

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE U.S. & CANADIAN EL SISTEMA MOVEMENT

## Thinking “Sistematically”

*Dennie Palmer Wolf and Steven Holochwost, WolfBrown*

It is February 22nd, an oh-so-California sun-drenched Saturday, the concluding day of the national [Take a Stand Symposium](#) for El Sistema orchestra programs, sponsored by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in partnership with Longy School of Music of Bard College. Today the children of El Sistema are front and center, as young musicians from Sistema programs from across the country, who came to take part in a “leadership institute” at the symposium, play side by side with the famed “Bolivars.” After the performance, the stage doors fly open and out spill the students, fanning into the arms of parents, siblings, and grandparents who have made the trip with them – who have borrowed vans big enough to pack four basses and two cellos, who have heard every note practiced many times, and who are, all of them, as proud as the day is bright.

This human mix gives a new meaning to the term Sistema. Yes, it is a shared system of learning among young musicians and a network of mutually supportive orchestras; but it is also a much larger human system: one that envelops, and potentially affects, not just the young players, but families, teachers, coaches, conductors, and maybe even symphony orchestras. To understand it, to take its measure, requires and deserves thinking *sistematically*.

Many discussions and assessments of Sistema-inspired programs focus on students: do they attend, progress, learn collaboration and empathy, contribute to their communities, graduate from high school, go on to college? These questions are unquestionably important – but they are perhaps part of a larger story. Consider the case of [The People’s Music School \(TPMS\) Youth Orchestras](#), at Hibbard Elementary School in the Albany Park neighborhood of Chicago. While the program has been producing evidence of participants’ school and social success, Youth Orchestras Director Albert Oppenheimer argues that those results don’t take into account what happens for families. “Many of our families work long hours,” he says. “But being part of the orchestra gives them rare time outside of the demands of daily life. Even the time in the car driving to rehearsals becomes an occasion to be proud and step outside the ordinary.” He also points out how the program creates a network for families. “Simple greetings between family members become carpool arrangements that turn into sharing information about local schools, summer programs, and other

opportunities. Those conversations open up the future, and a sense of agency grows.”

Let’s also consider what happens to the musicians who teach in Sistema. Will Robbins is one of eight Fellows of the [Civic Orchestra of Chicago](#) chosen to participate in a [Citizen Musician Initiative](#) sponsored by the Chicago Symphony in partnership with Yo-yo Ma and designed to expand the role of music in civic life and in creating positive social change. Having played under Sistema-trained conductor Raphael Jiménez, Robbins jumped at an opportunity to coach bass and chamber music at TPMS. “Coaching has helped my own fundamental playing,” he says. “I’ve re-realized how posture, alignment, and movement are basic to the way you make music on the bass. Now I think about my own posture not just as a matter of form, but also as the source of the music. Want to play beautifully? – Watch your left hand posture. Keep the bow hair flat.” Robbins also says that teaching chamber music has given him a chance to think about voice and artistic responsibility, even when he plays in full orchestra. “As an orchestra player, I know you can hide. But not in a quartet. There you have to listen and think about the dialogue among the instruments, the offer and response, the moving line and support role. I give my students a phrase and ask them to take command of it: how do they want to play it? What does it sound like when they try?”

Last week, Will coordinated a trip for 35 TPMS students and their families to hear Carlos Miguel Prieto rehearse the Civic Orchestra at Symphony Center. And this week, all eight Civic Fellows will visit TPMS to coach chamber ensembles and have a side-by-side full orchestra rehearsal. So the effects Will is experiencing are potentially much wider, reaching other Civic Orchestra musicians and helping to expand how a symphony orchestra enters its community.

Just a day before the young musicians celebrated with their families, we at WolfBrown announced a two-year study of the effects of Sistema participation, jointly undertaken with our partners at Longy School of Music of Bard College. We arrived at the Symposium intent on developing rigorous cross-site evidence for the effects of El Sistema on young people. That remains the heartbeat of our research, but we left committed to thinking and evaluating more *sistematically* – learning to ask what happens for families, teachers, and communities.

## FROM THE EDITOR

In calling The Ensemble “a newsletter for the U.S. and Canadian El Sistema movement,” we are always aware that we can’t yet use the phrase “North American Sistema movement.” We just don’t know the Mexican Sistema well enough, and don’t have the Spanish-translation resources, to serve the vast set of programs that comprise Sistema Mexico. We wish we could. After a trip to Mexico last month, I am newly aware of how much we share with Sistema colleagues on our southern border, and how much we have to learn from them.

Visiting sites in León, Guadalajara, and Puebla last month, my travel companions and I saw programs bursting with musical vitality – often with a distinctly Venezuelan feel. In a barrio in León full of boarded-up storefronts, we heard hundreds of children in a great courtyard decorated with strings of red hearts (it was Valentine’s Day) rehearsing the Ode to Joy in German and Spanish. The same ensemble performed the next day in a municipal stadium under a banner proclaiming “Parents and Teachers United For Peace;” at the end, their conductor told the 3000 public schoolchildren in attendance to go home and hug their friends, parents and grandparents. (Mexicans manage Valentine’s Day better than we do: they proclaim it “a day of peace and friendship.”)

In Guadalajara, we heard a large ensemble of children ages 7 to 17 tear into the “Pirates of the Caribbean” theme. As in Venezuelan núcleos, there were coaches and assistants moving constantly among the players, parents gathered in the shade to listen, and younger siblings sidling up to ogle the first violins.

Mexico’s Sistema history runs deep; its first wave began in the late 1970s, and several incarnations have followed. There are now some 50,000 students in a network of Sistema-inspired programs, many run by the federal government agency Conaculta and some sponsored by the [Azteca Foundation](#), which includes children’s orchestra programs among its many social initiatives.

Veronika, who runs the Guadalajara program with her husband Pepetoño, told me that when she was first interviewed to work there, she was asked, “If you need to teach a child who is poor and hungry, how will you do it?” She said she knew her answer instantly. “First, just a big smile. And then I will say, ‘There is a place for you here.’”

*Tricia Tunstall*

**“All provinces should be filled with choruses and orchestras. Daily life should be expressed in music.”  
– José Antonio Abreu**

## News Notes

**Alameda Music Project (AMP)** launched on February 3rd with a choir program meeting twice a week for an hour, with 40 students in grades 1-5. In the first six weeks, they wrote their own theme song, "One Step at a Time," using words and phrases from a team-building exercise. In

September 2014, AMP will expand its after-school program to provide experimental and classical music instruction five days a week for up to 80 children in grades K-5, including a string ensemble, choir and percussion, along with daily academic support and healthy snacks. AMP is choosing to grow in a steady, mindful way, starting small with the resources at hand and building community awareness and support through demand and success of the program. Contact: [lorrie@alamedamusicproject.org](mailto:lorrie@alamedamusicproject.org). [www.alamedamusicproject.org](http://www.alamedamusicproject.org)

On March 27-28, an invitational **National Summit on Creative Youth Development**, sponsored by The Massachusetts Cultural Council, The President's Committee on Arts and Humanities, and The National Guild for Community Arts Education took place in Boston. This first-ever effort to activate shared national priorities included a research report by Lauren Stevenson called **Setting the Agenda**, and will produce followup documents to align local efforts with national priorities. The website where the documents will be posted is <http://creativyouthsummit.org>, and the research report is available free at: <http://tinyurl.com/p4yrhb7>

## Resources

**The International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP)**, also known as the Petrucci Music Library, after publisher Ottaviano Petrucci, has created an online library of public domain music scores. Since its launch on February 16, 2006, it now includes 270,000 scores and 28,000 recordings for over 77,000 works by over 7,500 composers. <http://imslp.org>

The **National Endowment for the Arts' Challenge America Fast-Track** offers support for projects that extend the reach of the arts to underserved populations. Grants are available for projects that



*AMP chorus singing and dancing part of their song: "Live in a positive way/So we don't have to scream our heads away." Photo: Lorrie Murray*

emphasize the potential of the arts in community development. All grants are for \$10,000 and require a minimum \$10,000 match. Deadline: May 8, 2014. <http://arts.gov/grants-organizations/challenge-america-fast-track>

The National Leadership Forum for Young Musicians at the Take a Stand

Symposium included 25 students from 14 programs. The LA Phil's Rebecca Sigel led them through activities that addressed physical presence as part of leadership. The students demonstrated their learning when they addressed the full symposium a couple of hours later. It brought to mind Amy Cuddy's excellent **TED talk "Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are"** (<http://tinyurl.com/8lyyqmm>), which carries important messages for our students.

Eric Booth has completed a new essay for El Sistema programs. **Reframing El Sistema-Inspired Work: Getting Better at What We Do by Getting Clearer about What We are Doing** invites programs to distinguish between different kinds of challenges they face, in order to address them with more effective approaches – especially introducing the tool of developmental evaluation. Available at: <http://tinyurl.com/k75um26>

A number of ES-i programs have used crowdsourcing as a way of funding special projects. Those with an eye on this process will want to read a report on **phrases that are effective on Kickstarter**: <http://tinyurl.com/qjkhk5h>

For those who were not able to attend (and those who would like to review what passed so quickly), the Los Angeles Philharmonic is making videos of all **keynotes and a lot of photographs from the February Take a Stand Symposium** available after April 2, at: [laphil.com/symposium](http://laphil.com/symposium)

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## Evaluation and Research

*By Grace Waitman, doctoral student, Indiana University-Bloomington*

We who have experienced the innumerable benefits of music education need not be convinced of the transformational power at the heart of music education and in El Sistema programs in particular. Therefore, we sometimes lack a sense of personal urgency about evaluation and assessment. Indeed, we sometimes wonder how the complex, holistic benefits of El Sistema can be quantified and expressed in the language of assessment.

But as our programs mature, we are ever more conscious of the crucial need for evaluation/assessment tools, so that we can accurately chart and communicate our progress. In the process of creating the **Sistema Global Literature Review**, the research team strove to understand how programs around the world address this issue.

We found that a breadth of research endeavors and evaluation approaches have been successfully used, but this kind of research still remains in its infancy. Partly, this is because many Sistema programs – over half of the ones we investigated – are newly established; many launched in 2010 or later.

Therefore, much of the research to date has been on a relatively small scale, involving between 50 and 300 participants. In addition, the results have often taken a qualitative instead of quantitative form. While this provides a rich depth of information, it makes the discovery of broader and more wide-ranging outcomes difficult.

At the Take A Stand Symposium last month, it was clear that evaluation and assessment are now seen as cornerstones of possibility for Sistema programs. The success of the Sistema movement is inextricably tied to our capacity to communicate – in both descriptive and quantitative terms – its positive outcomes and benefits. The **WolfBrown/Longy School research project** is an opportunity to learn more about these outcomes and how they can be communicated to potential contributors, funders, and legislators.

Partnership has proven to be key to success. The creation of collaborative networks and ongoing dialogue among programs provides an opportunity, as we wrote in the Lit Review findings, "to bring a level of coherence, rigor and meaningfulness to future research and evaluation." By dedicating **5% of our work** to growing these networks, we can set the foundation not only for future research and evaluation, but for the strength and success of Sistema as a whole.

**"What would I want to tell kids in the U.S.? That we are the best orchestra. And that you can be the best too." – Edgar Ivan Rivera Iniguez, age 15, percussionist in Sistema program in Guadalajara, Mexico**