

First National Survey, by Abreu Fellows

By Stephanie Lin Hsu and José Luis Hernández-Estrada

Now we can say it for sure: the El Sistema movement in the U.S. is blossoming in a profusion of ways, to realize its common goal of re-imagining music as a catalyst for social transformation.

This fall, the third class of Abreu Fellows at the New England Conservatory embarked on the first nationwide data-gathering project with El Sistema-inspired programs across the country. In collaboration with the L.A. Philharmonic, Longy School of Music, and Bard College, the Fellows interviewed over forty program leaders about the specifics of their programs.

Our detailed findings will be reported at the Take a Stand Symposium in Los Angeles in early 2012, and will be made available to the whole field at that time. In the meantime, we can share some general trends of our research, which gave us a valuable comparative perspective on our emergent field. In the course of our research, the following themes emerged consistently.

- Balance between social and musical goals. Everyone we spoke with is highly committed to both goals; but it is the social and youth development aspects of their programs that seemed to engage the most attention and hope. One program leader shared a story about a young child – pegged as disruptive – who demonstrated tremendous leadership growth; by the end of a single summer, he was coaching and encouraging his peers.

- Evaluation. Everyone recognized the need for evaluation, which this point tends to concentrate on musical outcomes – and, to some extent, academic outcomes – because these are easiest to measure. But because social outcomes matter so much, many stressed the need for tools to better evaluate this aspect of their work.

- Parental inclusion. Our interviews suggested that parental involvement is higher than for many other youth music programs. We consistently heard that parents offer unsolicited praise and testimonial reports of positive changes in the children at home.



Abreu Fellows 2012. L to R, bottom row: Stephanie Lin Hsu, Albert Oppenheimer, Julie Davis, Jennifer Kessler; middle: Avi Mehta, Alysia Lee; top: David France, Ben Fuller, Aisha Bowden, José Luis Hernández-Estrada.

- Professional development for teachers. This is a frequently cited challenge – both selection of the right individuals, and ongoing teacher training. Of particular concern to our interviewees is the challenge of helping teaching artists learn to manage multi-age and mixed-level classrooms.

- Resources. Time, money, and high-quality instruments are, unsurprisingly, the scarcities leaders cite most often. However, movement leaders don't dwell on these challenges; rather, the prevailing attitude is optimism that they will be met over time.

This national needs-assessment project has served as a wonderful learning opportunity for the Fellows. It has been a distinct privilege to be able to see and hear firsthand how the hearts of núcleo leaders in the U.S. are wholly dedicated to this work, and how persistently the field is honing its frameworks for action and innovation in music education.

We will share much more detailed and specific results of our research at the Symposium. The successes and challenges mentioned above will become live – and viral, we hope – when we all have the opportunity to discuss them together. Our hope is that our findings will help shape all of our work, moving forward.

FROM THE EDITOR

"It's very important to have our complete continent together. No 'South,' no 'North,' no 'Central' – just one America." So said Gustavo Dudamel to the audience at his Hollywood Bowl inaugural concert. The ideal of a multi-cultural, pan-American identity is very important to Dudamel – and to Maestro Abreu, who speaks of El Sistema as the first major innovation North and South America can share as true equals.

A wonderful confluence of inter-continental energies took place this November, when the national youth orchestra of Sistema Brazil came to the New York area for its first-ever international tour. Performing with the collective discipline and passion we are used to seeing from Venezuela, they concluded their tour in the unlikely venue of Union City, NJ, where they played to help generate funds and excitement for a new Sistema program – in a city with no wealthy donors or large businesses.

Speaking with Angelica de la Riva, a Venezuelan singer who performed with them, I learned that the orchestra had struggled to make the tour happen. "In Brazil, they were in the streets at traffic intersections, soliciting money for the tour," she told me. De la Riva and her musical partner, guitarist Nilko Andreas Guarin, decided to help sponsor their tour. "As soon as I heard those kids play, I knew I had to help them," she said. "When a mission knocks at your door, you don't say no!"

Union City Music Project founder Melina Garcia imagines that her program will someday produce such a youth orchestra. "Some may call me naïve," Garcia has said, "but I have the will and the vision to bring this program to Union City."

As our movement grows, building alliances with our Latin American comrades may be one of our most important priorities. When Brazilian energy and Union City vision unite, who knows what can happen?

Tricia Tunstall

"I am determined that the Venezuelan Sistema will keep expanding until we reach our goal of free and full access to music for every child in the country." – José Antonio Abreu

News Notes

CityMusic was just launched by the Hartford Symphony Orchestra (HSO) in collaboration with the Hartford Public Schools, the Connecticut Center for Nonviolence, Billings Forge Community Works, and COMPASS Youth Collaborative. The after-school music program lives at the Latino Studies Academy at Burns, a public school in the Frog Hollow neighborhood of Hartford, and serves more than 50 students four days a week. In addition to music, the program teaches the Connecticut Center for Nonviolence's "Peace is Possible" curriculum and a creative nutrition curriculum, and uses a variety of musical genres and pedagogies, as well as choir, "paper" and string orchestra, and bucket band. [Sarah Hopkins, shopkins@hartfordsymphony.org](mailto:sarahhopkins@hartfordsymphony.org)



HSO guest beatbox artist Shodekeh teaches CityMusic kindergarteners rhythm and vocal skills

Longy School of Music and Bard College launched their first El Sistema site at **Paramount Bard Academy (PBA)**, a California Central Valley public charter school, in Delano in August 2011. The intensive program (five days a week, 90 minutes each day) emphasizes learning music through composition and the study of Mariachi music for adolescents (6th-8th grade), and is an integral part of students' education during the regular school day. Though U.S. El Sistema-inspired programs typically focus on inner city youth and classical orchestral music, the PBA program is in a rural (table grape farming) setting in the Central Valley, and uses Mariachi music, which is already part of the students' lives, as a starting point, aiming to build a bridge to classical forms and other musical genres. Students learn the rudiments of the violin, guitar, and trumpet, along with basic techniques for Mexican instruments, including the guitarron, vihuela and guitarra de golpe. elsje.kiblervermaas@longy.edu

Changing Lives: Gustavo Dudamel, El Sistema, and the Transformative Power of Music (W.W. Norton, 2012) is

is now available for pre-publication sales online, and will be in bookstores in mid-January. Written by Tricia Tunstall (the editor of this newsletter), this is the first major-publisher book about El Sistema in Venezuela and the U.S. Written for a general audience, the book provides an opportunity to introduce the history and power of our movement to a wide readership.

Resources

"Fusing Arts, Culture and Social Change: High Impact Strategies for

Philanthropy," by Holly Sidford, is a new report from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. It provides an excellent background on the history of funding for arts organizations with social change missions. <http://www.ncrp.org/publications> Among the many other good reports listed on this website is the November 2009 **"Seizing the Moment: Frank Advice for Community Organizers Who Want to Raise More Money,"** which offers practical, reliable advice from two experienced NCRP leaders that may be useful in fundraising for the social change mission of El Sistema-inspired work.

Resources for Evaluating the Social Impact of the Arts is a new website from Animating Democracy (a project of Americans for the Arts). It is rich with background material and evaluation tools that colleagues around the U.S. have shared about ways they are accomplishing the evaluation challenge faced by El Sistema sites. <http://impact.animatingdemocracy.org/welcome> Another new resource from Animating Democracy is **"Arts & Social Change Grantmaking,"** a downloadable free 185-page report providing a directory of basic information about funders who support social change. <http://www.giarts.org/sites/default/files/Arts-Social-Change-Grantmaking-Directory-of-Funders.pdf>

The Visitor's Perspective

By Elissa Kleiner, National Program Manager, Sistema Australia

From September to November 2011, I travelled from the east to west coast of the United States, observing and volunteering at programs in various stages of development. As they are all fairly new, these programs are busily refining their direction and finding their voice in the community.

It was fascinating to note the many differences between the programs, each devising their own strategies for addressing the needs of their particular community. At OrchKids, there is less focus on strictly classical repertoire, but a stronger push towards active physical expression and constant community engagement. YOLA at HOLA stresses the alignment of pedagogy, with a group of dedicated "lead teachers" helping all teachers own the direction of the children's musical education and experiences. While some programs have symphony orchestra partnerships to assist with fundraising and community awareness, others – notably Play On! Philly – are quickly boosting their profile in the community by simply "doing their own thing."

All of the programs are supported by the unshakable dedication of teachers who deal with miracles and crises on a daily basis. They are all highly energized, and respond quickly to challenging situations. I was deeply touched by the warmth with which I was greeted at every site, the openness of the program leaders and teaching artists, and their genuine interest in my own experiences. I had similar experiences at nucleos in Venezuela – they all made time for me, and were very proud to show me around.

Driving my tour of the US programs was the most amazing wave of energy created by a national movement of change, which I hope is something that will roll out and ripple across the world.

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"People are always quick to say you can't do this or that. . . And then there is Maestro Abreu, who never, ever says 'can't' – just one man, relentlessly positive, and doing unbelievable things." – Marin Alsop, Music Director, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra