

## The NYC Seminario

by Xóchitl Tafoya, current Sistema Fellow

On December 12, 2012, students from five El Sistema-inspired New York-area programs came together to participate in the first NYC seminario, "Tocamos Musical!" The event was presented by Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute in partnership with the DiMenna Center for Classical Music and Orchestra of St. Luke's. This was the first time these five sites – Corona Youth Music Project, Harmony Program, Union City Music Project, UpBeat NYC, and WHIN (Washington Heights and Inwood) Music Project – had worked together in any capacity. The students worked on four pieces: "Simple Gifts," "Venezuela," "Ode to Joy," and Terry Riley's *In C*.

A seminario is a chance for young musicians to expand their musical families by playing with and befriending students from other programs; often, they are coached and led by guest teaching artists. In this case, the kids were especially lucky – the guest artists were 12 members of the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela! The Venezuelan musicians embodied the fearless spirit of music making, and created a warm, energetic learning atmosphere in which students were engaged and having a good time while being held to a high musical standard. This mood was set from the beginning, when a Simon Bolivar Orchestra brass player told the children, "This is a very important day in your life – you are entering a great happiness. Music is about to become one of your great joys, for your whole life. This is going to change your life!"

The energy was high, and the excitement was contagious throughout the building. All the students were wearing brightly colored "Tocamos Musica" tee shirts, with each nucleo represented by a different color. Parents watched with pride as their children rehearsed, and excitedly met and talked with other parents from different NYC neighborhoods.

During just the first hour of the string rehearsal, one could feel and hear the dramatic increase in musicality. Each section was meticulously pushed at every level – technique, musical phrasing, and ensemble togetherness. Teaching artists from each nucleo worked with the guest artists. The teaching process involved near-constant playing, but always in the spirit of passion and fun.

Throughout the day, the children were challenged, supported, and encouraged to take risks. Watching



NYC seminario rehearsal. Photo: Courtesy of Wilbert Gutierrez for the Union City Music Project.

them, I thought of Abreu's words: "Trust the children," and "music gives endless potential." These young musicians were learning so much because they were working together to achieve one goal, one beautiful sound together. As they played and replayed the music, each time at a higher level, they told a story of possibility and potential.

The choice to include *In C* was a bold but good one, because it provided an accessible opportunity for improvisation. Students had no need for any prior knowledge of the music; they focused on listening to those around them and creating a vibe as ensemble. It gave them a chance to try something new and be courageously successful in front of an audience.

At the end of the day, they performed together as one large ensemble for their community, family, and friends. Clearly, everyone was working together to create something greater than their individual selves. Musicians at a variety of levels and ages were all connected in the goal of creating beautiful music.

Seminarios are challenging and time consuming for all parties. But the work is worthwhile, because the ritual of the seminario helps musicians young and old, beginner and advanced expand both musically and socially – and it allows the children's parents and communities to witness these transformations.

In the future, I hope that seminarios can enroll the audience (musicians and parents alike) from the beginning, to create and participate in music making. I also hope to see more peer-to-peer mentoring and teaching. At the NYC seminario this happened to some extent, through pairs of stand partners helping each other; however, there was not intentional time to allow students to work with each other.

"Tocamos Musical!" was a wonderful opportunity for all, and I learned a great deal from working with these nucleos and musicians. I look forward to participating in future seminarios throughout the United States.

## FROM THE EDITOR

To be an El Sistema story-teller is truly a blessed occupation: never was a bard luckier in the sheer scope, sweep, and inspirational nature of her subject. The business of researching, writing, and speaking about El Sistema is a continual source of joy and satisfaction for me.

In recent months I've had the opportunity to don a different hat, serving as a consultant with several new initiatives in the process of development. It's thrilling to be an active, contributing part of a process I've so often watched and written about. And it's humbling to discover that, as much as I know about El Sistema, I can sometimes identify an inner tendency to default, without even being aware of it, to the conventional music education norms and habits that have dominated my lifelong experience as a music learner and music educator. Becoming an active participant in the process of nucleo creation has shown me just how strong a gravitational pull those old habits can exert.

When presented with a draft list of the skills that faculty members wanted children to acquire, for example, I knew there was something "off" about it – but it took me a long moment to realize that the skills listed were all specifically musical, and didn't include social and psychological skills. That kind of "aha" moment is common, I'm sure, to many nucleo leaders and teachers. Even as you're pulled forward by the power of the El Sistema vision, and by your clarity and passion around that vision, there can be a strong backward tug toward everything you've previously known about learning and teaching music: measuring and evaluating by strictly musical standards; focusing on individual improvement, rewarding soloistic virtuosity.

Maestro Abreu often says about North America: "You have such great music teachers!" It's true that our lifetimes' worth of experience in opening up the power and beauty of music to children can serve us well in our new El Sistema-inspired incarnations – as long as we are vigilant about keeping our eyes, ears, hearts and minds aligned with our social mission. If we don't, we fall short of the potential we envision. I'm delighted to be sharing this challenge with you from a newly "embedded" perspective.

Tricia Tunstall

**"In Venezuela, if you get money for 100 children, you work with 1,000 children."  
– Eduardo Méndez, Executive Director, Fundamusical, Venezuela**

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE U.S. EL SISTEMA MOVEMENT

## News Notes

A new northwest site is born.

### Yakima Music en Acción

(YAMA) has just launched its first site in Yakima, Washington. YAMA's first ensemble is a string orchestra that meets two hours daily after school, five days a week. YAMA began on its first day with 11 students [auspicious! – you may recall the now-famous Caracas parking garage in



*Brooke Creswell (Yakima Symphony Orchestra's Founding Director and YAMA Bass Teaching Artist) on Day 1 of YAMA, in a double bass exploration to encourage a few YAMA students to select this instrument. Photo: Cindy Joseph*

which Maestro Abreu began El Sistema with 11 young musicians on its first day) and one parent, eager to learn the violin with her daughter. Within two weeks, YAMA ballooned into a 32-piece string orchestra that is eagerly preparing for its first show in early February at a premier performance hall in Yakima. YAMA is a program of OIC of Washington, a state-wide social service agency affiliated with OIC International, and is run in partnership with the Yakima School District and the Yakima Symphony Orchestra. YAMA is led by Director Stephanie Hsu (Sistema Fellow '12) and four local teaching artists. [stephanie.lin.hsu@gmail.com](mailto:stephanie.lin.hsu@gmail.com)

REP+Resource launches on February 1st, for the benefit of all US Sistema-inspired programs. As featured in September 2012 issue of The Ensemble, the new website offers repertoire collected from various sites, as well as articles, information, and other resources for the entire field, provided by colleagues. It will grow to its potential as an invaluable resource only through your submissions and input – what can you contribute to our movement's collective trove? Check it out at: <http://elsistemahawaii.net/REP+Resource>.

## Resources

Building on recent research in Canada and Hong Kong, a new study from Germany asserts a *causal connection between learning to play an instrument at age seven or eight and increased linguistic skills*. This is a significant new pillar for our advocacy arguments. Research has long shown a relationship between musical and literacy skills, but now the claim is affirmed – studying the instrument actually *causes* the increase in verbal memory and speaking capacity, which are foundational literacy skills. An article about the study: <http://goo.gl/Wr62p> Details on the study

itself: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3528082/>

The Jubilation Foundation supports the joyful side of human nature – isn't that a refreshing mission statement for a foundation? They believe that any kind of music and movement contributes to individual and community well-being. They offer nine grants for teaching artists as **Jubilation Fellows**, who receive \$5,000/year for two

years. Application deadline: February 28, 2013. You may nominate yourself or someone else. <http://jubilationfoundation.org/grant.html#4>

Cal Performances in Berkeley hosted the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra and led a concurrent **educators symposium** on Nov. 28/29, 2012. They have posted **audio recordings of the key sessions**, including a conversation with Maestro Abreu and Gustavo Dudamel, a keynote speech by Eric Booth, and presentations by Gillian Moore of Southbank Centre and Stanford Thompson of Play On, Philly. [http://www.calperfs.berkeley.edu/learn/watch\\_listen](http://www.calperfs.berkeley.edu/learn/watch_listen) During the Symposium, Cal Performances hosted an arts educators "brown bag lunch" to discuss El Sistema-inspired programs in the Bay Area; and there has already been a followup meeting with eight regional program leaders sharing their successes, challenges, and coordinated regional planning.

On February 1, **The Ensemble Book Club** begins. Focused on the book *Drive* by Daniel Pink, the opening question is: What do you find in the book's research on intrinsic motivation that has implications for the teaching or environment-building practices of our programs? Or more simply: Here's the research on human motivation – how do we foster it more effectively in our students? Sistema Global is hosting the book club discussion. Come join – and here is a podcast to whet your interest: <http://tinyurl.com/bkgdlrv>. To enter the Sistema Global subgroup (on LinkedIn) called The Ensemble Book Club, go to this address <http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Ensemble-Book-Club-4814362/about>, click on "Join Subgroup" (if you are already a Sistema Global member) or "sign up" if you are not. Follow the prompts and join the discussion. We expect many specific-topic discussion threads to emerge, so check back in, often.

## Regional Collaboration

by Ann Gregg, Director of Community Programs, Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute

The Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra finished its U.S. tour in residence at Carnegie Hall, performing seventeen concerts and education events as part of the Hall's Voices of Latin America Festival. My team produced twelve of these events in six days. The most complex was an all-day seminario for 150 students from five NYC area nucleos, presented at the DiMenna Center for Classical Music in partnership with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, and taught by members of SBSOV with support from local teachers.

The seminario was the first time the five NYC-based programs had really worked together, and the first time Carnegie Hall had worked with most of them. So a lot of "getting to know you" had to transpire quickly. Our joint planning meetings with nucleo directors were packed with decision-making about everything from overall goals to tee shirt sizes.

Everyone was interested in directly engaging with the Venezuelans. But the big question was: was this event simply about benefitting kids on a one-time basis, or would the seminario establish a model for city-wide collaboration?

With three days to go, all the nucleo directors met face to face with Maestro Abreu in the backstage meeting room of Carnegie Hall known as the "Cave." "How are you all collaborating?" he asked us pointblank. "It is the only way to achieve success."

He gave an example: "How are you acquiring instruments? If you worked together on collection and distribution, you could help so many children."

I asked the Maestro one question. "Collaboration is worth it, but it takes effort. What do you do when collaboration gets difficult?" In response, he spelled out a series of possible strategies, including finding a space that can house joint performances by massive numbers of students, and getting endorsements and government support, not for one program but for all.

The seminario was a great success. Since then, I've wondered how much the group will continue to work together, despite the extra steps it takes to collaborate. I wonder if the programs recognize their diverse strengths as the policy wonk, the organizer, the caretaker, the cheerleader, and the wise soothsayer. Do they realize that as a collective, they could be a powerful force?

Maestro Abreu's parting words were clear. "The ball's in your court," he said.

## Subscription Information

To ADD or DELETE names in the free subscription list for The Ensemble, send an email to:

[TheEnsembleNL@gmail.com](mailto:TheEnsembleNL@gmail.com)

**"When multiple sites work together, it multiplies the students' commitment and learning."  
– Adam Johnston, Director, ICAN (Incredible Children's Art Network) Music Program, Santa Barbara, CA**