

Singing Out the Uses of Chorus and Choir

by Aisha Bowden, Co-Founder and Director of AMPlify, Atlanta Music Project

Mention El Sistema, and people's first mental images are usually kids with violins or clarinets. But choirs have long been an important part of El Sistema nucleus in Venezuela. In this issue of The Ensemble, let's take a look at how choral music is being used in some U.S. programs.

We'll start with Baltimore's [OrchKids](#) program, where choruses perform everything from original compositions to Top 40 hits to Bach – often, all in the same concert. OrchKids students begin singing at age three, learning key concepts such as pitch recall, movement to music, and ensemble etiquette, and by age six they move into more advanced choral groups. Dan Trahey, now in his fifth year as Artistic Director, shares his conviction that choir can be used as an entry point into classical music and a way to boost the overall impact of his program. "The choir helps us show parents and the community that musical development is happening," he says, "even before children are proficient on instruments."

Some programs opt for including singing in musicianship classes rather than having separate vocal performing ensembles. This is the approach adopted by the [Conservatory Lab Charter School](#) (CLCS), led by Rebecca Levi. Employing the in-school model, CLCS holds musicianship classes during the day, to ensure that all students receive a strong foundation in singing. The youngest groups (Pre-K and K) have daily singing-based classes focused on folk, theatrical, and rock music; the repertoire of the older groups varies according to director.

Quoting the adage "If you can sing it, you can play it," [Lehigh Valley Program](#) Director Steven Liu describes his choral program as both a supplement to the orchestral program and a separate choral performing ensemble. All 54 students are in singing/musicianship classes; they are grouped according to their orchestra level,

and the ages in each group can range from first to tenth grade – an interesting challenge!

Inspired by the famous White Hands Choir of Venezuela, Steven created "Camp Hero" this past summer, for children with special needs [see October 2012 issue of The Ensemble]; the program involved a music teacher and a music therapist working with twenty deaf and hearing-impaired children. It was a great success, and he plans to include this component in his regular school-year schedule someday.



A student performs a solo in the choir portion of AMP's Spring Concert.
Photo: Anthony Westmoreland

Successfully operating orchestral programs for the past two years, the [Atlanta Music Project](#) (AMP) reinvents itself this year as a Sistema-inspired program that offers parallel orchestra and choral-based programs. AMP's three orchestra sites already include singing; but Director Dantes Rameau has launched a separate choral program, AMPlify (which I'm honored to lead!) as a way to broaden AMP's impact and to fill a perceived need in the community. "There's something wonderful when children sing," says Dantes. "As soon as they hit the first note, I look into the audience and see

tears in people's eyes." AMPlify will serve 50 children in southwest Atlanta this fall and will collaborate with AMP Orchestras for concerts.

Going north again, we find [Sister Cities Girlchoir](#), which includes fifty girls singing in West Philadelphia, a group of similar size in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia, and a third group in Camden, NJ, Philly's "sister city." The groups practice separately once or twice a week, and come together on Saturdays – not an easy feat, but certainly worth the effort, according to Director Alysia Lee. Alysia began with a small summer camp of twenty girls; this allowed her to gauge the children's musical ability and choose appropriate repertoire, as well as an opportunity to create a successful "singing culture" for the school year.

Clearly, we in the U.S. have invented many different ways to include singing in our programs. Let's all stay in touch – we have much to learn from one another!

FROM THE EDITOR

"Is El Sistema only for poor kids?"

I'm guessing that many readers of The Ensemble have been posed this question in the course of talking to people about the work you do. It comes at me frequently. We answer, "Usually, yes."

Most children in Venezuela's El Sistema are poor, although some are middle-class – and all comers are welcome, regardless of income. El Sistema's defining vision is that for impoverished children, highly engaged music-making in community can help disrupt the cycle of poverty. In the U.S., El Sistema-inspired programs have aimed primarily, and appropriately, at serving children in need.

But I found myself pondering that initial question recently as I prepared to give a speech about El Sistema at the annual convention of the New Jersey Association of Independent Schools. These schools are, by and large, strongholds of "the one percent," and their stewards tend to perceive them as standard-bearers of educational excellence. What could El Sistema have to offer them?

A number of things, I proposed. To academic cultures that value individual achievement above all else, El Sistema offers a learning culture based in community, with individual success and ensemble success deeply intertwined. To a scholastic system that treats students as competitors in a race for the best grades and best colleges, El Sistema offers an alternative paradigm: a network of support, rich in peer-learning and mentoring opportunities and based in empathic connection. To a curricular model that supports team-building only in the area of sports, El Sistema offers a different possibility: when an orchestra performs, no one loses.

And to school environments that tend to incubate stress, El Sistema offers Gustavo's famous proviso: "We never forget fun." What would happen if the academic environments of prestigious private schools were sabotaged – by joy? Would grades plummet and academic rigor evaporate? Or would achievement levels stay high, and morale even improve? The New Jersey educators were genuinely inspired, if also a bit daunted, by these questions.

Is El Sistema only for poor kids? Maybe not...

Tricia Tunstall

"To sing and play together means to intimately coexist toward perfection and excellence." – José Antonio Abreu

News Notes

The Josiah Quincy School Orchestra Program, located in Boston's Chinatown neighborhood, launches its second year with 70 student musicians in Kindergarten through 4th grade receiving one hour of general music and orchestral training every weekday before school, providing each child with a musically engaging jump-start to

the day. JQSOP is sponsored by the Josiah Quincy Elementary School, a K-5 Boston Public School with a commitment to educate the whole child. This year, the program will continue to offer community concerts in downtown Boston and will collaborate with other local El Sistema programs in their growing network. Recently, members of the Rimsky Orchestra received their first string instruments, and their teaching artists welcomed Lorrie Heagy for Take A Stand's Professional Development Workshop. JQSOP's Sibelius and Zimmer Orchestras will perform at Boston City Hall in December and House of Blues in January, as part of Boston Public Schools' annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration. For more information: Graciela Briceno: gbriceno@boston.k12.ma.us or: <http://jqsop.weebly.com>

You can register online for the Dec. 3-5 Symposium in Philadelphia in conjunction with a local residency by the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra. **Social Action Through Music Symposium: Breaking the Fourth Wall** will enable administrators and teachers in U.S. El Sistema inspired sites to reflect and inquire deeply together about what we know and need to learn as a movement. <http://elsistemasymposium.com>

Resources

New online resources you may want to explore:

- Here is a new site that follows the supercharged learning journeys of the ten current NEC Sistema Fellows: <http://sistemafellows.typepad.com>
- Marshall Marcus, a good friend to the U.S. movement and central figure in the worldwide growth, has posted some important and illuminating essays on



Lorrie Heagy, leading a professional development session at JQSOP.

Sistema Europe, Sistema Africa, and be sure to scroll down to "Time to Get Out the Measuring Spoons" on his blog: <http://marshallmarcus.wordpress.com>

- The LinkedIn site **Sistema Global** is a meeting place for colleagues around the world to meet. A lively new subgroup that focuses on questions of evaluation and research as arisen. Here are links to: 1) join Sistema Global in general with its many threads of discussion: <http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Sistema-Global-4182827/about>; and 2) join the Sistema Global Research Subgroup: <http://tinyurl.com/9nwumcl>

- Two excellent research resources: 1) A comprehensive essay **The Power of Music: Its Impact on the Intellectual, Social and Personal Development of Children and Young People** (to obtain, click on title, or [here](#)) by Professor Susan Hallam, of the Institute of Education at the Univ. of London and wife of Richard Hallam, a founding leader of In Harmony and Sistema England. 2) A page on Richard Hallam's website that collects useful essays and research, (including Susan's essay at the top). <http://www.dickhallam.co.uk/articles-publications-and-reports.php>

Contributing to the invigorated international discussion about coordinated research, Marshall Marcus has formed an archive to gather key documents in a Google Drive folder – open to everyone who wants to access and also to post research and evaluation onto. To get access to **SERA (Sistema Evaluation and Research Archive)** and find full information about the SERA site, go to <http://wp.me/Pohgn-g4> (or alternatively for the same page: <http://marshallmarcus.wordpress.com> and click on SERA on the drop down list on the El Sistema menu tab). You can also email Marshall a request at: admin@sistemaeurope.org

There is a **TED talk** (21 minutes) everyone involved our work should watch, **on the importance of body posture** in changing people's sense of power and chances of success. We teach posture in musical development, and Amy Cuddy (a social scientist who works with MBA students) affirms and expands what we know: http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are.html

Choral-Orchestral Partnering

by María Guinand, Artistic Director, Fundación Schola Cantorum de Venezuela.

Choral music is one of the most effective and stimulating ways to introduce children and youth to the whole world of music. In El Sistema programs, the choir, like the orchestra, offers an essential space to learn many values from an early age, such as harmony in teamwork, self-esteem, and excellence as a product of discipline and concentration.

Choral compositions offer opportunities for the use of the full body, including eurhythmic movements; the education of our own instrument, the voice; and the development of the internal ear. In an age of increasing isolation among young people, and widespread overuse of computers and mobile phones, such opportunities are more urgent than ever. Choral music can be a great tool in general education today, if presented as an activity that attracts children and teenagers.

In programs where the study of orchestral instruments and the orchestra itself are the main interests, incorporating choral work can be a challenge. However, the choir can be a very useful introductory step to teach general musicianship and the practice of working together.

We take it for granted that we can all speak and hear. But we need to make children aware of the beauty of being able to use their voices well, and we need to accompany this training with eurhythmic movements and body expression. In our experience, there is no doubt that children who are exposed to such training become more focused and more secure in themselves, and understand music from a very different perspective.

For forty-five years, the Fundación Schola Cantorum de Venezuela has devoted itself to developing choral music in our country and region by creating model ensembles and many children's choirs in low-income schools, training conductors and choral teachers, and stimulating the creation of new repertoire – in a word, by giving choral music its own space in the musical culture of our country.

After so many years working closely with El Sistema, we are happy to see that the Sistema is expanding ways for all children who want to become professional singers, music educators, and choral conductors. Thus children and youth choirs are being developed alongside the orchestras. We can see that the choir, as well as the orchestra, transforms lives!

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"There's always music to be made in a place where there's social isolation and people feel disconnected. I knew we would find passionate young singers here." – Alysia Lee, Artistic Director & Founder, Sister Cities Girlchoir, Philadelphia PA/Camden NJ