

Sustainable Growth is Smart Growth

By Symposium Manager Lauren Silberman

Early in January, nearly 100 leaders from El Sistema-inspired programs around the country gathered in Philadelphia to discuss sustainable program growth at the "El Sistema Symposium: Built to Grow. Built to Last." The *Play On, Philly!*-hosted symposium was framed around three case studies developed by the symposium speakers in partnership with El Sistema USA. These case studies presented three typical scenarios of programs

at critical stages of development; the scenarios were used to discuss issues of growth and sustainability for a program with operating revenue around \$75,000 per year, a program operating at \$225,000 at year, and one operating at \$850,000 per year.

In three plenary sessions, speakers brought different perspectives to the case studies. Beth Babcock (President and CEO of The Crittenton Women's Union) focused on capacity-building and strategies for continued donor support and spurring growth. Her key takeaway was that sustainable growth is not getting bigger – it is getting bigger and better at the same time. John Martinez (Deputy Director of Program Development, Development and External Affairs at MDRC) discussed building a "fund-worthy organization." His key lesson was the three important aspects of a successful funding proposal – making an evidence-based case, having organizational capacity, and strong data with measureable outcomes. Tom McLaughlin (President and CEO of McLaughlin & Associates) discussed the importance of strategic planning, financial planning and control measures, and having an accountant on your board or staff. An important takeaway from this session was that a single staff or board member should not run all of the financial control systems for an organization.

Stacy Holland (Executive Director of The Lenfest Foundation) brought her experience serving high-risk youth in Philadelphia as keynote speaker for the symposium. Her story of service, from her own start-up nonprofit to the foundational work she does today, reminded participants of the true community impact of social development programs like El Sistema. Bob Fiedler (former Executive Director of The People's Music School in Chicago) shared real-world lessons on what happens when a program faces tough decisions about sustainable growth. With many former and current staff, teachers, and board members of The People's Music School in the room, the delicate but important conversation turned into its own case study lesson. Bob's session encompassed personal and professional

growth. "If you want to be a better manager and a better leader," he said, "be a better you."

Symposium participants identified common sustainability missteps in early organizational development. Foremost among these was relationship management, from boards to donors. Board governance tends to be poor in new organizations,

so board members are not able to connect programs with opportunities to grow sustainably. And donors must feel a strong partnership. Relationship building is slow and difficult work, but it is the foundation every organization needs to grow.

Discussions frequently focused on the numbers, from evaluation outcomes to budgets. As a field, our programs struggle

to produce assessment data that current funders want to see, especially measureable outcomes that demonstrate social change through music. Positive outcomes are often compromised by growing too wide programmatically, which easily puts the entire organization at risk.

Start-up organizations need financial accountability to secure sustainable funding. Weak financial controls, often paired with a weak strategic compass, make many of our programs undesirable for funders. Financial expertise, either on staff or on boards, is essential to program growth. Success stories of partnerships with school sites, graduate programs, and other nonprofits to conduct evaluation were shared.

Pre-symposium activities gave participants a look at how *Play On, Philly!* manages curriculum and repertoire, operations and site management. On a post-symposium day, El Sistema USA hosted a visioning session in which participants imagined ways ESUSA could better support the field; ideas included consultant teams to support individual programs and resources for evaluation and funding. Program leaders discussed the value of the already-forming peer-to-peer support programs and regional support networks. As ESUSA continues to define its role, the board will work to incorporate these suggestions into strategic planning.

The symposium was live posted on Twitter using the hashtag #elsym. Search for #elsym or @ElSistemaUSA on Twitter to discover more. A final report will be available in Spring 2015.



Keynote Speaker Stacy Holland of The Lenfest Foundation. Photo: Albert Yee

FROM THE EDITOR

This month we celebrate the 40th birthday of El Sistema, born in Caracas in February 1975.

Like all 40-year-olds, it has changed beyond recognition since birth. In fact, the only El Sistema program in the world that began without a youth development mission is...El Sistema Venezuela.

Certainly, it began with a mission. But that mission was more about class and culture than about childhood social development. The young musicians who gathered nightly to rehearse in a parking garage or an abandoned warehouse were fired with ambition to reverse the class-based tradition of classical music as an elitist sphere reserved for North Americans, Europeans, and wealthy patrons, and to claim this music as their own. They were out to prove true Abreu's conviction that Venezuelan musicians could make great orchestral music.

Prove it they did; but what's equally remarkable is what happened along the way. Abreu and his colleagues could have gone on to create a national fleet of youth orchestras for young adults with musical training, and to leave things at that. In fact, this would have been the most logical next step.

But instead of hewing to predictability, they remained open to exploration. They noticed the transformational power at the heart of music ensemble work. They began to imagine its potential for society's most vulnerable children and communities. In the process, the great, central insights of El Sistema as a social mission evolved.

There's a common Sistema adage: "El Sistema is not a pedagogy, it is an inquiry." To a degree rare in huge national organizations, El Sistema is constantly open to questioning and widening its vision.

Now as ever, Sistema Venezuela continues to pursue its evolving inquiry. Even as programs modeled on the nucleo structure emerge across the world, the Venezuelans are busy experimenting with Sistema in prisons, hospitals, and other untried venues.

For Sistema-inspired programs in the U.S. and Canada, our status as networks of independent or affiliated programs rather than a franchise means that we are well positioned to emulate this perpetual spirit of exploration and evolution. As we remain aligned with our common mission, we can stay open to the unexpected, attentive to surprise.

Let's honor this 40th with a renewed commitment to remember: it's not a pedagogy, it's an inquiry. Happy Birthday El Sistema!

Tricia Tunstall

"We started with a national spirit. From the beginning, the orchestra was considered a symbol of the country -- very important." – José Antonio Abreu

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

News Notes

Forty years ago, El Sistema was born in a Caracas parking garage. This February, [El Sistema in Venezuela celebrates its birthday](#) with a month of concerts. To honor and congratulate the founders of the movement, [Seth Truby](#) and Mia Allen, with the help of [El Sistema USA](#), request your participation in a [U.S. national project](#):

Submit a video (up to 3-4 minutes) of your students performing Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* in the key of concert D, tempo at quarter note=120.

Film your students individually and in small groups, answering: "El Sistema is _____."

Also, film them in a large group saying in English or Spanish: "Happy Birthday El Sistema!", "Feliz Cumpleaños El Sistema!", and "Tocar y luchar!", "Thank you Venezuela!", "Gracias por la música!", etc.

For more details and specifications on filming, go to: <http://www.elsistemausa.org/userfiles/file/ElSistema40AnniversaryVideo.pdf>

The [National Take A Stand Festival](#) begins its three-year journey with a teacher training and pilot program in 2015, adding regional youth orchestras in 2016, and culminating in a weeklong national youth orchestra camp in 2017. This camp will be [the first U.S. national Sistema youth orchestra](#), conducted by LA Phil Music Director Gustavo Dudamel. Take A Stand is a partnership between the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Longy School of Music and Bard College; this Festival adds as partners the Aspen Music Festival and School and Venezuela's FundaMusical, working in tandem with El Sistema USA. Students involved with the Festival will work with reknowned artists including Robert Spano, Music Director of the Aspen Music Festival and School, and Leon Botstein, President of Bard College and Music Director of the American Symphony Orchestra. They will have access to famous concert venues such as Walt Disney Concert Hall, the Hollywood Bowl, Bard College's Fisher Center, and Aspen Music Festival's Benedict Music Tent. A new era of national coordination begins. <http://tinyurl.com/mjwrylc>

Sistema New Brunswick will host the 2015 Residency of the YOA (Youth Orchestra of the Americas) in Moncton, in partnership with the Province of New Brunswick, July 5 -16. Eighty musicians from more than 30 countries will study with a distinguished faculty led by Leon Spierer, Berlin Philharmonic, and

will work with Sistema New Brunswick students. Forty faculty, guest artists, composers and conductors will be part of the Residency, which will also include a performance tour in New Brunswick focusing on youth and family audiences.



Resources

Now you can state it with confidence, thanks to Joe Hamm's completion of the [2014 Fiscal Year Census Preliminary Report](#) for El Sistema USA: there are currently 117 programs in the U.S., and there are over ten thousand children (total) in them! (These numbers may shift with ongoing research and increased survey participation, but are the first solid data we have.) Programs are open a median of 35.5 weeks a year, and provide a median of ten hours of instruction per week, with a high of 40 hours a week in one program and a low of 3 hours a week in another. We often discuss issues of cost (as well we might, with one program spending \$7,118 per child per year) – the median is \$1,250 per child per year. That figure falls in line with average costs for after-school programs in general – and yet Sistema programs usually provide much more than standard afterschool programming. This information is a major contribution to our field; get a copy of the summary findings at: <http://tinyurl.com/oaovj6k> In the Guest Column at right, Joe tells a little about his process.

2014 was a good year for [music and brain science](#). We reported a number of new studies affirming through research what Sistema practitioners know intimately through experience. This blog post identifies a dozen new things about the music-brain connection that bolster the Sistema advocacy case: <http://mic.com/articles/106100/12-amazing-things-scientists-discovered-about-music-this-year>

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How the Census Came to Be

by Joe Hamm, Program & Media Manager, *Soundscape*, Newport News VA

When I attended the Take A Stand conference in Los Angeles in 2012, I heard numerous speakers make vague claims that El Sistema in the U.S. was succeeding. I realized that the field needs a clear understanding of what's actually happening.

This became even more evident when I started producing my short [documentary film](#) about *Soundscape* and could not find a credible source for up-to-date national information. I figured I would start creating such a source myself. I began by collecting any spreadsheets I could find, researching online, and simply asking people, "Do you know if this program is still running?"

The National Alliance of El Sistema Inspired Programs and [El Sistema USA](#) (now one organization) created a committee to support me, and I brought in my friend Jason Smith, an academic sociologist, to help. What I thought would be a piece of cake was not. (I suppose this is how wisdom is acquired!) Only about 63 programs responded to our inquiries – which was frustrating, since I was sure there were more than a hundred of us out there.

I improved the survey and sent it off again in July 2014. Spreadsheets proliferated! I reached the point where I felt like a caveman carving tally marks on a wall – or like the guy in the movie *The Matrix*.

I decided we needed a centralized data source for El Sistema USA that could be quickly and easily updated. With the assistance of Rey Ramirez at *Soundscape*, I began to create a database for El Sistema USA. That year we collected only 58 surveys – but we kept going, and collected 60 in 2014. At present, we have identified 117 programs in the U.S.

Having finally gotten a good handle on survey response and data collection, we can now use this data to ask and answer some really important questions about where we are now and how we move on. The information we collect and publish will empower scholars, writers, teaching artists, program leaders, and experts throughout the country to move the field forward and ultimately put instruments in the hands of many more children.

Just to be clear: I have been a drum set player since I was 14. I studied Jazz at Christopher Newport University, and I continue to write and record original music and form bands. I AM NOT A STATISTICIAN. I am not a database developer. In fact, looking at all these numbers bores me to death until I see a result.

I do, however, know the value of creating this source, and how to assemble a well-balanced and skilled team to do quality work. I know that we, the U.S. Sistema-inspired movement, are capable of reaching far more children than we do now, and doing so in a way that will help us stay with them as positive influences throughout their primary schooling, if not their entire lives. We have something special. It's time we find ways to scale it, and communicate the social and economic value of music-making to the citizens, business-people and political leaders of the United States.

"We understand perfectly why Abreu built El Sistema, and like him, we will use it to fight against ignorance and barbarism." – Jean-Claude Decalonne, Director, *Passeurs d'Arts* (Sistema-based program), Paris, France