

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

Pre-Orchestra

By *Rafaela Dreisin, Site Coordinator, OrchKids at Mary Ann Winterling*

El Sistema-inspired programs often approach the issue of pre-orchestra by asking, "What qualities does a successful orchestra need from its members, both musically and socially?" – and then working backwards to prepare students to achieve those qualities. A reciprocal effect is at work here: the pre-orchestra is influenced by the orchestra's needs, and the orchestra is influenced by what is happening in pre-orchestra levels. In this article, I describe the distinctive approaches of three U.S. Sistema-inspired programs to the pre-orchestra process.

At the *Juneau Alaska Music Matters (JAMM)* program, director Lorrie Heagy says that the top qualities she is looking for in students include the ability to follow a conductor and the ability to be aware of the other musicians in the ensemble. All JAMM students begin their musical paths on paper violins; creating these instruments helps parents to become involved from day one, and helps students to understand the physical nature of the violin and to feel ownership. The students spend several months learning songs with accompanying motions on the paper violins, working as an ensemble with a conductor, and after a while transitioning to real bows.

Once a student is ready for a real violin, the paper instrument is ceremoniously traded for the real thing. By the end of the first year, students are ready to join the orchestra, able to follow a conductor and effectively participate in an ensemble setting, with good posture, self-discipline, and a degree of technical skill.

Eli Wirth, orchestral director of the *Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's OrchKids* program, emphasizes the following qualities in orchestra students: the ability to follow a conductor, the ability to read music, a capacity for self-control, and the ability to be a part of a group setting, without needing to be the center of attention. OrchKids' Artistic Director Daniel Trahey says that when students enter the orchestra, the quality he most wants to see is a strong desire to be there; this motivation, he believes, improves discipline and maturity.

The OrchKids program has several steps leading up to orchestra. Beginning OrchKids (Pre-K to 1st grade) spend their first year in the 'Ms. Marin' level, where students learn musicianship in bucket band and choir, and also participate in "exploratory," which involves 3 three-month trials of trumpet, violin, and recorder. Each trial session begins with building 'paper' versions of the instruments: "hose-a-phones" for the brass, paper violins for the strings, and "bubble tea bassoons" for the woodwinds. Students then move to real instruments; year two begins with students entering the 'Beethoven'



An OrchKids student practices his hose-a-phone, in brass pre-orchestra study. Photo: Rafaela Dreisin

level, where they choose their principal instruments and participate in group lessons, bucket and, and choir. Not until the

third level, typically 3rd grade, do students enter the orchestra.

The *Youth Orchestra of Salinas in California (YOSAL)* is a five-year-old program with deep roots in El Sistema philosophy and a thorough pre-orchestra program. YOSAL director Juan Felipe Molano considers strong self-confidence and an understanding of high expectations the skills he most values for students entering orchestra.

YOSAL students typically enter in the junior program (K-2), which runs during the school day and focuses mainly on singing. Beginning typically in 3rd grade, students enter a two-year pre-orchestra program involving four levels. The Cantabile level introduces students to the Orff ensemble, with all songs in unison. When they move to the Scherzo level, the repertoire becomes more difficult and includes harmonies and melodies. The Vivace level requires students to be able to rotate between Orff parts and ready to perform each part accurately. Finally, the Intermezzo level provides the transition to orchestra, offering students group lessons on their principal instrument once a week and rehearsals the remainder of the week. By the time students reach orchestra in about 5th grade, the culture of the orchestra and understanding of expectations is already highly developed, and they have strong ensemble skills and good ears.

All three programs agree upon the vast benefits of a pre-orchestra process. Lorrie Heagy observes that this process builds not only skills but also an ensemble culture. OrchKids staff members observe that there is an extremely low rate of instrument change requests among students who have gone through the 'Ms. Marin' level. And Juan Felipe Molano notes that students who enter the orchestra without pre-orchestra experience do not have the same level of discipline and understanding of ensemble dynamics that students who have been in pre-orchestra demonstrate. Each in its own way, these programs use carefully designed, immersive pre-orchestra processes that help to guide students toward successful orchestral experiences.

A longer version of this article with more details is available at: <http://www.bsomusic.org/media/263414/Ensemble-Article.pdf> And join a discussion about this topic at: <http://lnkd.in/b/HhdRjD>

FROM THE EDITOR

Arturo Márquez, renowned composer of works inflected with the rhythms, harmonies and timbres of Mexican music – including the rhapsodically beautiful *Danzon No. 2*, so beloved of Venezuelan youth orchestras that it has become a kind of El Sistema anthem – decided a year or two ago to retire from his teaching obligations. "I was just going to compose and relax," he told me when I visited him in Mexico recently. Sitting on the porch of his home in a flower-filled village, he elaborated. "My plan was to spend my afternoons here in the sunlight, listening to the birds, writing music."

His plan has met with one problem. Within weeks, he and his wife, music therapist Laura Calderón de la Barca, realized that there were many children in the town who had no place to play music. "My wife and I thought, 'We need to form a youth band.' We didn't mean a strictly traditional folk band – we wanted to teach them to read music and play more ambitious music in different genres."

With help from Fomento Musical, the government agency responsible for Mexico's extensive national Sistema-inspired program, Márquez and Calderón started a children's band. In short order, they were helping with four other regional bands and orchestras. Now their goal is to establish youth ensembles in every district in their province. "In a year, we've already got five," he said. "Why not go for thirty-five?"

Márquez often coaches and conducts the ensemble he founded. "*Crescer Con Musica*" – Growing With Music – that is our motto," he said. "Children working together for three or four hours every day... they will learn to grow emotionally. They will learn a different sense of society."

Laura Calderón encourages the children to keep diaries of their music experiences. "We can see already how their lives are changing," she told me.

And after many years of winning international accolades for his work, Mexico's most famous living composer is taking on a new compositional challenge: "I write arrangements for them all the time! Learning to write for all those skill levels – I love it. And the most exciting part is to hear those little kids play." He paused and then added, "I guess I didn't retire, did I?"

Tricia Tunstall

"Ideals of access and excellence are maintained in a productive balance that maximizes both the fullest success for all and the highest accomplishment for some." – José Antonio Abreu

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News Notes

A new kind of project for the El Sistema-inspired movement. The vision: programs across the U.S. (and beyond), perform the same song in honor of a particular occasion. James Taylor's anthem "Shed a Little Light" celebrates Martin Luther King with eloquence and energy. Taylor generously agreed to waive rights and royalties for the creation of a new arrangement specifically for the El Sistema movement, which can be performed for free by our programs. Adam Johnston (founding Director of the Santa Barbara's iCAN program) was commissioned to create an "arrangement package" that enables a full range of El Sistema students to join – from beginning chorus to experienced orchestra. This package is available free to all El Sistema-inspired programs.

Further, we envision a sustainable ongoing program of co-commissioned arrangements and compositions. We ask people and programs to join as official Co-Commissioners by donating \$50 to the project, which is being managed on the new Sistema Global website by our friends at Rep + Resource. You don't have to donate to play the piece, but donations support the ongoing development of works created just for us. Please do contribute, and your program's name (or your name) will be listed on the cover of the piece as a Co-Commissioner. <http://sistemaglobal.org/item/shed-a-little-light>

Located in St Paul, MN's Promise Neighborhood, and founded by Sistema Fellow Sara Zanussi, ComMUSICation launched in January and added three more public schools in February. Focusing on building life skills through choir and community, students are bused to the school location from 3:00-5:45 Monday-Thursday, including a dinner and transportation home. They spend the first hour doing homework, learning piano, and playing other musical games; after dinner, students participate in Dalcroze music and movement classes, theory exercises, peer teaching, body percussion, sectionals, and full choir. They focus on multicultural music and use solfège, with local high school and college students interning as teaching assistants. In a



Students learn character by swaying with "Wind on the Hill." Photo: Jenna Pritchard

pen-pal project, students write to local seniors, and will soon meet their pen pals and perform for them. www.commusicationmn.org. Contact: director@commusicationmn.org

Resources

There is a growing buzz about the 5% solution – the shared commitment to have everyone who works in the U.S. El Sistema movement dedicate 5% of her/his work time to projects that contribute to the national and international field. The basic idea: to get our movement moving! Watch a video podcast of three leaders discussing this idea: <http://sistemaglobal.org/el-sistema-5-percent-initiative>. Then use a sliver of your 5% time to jump into the discussion about this idea that involves all of us: <http://lnkd.in/dweC9QR>

Call for El Sistema bassoon, violin, and percussion teachers – a 10-day immersion in Venezuela, June 12-22. A rare intensive experience, working in a large seminario with students (ages 8-22) from multiple Venezuelan núcleos, featuring orchestra and chamber music. Teachers must pay for their own transportation to and from Maiquetía; all other expenses for room, board, and ground transportation in Venezuela will be covered. Program led by Dan Trahey, Artistic Director of Baltimore's OrchKids program. To apply: archipelagomusic@gmail.com

Announcing the first International Sistema Teachers' Conference. Designed for teachers by teachers, it will be a four-day (October 27-30) immersive experience sponsored by Sistema Scotland and bringing 150 musicians from Europe and beyond. The Sistema Scotland curriculum will be the starting point for delving into issues of pedagogy, repertoire, behavior management, and teaching styles. Subsidized fees will make costs affordable, but participants must pay their own airfare. For more information and registration (while available slots last): bignoise.org.uk

In March, over 200 U.S. youth development leaders created an "agenda for progress" to unify the field and to distribute to policy makers to foster further support. The document can be found here: <http://www.mass-culturalcouncil.org/CYDSummit.pdf>

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Our Own Arrangements

By Adam Johnston, Founding Director of iCAN Music, El Sistema-inspired program in Santa Barbara CA

"What music can a western orchestra play?" The answers are wide and varied (as they should be after hundreds of years of repertoire building): Bach, Beethoven, Copland, Bernstein, John Williams, and even Beatles adaptations. The choices are rich.

When the question becomes, "What music can a beginner orchestra, or an early youth orchestra, play?" the answer is less immediate. Some Vivaldi, some Beethoven, bits of John Williams. Or, as many program leaders and teaching artists know, they can play arrangements tailored to their abilities.

Christopher Shroeder very effectively addressed the fine points of arranging for beginners in this year's January Ensemble (http://ericbooth.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/TheEnsemble_January2014.pdf). My point here is to advocate a specific purpose for such arrangements: to capture the cultural significance of a day, a moment, or a tradition. Arrangements can be used to excite and communicate precisely the emotional resonances that are the central reason we teach art-making.

During my 3½ years as program director of iCAN Music in Santa Barbara, there were opportunities for us to play on Halloween and Earth Day, around the 4th of July, during the annual Spanish Days celebration, and at many more marking moments. These performances were lovely ways to showcase our students at community celebrations, and they were always best when we had music representative of the meaning of the moment.

"What music can a beginner orchestra play to celebrate MLK day?" Our civil rights leaders are not typically celebrated by orchestras. But we can change that. Coinciding with the launch of Rep + Resource material on Sistema Global, a "co-commissionable" arrangement has been conceived to do just that. I arranged James Taylor's song "Shed a Little Light," creating three versions based around the same vocal part – for full orchestra, string orchestra, and choir and piano. These parts hover around the Grade 2 level for each instrument, so I also wrote secondary parts for beginner strings, wind, and brass players. The goal was to maximize participation without sacrificing musicality.

With this arrangement and others like it, we may find that honoring modern cultural heroes through sharing celebratory pieces brings new power and meaning to our performances. Find the piece on the new Sistema Global home for Rep + Resource: <http://sistemaglobal.org/item/shed-a-little-light>

"When you are composing in the classical tradition, the tools you have are really powerful, and they are from the heart and to the heart." – Arturo Márquez, composer