

## Sistema within a Social Service Agency

By Jennifer Propp, Associate Professor at Westfield State University

**Kids 4 Harmony**, in the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts, is similar to other El Sistema-inspired programs in striving to promote social justice through intensive ensemble-based classical music education. What is special about Kids 4 Harmony is that it is one of the only El Sistema-inspired programs in the U.S. that was established by a social service agency, **Berkshire Children and Families** (BCF).

BCF has served at-risk children and families in Pittsfield, Massachusetts for over a hundred years, providing early childhood education and care, parenting and family support, and intensive foster care and adoption. When the agency began to develop a strategic focus on the root causes of poverty through primary prevention programs, El Sistema provided a framework and a set of values and beliefs about how to approach this work. Kids 4 Harmony was launched in 2011 under the leadership of Carolyn Mower Burns BCF's President and CEO, with guidance from a well-established Advisory Committee.

The program is located in Morningside Community School and Brayton Elementary School; it runs as a free after-school program five days a week during the school year and one month during the summer, providing full ensemble work, sectionals, and private pullout lessons. Advanced students assist and mentor younger students in achieving musical confidence on violin, viola and cello.

Family involvement is key to family empowerment, and the Kids 4 Harmony families have developed a powerful voice and strong support network. The program's connection with the social services agency is a crucial part of this process. In addition to informal family concerts each Friday, there is a family advisory group that provides important feedback and input into the goals, direction and operation of the program. Also, at each site, there is a BCF "family liaison" whose role is to connect with families on a regular basis to help identify family strengths, needs, and challenges. The liaison acts as the bridge between Kids 4 Harmony and BCF, serving as a connection to needed resources and services.

BCF training helps the staff to understand the many

challenges our families experience, and to know how to engage and work with families around issues of trauma, behavioral problems, parenting concerns, and the many challenges of living in poverty.

Several children in the program have been in foster care or kinship situations; the connection with BCF allowed for special support to these children, who otherwise may have had to drop out of the program. BCF has also been valuable in dealing with children's behavioral issues, helping to develop behavior management plans that include families, staff, and teachers.

As Associate Professor at Westfield State University, I have been able to conduct an ongoing external evaluation of Kids 4 Harmony. Findings from three years of evaluation data indicate overall gains in child functioning in a number of areas, including academics, confidence, responsibility, social interactions, happiness, and self-esteem. Family routines seem altered by involvement in the program, suggesting more structure in out-of-school routines, increased caregiver and child interaction, and, most notably, less time with television and video games. As one father noted, "Instead of playing video games together now, he teaches me how to play the keyboard."

These positive impacts extend to the school and larger community.

It seems that more families are opting to send their children to Morningside School, in hopes of becoming a part of the Kids 4 Harmony program. The school, the neighborhood and the community are beginning to be seen in a different light because of the reputation of Kids 4 Harmony. One teacher remarked in a focus group, "It is nice to be known for something positive for a change. For so long, we were known as the tough school with the bad kids."

The impact of Kids 4 Harmony is notable, given the short time it has been in existence. BCF has made a long-term investment in Kids 4 Harmony as a new form of engaging and delivering social services to children and families in their communities. In the words of one teacher: "Lots of kids, when I send them home, I worry about what they are going home to and what will happen to that glimmer I see in their eyes. I would like to see Kids 4 Harmony reach more kids, to turn that glimmer into a spark."

## FROM THE EDITOR

I am haunted this week by a phrase from an Op Ed piece in the November 21st New York Times, by columnist Roger Cohen. "Paris has placed its chips on beauty," he writes, "a gamble of course, because beauty invites destruction from those who would subjugate rather than uplift the human spirit." He goes on to evoke, in moving detail, the particular symbolic significance of Paris for all who care about enlightenment, both aesthetic and philosophical.

Paris has placed its chips on beauty. For many centuries, it has been a beacon of the tangible and spiritual loveliness humans are capable of creating through art, music, architecture, fashion, cuisine. And one consequence of that is vulnerability. "Beauty invites destruction," in Mr. Cohen's words.

The metaphor haunts, of course, because El Sistema, more than any educational enterprise I've ever known, places its chips on beauty. Beauty is not simply a by-product of the ensemble music learning that is El Sistema's most fundamental practice. It is a crucial aspect of the learning experience itself, because within the very language of musical art lies the potential for emotional growth. Playing beautiful music can be a transformative exercise in the life of feeling, expanding our capacity to express deep feelings and even to feel deeply. We experience human emotions transmuted into the forms of beauty.

To play beautiful music together is to intensify feelings of human connection. In El Sistema, children and young people are continually engaged in turning feeling into beauty, through an endeavor that involves continuous connection with others. They grow up within that place of shared connection, and it nourishes the growth of their habits of mind and heart, day after day and year after year.

So in placing our chips on beauty, we are also placing our chips on empathy. We are placing our chips on compassion. Certainly, we're vulnerable to the cynicism of pessimists. The research tool may never be invented that provides conclusive proof for a correlation between the experience of musical beauty and the capacity for empathic feeling. Still, we know what we know – not only through our own experience, but also through watching the children of El Sistema discover new ways of feeling through making music together.

Beauty may not save the world, but it means the world to each child we save. That's all we've got. It's enough.

*Tricia Tunstall*



*Family Liaison Kathy Quinn works with students and their grandfather. The boys showed him how they use a Tibetan singing bowl to relax and focus before violin class – listening intently, then raising the bow when the sound has dissipated. Photo: Mia Friedman*

**"We need to create a new way of thinking in classical musicians: that they will be totally committed to culture." – José Antonio Abreu**

## News Notes

**Creative Connections** is a weeklong immersion workshop about leading music composition projects with any combination of students, professional musicians and community members. Offered by Peabody Conservatory and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra OrchKids program, and led by Dan Trahey, it will take place March 12-18 in Baltimore, MD. To learn more: <https://www.facebook.com/creativeconnectionsproject?fref=ts> To register, email Eliza Minster at [ejadem@gmail.com](mailto:ejadem@gmail.com).

**Lincoln Center Education**, the largest education program of an arts center, opens applications for the **Teaching Artist (TA) Development Lab**, often called the best TA training in the U.S. Two-week intensives offered for new, intermediate, and advanced TAs (international applicants welcomed) in July at Lincoln Center. Early applicants can get discounted housing at Juilliard dorms. For information, contact Jose Velez at: [jvelez@lincolncenter.org](mailto:jvelez@lincolncenter.org)

A research conference entitled **Reframing El Sistema: A Conference Connecting the Evolving Practice and Research of Social Action Through Music** will take place at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County on April 9 and 10, 2016. Details are available at <http://www.reframingelsistema.com>, and the gathering "will critically examine the premises and practices of Sistema-inspired programs and alternative programs."

**The Youth Orchestra of the Americas (YOA)** is celebrating its 15th anniversary. It is a good friend to Sistema programs in the Americas, has involved over 800 musicians in its orchestra programs, and has made a strong contribution to the presence of and enthusiasm for orchestral music across the Americas. Congratulations!

**Sistema New Brunswick** has announced a new partnership, between Capitol Theatre and Tutta Musica (the professional orchestra of the Sistema NB teaching artist faculty), to produce musical theater together annually, beginning in 2016 with "The Sound of Music," on its 50th anniversary.

## Resources

**The Center for Arts Education** in New York City has just launched its **Parent Advocacy Toolkit**. While

aimed at supporting arts education in general, it may be helpful in activating parent advocacy for Sistema programs. <http://toolkit.centerforartsed.org/advocacy/resources/toolkit-landing?body=>



*Inside The Firehouse, new home of MYCincinnati.*  
Photo: Annie Gordon

**Americans for the Arts**, the nation's largest arts advocacy organization, has launched a new resource for the field. Called the **Arts Education Navigator**, it includes a compendium of tools and information ready to study and download, to use in advocating for a healthier local arts ecosystem. It includes a six-step process for building a local movement: [www.AmericansForTheArts.org/Navigator](http://www.AmericansForTheArts.org/Navigator)

New research from Australia suggests that **informal music-making in the home** from around the ages of 2 and 3 can lead to better literacy, numeracy, social skills, and attention and emotion regulation by the age of 5. The effects may be stronger than the effects of reading to children. <http://tinyurl.com/oy28ja9>

**Quick facts** from the **2014 El Sistema USA survey**:

- ✓ Programs in the U.S. average 209 students.
- ✓ Most programs have students participating 40 weeks per year.
- ✓ Individuals gave \$755,000 to El Sistema USA programs in Fiscal Year 2014.
- ✓ 78% of U.S. programs have instructional facilities as an in-kind service.
- ✓ One quarter of U.S. programs are in California.
- ✓ The average yearly cost for a student to participate in a U.S. Sistema program is \$1,500.
- ✓ Most programs have one full-time administrative staff member.
- ✓ Students average 10 hours per week in U.S. programs.

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## A New Home in Cincinnati

*By Eddy Kwon (Director) and Laura Jekel (Founder and Program Advisor), MYCincinnati*

MYCincinnati is an El Sistema-inspired program in the Price Hill neighborhood of Cincinnati. We began in 2011 with 11 children, two teachers, a borrowed space, and instruments on loan. Now, just over four years later, we've relocated to a historic firehouse that has transformed our program and the surrounding community.

The firehouse, which has more than enough room for our 90 students and 4 staff members, has itself been through many transformations. Over 100 years ago, it operated as a horse-and-buggy fire station, protecting Price Hill from disaster. A few decades later, it became a community center, and most recently, it was used by the Cincinnati Police Special Detectives Unit. Makeshift prison cells, interrogation rooms, and police offices filled this massive building.

In August 2015, the police moved out, and MYCincinnati moved in. Since then, we've transformed the first floor into a giant rehearsal and performance space, and the interrogation rooms into practice studios. Artwork collected over time hangs on the walls, and our eclectic collection of chairs are spread out through every room. In addition to four large rehearsal spaces, there is a meeting space that is used by our parent organization Price Hill Will, as well as by neighborhood arts groups. To top it off, a MYCincinnati teacher lives on the third floor with his wife and cat. We have definitely "moved in."

Just as we have transformed the space, the space is transforming us. The high ceilings allow the sound of the orchestra to expand, and the beautiful architecture inspires us. More space brings a capacity for more students, and we are growing rapidly. With areas for parents and siblings to hang out during rehearsals, we've noticed increased engagement with families. Five parents joined the orchestra this year after spending weeks on the couches, watching their children enviously.

Since moving in, we've hosted concerts, potlucks, movie nights, community meetings, weekend classes, and a film festival focusing on the theme "Social Justice." We hope to continue to expand the MYCincinnati family to include a broader community of artists, activists, community organizers, and art lovers who will help us shape this fantastic space.

**"Attention without feeling ... is only a report. An openness – an empathy – is necessary if the attention is to matter." – Mary Oliver, poet**