

“Take A Stand” Symposium Highlights

By *Sistema Fellows*

Among the 400 participants at the 2014 Take A Stand Symposium were Sistema Fellows now in the [New England Conservatory program](#). Eight of them share their impressions here for colleagues who were unable to attend. Many thanks to the Take A Stand partners (LA Phil, Longy School of Music, and Bard College) who brought us together, along with 25 Leadership Forum for Young Musicians participants from 14 U.S. Sistema-inspired programs.



Leadership Forum for Young Musicians participants at symposium.
Photo: Mathew Imaging

Classical Music as Community Endeavor

By Megan Moran

As I flew back to Boston from Los Angeles following the El Sistema Take a Stand conference, I was struck by the diversity of landscape of the United States outside my window, and thought about how music is woven into the fabric of the cultures and communities within that landscape. And I thought of Leon Botstein's reminder that Western classical music has not always been an art form defined by professionals. Correct fingerings and perfect recordings were not the original goals of music-making. At its origins, music was a social ritual, a community accessible to everyone.

The essence of El Sistema is a return to those origins of creating music in common, understanding the importance of a collective voice built on individual strengths. We need to support students in their intrinsic motivation to be part of something larger – sharing struggle and beauty, having fun with friends, creating a positive, empowered community.

Rediscovering the “Good Stuff”

By Hana Morford

One theme pervading Take a Stand was the concept of using positivity and joy to reframe our work.

Robert Duke described the learning process in three parts: initial romance, then inevitable struggle, and finally victorious beauty. He advocated for teachers to create beauty every day, providing treasured moments (“the good stuff”) to help sustain motivation. Kathleen Turner’s interactive session on song skills provided a

great example. In one creative writing game called the “Job Song,” students created their own lyrics and accompanying motions to describe various professions. Equipping students to make their own musical decisions in these activities, Turner captured the innate curiosity of youth in engaging, fun experiences.

And therapist Marianne Diaz highlighted how Sistema advocates can focus on student assets – again, the “good stuff” – to provide a prime environment for healing and succeeding. Although joy is an intrinsic human emotion, it’s good to be reminded that joy is

at the heart of our mission!

Growing as a Movement

By Tatjana Merzyn

Around 400 people from 28 states and 12 countries came to Take A Stand to exchange ideas and connect with others in the field. A big question was: How can we grow as a national and international movement?

Eric Booth noted that many people are doing brilliant work in their programs, but our understanding of contributing nationally is still underdeveloped. We can only grow as a movement if we are all willing to share best practices and dedicate 5% of our time to contribute to the national field. One great example of this spirit of sharing is the [Rep+Resource project](#), presented at the conference by Louise Lanzilotti from Sistema Hawaii and Diane Cline from Sistema Somerville. What a great resource this platform could be, if everyone in the U.S. contributed to it! This is a simple, effective way to meet the “5%” commitment.

Collaborative Creativity

by Amelia Downs

How can El Sistema-inspired programs foster opportunities for collaborative creative projects that deal with social issues?

Leon Botstein’s speech reminded us that music is a participatory creative act that is the result of a collaborative process. And I saw some great examples of collaborative creativity in action. The Creative Connections workshop led by Dan Trahey

FROM THE EDITOR

Suppose you had the hundred-plus kids of a new international Sistema youth orchestra convening in a major city with no available rehearsal space and a concert in five days. What would you do?

If “drain a big municipal indoor swimming pool, and have the rehearsal there” is your answer, you are clearly operating with the kind of flexible, imaginative mindset that characterizes Sistema Europe. This pan-national alliance, as described by its director Marshall Marcus in his presentation at last week’s Take A Stand symposium, came together two years ago, when leaders of European Sistema programs decided to form, in Marshall’s words, “a network that is open, flexible, unencumbered, and not autocratic.”

They have done so, with already remarkable results. In less than two years, the 28 countries of [Sistema Europe](#) have achieved an agreement on common principles, several kinds of mutual support, some significant collective funding, a Sistema Europe Youth Orchestra, and that innovatively rehearsed joint concert.

It’s fascinating to me that the continent we like to think of as the Old World, burdened by the constraints of custom and bureaucracy, has managed so beautifully and efficiently to organize on a large scale without – Marshall’s words again – “becoming deadened by process.”

My experience over the course of the three-day symposium has me feeling optimistic that we in the U.S. may also be moving in that direction. There were many familiar faces but also many new ones, and a general atmosphere of astute, nimble connections being made at a rapid clip. People were energetic and intuitively smart about pursuing the inquiries that felt essential to them, honing in on answers to pressing questions, and exchanging greetings that will become online exchanges that will lead to long-term bonds. We may, in fact, be finding our way to the kind of informal but robust networking that will be key to growing the national movement.

Case in point: representatives from four small but splendid Sistema-inspired programs in my own state, New Jersey, crossed the country to attend the symposium. We all listened and learned together, and by the third day we were indisputably a network. Back East, we are already planning our first joint concert. Everyone into the pool!

Tricia Tunstall

“How can you not succeed with El Sistema in the U.S.??; you have so much.” – José Antonio Abreu

(from OrchKids in Baltimore) demonstrated how a large group of people of different abilities can easily collaborate in fun compositional activities. Four small groups were created to contribute musical ideas, which were then put together to form a composition, and a YOLA student gave us a “Boom-shaka-laka-laka” call and response introduction.

Robert Duke’s presentation emphasized that the fundamental purpose of music is to convey meaning to others. In the ES-i movement, we seek to communicate some very powerful messages about social issues. I would encourage ES-i programs to use collaborative creative projects to communicate about social issues as well as to foster artistic creativity.

Identity and Languages of Power

By Ayriole Frost

I attended a powerful session by Ndindi Kitonga on identity; we reflected on what aspects of our identity come up in daily life, in order to foster awareness about what comes up for students. This awareness helps us to create culturally sensitive environments.

Aspects of identity include race, ethnicity, religion or spirituality, sexual orientation, gender, class, ability, and age. Women in the session reported gender as a large portion; non-white participants reported race or ethnicity; and the youngest and oldest participants reported age as particularly important.

Dr. Kitonga used the phrase “languages of power,” and referred to Western classical music as one of those languages. She suggested that educators can help students access these languages without sacrificing other aspects of culture. Using classical music as a vehicle for social change can create pathways to success for students, but need not come at the expense of embracing the culture of a community.

Sparing the Assumptions

By Ricki Nelson

During a discussion forum at Take A Stand, we were tasked with collaborating in small groups and sharing perspectives on some of the more difficult issues that arise when working with students. One particular issue that struck me came in the form of a question: “Why do we make assumptions about our students?” We all would do anything to see our students succeed. But we are all guilty of making assumptions about their needs. Perhaps this is partly because of time; as the teacher/student relationship slowly evolves, teachers feel under pressure to resolve issues quickly and to always “have an answer.” But sometimes a

student simply isn’t ready to open up, and we need to be patient, evaluate situations carefully...and ask questions, not draw conclusions.

I’ve learned that in order to promote the ideals of social change, voices need to be valued and heard. And a good place to start is by asking questions.

El Sistema as International Superstar

By Eriel Huang

At the symposium, El Sistema felt like a rock band going on tour and taking us around the world with it, offering personal autographs from the U.S., Japan, Europe and Canada. Each country’s organization proudly described its particular version of the Venezuelan spirit “si, se puede.”

Yutaka Kikugawa ([Friends of El Sistema Japan](#)) spoke of learning through joy, restoring dignity of children affected by the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Peer mentoring and composition have been highly successful means of learning and teaching there.

Ken MacLeod ([Sistema New Brunswick, Canada](#)) articulated the importance of strategic choices and influential leadership. And Marshall Marcus ([Sistema Europe](#)) described how 30 Sistema-inspired countries operate with a “nobody owns it” network model.

International colleagues from Latin America, Australia, and Africa were present, emboldened “con spirito” with the Venezuelan joy and excitement. Who would have thought the quadragenarian El Sistema with its humble origins in Venezuela would be an international super-star decades later, taking the world by storm?

Experiment vs. Recipe

By Clara Yang

As a classically trained musician, I was taught a recipe – play the right notes and watch the conductor. During Robert Duke’s presentation on tapping into the naturally improvisatory inclinations of children, I was simultaneously nodding in agreement and drawing a blank on how I could actually do this.

Then, during the workshop day of TAS, we were able to observe master teachers of student-driven music making. We applied these new tools at a post-symposium workshop in Santa Barbara. In collaboration with faculty at the [Incredible Children’s Art Network \(iCAN\)](#), we designed and led student-driven music making lessons with young musicians.

With continued collaboration like this, our field can move from music-making as recipe to music-making as experimentation with young musicians.

Just Another Conference?

by Christine Rhomberg, *Managing Director of the Hilti Foundation, FL-Schaan, Liechtenstein*

Is this just another El Sistema conference? This was one of my questions as I flew to Los Angeles to participate in the Take a Stand 2014 symposium. Upon arriving, I found myself in a big and enthusiastic crowd of predominantly young people, many of whom – as I would learn in the course of the event – have founded and are now running their own Sistema-inspired projects all over the United States. These young musicians have found their way to teaching, not just taking it on as a second-class job after failing to achieve a solo career or an orchestra position (which, by the way, is still a very common way of thinking, and not only in good old Europe), but understanding that excellent and dedicated teachers are the key to success for making these programs run successfully.

Leon Botstein stated in his keynote speech that music-making is a collective activity for everyone, setting a broadminded frame for the conference and reminding me of a central statement in José Antonio Abreu’s opening speech for the Salzburg Festival in 2013, when he proclaimed that “music should no longer be a social luxury.” And Robert Duke reminded us that fun and passion are basic principles for successful community work. (Yes, we know, but sometimes it is just good to be reminded.) What particularly hit me was Marianne Diaz’s hardline report about daily life in an underserved community in the U.S. (and I doubt that the situation is much better in many other countries worldwide).

Visiting YOLA at LACHSA on Saturday morning was another striking experience. Self-confident and curious children were participating in the workshops side by side with the adults, and absolutely on a par with them. I have no doubt that their talent – for music or whatever – will be developed through these programs. And I have no doubt that their contributions to society and to community will be strong and successful.

I leave Los Angeles with a good feeling about the future of El Sistema in the U.S., but also with the conclusion that we all - be it in Europe, the U.S., or any other country in the world – still have a long way to go; there are so many thousands and thousands of students awaiting El Sistema programs. Take a Stand has again shown that, going this way together, we can be even more powerful.

“Originally, classical music was not an art form; it was a social activity – not a listening event but a participatory event.” – Leon Botstein, President of Bard College, at the Take A Stand symposium

News Notes

An **important new advocacy film** is available from Fundamusical in Venezuela. Featuring José Antonio Abreu, it gives a strong, clear (13 minute) introduction and inspiration about El Sistema in Venezuela and beyond. Very useful. <http://tinyurl.com/l8puqr3>

After seven months of gathering information (with the help of colleagues from the [Alliance and El Sistema USA](#)), Joe Hamm (Program and Media Manager at [Soundscapes](#), Newport News, VA) has pulled together his findings from a [Census of El Sistema programs in the U.S.](#) While incomplete (a number of U.S. programs did not respond), it provides a lot of clarifying data about the nature of the field. <http://tinyurl.com/lq5xt6l>

On January 8, 2014, the [Harmony Program \(in NYC\)](#) launched a partnership with the D'Addario Foundation (the instrument string company), which fosters the growth and appreciation of music around the world by partnering with music educators. Familiar with the Harmony Program's model, D'Addario was eager to bring El Sistema benefits to its corporate home community in Farmingdale, Long Island. This three-year collaborative effort will provide 26 third- and fourth-grade students from the Deauville East and West Elementary Schools with musical instruments, transportation to the D'Addario manufacturing facility where they will play after school, and six hours a week of instruction on violin, viola and cello, provided by teachers who are local professionals and music education students at nearby Hofstra University.

Efforts by the [San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory \(SDYS\)](#) to restore music education in the Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD) just took a big step forward with a commitment from [VH1 Save The Music Foundation](#) to provide musical instruments to every CVESD school as more music teachers are hired. As a result of SDYS's Community Opus Project, [CVESD began hiring full-time music teachers for the first time in 15 years](#), with a plan to restore music and arts to all 45 district campuses. The after-school [Community Opus Project](#) has grown from serving 70 students at two schools in 2010 to more than 3,000 students at eighteen schools, in concentric circles of impact from intensive El Sistema programs to regular music classes that are Sistema-inflected. For more information, contact Lucy Coker: lcoker@sdys.org

For the many who weren't able to attend the Take A Stand symposium for the El Sistema-inspired movement, there is a way to get a feel for the event. Sistema Global has posted [video podcasts](#) of four

attendees (and a few guests) sharing their impressions and discoveries at the end of each day. The podcasts are available at: www.sistemaglobal.org/takeastand.

And speaking of Sistema Global, it is worth reminding readers of the 2013 [Literature Review](#). This is the first study of the worldwide Sistema movement. We were surprised at how many people at the symposium didn't know of it. To get your free copy of *El Sistema and Sistema-Inspired Programmes: A Literature Reivew of research, evaluation, and critical debates*, go to: <http://sistemaglobal.org/literature-review/>

The Sistema Fellows (who wrote this issue's cover article) have also written a report on their recent monthlong [residency traveling and teaching in Venezuela](#). Read about their observations and discoveries in a summary report they prepared for Maestro Abreu. <http://tinyurl.com/kxyopu8>

At the symposium, Eric Booth charged us to rethink what it means to be a part of this field, asserting that it is not enough to put your head down and do good work in your home program; we must also take responsibility to contribute to national endeavors that raise the level of all program boats. Otherwise we will never get going as a national movement. He proposed the "5% commitment" – that everyone, even part-time teachers, working in the field dedicates five percent of work time to initiatives that help the whole field. With a surge of enthusiastic agreement, people grabbed their 5% buttons and asked, "Where can I pour my 5% time?" Louise Lanzillotti, co-founder of the Rep+Resource project (<http://tinyurl.com/kftx4dr>), began gathering suggestions. Following are projects that anyone can join right away. Submissions (pdfs), further suggestions and reports of actions taken should go to Louise at her program in Hawaii: kalikolehuamele@gmail.com She will set up a handy communications site. Send her:

- ◆ Resources: parent handbooks, student agreements, professional development materials, audition processes, mission statements, links to other large resource banks, curriculum descriptions, theory packets, game resources, ideas for camp sessions, ways to review after breaks, instrument maintenance tips, evaluations and assessments, ideas for working with special needs children...whatever might help others avoid reinventing a wheel.
- ◆ Repertoire: choral music, wind ensemble music, repertoire lists, whatever you have - just send it as a pdf.
- ◆ Communicate: start and join conversations on Sistema Global and other online forums.
- ◆ Learn about the U.S. movement so you can advocate for it, make presentations, write letters to newspapers, articles, blogs about the movement.

Reflections Across the Pond

by *Richard Hallam, MBE, Chair, Music Education Council UK; Trustee of Sistema England*

What an enormously stimulating three days at the Take A Stand Symposium! Just as El Sistema inspires young people across the world by immersing them in music in a way that is socially as well as musically beneficial, so delegates at the symposium were able to immerse themselves with like-minded people, listening to and learning from each other whilst observing and reflecting on the worldwide phenomenon that is El Sistema.

Throughout the symposium, the generosity of spirit I experienced in Venezuela was in evidence. Conversations searching for the holy grail of "what makes Sistema work" went on late into the night, and the brainstorming in the hallways was just as important as the learning in the formal sessions. In the process, we re-experienced afresh some essential truths.

We were reminded that the music is what ultimately does the talking, both in practice and metaphorically, and that the best way to motivate young people is through musical example and modeling. We were reminded of the importance of good repertoire that is both accessible and inspiring, but we were also reminded that documents and repertoire alone are not sufficient. It is process that is most important: the strength and nature of the relationships between people are what makes the greatest difference.

Finally, we were reminded that just as the orchestra and choir provide structures in which young people can work together for a greater good, we too can achieve more if we work together collaboratively, supporting each other and committing even just 5% of our time to the greater good. We must have the highest expectations of young people – they deserve no less. We do this by challenging and supporting them. In the same spirit, we must also challenge ourselves and one another.

My overriding impression of Take A Stand 2014 is of a fantastically committed group of people, each understanding that "I can make the world a little bit better than it was when I started." Together, the cumulative impact is enormous! Long may this movement continue and grow from strength to strength.

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"We are not only doing this for ourselves, we are doing something good for the world." – YOSAL (Youth Orchestra of Salinas) student, responding to a question from the audience at the Take A Stand symposium