

Doing Good, Smarter

by Jonathan Kaufman, Co-Founder and Principal at *Third Plateau Social Impact Strategies*

Let me just come right out and say it: I'm a data nerd. I'm giddy around data sets; I find beauty in metrics dashboards; and if the state of California would allow it, I would take Microsoft Excel as my bride. I fly my data nerd flag high and proud, but not for the reasons you might think. I couldn't care less about the calculations themselves or math for math's sake. Rather, I'm a data nerd because I have an insatiable hunger for social impact. If you do, too, then it's time to put a little extra tape on your glasses, grab a new pocket protector, and join me on the data nerd train.

Most Sistema programs sprout up from passion, but passion can only take us so far; at some point, we have to be strategic and manage. That's where metrics and data nerd-dom come in. Metrics, when done right, are the difference between a fledgling music education program and an organization that profoundly and positively changes lives and communities. The problem is, the vast majority of Sistema programs don't do metrics and data right.

There are three key elements to a strong metrics and data strategy. The first element is that metrics and data efforts should be mission-aligned.

Data can be collected about anything; the trick is to focus your data efforts on what actually matters. For example, you could collect data on how many violas and oboes your program has given out, but is that what you're really trying to accomplish? While tracking inputs (like the number of instruments) and outputs (like the number of students you've taught) can be helpful, what we really need is to collect data around our desired outcomes: are our students more empowered and confident as a result of our program? Are our students more creative, optimistic, and engaged in their communities as a result of our program?

The second element is that metrics and data should facilitate decision-making, not marketing. Many organizations focus on vanity metrics, which sound impressive, but don't actually teach us anything. For example, if I told you that 75% of my students show significant gains in school as a result of my program, you'd probably think that I'm running a great organization. But can you actually say that with certainty? What if you found out that in the two

years my program has been running, 100% of the students from Year 1 reported better school outcomes, but that just 50% of the students in Year 2 had the same positive gains? My average is 75%, but there is something more insightful here: by comparing year-to-year, I now know my program is actually becoming less effective. By providing context to my metric (the change from Year 1 to Year 2), I've turned my vanity metric into a useful management metric. Now I can examine what was different about my program content between Year 1 and Year 2, which will allow me to begin to understand what components of my program lead to the positive outcomes I want to see. Then, I can prioritize and invest more heavily in the components I know work, and shed the ones that don't.

The third element is that metrics and data are program-agnostic, and we need to be too. Our metrics and data don't care about one program more than another, or even one lesson plan more than another. They evaluate everything without bias and provide the unemotional barometer of a program's effectiveness and value. To capture that

benefit, we – the program managers, directors, and teachers – have to trust what our metrics and data are telling us. We do not do what we do because we love a certain program. We do what we do because we love the outcomes that program generates. When our metrics and data show us a way to get stronger outcomes, we have to follow that path, even if means scrapping a program we've been running for 25 years. We have to have the mentality that we are in the business of driving outcomes and impact, not in the business of running a program. A strong metrics and data strategy makes that possible.

If we want to leverage Sistema to help our students and communities thrive, we need to prioritize building metrics and data strategies that are mission-aligned, enable decision-making, and are managed by teams that are program-agnostic. We need to embrace our inner data nerd.

This essay derives from Jonathan Kaufman's presentation at the Reframing El Sistema Conference in Baltimore, April 8 and 9.

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FROM THE EDITOR

Many Sistema-inspired programs in the U.S. and elsewhere use the term "teaching artist" to describe their staff members. And even in the programs that don't use this specific term, many teachers describe themselves as teaching artists. But I sense some fuzziness around the term. How, exactly, is a teaching artist different from an arts teacher?

The question is particularly timely, because here in New York, the annual [Teaching Artist Development Lab of Lincoln Center Education](#) (LCE) is about to begin. The concept of teaching artistry was born at LCE forty-one years ago (coincidentally, it's exactly as old as El Sistema). What skills will teaching artists be honing at Lincoln Center this July?

Let's start with the definition of teaching artistry offered by Eric Booth: *A teaching artist is a practicing artist who develops the skills, curiosities, and habits of mind of an educator, in order to achieve a wide variety of learning goals in, through, and about the arts, with a wide variety of learners.* A nicely capacious definition, if a little short on specificity. More specific definitions are provided by 7 "Purpose Threads" that will structure the learning of the LCE participants. One of these threads, about "skills development," seems especially relevant to Sistema practitioners: *"Going beyond technical, mechanical and copycat learning, teaching artistry aspires to produce artistically alive people."*

Artistic aliveness! – isn't that the quality we value most in good Sistema ensembles? In the process of teaching skill mastery, good Sistema teachers prioritize awakening aliveness of many kinds. They model and evoke the excitement and richness of music-making for every aspect of experience – artistic, intellectual, emotional and communal. That multidimensionality is what places Sistema teaching squarely in the tradition of teaching artistry.

It's an ambitious mission. Explaining the correct bow grip, drilling the E flat scale, refining the embouchure – these vital skill-building tasks do not always burst with opportunities to conjure artistic aliveness. But teaching artistry is an ongoing experiment in connecting art and aliveness. The beauty of the Sistema learning environment is that it, too, is capacious. There is time and space enough to both teach skills and explore ways that students can feel empowered to use these skills for their own expressive purposes. Sistema is an ideal arena for exploring the aliveness of music in students' lives.

Tricia Tunstall

"The most miserable and tragic thing about poverty is not the lack of bread or roof, but the feeling of being no-one, the lack of identification and public esteem." – José Antonio Abreu

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

News Notes

In late June, 84 students from 20 U.S. Sistema-inspired programs in 11 states came together for five days with a national faculty and conductors Juan Felipe Molano and Robert Spano at the Aspen Music Festival and School in Colorado, for the first half of the National Take A Stand Festival (a partnership of the LA Phil, Longy School of Music of Bard



Meeting new friends upon arrival in Aspen at the National Take A Stand Festival. Photo: Elle Logan

College, and Bard College). The second half of the NTASF will take place at Bard College in upstate New York in late August. (More on the NTASF in our September issue.) These two 2016 festivals will culminate next summer with the first U.S. national El Sistema youth orchestra, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel. More photos available at: #takeastandaspenn

Resources

This is no surprise, but now researchers are backing up what you always knew: to master new skills faster, it helps to **vary the practice routines**. The technical term for this learning benefit is “reconsolidation,” and what it means is that playing around with practice processes can accelerate learning. <http://hub.jhu.edu/2016/01/28/learning-new-skills-fast>

In light of the lead article in this issue that urges us to think more intentionally about our **evaluation**

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practices, the EMCarts blog Arts/Fwd looks at several kinds of program evaluation: <http://tinyurl.com/gqulpfu> Those who are interested in the “developmental evaluation” described in the blog can read more about its potential for Sistema-inspired programs here: <http://tinyurl.com/k75um26>

Many programs use **auctions to raise money**. This article in *Arts Management and Technology* gives five reasons that such fundraising events will go better if you use a mobile bidding application for them. <http://tinyurl.com/zqpv465>

For the past ten years, Americans for the Arts has produced a **National Arts Index** that reports changes in many measurable aspects of the field. They are ending the project, and this year’s report shows trends over that time, helping us understand the complex context within which Sistema-inspired programs grow. <http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/research-studies-publications/arts-index>

The Union Pacific Foundation’s Community-Based **Grant Program seeks to improve the quality of life** in cities near Union Pacific Railroad tracks (primarily in the midwest and western states). The program gives priority to requests that help non-profits build their capacity and increase impact. Eligible programs are invited to submit a preliminary application form online from July 1 through August 14, 2016. (Early submissions are encouraged.) Selected organizations will receive instructions on accessing the online final application form. <http://www.up.com/aboutup/community/foundation/grants/index.htm>

It is summer in North America, and many programs find an occasion to **perform outdoors** in the warm months. This article from England’s *Arts Professional* magazine reports research from **The Audience Agency** showing distinctive preferences audiences have toward music al fresco – the greatest enthusiasm comes from audiences who are least used to attending performances in arts buildings. <http://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/outdoor-pursuits>

Making the Music Work

By Dan Trahey, Artistic Director, *OrchKids*, a program of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra

As the social change through music movement continues to gain momentum in the United States, many programs seem to focus mainly on the re-creation of Western classical music. Although these works are monumental and deserve a place in our pedagogical vernacular, we have the opportunity as programs that strive for all forms of diversity to also diversify the repertoire our students are studying. We tend to play far fewer works by composers of color and women composers than works by dead white European males. We need to promote the diversity of those creating music as well as those performing it. This is not a new concept; our public school general music classrooms are full of repertoire diversity, and music is actually used to teach cultural awareness and understanding.

“Sistema” programs have a beautiful opportunity to do even more, because of our mindsets and our schedule. We are not once-a-week youth orchestras or in-school orchestras – and because our kids spend so much time together, we have a golden opportunity to create new music, try new repertoire, and collaborate with more diverse communities.

Why diversify your program’s repertoire?

❖ *To develop a region-specific sound.* This is critical to the survival of the genre: professional orchestras now sound so homogenous that most people can’t tell them apart. We have an opportunity to create a much more region-specific sound through the ensembles we create and the repertoire we select. The Maryland Blue Crab tastes different from the California Dungeness Crab; why shouldn’t our ensembles sound and look different as well?

❖ *To create cultural acceptance and celebration* by melding musical genres together from the different demographics our programs serve. Think Mariachi – plus Afro-Cuban – plus the New World Symphony.

❖ *To use song as a means to connect with current social issues.* Great examples of this are Bob Marley’s “Get Up Stand Up,” John Adams’s “Nixon in China,” David Maslanka’s “Hymn for World Peace,” and Pete Seeger’s “We Shall Overcome.”

❖ *To give our students and community a measure of musical ownership.* By doing so, we begin to build the community’s confidence in its own abilities. Imagine the profound impact on our communities if we start using music they generate or identify with.

We must teach our students to be grand troubadours of music, who have the ability to make and create music with anyone, with or without written music, and in any genre. With these skills, our students will become the true cultural ambassadors necessary to lead our movement forward.

“We become artists only when we enjoy the practicing as much as the performing.” — James Hillman, psychologist