

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

## PlayUSA Creates Sistema Action Researchers

by Joanna Massey, Director of Learning and Engagement Programs, and Eli Rumpf, Public Relations Associate, at Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute

This year, five Sistema-connected programs are part of a group of organizations around the nation that are investigating best practices as part of PlayUSA, a new initiative of Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute. This initiative supports selected instrumental music programs designed to reach low-income and underserved students, providing funding and helping them define areas for improvement and then design collaborative action research in those areas. ("Action research" is a form of collective self-inquiry in which organizations do research on their own practices and effectiveness.) In total, seven programs – the Sistema-connected programs plus two more – were chosen in a competitive application process to participate in this year's PlayUSA.

One of PlayUSA's goals is to help programs examine the relationship between instructional practice and student learning. "Each program is committed to reaching a diverse group of young players," says Sarah Johnson, director of Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute. "We hope to help them deepen and support student learning."

The programs are organized into three collaborative action "cohort groups": student agency in music-making, strengthening the community of music making, and improving fundamental music instruction. The consulting firm WolfBrown is partnering with the initiative, providing evaluation templates to help programs measure their progress.

What areas of practice are the Sistema-connected programs investigating? Here's a brief overview.

The Atlanta Music Project (AMP) is examining what it takes to give students more agency and control over their music-making. AMP's "Student Takeover" project aims at empowering students by giving them ownership in such areas as warm-ups, section leading, conducting, repertoire choice, and assistant teaching.

Community MusicWorks (CMW) in Providence, Rhode Island is part of the "Strengthening the Community of Music-Making" cohort. Through its "Walking Hand

in Hand" project, students will explore the song "We Shall Overcome" as an entry point for exploring the connections between ensemble music-making and issues that are meaningful in students' lives – with the goal of increasing motivation for skill-building.

The People's Music School of Chicago is also working within this cohort, focusing on culturally responsive teaching. Their project "Attune to Play" explores how teachers can build trust and become more in tune with their students' lives and communities. Professional development sessions will help teachers better understand communities they serve.



Students in the Youth Orchestra of St. Luke's performing at the DiMenna Center for Classical Music. Photo: Eric Weiss

In the "Improving Fundamental Music Instruction" cohort, the El Paso Symphony Orchestra's Tocando program will explore ways that skills within the community such as persistence and hard work can transfer to Tocando in a way that builds respect for student participation. This "Lead Forward" project will structure student-led activities in areas such as repertoire selection and self-tracking.

In the same cohort, the Youth Orchestra of St. Luke's will hone in on helping beginners make meaning out of a musical score. Its project "From Sight to Sound" aims to standardize methods for teaching musical literacy. The goal is to empower students to become confident music learners by

helping them move away from rote memorization and acquire the tools of music reading.

Scrollworks in Birmingham, Alabama will concentrate on creating a culture of practicing, and Music for Life in New Orleans, Louisiana will focus on strategies to help students exhibit creative leadership.

While the programs' specific explorations differ, all are committed to better supporting student learning. The PlayUSA network allows ideas and solutions to flow from one site to another – and ultimately to the entire field. Johnson says, "We are committed to creating a strong community of organizations across the country focused on this work, exchanging ideas, and thinking critically about how to better serve young musicians." To learn more, visit [carnegiehall.org/playusa](http://carnegiehall.org/playusa).

## FROM THE EDITOR

Any time the vast majority of a program's leaders are white and the vast majority of participants are people of color, issues of race are in the mix, at least in today's U.S.A. There may be no troubling incidents; there may be good will all around; but racial awareness is inevitably part of the learning environment. The few occasions when racially-charged incidents have arisen in U.S. Sistema programs should serve as a reminder for programs that questions and feelings about race exist in the hearts, minds and daily lives of most students, faculty, and families, even if these feelings and thoughts are not overtly articulated. Although we have elected an African-American president twice, issues of race lodge deep in the national psyche. The recent election dials up the intensity of the issue for most students and, thus, for all of us.

It is essential, therefore, for program leaders and teachers to address these issues directly – and hopefully before they erupt into painful situations. We know this is not easy, and we aren't in a position to recommend exactly how to do it; responsible solutions will look somewhat different in each program. We can only affirm that the process will be most successful if it exemplifies the honesty, compassion and inclusion we want ourselves and our students to practice in all areas of life.

It's not enough to decide to make some shifts in language and behavior, although such shifts will almost certainly be involved. The necessary changes run deeper, and require sometimes-inconvenient commitments of time, energy and openness.

This above all – we must listen more, and listen harder, to our students, to their families, and to each other. We must open more fully to the realities of the communities we serve. Sometimes we may seek the help of skilled facilitators, to achieve the balance of honesty and empathy we need.

Over time, if our movement grows well, many students of color will become the faculty and administrators of programs, embodying the transformative aspirations of our work. In order for that to happen, we must expand our social justice competency just as we continue to expand our pedagogical competency. Only in this way can we truly be nurturing social change through musical accomplishment.

Tricia Tunstall & Eric Booth

"In the long history of human kind (and animal kind, too), those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed." – Charles Darwin

## News Notes

A just-released study conducted in 2012 in Venezuela's El Sistema examined some social effects of a single year's participation. Researchers found increased self-control and reduced aggressive tendencies (measured by self- and custodian-reporting) in boys, particularly boys who had been exposed to violence. The report did not find benefits for girls, or academic benefits for boys, in the first year of participation. [We note that many programs around the world report, and the WolfBrown-Longy research confirms, that benefits accelerate in and beyond the second year of participation.] The study, "[The Effects of Musical Training on Child Development: a Randomized Trial of El Sistema in Venezuela](http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11121-016-0727-3)," by lead researcher Xiomara Alemán at the Inter-American Development Bank, with other researchers, is available at: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11121-016-0727-3>

**Creative Connections** is a weeklong intensive workshop focusing on collaborative composition, facilitation of music-making in diverse settings, and cultivation of one's creative voice, concluding with a socially-minded collaborative musical composition by Peabody Conservatory students, OrchKids students, Baltimore City public school students, community members, and participants from across the world. This workshop takes place March 18th-24th in Baltimore, and is for musicians and educators interested in connecting with communities and collectively composing music with any combination of students and professional musicians. For more: <http://tinyurl.com/jgytlrm> or contact project manager Eliza Minster [ejadem@gmail.com](mailto:ejadem@gmail.com).

For students/professionals with interest in or experience of Sistema teaching, North Park University in Chicago offers a **Certificate in Music for Social Change and Human Values** – an undergraduate curricular program comprised of 8 semester hours of courses and experiences related to El Sistema and Human Values education. The program offers internships in Chicago at The People's Music School and The Chicago Metamorphosis Orchestra Project, as well as the Sathya Sai Institute

of Education in Human Values in Thailand and the Escuela de Musica de Cobano/Costa Rica. Music majors can apply for combined annual scholarships that may range as high as \$13,000. For more information: <http://www.northpark.edu/music> or contact program Director Tom Zelle: [tzelle@northpark.edu](mailto:tzelle@northpark.edu)

The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, with the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, is accepting **applications for the 2017 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Awards**. The 12 award-winning programs each receive \$10,000 and an invitation to accept their award at a White House ceremony. After-school and out-of-school-time arts and humanities programs are encouraged to apply. Online applications only; deadline Feb 8. <http://www.nahyp.org/how-to-apply>

Canada's **Sistema New Brunswick has opened a new "satellite" site** (connected to their Richibucto Centre) in the Elsipogtog First Nation, the largest First Nation in the province. Beginning with 25 six- and seven-year-old students, all learning violin for an hour a day at noon, this less intensive daily program is an experiment of SNB to try to answer overwhelming demand with less costly options.

The El Sistema Sweden Foundation invites music teachers to learn more about El Sistema's methodology, pedagogy, and repertoire at a three-day workshop at the **El Sistema Academy**, on February 3-5 in Stockholm. With outstanding teachers and conductors from Venezuela and Sweden, including Ron Davis Alvarez, Josbel Pulche, and Birgitta Mannerström-Molin, the El Sistema Academy will offer workshops for orchestra, choir, and paper orchestra. For more information, email: [info@elsistema.se](mailto:info@elsistema.se). Sign up: <http://tinyurl.com/j436b4c>

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## Activating the "Inner Guide"

By *Andrea Profili, Orchestrating Dreams, Executive Director*

After graduating from the Sistema Fellowship at NEC, I began conducting and teaching at **WHIN Music Project** and **Upbeat NYC**. I realized that the students accelerated their learning when I focused on finding the best way to practice peer mentoring. I found that it was possible to teach mentoring skills in sequential steps so that children become independent learners and effective mentors.

My work in this area was inspired by the theories of Edwin Gordon and Maria Montessori about student-centered lessons. Both of these esteemed education theorists saw the student as a self-constructor who thrives in a prepared environment with guidance from more experienced learners. I believed that combining Montessori and El Sistema principles could be a highly effective way to develop peer mentoring, and I was curious to try partnering "tocar, cantar y luchar" with "follow the child."

In Montessori, the work of developing the inner guide (also called "private speech") is the process by which children make sense of the world around them, eventually reaching "rational consciousness," which allows the independent mind to master challenges. The student's inner guide is shaped by social interactions and environment. It is then the teacher's responsibility to model positive and constructive language ("public speech") through meaningful activities for the student.

In class, I began to share my inner guide with my students. First, I asked myself aloud what the problem was. Next, I offered several efficient practice techniques that could solve the problem, and asked the students about the effectiveness of each strategy. I continued to ask questions until students could identify problems, self-correct, and, finally, demonstrate their outer guide. Developing public speech through both musical and non-musical activities is essential to shaping children's ability to communicate efficiently, develop empathy, and share their problem-solving skills – i.e., to be mentors. Going through these structured, scaffolded activities will not detract from learning time, but will accelerate learning.

In the words of Maria Montessori: "The greatest sign of success for a teacher... is to be able to say, 'The children are now working as if I did not exist!'"

## **ACTION FOR THE MONTH:** Email Anne Midgette at *The Washington Post* [Anne.Midgette@washpost.com](mailto:Anne.Midgette@washpost.com)

Anne Midgette is the classical music critic for *The Post*. She has written negatively about El Sistema, in Venezuela and in the U.S., maintaining that there is no research about our programs, and that our enthusiasm is the mindless hype of a cult. Please write a short, polite email to her with at least one fact from research or evaluation data that affirms something important about your/our impact on young people. To read more about this action, go to: <http://theensemblenewsletters.com/action-for-the-month>