

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

Chamber Music Within Orchestra Programs

By Tina Fedeski, Executive & Artistic Director, OrKidstra, Ottawa, Canada

My friend and colleague David Visentin, the director of [Sistema Toronto](#), has said that chamber music “is the most intimate reduction of the social/orchestral model, and places pure responsibility on each individual to demonstrate exemplary self-governance, commitment and professionalism.” We at the OrKidstra program in Ottawa, Canada agree with him.

In fact, many of our students love playing chamber music so much that they inspired us to start a Friday Night Youth Group for our older students (ages 13-18). Every Friday, a variety of chamber groups play for a few hours, and then we have a movie, games or a special event.

The Youth Group has strengthened teamwork, friendships, mentorship and leadership across the whole OrKidstra program.

Our chamber ensembles have become our main ambassadors for playing in the community because they are well-rehearsed and play at a high level; their players are more self-motivated

to practice independently. In addition, the groups are easier to transport and less expensive to coordinate. And it's great experience for the students to play at the inauguration of Ottawa's mayor, in the hospital room of a loved one, or for the celebration of Peace Day.

Nearly all of the programs we contacted for this article said that they too engage in chamber playing and find it particularly rewarding for the older and more advanced students. In general, the feedback we received about roles for chamber music can be clearly divided into four areas: musical development, social development, exploration and development of repertoire, and development of program ambassadors.

Musical Development. Kathleen Krull from [Play On, Philly!](#) noted that “playing in a smaller ensemble without a conductor, and being able to listen in that way, helps make students more alert and aware when they play in orchestra. It gives students a deeper understanding of what it takes to make music with others.” Albert Oppenheimer said that “from what I've observed and

implemented while with the YOURS Project, programs use chamber music as a means of strengthening sections.” Dan Trahey from [OrchKids](#) in Baltimore emphasized that chamber music is a great way for kids to learn to rehearse on their own.

Social development. While the whole is greater than the individual parts, each part is especially essential within the chamber ensemble. Without each part, the music isn't complete. As we heard from many programs, students learn responsibility to themselves and commitment to the group in a tangible way. This fosters stronger group interaction and builds friendships. Chamber players develop clear leadership qualities and seem to carry themselves with greater confidence.

Exploration and development of repertoire and musical styles. Along with more accessible chamber music repertoire, we have often used orchestral string music as quartet or quintet music, sometimes also adding winds and transposing/re-arranging parts as necessary. In addition, we play different styles of music, including jazz, world and pop. Lorrie Heagy at [JAMM](#) in Juneau, Alaska makes intentional use of a Friday morning rock band as a kind of chamber music – very cool! Here at OrKidstra, we are big fans of arrangements that allow for flexible instrumentation – for example, “A Charlie Brown Christmas” or “Frozen FlexBand” arrangements can be played by full orchestra, string quintet, winds and brass, or any mixture of the above. Fun and flexible!

Development of Program Ambassadors. Dan Berkowitz at [YOLA](#) spoke of putting together chamber groups of more advanced players together when going on tour. “Chamber groups are also great tool for special events for public officials, fundraisers, and board retreats,” he said. “They can achieve a very high level of musicianship and are much cheaper to produce than the orchestra.” David Visentin from Sistema Toronto says, “We have outside opportunities for small groups, and this provides added exposure for a few children who are developing as leaders.” And Dan Trahey's OrKidstra noted that one of the many benefits of chamber music is its portability.

A major challenge posed by including chamber music in our programs is that it needs extra time and human resources. So what's new? It is clear that chamber music not only soothes the soul but also is a powerful building block for orchestral playing and social and community development.



An OrKidstra ensemble performs at a wedding in a paying gig.
Photo: Tegan Patmore

FROM THE EDITOR & PUBLISHER

The publication of the book [Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth](#), by Geoffrey Baker, has caused a stir in the El Sistema world. We have a few thoughts to add about this public attack on Venezuela's El Sistema.

Baker presents his views as objective research. But he quotes only people who have negative views of El Sistema, and most of his sources are anonymous, making them unverifiable – and verifiability is a hallmark of objective research. Further, he chooses not to present the other side of any of his arguments against El Sistema. He has refused to speak to Maestro Abreu, or to any Sistema leaders. He condemns orchestras in general as oppressive and symphonic art music in Latin America as colonialist.

Baker dedicates a good deal of his book to a character attack on Maestro Abreu, accusing him of multiple evils. We are not surprised that in the volatile and hyper-political environment of Venezuela, Abreu has made enemies – and not surprised that these enemies were happy to air their grudges for anonymous publication. We are surprised that an author would present them as objective research.

Baker calls his book a critique, but we see it as three hundred thirty pages of unrelenting denunciation. A true critique offers context and has a constructive intent, even when it reports what isn't working.

Fundamusical Executive Director Eduardo Mendez says that balanced critiques of El Sistema are welcome contributions to the field. Any forty-year-old organization involving half a million children is bound to have made mistakes along the way, and to have problems that need to be thoughtfully addressed. It's a shame that this book's potential usefulness is lost in a fire-hose spray of negativity.

We recommend that colleagues in the field not give this hectoring, accusatory book more energy than it deserves. We include some links to published reviews of and responses to the book.

The New York Times: <http://tinyurl.com/mvjd4yc>

The Los Angeles Times: <http://tinyurl.com/magwg5y>

Blogpost by Reynaldo Trombetta (from Venezuela), Communications Director of In Harmony England: <http://tinyurl.com/lu3td9t>

Tricia's review in *Classical Music Magazine UK*: <http://tinyurl.com/mv6ruzx>

Blogpost by Jonathan Govias: <http://tinyurl.com/lbob5r3>

*Tricia Tunstall, Editor
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“Once a child discovers he is important to his family, he begins to seek new ways of improving himself. And hopes better for himself and his community.” – José Antonio Abreu

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News Notes

After starting in 2014 as a summer pilot in partnership with an existing academic tutoring program, the [East Lake Expression Engine](#), led by co-founders Michael Kendall, Libby O'Neil, and Evelyn Petcher, now serves 44 elementary school children in the East Lake neighborhood of Chattanooga, TN. Students take choir, bucket band, and orchestra ensemble classes, alongside group instruction on select instruments.



Expression Engine students learning to play recorder.
Photo: Molly Gardner, Molly Gardner Photography

General music theory and musicianship skills are incorporated into the ensemble and instrumental classes, along with a creative group composition project once a semester. They meet after school four days a week at New City Fellowship East Lake church. ELEE partners with both the existing tutoring program (East Lake Every Child Taught) and the church. Find ELEE on Facebook or email: eastlakeexpressionengine@gmail.com

The Leading Note Foundation, parent of [OrKidstra](#) in Ottawa, Canada, is hosting a [two day Symposium on Instrumental Change in Sistema-inspired programs](#). February 12 & 13, 2015. Early bird discount until January 10, 2015: General \$125, Student \$30. Keynote speakers include Simon Brault (Director/CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts) and Richard Hallam (Founding member of Sistema England, Chair of Music Education Council, UK). For more information and registration: <http://tinyurl.com/knce3z>

In 2014, Massachusetts became the first state in the U. S. to set aside funding explicitly for El Sistema programs. While the initial funding from The Massachusetts Cultural Council is modest, a dozen sites are the first grantees, and the funding is expected to grow. <http://artery.wbur.org/2014/12/02/massachusetts-becomes-first-state-to-fund-music-education-via-el-sistema-program>

Resources

Neuroscientist, psychologist and educational innovator [Prof. Adele Diamond](#) (at the Univ. of

British Columbia) gives a stirring TEDx talk on the [development of executive function in children](#), and makes explicit and favorable reference to Sistema programs. The talk is a strong advocacy tool. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StASHLru28s> Inspired viewers may wish to see, and use, this call to action:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRmWrGj9Nts&feature=youtu.be> You can learn more about Adele Diamond and about executive brain function in this podcast of On Being; here is address and its transcript: <http://www.onbeing.org/program/adele-diamond-the-science-of-attention/transcript/6694>

For those who were unable to attend, this five-minute film captures the feel of the [International Sistema Teachers Conference](#) held in Stirling, Scotland on October 27-30, 2014, hosted by Sistema Scotland. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RSkJTPZtHM&feature=youtu.be> Speaking of Sistema Scotland, many respect its history of program research and evaluation. Its latest [Evaluation Plan](#) is available here, to read and learn from: http://www.gcph.co.uk/publications/507_evaluating_sistema_scotland_evaluation_plan

The [Anthony Quinn Foundation scholarship program](#) provides grants for high school students who demonstrate exceptional talent and dedication with a strong commitment to personal artistic growth, and who have financial need. Perhaps this is a fit for one of your most motivated high school musicians? <https://anthonyquinnfoundation.fluidreview.com/>

Another piece of neuroscientific evidence in the ever-strengthening case for the [lasting health benefits of early musical training](#) can be found in this study that shows that nerve function decline associated with aging, in this case around auditory challenges, is much less likely in people who learned to play an instrument when young, even if they played for only a few years. <http://tinyurl.com/phy4ohz>

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In Praise of Bucket Band

by [Pete Tashjian](#), *Bucket Band Director and Teaching Artist, Shift: Englewood, Chicago*

From an early age, we are able to internalize and recognize rhythms. Children understand rhythm intuitively long before they can comprehend harmony or melody. Building on that natural ability can be an invaluable tool in working toward the social and musical goals of Sistema-inspired programs. The bucket band model provides a great vehicle for establishing skills that will help young people create positive changes in their lives.

Giving students the ability to sound good is extremely important for beginning students as well as for beginning programs. Bucket band affords a cheap and fairly easy way to give young students the joy of performing and being part of a powerful, appealing sound. Ideally, this early experience carries over to all ensembles, and raises students' expectations about what they can hope to achieve in making music with others, and also about the satisfactions that music-making can bring.

For starting a bucket band, call and response activities are the usual jumping-off point. Any time you can challenge students to be playing and listening in the same activity, I would say it's a good idea. When students are asked to take turns making up the "call," a third skill, improvising, becomes involved – an invaluable skill that challenges a very important part of the brain. As students advance, bucket band can become a creative outlet. Creating pieces together gives students a greater stake in the group and motivates them to work hard.

The bucket band model also lends itself extremely well to the social goals of a Sistema-inspired program. Peer-to-peer teaching and student leadership are learning modes that play a huge role in the bucket bands I lead. In addition, one of the most important and helpful teaching tools in bucket bands is establishing a rest-and-ready position. Without that strict guideline for quieting students and getting them ready to start playing again, a bucket band class can be extremely chaotic. But with a guideline firmly in place, bucket band offers the opportunity to discuss the larger idea of listening to one another and allowing one another's thoughts to be fully expressed before responding. I spend a lot of time connecting this idea with the importance of having respect for one another and for the teacher. This reinforces the social goal of mutual listening.

A bucket band can be created very inexpensively, with a minimum of resources, and can provide students with many tools and skills. As this idea spreads out and evolves, and as new teachers learn it and in turn make it their own, I see an opportunity for it to have a substantial impact on the young people in our Sistema-inspired programs. It is a privilege to write about this topic I feel passionate about, for colleagues who share this passion!

"Anyone who doesn't believe in miracles is not a realist." – David Ben-Gurion