

Going to School on Sistema Teaching

by Tom Zelle (*Director of Orchestral Studies and of the Certificate in Music for Social Change and Human Values at North Park University, Chicago*) and Ayriole Frost (*Executive Director of Shift Englewood Youth Orchestra, Chicago*)

There is a growing demand for learning opportunities for young musicians wishing to enter the El Sistema field, as more musicians take on community-based projects as part of their repertoire. While several institutions are beginning to add social justice emphases to their arts programs, in this article we focus on three programs specifically designed for teaching artists wishing to work in El Sistema-inspired programs: the [Certificate in Music for Social Change and Human Values at North Park University](#), the [Longy/Bard Master of Arts in Teaching \(MAT\) in Los Angeles](#), and the [MAT at University of Alaska Southeast](#).



The first class of graduates from the North Park Univ. program, 2015. Photo: Tom Zelle

In 2013, the North Park University School of Music in Chicago launched an undergraduate El Sistema program called the Certificate in Music for Social Change and Human Values. (North Park has been involved in the Sistema-inspired YOURS Project at Hibbard Elementary School since the project's inception.) The Certificate has four curricular strands. First is a course focusing on the history and current developments of El Sistema, and more generally on music education, social justice and civic engagement. Second is a string pedagogy course that is directly connected with the program at Hibbard, so that North Park students work with El Sistema students in the field. The third strand is a Rehearsal Techniques class that focuses on an "Education in Human Values" model, based on the Sathya Sai Educare system. The North Park University Orchestra Program uses this Human Values model in all rehearsals and concerts, so Certificate students experience the transformative application of the model both as rehearsal leaders and as orchestra participants. Fourth, students must complete three semesters of internship in El Sistema projects. One of the internships offered is a 10-week summer

certification course in Education in Human Values at the Sathya Sai School of Thailand.

The 12-month MAT and teaching credential program of Longy School of Music of Bard College, in partnership with the L.A. Phil's Sistema-inspired Youth Orchestras of Los Angeles at Heart of Los Angeles (YOLA at HOLA), welcomed its 5th class of students this summer. This community-based teaching residency offers students an integrated graduate-level degree program with hands-on learning experiences at YOLA and in urban public schools in Southern California.

Participants spend one calendar year taking graduated courses focused on performance, music pedagogy, and social justice, and pursuing a teaching practicum in which they learn and teach in El Sistema-inspired núcleos and public school classrooms. They also complete two research projects and take lessons on their major instrument, or in voice, composition, or conducting, with members of the L.A. Philharmonic and other professional musicians.

The MAT program at the University of Alaska, in conjunction with Juneau Alaska Music Matters (JAMM), provides a graduate degree, or a K-12 music certificate, or both. Grounded in the work of JAMM founder Lorrie Heagy, this program embodies the idea that the roles of school music teachers and community musicians are one and the same. Over the course of one academic year, students are fully immersed in teaching both in the school classroom and in the after-school Sistema-inspired program. The intensive practicum and the team-teaching approach combat a sense of isolation by giving pre-service teachers rich collaborative experiences with veteran teachers. Paired with mentor teachers, they engage in rigorous hands-on classroom experience as well as learning brain-based teaching practices, classroom management, positive youth development techniques, and a variety of music pedagogies.

MAT students practice their art by performing with the Juneau Symphony. They also create an online educational portfolio designed to add to the wider El Sistema field as well as to document their work, and carry out a research project that will contribute meaningful data about student outcomes, program effectiveness, and/or community engagement. Along with a \$10,000 scholarship, they can receive in-state tuition, regardless of their state of origin.

FROM THE EDITOR

Diversity and Inclusion in Classical Music. Is it just a coincidence that this summer has seen gatherings devoted to this topic, on both sides of the Atlantic?

In June, the League of American Orchestras made diversity the theme of its annual conference and convened a national "Diversity Forum" as part of it, dedicated to "Increasing Participation by Musicians from Underrepresented Communities." In July, the Sphinx Organization sponsored a "Global Symposium on Diversity and Inclusion in Classical Music" at the Southbank Centre in London.

Coincidence, probably. But also a sign that the classical music field has arrived at a new level of awareness about the stubborn lack of diversity and inclusion within its ranks. And they concur that problem is urgent. Speakers at Southbank stressed that if the classical music world doesn't take immediate steps to diversify its artists, audiences, and repertoire, it is doomed to irrelevance. "We need to disrupt every single thing about our basic assumptions," said Claire Mera-Nelson, Director of Music at the Trinity-Laban Conservatory.

The symposium ended with collective commitment to several action steps: orchestras represented there will establish a fellowship for minority musicians; concerts will include at least one piece by women or minority composers; and the goals of inclusion and excellence will no longer be seen as an either/or choice. (See Marshall Marcus's more thorough [blog post on the symposium](#).)

The League forum also had an action agenda, launching five national projects that will help build a supportive, sustainable pipeline from school music programs through audition support and mentoring into orchestra jobs, and even into higher-paying orchestral jobs.

For Sistema-inspired programs, it's very good news that leaders in the classical field are becoming activists and agitators for inclusion. We need to make sure we have a strong presence in these conversations, a strong voice advocating for change.

Our oldest students are now teenagers, and some are choosing to pursue a life in music. Let's make sure their voices, too, are heard in the international conversation about diversity. In this movement toward a new, more capacious understanding of classical music – reimagining who plays it, who listens to it, and how it's defined – our students can help to lead the way.

Tricia Tunstall

*"Culture is love. Art is sex. This is how cities propagate to stay alive."
- Eduardo Paes, Mayor of Rio De Janeiro, Brazil*

News Notes

At the end of July, MYCincinnati hosted and had their students join the inaugural [Price Hill Creative Community Festival](#), which brings internationally-renowned performing artists together with the musicians of MYCincinnati for unique and unpredictable performances. This year's Artists-in-Residence were impossible to categorize – from hip-hop globetrotter Napoleon Maddox to underground art-rockers Lazy Heart, Israeli punk composer Ofir Klemperer, Cincinnati's "Silent Poet" Desirae Hosley, and dream-pop songwriter Isaac Karns. Each artist performed brand-new work in collaboration with the young musicians of MYCincinnati. Read about it: <http://www.mycincinnatiorchestra.org> Facebook event: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1775177089389535>



The Youth Orchestra of Northern Alberta (YONA-Sistema) program of [Edmonton Symphony Orchestra](#) (ESO) celebrated the completion of its three-year pilot phase with a million dollar contribution from the La Bruyère family, the largest donation to an arts learning program in Edmonton history. Half of the gift will be used to establish an endowment that provides financial sustainability, and YONA has adopted a policy of having a portion of all future contributions to the program go into its endowment. To honor this significant gift, their most advanced orchestra has been named the La Bruyère Orchestra of YONA-Sistema in perpetuity. For more information, contact Alyssa Paterson, the

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Resources

The highest goal of El Sistema-inspired programs is not to produce professional musicians, but rather to develop skills that widen life possibilities and enrich the joy in lives and communities. The report *Artful Living*, from Vanderbilt University's Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy, strongly asserts the conclusion that artistic practice is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, a more positive self image, less anxiety about change, a more tolerant and open approach to diverse others, and, in some cases, less focus on materialistic values and the acquisition of goods. The report finds not only that there is a relationship between artistic practice and wellbeing, but also that the relationship is strengthened with increased frequency of practice. All else being equal, the more one participates in artistic activity, the higher one scores on a variety of wellbeing metrics. The intensity and frequency of artistic practice is particularly relevant for former arts students. The intensity of Sistema programs with young people may well be a strong contributor to lifelong wellbeing. <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Research-Art-Works-Vanderbilt.pdf>

We have reported on this research before, but here is a compelling article in the *Life Sciences and Medicine* online journal. It affirms an advocacy case for Sistema programs that many make: that in-depth music instruction improves cognitive and socio-emotional development in young children. This resonates with Bonnie Reagan's case, articulated in her column on this page. <http://tinyurl.com/jbuj88k>

The article *The Developmental Challenges of Middle School* (from The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds, of Mass General Hospital and Harvard Medical School) states that "this particular phase of adolescence is in large part about whether a teen feels included or alone." Kids at this age want to belong to something; they want to feel a part of the team, not a solo pilot." Sistema programs provide powerful ways to support young people well through this stage. Learn how to do so even more effectively: <http://tinyurl.com/hgcjwjx>

Sistema as a Health Program

By Bonnie Reagan, Board President and Co-Founder, BRAVO Youth Orchestras, Portland OR

"If health is about adaptation, understanding, and acceptance, then the arts may be more potent than anything medicine has to offer..."
Richard Smith, Editor British Medical Journal, 2002

We talk about El Sistema programs as being social service programs, arts programs, and education programs. But as a retired family physician working with BRAVO Youth Orchestras, I would like to describe them also as health programs.

Health care professionals are increasingly talking about the "social determinants of health." These are the economic and social conditions – and their distribution among the population – that influence individual and group differences in health status. Such conditions include income, working conditions, food security or lack thereof, social status, housing, ethnicity, and more. Research shows that a stressful life in poverty can cause higher levels of cortisol (affecting the heart), worse sleep, more chronic diseases, and shorter lives. People who live in poverty can expect up to 10-15 fewer years of life than can those who are affluent, and the gap has been widening.

Our El Sistema-inspired programs can help to change this pessimistic picture. We are creating a strong sense of belonging for our students, and a network of social contacts. We are providing an environment that challenges and supports them, and helps them to succeed and thrive. We are helping them build positive identities, encouraging their creativity, and giving them opportunities to engage with the community. We hope to improve school attendance, graduation rates, and college attendance. All of these environmental and social changes can mitigate the negative social determinants of health and create healthier people. In addition, playing music is actually enhancing the neural pathways in their brains, which is associated with improved cognitive skills and increased intelligence.

There is still much to learn about the music/health link. We should engage funders and academics interested in health to assist us, as we will need collaboration and support. I am very excited about exploring this area, and I invite you to join me!