

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

## Graduating with Gratitude

By Vivian Yu, violinist at *Roxbury Youth Orchestra*, who recently graduated from *John D. O'Bryant School* and will attend *Wellesley College* this fall.

Dear Beloved Orchestra,

I still remember the first time I met you, those warm, wood floors and tall, wide windows. I was lost, literally and figuratively. I did not know how to find you -- I had to ask some good Samaritans for directions -- perhaps because I never understood the sheer magnitude of the world. I had lived

in my little bubble my entire life: I went to school, I went home, I went to school, I went home, rinse and repeat, a cycle of perpetual numbness. Along with the delicate balancing of a violin on my shoulder, you have taught me to communicate, to be a leader, and to understand that deliberate

practice and determination are essential to results. You have showed me what I never even knew I was missing out on; a world full of possibility, hope, and most of all, music, the vibrant music of life.

There is a remarkable difference between playing a solo and playing with you. In an orchestra it is vital to communicate; we must always be listening to each other and working as a collective. An orchestra is an organism, a succinct machine; even if we speak no words, we are constantly having musical conversations for hours on end. They usually start with eye contact, anticipation, a slight nod of the head, a simultaneous breath, and the all-consuming sound of listening. Listening is a powerful art, often overlooked. It is how a ragtag group of teenagers with different backgrounds, from different schools, banded together under their love for music to create the Roxbury Youth Orchestra.

I tend to think of myself as the oldest of the orchestra not in terms of actual age, but in terms of years with you. As a little girl I wanted to disappear whenever I was on stage, but now, as a concertmaster, I stand before the crowd. The concertmaster inside me spares no movement; behind every gesture is an implied responsibility: to lead the sitting, to cue sections in, to be the connection between the conductor and the



Vivian Yu (with microphone) had a tough choice to make about one particular night-- to attend her senior prom or to perform with the Roxbury Youth Orchestra in its Jordan Hall debut. She worked it out to arrive late to the prom. Photo: Will Prange.

orchestra or, as one of my orchestra members likes to call me, a "miniature version" of our orchestra director, Mr. France. As "mini Mr. France" I spend time guiding new members and leading them in the many exercises we have to complete, and instilling in them the same confidence and passion in their practice of music.

True practice must be slow and deliberate. In my first year of orchestra, when I learned to play violin, I spent months not even touching a bow; instead, I played in pizzicato and practiced at least a hundred bow holds and bow stroke exercises each day. The hundred bow strokes transformed into a soaring solo for *Steal Away Home* and the gritty beat for our Michael Jackson arrangement. True practice and determination is visible; my calloused hands carry the fifteen hours a week that I spend with orchestra, and my pitch-trained ears carry the hours of listening and perfecting my sound.

Under the four strings and gentle arches of the f-holes, the violin holds my life, my accomplishments and vulnerabilities. For a period of time I lamented my late start into music and stared wide-eyed at the 8-year-old prodigies, because I started violin at sixteen, double their age. When I was younger, my family simply could not afford music; we listened instead to our leaky ceiling whenever it rained. For more than a decade of my life I had lived in this musicless box called home. Home was an insipid four walls that trapped human life. So I would escape: I have had love affairs with libraries and rendezvous with Renoir. And then I met you. Your music entralls me, because music is not singular. You connect the artist and audience, transcending physical boundaries and teaching tolerance. In you I have found the compassion of other beings. I have found the structure of math and science: counting out beats in 4/4 time, riding sound waves on minor chords that very literally move me. You have taught me to take deep breaths when nervous, to develop a passion for music, to love others, and to love myself.

The violin has brought music to my life, and music has created a home.

## FROM THE EDITOR

"Vi är här...here we are... singing side by side"... These words are from an anthem celebrating the "Side By Side Summer Camp" in Gothenburg, Sweden, convened by [El Sistema Sweden](#) in June.

In the world of El Sistema, we hear the "side by side" rallying cry just about everywhere. In Sweden we found the familiar joyful, ambitious feel: several thousand children and several hundred teachers accomplishing energetic high-speed learning.

But we found some surprises, too. This gathering took the word "inclusion" to more and deeper levels than any seminario we've experienced.

First: the children's camp included not only Sistema kids from across Sweden and from other countries, but also some non-Sistema Swedish children and young people who study music within Sweden's long-established system of Culture Schools. So kids from very different learning contexts were rehearsing and performing side by side every day.

Second, the advanced orchestra performed side by side with the [Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra](#), under Venezuelan maestro Josh dos Santos' baton.

The choral group took inclusion to a third step, with special-needs children singing side by side. And more: the professional [Swedish Chamber Choir](#) were embedded with the kids, absolutely side by side in every song. Adding these fine singers' harmonic depth and dynamism, the kids could hear themselves as part of a powerful sound, and feel indelibly included in their city's musical life.

Inclusion went farther still. Multiple threads throughout the proceedings included a "Young Leaders" seminar and a Teaching Artists Forum, which brought together Swedish Sistema and non-Sistema teachers. Side by side, they discussed in depth what they might learn from one another.

When Sistema programs in the U.S. and Canada create seminarios, we tend to bring Sistema programs together. There's a real need for such gatherings: they create solidarity, cohesion and invigorated purpose for students and teachers alike.

But I'm thinking it could also be powerful for our Sistema programs to convene more inclusive gatherings now and then -- where kids and teachers from varying musical environments can explore their differences and similarities. Extending the spirit of "Side By Side" to include those outside of Sistema but resonant with its ideals could create valuable widening circles of teaching and learning.

Tricia Tunstall

**"Tocar y luchar. To play and to struggle. There is always this double meaning within the kids, to be both artists and social fighters." – José Antonio Abreu**

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## News Notes

The Yale School of Music has honored the Chula Vista (CA) Elementary School District with the Yale Distinguished Music Educator Award 2015 for the results of its partnership with San Diego Youth Symphony's (SDYS) El Sistema-inspired **Community Opus Project**. The partnership began in 2010, when CVESD had no music or arts teachers. Because of the significant benefits the Opus after-school music program (orchestra and band) provides students, professional development capacity from SDYS, and VH1 Save the Music Foundation instrument grants, 3000 children now receive in-school music instruction with El Sistema informed pedagogy. The Community Opus Project will expand its after-school in-depth ensemble options for the coming school year, and the District will provide sequential arts learning to all its 29,000 students for the first time in over 15 years. *Also winning this award is OrchKids in Baltimore – more details on that next month.*

Nine students from Ottawa's OrKidstra participated in **Side by Side** by El Sistema in Gothenburg, Sweden in June. The gathering of over 2000 participants included 700 kids in orchestras and choirs and 200 teachers/tutors from 10 countries. There were rehearsals and performances for a younger orchestra; a side by side performance for the advanced musicians, with the **Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra**; an inclusive chorus; a Teaching Artist Symposium that mixed Sistema and non-Sistema music educators; and workshops to advance female conductors and young education leadership talent.



*OrKidstra musicians Ngoc Kim La, viola (L) & Rinila Haridas, violin (R) at Midsummer festivities in Gothenburg, Sweden. Photo: Tegan Patmore*

## Resources

The **Turnaround Arts Schools Initiative** of The President's Commission on Arts and Humanities has intensified arts education investment in struggling schools, now reaching 50 schools in 14 states and the District of Columbia. The recent **Evaluation Report**

on **Turnaround Arts** was conducted by Booz Allen Hamilton and provides a description and analysis of program impacts in the pilot cohort of Turnaround Arts schools at the end of their second year, including summaries of: 1) the theory of action and program pillars, 2) the evaluation design and research questions, 3) program operation and implementation in the arts, and 4) outcomes and trends in school reform indicators and student achievement data. Report available at: <http://tinyurl.com/p5xwut5>

A reminder to subscribe to the regular **blog entries** from **Sistema Fellows** alumni (at the Sistema Fellowship Resource Center at NEC: <http://tinyurl.com/p5r56j7>) as they continue their investigations and observations about El Sistema in the world. There is an interesting new entry from Jose Luis Hernandez-Estrada: <http://tinyurl.com/obujptk>

Is there a spiritual component to playing profound music in an orchestra? Not a "religious" component, but something nurturing to the spirit? Many would say yes. There is a significant body of research

affirming **the strong benefits an active spiritual life provides for teenagers**. This article by Brian Bethune in MacLean's Magazine investigates the issue, with findings such as: "Spiritually connected teens are 60% less likely to suffer from depression than adolescents who are not spiritually oriented. They're 40% less likely to abuse alcohol or other substances, and 80% less likely to engage in unprotected sex." Sistema programs don't have a religious identity, but maybe wholehearted investment in profound music also provides spiritual benefits for young artists. <http://www.macleans.ca/society/science/god-is-the-answer>

Many Sistema students who are thinking about college get shy or nervous when speaking about their personal strengths. It may be useful for them to complete the VIA Institute on Character free online **survey of character strengths** to help them recognize and claim their own assets. VIA has developed the world's largest database on character strengths. <http://www.viacharacter.org/www>

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## Composing a Faculty Team

*Christine Witkowski, Founding Director of YOLA at HOLA*

From the start, a desire to use music for social justice has bonded the Heart of Los Angeles Music faculty. With this baseline connection, the YOLA at HOLA and HOLA Music staff has become highly collaborative and cohesive around these principles:

**Use Mission and Vision as Tools.** To stay mindful and intentional, the team uses the mission/vision as practical guidelines for every aspect of planning, decision-making and problem-solving in the program. This intentionality helps a large and diverse group stay focused on the shared larger goal. For example, when dealing with a challenging class, the group references its baseline mission: empowering students through music. From there, inquiries are formed: Is the content and the instruction excellent, engaging and empowering for this particular group? How can the classroom culture become nurturing and collaborative?

**Model Core Values and Culture.** The caring student culture happening in HOLA's classrooms begins around the staff table. Faculty members make a conscious effort to model the core values of HOLA (respect, responsibility, positive communication and support) from the top down. When students walk into the music office, they see a large "Gratitude Wall" where teachers recognize one another for acts of kindness and appreciation. Upholding these core values creates a safe space for teachers to be vulnerable, take risks, share success stories and support one another.

**Make Time for Shared, Novel Experiences.** Weekly meetings for feedback and collaboration are critical for any El Sistema team. However, these meetings do not replace the need for faculty to share in new experiences together. The same activities that brought HOLA students closer -- long bus rides, large group accomplishments, concert field trips, summer camp -- were also seen as critical opportunities to bond (and reconnect) the staff. Additionally, regular professional development and teacher training gives teachers the opportunity to develop a shared language for trouble shooting and brainstorming.

Regularly setting time aside to sustain group cohesion greatly enhances a team's ability to fulfill its mission. El Sistema work is both rewarding and challenging; those on the ground do their best work when they are supported, encouraged and inspired by one another.

**"A great teacher is one who can light a spark that sets you on fire with enthusiasm for music or whatever you happen to be studying. Because it's only out of enthusiasm that curiosity comes."**  
– Leonard Bernstein