

Big Noise, Big Learning

By Katie Wyatt, Executive Director, *Kidznotes*, Durham, NC

I was fortunate to be a Duke-in-Durham Fellow this year. This fellowship is one of Duke's important investments into the community of Durham; for me, it meant a chance to design an exploratory trip to Sistema programs in the U.K., and I spent my first two weeks there in Scotland.

One of my first impressions was how similarly *Kidznotes* and *Sistema Scotland* set up our structures. Independently, we created a hub-and-spokes model where students are recruited as 5- and 6-year olds from 3-5 elementary schools, and then feed into a central núcleo as they advance through levels of orchestra.

I found much to learn about management structure in Scotland. A year ago, after four years of steady growth, *Sistema Scotland* faced a flat staff structure, with few senior leadership positions, and lots and lots teachers reporting to only one or two people – a ratio of 15-18 staff to one direct report sometimes. Nicola Killean, Director of *Sistema Scotland*, and her colleagues devised some smart and effective solutions. First, they created the leadership positions of Senior and Lead musicians, for experienced teaching artists – in Nicola's words, these positions are "line managers" to supervise and support the many teaching artists on staff. They also added administrative support to their operations positions.

These ideas came just at the right time for *Kidznotes*. We too were facing an extremely flat management structure, with lots of boots on the ground through our teaching artists but not enough "line managers" to organize them. Following Scotland's lead, I began to explore creating leadership positions for our teaching artists. Also following Scotland, I added administrative support positions for our two núcleos, recognizing that the work of instrument repair and maintenance, transportation, and site coordination is quite different from the work of tracking evaluation, assessment, and managing relationships with parents and partner schools. With a pipeline in place for promotion and added responsibilities, our teaching staff will now have somewhere to grow.

In addition to staff restructuring, the thing I got most excited about in Scotland was their Parent and Adult Orchestra. "The Noise" is the parent and partner orchestra at *Big Noise Raploch*, and its 15-20 regulars

love it. In addition to some student parents, the janitor, principal, secretary, and cafeteria staff at the school have all picked up instruments and begun to learn. They warm up with some singing and basic theory games, and then jump into orchestra, led by Veronica, the silliest, funniest orchestra director I've ever met. The only thing that could possibly make "The Noise" rehearsals more hilarious would be to add beer!

Here at *Kidznotes*, parents approached me about this idea a year ago, and I thought it was too much, so I offered to organize a parent choir. Nobody took the bait. They want instruments! So we're going to try for the parent orchestra this year.

Finally, in terms of teaching philosophy, I love *Big Noise's* adherence to the Positive Behavior system. They don't let anyone go, and there is no hint of "this program just isn't for him/her." At *Kidznotes* we face this issue all the time, often thinking that in the service of the greater good (namely the other 15-20 kids in the class), "we can't try to save everyone."

In Scotland, they do try. If children are disruptive in rehearsal, they are pulled out and talked to, and then they're right back in there. On occasion, misbehaving children are sent home; but they can come back and try again the next day. In Nicola's words, "We have a non-exclusion policy and a clean-slate-each-day approach." From my actions-have-consequences perspective, this was startling – and admirable. Families don't give up on their own children, so why should we give up on any of our students?

The chance to observe a similar program in a totally different setting, culture and circumstances was invaluable. There was so much to be learned by exploring the experience of another program, in another country, in depth. Equally important, the staffs of the two programs will now have many reasons to connect, exchange and make helpful suggestions. If at all possible, I would highly recommend total immersion in a program that is similar to your own design in another of the *El Sistema* countries, or in a state or city that has a completely different culture, feel and way of solving problems. Both similarities and differences can turn out to be hugely instructive. And there's no question that getting to know our *Big Noise* friends has changed *Kidznotes* forever!



The Noise, Big Noise's adult orchestra, performing during Big Noise Raploch's 5th birthday concert last year. Photo: Mark Marnie

FROM THE EDITOR

Traveling in Europe in recent weeks, I found World Cup-mania everywhere I went. And I saw its undeniable power: to unite antagonistic ethnicities (in Bosnia, Muslims and Serbs said they felt like countrymen for the very first time, as they rooted together for the Bosnian team); to lift smaller countries' self-esteem (Costa Rica, Belgium, Rwanda); to focus the attention of millions upon teams playing together with breathtaking skill. The World Cup seemed to be a kind of lingua franca.

This is interesting for us in the *El Sistema*-inspired movement, as we work to grow the movement across the world. After all, we dare to dream of *El Sistema* as a potential lingua franca, transcending ethnic enmities, lifting the self-esteem of communities and countries, and focusing people's attention around the world upon ensembles who play together with breathtaking skill and artistry.

Formulating this similarity between the two phenomena has me thinking about the fundamental difference between them. The World Cup is about winning and losing. It is a series of variations on a single theme – the drama of victory and defeat. The *El Sistema* vision is exactly *not* about winning and losing; it's about mutual success. The goal of an orchestra is never to defeat another orchestra. The goal of an orchestra is to create beauty together, as brilliantly and collaboratively as possible.

So the question arises: how does competition – which seems an inescapable part of the human condition – live comfortably within *El Sistema*? We all know that the words "Can you do it better than they did?" tend to infuse a group of young players with an extra jolt of energy. And *Sistema* kids routinely compete hard to get into a núcleo's top orchestra, or a regional ensemble, or a national orchestra.

But *El Sistema's* kind of competitiveness seems closer to the word's etymology – literally, "striving in common with" – than to the "striving against," win/lose team sports model. Cultivating a competitive spirit that drives aspiration but co-exists easily with cooperative effort and celebration of others' achievements – is this actually possible? I don't know the answer. But it's an important question.

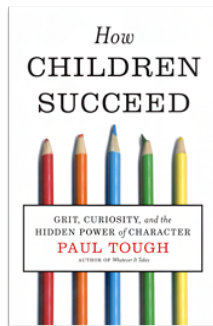
I remember asking a 15-year-old percussionist in the *Sistema* program in Guadalajara, Mexico, "What message could I take from you to *El Sistema* kids in the U.S.?" He answered, "That we are the best." With no hesitation, he added, "And that you can be too." In the World Cup, an utter contradiction in terms. In *El Sistema* – possible.

Tricia Tunstall

"Play and fight." Those two verbs suggest a fighting spirit. Right from the start, we understood that we couldn't just play, that we couldn't turn away from the fight that this implied." – José Antonio Abreu

Resources

The Ensemble Book Club's August exploration of Paul Tough's bestseller *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* is underway. Join the conversation about the deep relevance of this book for Sistema practice at: <http://tinyurl.com/n3xu53a>. To get started, watch an interview with Paul Tough and Book Club leader Graciela Briceno at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5seezrt6eA>. The 5% Initiative invites all of us to dedicate 5% of our work time to projects that advance the whole movement – contributing to the Book Club is a great way to do that.



The Library of Congress has made available a new collection of music, offering a musical exploration of American history in *The Songs of America*. From 19th Century pop songs, to many versions of the national anthem, to the funeral music played for Abraham Lincoln, sheet music, background information and recordings are available at: <http://www.loc.gov/collection/songs-of-america/about-this-collection>.

A new research study examines the role of school-based, home-based, and community-based arts participation in students' academic (e.g., motivation, engagement) and nonacademic (e.g., self-esteem, life satisfaction) outcomes. While the positive findings are not surprising for Sistema music educators, this solid research adds a new piece to the advocacy research portfolio. <http://tinyurl.com/p4m5zwx>

A new study from Boston Children's Hospital suggests the reason that researchers find a consistent link between music education and higher test scores: musical training seems to promote the development and maintenance of a key set of mental skills we call "executive function." Many Sistema programs claim their work advances executive function in their students; this study illuminates the basis of that argument. <http://tinyurl.com/n75g4m5>

A recent article in CommonHealth details the neuroscience of the way learning to play music impacts the child's developing brain, with the "OPERA Hypothesis" to explain why music boosts executive function, and includes a profile of the Conservatory Lab Charter Schools Sistema program. http://commonhealth.wbur.org/2014/07/music-language-brain?utm_source=facebook.com

The Grammy Foundation's annual grant program supports individuals and institutions up to \$20,000 for scientific research projects related to the impact of music on the human condition. For example, this might include the study of the effects of music on mood, cognition, or healing. Priority is given to projects with strong methodological design as well those addressing important research questions. October 1, 2014 deadline for letters of inquiry. <http://www.grammy.org/grammy-foundation/grants>

The Fund for a Just Society (a program of the Unitarian Universalist Association) provides grants to nonprofit organizations in the U.S. and Canada that address issues of social and economic justice in order to bring about systemic change. The Fund seeks to mobilize those who have been disenfranchised and excluded from resources, power, and the right to self-determination. Special consideration is given to projects that are less likely to receive conventional funding because of the innovative or challenging nature of the work or the economic and social status of the constituency. Most grants range between 6,000 and \$8,000, but some reach \$15,000. The next application deadline is September 16, 2013. <http://www.uua.org/giving/funding/102186.shtml>

Grantmakers for the Arts supports the philanthropic use of resources to advance arts and culture. Their national magazine recently did an in-depth profile of the San Diego Youth Symphony's Opus Program and its sustainability implications. <http://www.giarts.org/article/disrupting-status-quo>

Most arts education advocacy argues for the academic and personal benefits of arts learning. An article from the National Endowment for the Arts identifies the economic benefits of arts education: <http://chronicle.com/article/Who-Knew-Arts-Education-Fuels/145217>

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Sistema in England

by Dan Trahey, Artistic Director, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's OrchKids program

I was lucky enough to spend time last month observing, teaching, and soaking in another culture's approach to El Sistema – in Liverpool and Leeds, the sites of two of the eight programs that work with Sistema England. Faith Primary School in West Everton, Liverpool (good luck understanding the dialect!) and Windmill Primary School in Leeds, both "In Harmony"-sponsored programs, must be the luckiest schools in the country: in each school, every single student is involved in the Sistema program, and every single classroom teacher is learning an instrument along with the kids.

In Liverpool, where the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic administers the program, RLP Education Director Peter Garden and Nucleo Director Rod Skipp have created a high-energy grassroots núcleo that is well integrated with the culture of the professional orchestra, which rehearses and records in the same neighborhood where the núcleo is located! Peter commented to me that the program is actually attracting musicians with a sense of social commitment to audition for the orchestra.

In Leeds, the núcleo is run by Opera North at Windmill Primary School, under the direction of Ed Marsh. The students participate in music-making with a beautifully rigorous schedule that slaloms between classroom instruction, group instrumental lessons, gym, choir, lunch, and string orchestras of almost 200 students that bulge out of the cafeteria.

Two impressions of Sistema England in general: one, most of the teaching artists are actively engaged in arranging for their students, and there is a tremendous amount of sharing of arrangement resources between núcleos. Two, there is a real philosophical tension among our English friends regarding whether núcleos should be focused on talent development or social change. I imagine this comes from the rich history of superior music education and performance in England.

But one thing is clear: everyone I met is extremely dedicated to making a difference in the lives of children, and everyone believes music is the way to make the most impact. If you are looking for a good hot curry, rainy weather, and perfect examples of how a professional orchestra and an opera company run El Sistema programs, a visit to England is a must!

"When we dream alone it remains just a dream; when you dream together it is the beginning of a new reality." – Brazilian proverb