

Commissions in Sistema Programs

By Jennifer Kessler, Arts and Education Producer and Sistema Fellow

For North American Sistema-inspired programs whose students may have started their instruments just a few years ago, tackling the full score of Dvorak's 9th Symphony may not be a realistic goal. Instead, many programs opt for arrangements that give students an opportunity to experience repertoire at their own levels. And increasingly, programs are commissioning composers to write new works for their student ensembles.

Commissioning takes a myriad of forms across North America. The Los Angeles Philharmonic and the [International Contemporary Ensemble](#) recently co-commissioned Tania León to write a piece for members of ICE and the wind ensemble of [Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles at Heart of Los Angeles](#). The [New Brunswick Youth Orchestra](#) commissioned a piece to commemorate the role of Canada in World War I on the 100th anniversary of the war. At [OrchKids](#), Artistic Director Dan Trahey explains that many students "can't yet accompany Hilary Hahn in her standard encores, so we use compositions or arrangements" to feature the students alongside the soloist and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.

Commissioned works can be powerful learning tools for students. Trahey believes that "new music catering to students' levels helps them reach their full potential musically." Through a recent partnership with music publishing powerhouse Music Sales Group, the [Harmony Program](#) in NYC enjoyed new music written for its students by world-renowned composers André Previn and John Corigliano. The composers received musical parameters such as range and key signatures, and worked directly with students in rehearsals. Harmony Program Executive Director Anne Fitzgibbon says that "connecting kids to living composers and breathing life into new work" gives them great motivation and challenges them to work harder. "Part of what motivates kids is that they have the opportunity to play meaty and demanding repertoire."

David Visentin, President and CEO of [Sistema Toronto](#), explains that the "unique inclusive and access-based pedagogy of Sistema requires compositional creators to allow for various entry points so that everyone can participate, or not, and still have a viable composition that can be performed." But he also believes that many composers today have experience in educational

settings such as schools, and are therefore prepared to write for a student El Sistema ensemble.

So how do programs find appropriate composers? With Harmony Program, Fitzgibbon collaborated with Peggy Monastra, Director of Promotions, and Robert Thompson, Vice President of G. Schirmer Inc. to identify composers who would be willing and interested to participate. The group is now considering how to make the new compositions more widely available in order to launch what could become a shared canon of El Sistema repertoire.



Harmony Program All Star Students and New York Philharmonic Violinist Haeyoung Ham rehearse with John Corigliano, who was commissioned to write "Lucy's Aria," which premiered at the Lincoln Center Atrium. Photo: Mike DiVito

For those programs that have not yet partnered with an international publishing company, commissioning can be an excellent vehicle to deepen relationships with partner or local orchestras. [Youth Orchestra of Northern Alberta](#) (YONA-Sistema) Manager Alyssa Paterson engages a member of the [Edmonton Symphony Orchestra](#) each year to arrange student pieces into a medley to be performed by YONA and the ESO. Sistema Toronto engaged a composer-in-residence at the Toronto Symphony, Kevin Lau, who focused on sound painting and the basics of extended technique for beginner students.

This example of Sistema Toronto underscores another benefit of commissioning projects: they can encourage student leadership, deeper artistry, and empowerment through student input. [Encore! Sistema Quebec](#) hired a composer-in-residence, Tim Brady, to facilitate workshops that drew out sound ideas from the students, which were then incorporated into a new piece. Founder and Program Director Theodora Stathopoulos believes that this exchange enabled students to explore composition and take ownership of the pieces in progress, while giving the composer more access to the ensemble he was writing for.

As with so many aspects of El Sistema programs, perhaps the most significant advantage of commissioning projects is that students receive permission to participate in the creative process. Through this ownership of the music and connection to living composers, participants can develop self-confidence and an awareness of their role as part of a much larger musical community.

FROM THE EDITOR

A string octet from the Philippine Sistema-inspired program [Ang Misyon](#) is visiting the U.S. this month for its first "International Awareness and Education Tour;" performing along with them is the program's founder/director, pianist Jovianney Emmanuel Cruz. I met these dedicated young musicians and their colleagues in the Orchestra of Filipino Youth in the Philippines last year, and one of my most vivid memories is of standing with them in the wings of a cavernous theater, watching Jovianney, solo at the piano between orchestral numbers, play Leonard Bernstein's piano transcription of Copland's *El Salon Mexico*. At the end, Jovianney played the final low octave-crash so hard that he propelled himself off the bench – and I felt the kids around me forcefully and collectively levitate along with him. It was as though they were inhabiting the music by virtually inhabiting their teacher.

This memory leads me to another, of a recent Skype conversation I had with vocal teacher Daniel Soren at the Sistema-inspired program [Orquestando a Vida](#) in Campos, Brazil. Daniel told me that every other year, faculty members and guest professionals sing the lead roles in the annual opera-production; in alternate years, the students sing the leads. He explained that while it's important for kids to sing those roles, it's equally important for them to hear professionals sing them. "The kids form the chorus, and so they stand onstage with the pros, experiencing our work," Daniel told me. "They hear the sound up close, they feel it in their bodies. It gives them sonic models to emulate."

So here's my question to teaching artists in the U.S. and Canada: do your students hear you perform often enough? I don't mean the D scales and the "Go Tell Aunt Rhody's" you play along with them – although those are certainly crucial in developing their sonic awareness. I mean the experience of hearing you play the music you play professionally, passionately, alone or with your colleagues. I think this sharing of your own sounds and skills is an essential element of teaching artistry, one that can contribute immensely to your students' musical growth. But very often it gets skipped, in the interest of maximum playing time for the children.

We like to encourage our students to think of performing as an act of generosity, of sharing. Don't forget to be generous with your own artistry. Your students are hungry to absorb, emulate and internalize the music you love to make.

Tricia Tunstall

"The child's development in the orchestra and the choir makes him a better student at school because it inspires in him a sense of responsibility, perseverance and punctuality." – José Antonio Abreu

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

News Notes

The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities has announced [50 program finalists](#) for the [2016 National Arts and Humanities Youth Programs](#) awards – including the Sistema-inspired Boston City Singers and Atlanta Music Project.

Two notes from Ontario, Canada:

• [Sistema Kingston](#)

celebrated its first year with a culminating performance; the program is a collaboration between Queen's Community Music, the Limestone District School

Board, and the Joe Chithalen Memorial Musical Instrument Lending Library. For more: [Karma Tomm, tommk@queensu.ca](mailto:KarmaTomm@queensu.ca)

• And, in keeping with its strategic plan for growth, [OrKidstra](#) in Ottawa is expanding into a new site in Vanier in September.

In the context of the [debates over immigration](#) in the U.S., Gabby Escobedo Chavez wrote this Facebook post to the leadership of the [Tocando Music Project](#) (a division of the [El Paso Symphony Orchestra](#)) about seeing her son perform recently: "I just wanted to take this time to thank you all from the bottom of my heart for today's live concert. I'm a mother of one of the students from Tocando. Unfortunately, I am living in Mexico; I'm undocumented and my son lives in El Paso with my mother. So I miss so many important episodes in my baby's life, but thanks to you all today I was able to see my baby performing alive, and it brought me to tears full of joy and happiness. Words simply can't explain my happiness, and that's why I couldn't let this day go by without thanking you all for what you did today."

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My son's name is Jose Guizar, so you know he's such a great kid, with such an amazing heart. Once again thank you all for making it possible, even through a screen, to see my baby playing his violin."

A [ballet premiere](#) brought the Sonoma, CA community together in a new way in April. The [Valley Vibes Orchestra](#) (the Sonoma Sistema program) performed [Por La Luz De La Luna](#) with the local ballet company [Ballet to the People](#), and many

of the dancers are classmates of the musicians. The ballet tells a story of local Mexican heritage and responds to current political tensions around immigration.

Resources

[Encore Sistema! Montreal](#) is offering a [three day intensive weekend focused on the essentials of Sistema-style teaching](#) followed by three days of immersion in teaching at their Face Up! Summer Day Camp. The dates of the weeklong learning experience are August 12 -17, 2016. The June 1 application deadline has been extended to June 17. <http://tinyurl.com/jzyrhju>

[New West Symphony Harmony Project](#) is hosting a [teacher training workshop in June on the Creative Ability Development method](#), which develops creative capacity in students through improvisation. The originator of this approach, Alice Kanack, will lead a two-day workshop with teachers in Ventura, CA, June 17-18th. To find out more or to arrange participation, contact Andrea Landin: alandin@newwestsymphony.org

The National Endowment for the Arts has awarded more than \$30 million to 389 Our Town projects since 2011. To consider your own application for the next round of [Our Town creative placemaking grants](#) (deadline in September for 2017 grants), visit their Project Showcase of awardees and Project Insights, which reports lessons learned along the way. <https://www.arts.gov/exploring-our-town> For complete information and applications for Our Town grants, visit <https://www.arts.gov/grants-organizations/our-town/introduction>.

Making the Music Work

By Dave Rimelis, composer and arranger

In the forty years I have been composing for a wide variety of musical situations, some of my most rewarding commissions have been for El Sistema-inspired programs. I have found that the interaction with the children and teachers has always been stimulating and inspiring.

There are a number of challenges involved in working with El Sistema groups. How to keep the music simple yet make it interesting and fun? How to choose material that will engage the students and still give them the skills they need to move to the next level? I find that a combination of pop music and classical melodies often works best. For example, in writing a piece for the El Sistema New Jersey Alliance, I chose to combine the melody of "Ode to Joy" with Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds." (I tend to stay away from using current pop tunes because I don't know which ones are going to have staying power.) To accommodate the students' beginner-level string skills, I chose the key of D major. I also changed the words to reflect the students' experience.

Another challenge is: how can I create a form that can be expanded to accommodate students as their skills progress? I like to create advanced versions of these pieces that add more complex articulation, faster notes and wider register range, while leaving the first version intact so that less-skilled students can play along with more advanced players.

A special challenge was a commission for a side-by-side piece for OrchKids and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. It became clear as I worked on the piece that the priority was for the students to be playing all or most of the time. Although the Baltimore Symphony is a wonderful group to write for, they had to take a back seat to the real stars. I gave the student string players mostly open strings to play, and gave the tune to the student wind players, using the first five notes of the Bb scale; I also included a chorus who sang and rapped and a bucket band who played a "street beat" throughout the piece.

It's a wonderful feeling to see and hear several hundred students bringing your concept to life with such enthusiasm. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with El Sistema-inspired programs, and I hope to have many more experiences with these amazing young musicians.

"I believe that the urgent need to take hold of and develop the innate curiosity and immense learning capacity which all children share must take precedence over all other considerations." — Leonard Bernstein