

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

## Venezuelan Visitor as Catalyst

By Rey Ramirez, Co-founder and Program Director, *Soundscapes*, Newport News VA

It's amazing how an infusion of energy from "the source" can turn up the dial on the aspirations of both students and teachers in El Sistema-inspired programs.

Roberto Zambrano, a member of the original Simon Bolívar Orchestra of Venezuela, is the director of the Acarigua-Araure nucleo in the state of Portuguesa in Venezuela. He is also a teacher and leader who has helped to found, guide and inspire El Sistema programs throughout Latin America.

In October, three Sistema-inspired programs in the U.S. – *Orchkids*, in Baltimore; *Kidznotes*, in Durham, NC; and *Soundscapes*, in Newport News, VA – decided to share resources and to bring Maestro Zambrano for a three-week residency with our programs.

"There are many great teachers in Venezuela," Roberto had told us

when we visited Venezuela. "Seeing us here in our own country is great, but having us come and work with our kids is very valuable too." So that is what we did. His visit proved to be extremely valuable for our students, staff and supporters alike.

Roberto worked with each of the three programs in a variety of ways. He did presentations for development events, performances for the public, and lectures at universities. He provided program feedback, worked with program staff, and of course worked a great deal with our students. It is impractical to take your whole staff, donor base, and volunteers to the source, but we essentially succeeded in bringing a small part of Venezuela to us.

At *Soundscapes*, Roberto spent most of his time with the elementary orchestra, giving our teachers a vivid demonstration of his high standards and expectations. The mode of operation for American teachers tends to be soft-handed with students; sometimes we hesitate to push students past their comfort zone. Roberto's way of working was very different. His much higher expectations for what a child should and can do pushed our students (I would also add our staff) to think differently. He quickly set a high standard of behavior and posture for our students, and he held them to it. "I'm not being mean to the students, I'm holding them to a high standard," he said to *Soundscapes* staff. His

rehearsals were intense, and our students loved them! In fact, Roberto made it a point to connect joy and hard work. He often asked the students if they were having fun, and pointed out the accomplishments they were achieving.

Here are some take-a-ways from the residency.

"Open Nucleo" Model. Roberto noted that many of the nucleos he saw in the U.S. were open only to students

from a particular school or neighborhood. He suggests opening enrollment to everyone in the community that can get to the program. This will open up competition for spots in the program, and bring music-making to the forefront of the process. Roberto also urges programs to "stop giving it away, and make students work for it." He encourages holding auditions for students to move up from one level to another, and requiring adherence to behavior standards

as a condition for staying in the program.

Playing with conviction. Roberto believes that kids should start by playing forte! From there, he says, they can back off and learn to play more quietly. But many kids never have the opportunity to learn to play loudly, because of their teachers' worry about them not sounding good or making mistakes. He also reminds us that string players need to use the whole bow as often as possible, even when they are first beginning to play.

Having all students conduct. We were all interested in Roberto's idea of having all students conduct while singing rhythms. Just tapping rhythms, he says, doesn't suffice because it doesn't give the student a physical idea of where they are in a measure. Having students conduct rhythms also helps students to understand what the conductor is doing up there!

Kim Demery, Director of Programming at *Kidznotes*, said of the residency, "Roberto's experience and zest for this mission are undeniable." Hopefully, residencies like this will become more commonplace, to help our U.S. field to develop and grow. Programs don't have to take on the full cost of a residency alone; working collaboratively with other programs can open many more doors than one single program can. The important thing is for programs to talk to each other, figure out shared needs, and work together to fill them.



Roberto Zambrano works with *Soundscapes* students. Photo: Joe Hamm

## FROM THE EDITOR

I attended a conference last month in Bressanone, Italy, and here are a few of the phrases I heard from various speakers and attendees over the course of two days: "claiming artistic citizenship"... "through music, helping to solve pressing social problems"... "teaching music for serious social change"... "empowering people through music."

You're thinking, perhaps, that this was an El Sistema conference? It was not – although El Sistema was given considerable attention. It was a conference on community music. The mostly European participants provided a bracing reminder that the understanding of music education as a potential force for social change is not a concept unique to El Sistema, but an ideal that grounds many diverse initiatives for music and arts education.

In particular, it helps to ground the field of community music, which in Europe, as in the U.S. and Canada, has long been focused on bringing music learning and participation opportunities to communities with limited or no access to these activities. Community music programs provide music lessons and sometimes ensemble opportunities to children, adults and senior citizens. Their aim is to provide an inclusive alternative to what one conference speaker called "the sorting machine" of conservatories and some school music programs – the mechanisms that draw distinctions between "talented" and "untalented" students, and that concentrate on nurturing the former.

At the Bressanone conference, it was clear that longtime "CM" practitioners in Europe view El Sistema with interest but also with a degree of wariness. Some are concerned about competition for scarce philanthropic dollars. And some question how a classical-based model developed in Latin America can be relevant to European contexts. But as the conference proceeded, what was most striking was how much we all had in common.

I came away surer than ever that El Sistema is a form of community music. It's one that concentrates on the most radically underserved populations; and is based in the particular practices of immersive ensemble and peer learning. But its fundamental assumptions and goals are deeply shared with community music endeavors of many models, in many places. Possible New Year's resolution: let's make, or strengthen, connections with local community music programs. Surely, there is powerful potential synergy here.

Tricia Tunstall

"Music is immensely important in the awakening of sensibility, in the forging of values and in the training of youngsters to teach others." – José Antonio Abreu

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## News Notes

### CHIME: Creating Harmony Invigorating Music

Education was launched this fall by the 37-year-old Empire State Youth Orchestras, with its first site at Yates Arts in Education Magnet School in Schenectady, NY.

CHIME at Yates has begun with 40 1st to 4th graders in an afterschool program five days a week for over 12 hours a week, and it coordinates with the free in-school music programs ESYO has been providing for area inner-city schools for twenty years. CHIME adds a stronger elementary

component to a continuum of music instruction ESYO provides to underserved neighborhoods that reaches from 1st grade through high school. <http://esyo.org/2015/09/launching-chime>

The San Diego Youth Symphony and its Community Opus Project present an [Arts Education Learning Exchange](#) from March 16-18. The goal is to share how they have applied El Sistema principles to inspire restoration of school music education and to increase diversity in our traditional youth orchestras, using the partnership with Chula Vista School District as a case study. This remarkable success story is described in a webinar by the National Endowment for the Arts (<https://www.arts.gov/video/arts-education-webinar-chula-vista-elementary-school-district>). In addition to exploring San Diego Youth Symphony's collaborative work, the event will include a day that combines classroom teachers with teaching artists in San Diego Unified, focused on the use of Title I federal education dollars for arts programming. For more information: <http://www.sdys.org/learningexchange>

In partnership with JAMM (Juneau Alaska Music Matters) and the Juneau Symphony, the [University of Alaska Southeast MAT scholarship program](#) has launched for the 2016-2017 school year. Program participants earn their Secondary Master's of Arts in Teaching with a K-12 music certification in one year by completing their student teaching



CHIME cellists rehearse for a Friday Casual Concert, in their first weeks of study. Photo: Rebecca Calos

requirements at local Juneau schools, performing with the Juneau Symphony, and teaching classes with JAMM's after-school program. Please share this link with string teaching artists/graduating seniors who might be interested in this year-long program where they are performers, teachers, scholars, and citizens. Application deadline is March 1, 2016, and more information at: <http://www.juneaumusicmatters.com/mat-program.html>

There is a new career development [continuing-education course](#) at New England Conservatory, entitled [El Sistema Survey: Investigating Music Education for Social Change](#). Taught by the Director of the Sistema Fellowship Resource Center, Heath Marlow, the evening course investigates theories of social change and progressive education as they can be used in creative youth development programs. For their final project, participants will determine changes needed to make a selected organization align more completely with El Sistema's essential elements. <http://necmusic.edu/ce/career-development>

## Resources

A comprehensive longitudinal study of music instruction entitled "[How learning a musical instrument affects the development of skills](#)" uses data from the German SocioEconomic Panel and was completed in 2013 by German researchers Adrian Hille and Jürgen Schupp. They identify a strong list of skills that are developed in musical study, and bluntly conclude: "Our findings suggest that adolescents with music training have better cognitive skills and school grades and are more conscientious, open and ambitious. These effects do not differ by socioeconomic status. Music improves cognitive and non-cognitive skills more than twice as much as sports, theater or dance." Study: <http://tinyurl.com/hervjur> and an article that discusses their findings: <http://tinyurl.com/z6vez77>

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## Beyond Access

By Christine Taylor, [REACH\\*TEACH\\*PLAY Education Programs at Ravinia Festival](#), Director

Music educators: you know this feeling. You turn around, and a teaching gig you thought would be a stop on the way to a performance career has turned into a joyful 20-year journey in arts education.

I proudly tell people I have a dream job. With a mission of bringing music enrichment to underserved Chicagoland communities, Ravinia's REACH\*TEACH\*PLAY programs provide a portfolio of offerings that engage kids and families in music at various levels of intensity. But until we discovered El Sistema, we had not found a replicable program for classical music. We created our first Sistema Ravinia nucleo in 2012, and have already expanded to five other sites.

For me, this avocation-turned-vocation has morphed into a mission around the issue of civil rights. As a black woman in arts education, I want to place more African-Americans and Latinos into the arts, into the next generation of symphony musicians, classical music audience members and arts administrators. Until that happens – until we see more talented people of color performing in the world's major orchestras – even those of us who are in this work won't really believe that they can, and the kids we serve won't either. Viewed through this lens, "*tocar y luchar*" takes on new meaning in the narrative of El Sistema-inspired programs in the U.S. and around the world. This is liberation theology transposed to the world of classical music.

It is no longer enough to provide "opportunity," our word of choice for the past 30 years. We must do more to ensure that the children we serve have the opportunity, the method, and the means to achieve high levels of success. A new word has joined the lexicon lately: folks are now talking about providing "pathways." But are we still setting our sights too low? Through El Sistema, shouldn't we seek to provide the pathway, the car, and a full tank of gas?

A gap has long existed between the worthwhile programs we provide (free symphony tickets, teaching artist residencies, arts-integrated curricula) and the results we hope for (giving our kids lives in music as performers, patrons, and philanthropists). El Sistema-inspired programs have the potential to bridge that gap for large numbers of kids. Children of color can have significant representation in programs that equip them to achieve musical excellence. I challenge us all to give these students a vision of a future that seats them centrally in all arenas of classical music, and provides them with the means to get there.

"Knowledge is only a rumor until it lives in the muscle." – A saying of the Asaro tribe of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea