementary school located in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn) when Anne Fitzgibbon launched the El Sistema-inspired Harmony Program there three years ago. The program served about 40 of our 860 students with free, intensive after-school instrumental music instruction five days a week. I was very proud of the program I had been building at the school, and even more thrilled at the opportunity to provide a select number of students with a truly unique opportunity. But I wondered how the program might benefit the rest of the school population.

As it turns out, the benefit to the school musical culture at large has been substantial and sustained. I found that having a select group of students who were immersed in an intensive instrumental program served to inspire my "general" music students and raise the overall level of the music culture in the building considerably. Often, during my general classes, I would ask a Harmony Program student to take out his or her instrument and play along with a classroom of recorder-playing peers. This served to focus the sound and to create a bridge between "general" and "instrumental" music, and the overall level of musical culture was considerably richer and more exciting. And the modeling demonstrated by the Harmony Program students yielded rich rewards for the overall population in powerful ways.

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"We are excited to welcome the MAT program to our HOLA campus so that the kids, our staff, and the MAT students can work together to shape tomorrow's leaders." - Tony Brown, Executive Director, HOLA