

# the ensemble

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE U.S. EL SISTEMA MOVEMENT

## A New Stage in Our Movement's Growth

by Eric Booth, Advisor to many El Sistema programs, Publisher of *The Ensemble*

Kids have developmental stages; so do movements. I have noticed a pattern that may be a sign of a new stage in our developing U.S. El Sistema-inspired movement: an increase in the number of conversations about the way our programs relate to the other players in the U.S. music education ecosystem.

Our practices can look similar – similar enough to make it appear that El Sistema-inspired work is the same as traditional U.S. music education with the “time commitment” dial turned up a couple of notches. It’s not. Even though we are still growing and experimenting, we are at the stage where we need to begin clarifying how our work is different – clarifying for ourselves, and to help us contribute our best, synergistically, to the larger music learning ecosystem. This was the topic of two presentations I gave last month at national conferences – a workshop at the [National Guild for Community Arts Education](#) and a keynote at the “[Reaching for the Stars](#)” conference in Berkeley, CA. In both I cited the key distinction as the social goals of El Sistema-inspired work; to change the trajectory of young lives and of communities. Many other – perhaps most other – kinds of music education argue that they accomplish this goal too for a lot of kids, but few emblazon it as their reason for being.

Other differences, obvious and subtle, emanate from this priority. Our work is largely in ensembles, believing that excellence can be achieved without heavy reliance on the private lesson and endless hours alone in practice as the main tools of learning. We aspire to have the learning be intrinsically-motivated, and to create learning environments and practices that emphasize joy, that provide a consistent experience of being a valued asset, that are irresistibly fun and full of feeling. We encourage peer-to-peer learning; and while we are still discovering how to foster the sense of responsibility and care that leads to natural peer helping as a habit of mind, our priority on this goal distinguishes our work.

Here are three other distinctive elements of our movement’s practice. First, we tend to believe that passion provokes precision (reducing the fear of making mistakes and increasing the intrinsic hunger for excellence) – if a young musician’s heart and motivation are aimed right, technique improves healthily with less need for one-on-one instruction.



*Educators confer with Eric Booth at the Berkeley CA conference: from top left: Sabrina Klein (Bay Area Consultant), Laura Abrams (Cal Performances), Gillian Moore (Southbank Centre, London) and Melanie DeMore (teaching artist).*

Second, we ask our teachers to take on multiple roles. Some refer to the Venezuelan example as the CATS model—teachers taking on the roles of citizen, artist, teacher, and scholar in their students’ and community’s eyes. Great music educators in any program go far beyond the teaching role because of the extraordinary people they are; for us, however, this isn’t just a set of remarkable superstar individuals, it is our job description. This is why I often say the “gig mentality” is one of our largest hurdles in building our faculties.

Third, El Sistema-inspired work is outrageously ambitious. One crucial difference between a positive and a life-transformative impact on a child’s life is the degree of hunger driving the aspiration for excellence. What changes young lives is being a part of an aligned community that reaches unreasonably high together, regularly, to achieve excellence that matters to them and to others. This cycle of unusually ambitious yearning and achievement, repeated consistently for the sake of beauty and contribution to community, can over time turn into the belief that one can achieve near-impossible things, like creating a life path no one in your family has ever taken. This confidence leads to the thousands of small and larger choices a young person makes in creating the beautiful music of her ensemble and of her life. Fuelled by a sustainable supply of joy.

We are growing into a new, more adult stage in our movement. I think of us as a research and development lab for the music education field.

## FROM THE EDITOR

A few years ago, we in the U.S. Sistema-inspired movement found ourselves constantly having to explain what we were up to. That’s beginning to change. Thanks to our tumultuous growth, people are noticing and responding to our programs and our ambitious ideals. So we face a new challenge: how to respond to the responders?

Most responses are positive. Some are passionate, even adulatory. A great many ask, “Is there a way I can be part of this?” To this, I think our answer should always be “Yes!” Even if they’re not musicians, even if they’re not educators, there may be a trombone in the attic, or a friend who works at a foundation. Perhaps there’s a need for someone to provide healthy snacks on Thursdays.

However, now that we’re big enough to be noticed, we’re big enough to be criticized. Sometimes the underlying motivation for a negative reaction is simple resentment. Most school music teachers are passionately dedicated and yet marginally (if ever) acclaimed. It’s no wonder that some might resent the hoopla around El Sistema programs.

Our best response to them, perhaps, is enthusiastic appreciation of the work they do, and an exploration of possibilities for partnership – even as we clarify the distinctions Eric Booth delineates in this month’s feature article.

But then there are the spoilers, the armchair critics. Their armchairs are sometimes in academic offices, sometimes third row center in concert halls, and their motivations seem to range from principled disapproval to sheer delight in debunking anything the media has extolled.

How to react? First, respond with all your heart and mind. Refute misconceptions and false claims. Articulate the truths and goals of your program as eloquently as possible.

One of two things will happen. Either your respondee will come back with interest in a dialogue – a potential learning opportunity on both sides – or you’ll be met with escalating critical vehemence. In which case I’d say...don’t waste any more energy. Put it aside, and go back to the daily gift of the work you do.

Tricia Tunstall

**“In Venezuela, we encounter art, not just in museums and concerts, but in everyday things, in the fight against the perverse use of leisure, against drugs and violence.” – José Antonio Abreu**

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## News Notes

The United Palace of Cultural Arts (UPCA) is leading a cultural renaissance in New York City's Washington Heights, and at the cornerstone of this effort are two El Sistema-inspired programs that launched in October, 2012. **The Harmony Program** provides daily afterschool instruction to 25 fourth-graders on cello, viola, and violin. On Saturdays, the **WHIN Music Project** trains several dozen older students to form a Northern Manhattan youth orchestra. The programs are based at the historic United Palace Theater, whose previous incarnations were as a 1930's vaudeville stage and movie palace, and in the 1960's as home to the congregation of "The Success and Prosperity Preacher," Reverend Ike. Today, his son Xavier Eikerenkoetter and the UPCA staff lead the theater's new chapter as a community arts center, and they chose to begin with classical music. "There is no better example of the power that the arts have to transform the life of an individual or a community than the success of El Sistema," said Mike Fitelson, Director of Programming at UPCA. [mikef@unitedpalace.org](mailto:mikef@unitedpalace.org)

In September, **Community MusicWorks** (CMW) launched a new **Daily Orchestra Program** in Providence, RI in collaboration with John Hope Settlement House. Founded by MacArthur "genius" award recipient Sebastian Ruth, CMW builds relationships between professional musicians, children and families through free lessons, concerts, and workshops with guest artists. The Daily Orchestra Program, led by former CMW Fellow and Sistema Fellow Adrienne Taylor, aims to deepen the impact on children's lives by providing an opportunity to participate in daily ensemble time in addition to private lessons and individual practice help. Participants, ages 6-7, also have access to homework help, mentoring relationships with Brown University students, and involvement in special activities, including growing vegetables in the Settlement House garden. Students gave their first performance in November at a community event made possible by a grant from ArtPlace,



*Future students at the celebratory program launch in the United Palace Theater in October 2012* Photo: Yuan Kong

which included a spaghetti dinner and a performance by Community MusicWorks resident musicians. For more information, contact Adrienne Taylor. [ataylor@communitymusicworks.org](mailto:ataylor@communitymusicworks.org)

## Resources

New resources have been added to the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (YOLA) Resource Library – from research to sample schedules, open to all: <http://www.laphil.com/education/yola/resource-library>

**Independent Sector**, a coalition network of 600 philanthropic organizations, has released **Beyond the Cause: The Art and Science of Advocacy**, a useful new study that identifies five essential approaches to successful advocacy and analyzes the issues facing the nonprofit and philanthropic sector. Obtain the report for free at: [http://www.independentsector.org/beyond\\_the\\_cause](http://www.independentsector.org/beyond_the_cause)

**Instructor Perceptions of El Sistema Based Programs in the United States** is an M.A. thesis by Edward Preston Israel, at American University, which shares the results of his study of teachers in U.S. El Sistema programs. While the number of programs studied in his sample is admittedly modest, he provides the first analysis and comparison of faculties across sites. In Dropbox: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/u5iz4vvpctjy36/Instructor%20Perceptions.pdf>

**New Music USA** supports the creation of new musical works and ways to engage people and U.S. communities with that new work, through the MetLife Creative Connections program. While the grants are not designed for El Sistema-inspired programs, composition projects might fit well with grant guidelines and MetLife goals. Grants sponsor one or more composers to participate in community outreach activities organized, sponsored, and/or presented by the lead organization. Next deadline is January 7, 2013. Visit the New Music USA website for online application information. <https://www.newmusicusa.org/grants/metlife-creative-connections>

## The Guerilla Wing

by Gillian Moore, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre, London

My job title disguises the fact that I'm really a secret agent on behalf of arts education. Or perhaps not so secret, since everything **Southbank Centre** does has an educational heart – as befits the UK's largest arts center, with progressive ideals written into its DNA. (Inaugurated in 1951 by the postwar Atlee government to celebrate peace, progress, and the human imagination, Southbank has blossomed into a great cultural and leisure district where the spirit of its origins remains very much alive.)

In particular, we are plugged into the rich and sometimes infuriatingly varied structures for music education which exist in the UK: our local education authorities, our National Youth ensembles, and, most recently and fruitfully, England's fledgling Sistema-based program "**In Harmony**." There are currently six In Harmony programs, all partnered with performing organizations; the program on Merseyside partners with the Liverpool Philharmonic, the program in Leeds with Opera North, the Lambeth program with Southbank Centre and our resident London Philharmonic Orchestra. There is also a thriving **Sistema-based project in Scotland**.

These Sistema-based programs are what I like to call the guerilla wing of a huge range of structures in the UK collectively aimed at making sure that all children experience the joy of music. Our statutory National Curriculum stipulates that all children aged 5-14 are entitled to a music education in the classroom – and it's comforting to have that articulated policy in place, although in practice, it's hard to ensure that generalist teachers in primary schools are equipped to teach music.

Instrumental teaching, ensembles and orchestras are another matter. In my 1970s youth, local government provided these services free at the point of delivery, like roads, drains, and (controversial in the US context, I know!) the health service. Mrs. Thatcher did her best to eliminate this, but wasn't completely successful; this year, England got a National Plan for Education from the government, which aims to join all of the many post-Thatcher initiatives into a network of hubs for music education round the country, so that motivated children and parents can have a "one-stop shop" for getting involved in music.

Still, there is no doubt that the El Sistema guerilla wing will be needed for those young people who are harder to reach – and that cultural institutions such as Southbank Centre must provide loyal support.

## Subscription Information

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**"Our work with El Sistema has dramatically expanded our understanding of what is possible for music education."** – Leni Boorstin, Director of Community and Government Affairs, Los Angeles Philharmonic