

## Planning for a U.S. Sistema Youth Orchestra

By Mark Woodward, Artistic Director/Conductor, *Bravo Youth Orchestras, Portland OR*

On the first Friday in October, education leaders from Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Longy School of Music of Bard College, along with 12 of the newly announced "International Teaching Faculty" (teaching artists chosen from Venezuela and El Sistema-inspired programs across the U.S.), met in Los Angeles for a three-day retreat. The purpose of the gathering was to bring teachers into the design process for the launch of a series of national youth orchestra festivals for El Sistema-inspired programs in the U.S. The L.A. Phil's Take A Stand collaborators include Longy School of Music of Bard College, Bard College, and the site-partner Aspen Music Festival and School.

The first national Take A Stand Festival will be approached in stages over the next two years. There will be two five-day regional Take A Stand Festivals in 2016: at Bard College on the Hudson River in June, and in the mountains of Aspen, Colorado in August. These regional festivals will help shape the inaugural national Take A Stand Festival held in Los Angeles in August 2017. The current venues and budgets have the capacity to support one hundred students at each festival, including all costs for travel and accommodations.

But what exactly should happen at these festivals, and how can their impact extend to students who are not participating in them? Here are some of the thoughts from the retreat, of which I was honored to be a part.

First, we explored two fundamental questions: "Whom are we serving?" and "What are the values that should guide the project?" Annual surveys conducted by El Sistema USA (see FY2014 Census Report) indicate that over half the programs in the U.S. are less than four years old. Therefore, the regional festivals will be designed as intermediate orchestras, with middle school students as the median-age participants.

Participants agreed that the festivals should represent both the geographical diversity of our programs and the cultural and racial diversity of our students. In addition, repertoire selection should support the priority of inclusion by emphasizing pieces and arrangements that offer vigorous parts for all participants. There will also be singing activities that reinforce the repertoire.

While on-site participation in the festival is limited to a fixed number of students, a robust application process

has the potential to engage and motivate all students of our programs. This process should include early communication with students and families, focus on musical excellence, guided student self-reflection with



*Festival faculty (and staff) during their planning retreat.*

written or video-recorded personal statements, and opportunities for ensembles and classrooms to aspire toward common goals. Teacher recommendations will also be a strong component of the process.

The final day of the faculty retreat ended with a seven-hour "workshop festival" for the International Teaching Faculty and one hundred YOLA students. The faculty had their first chance to work as a teaching team and implement some of their ideas for next year's regional festivals. The afternoon culminated in an explosive family concert with Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King" and Brahms's "Hungarian Dance No. 1."

The faculty retreat was followed by the Take A Stand Symposium, which began Monday afternoon with a site-visit to Youth Orchestra LA (YOLA) at LACHSA. During the next two days, participants explored the idea of "raising the bar" of musical and social excellence within the context of the upcoming regional and national festivals. A variety of sessions and forums enabled the conversations that began at the faculty retreat to extend to the movement at large. There were also sessions on instrument teaching, musicianship, and choir, led by the International Teaching Faculty. The conference ended with an all-Beethoven concert featuring advanced YOLA students, fifty teaching artists and directors from programs across the country, and members of the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra.

Throughout the Take A Stand events, it was clear that the value of inclusion – and its implementation in our local programs and regional and national festivals – is one of our greatest strengths. It is the act of listening to one another that connects us, and it is listening that will make our new national youth orchestra festivals a powerful voice for our students and their passion.

## FROM THE EDITOR

Marshall Marcus, the President of *Sistema Europe*, once said to us that there are two kinds of orchestral virtuosity. The one we're most familiar with is *virtuosity of technique*, long the highest standard of the orchestra world. "But the Simon Bolivar and other great orchestras of the Venezuelan Sistema," he said, "have taught us about another kind: *virtuosity of communication*. They specialize in a truly virtuosic ability to communicate emotionally and passionately through music."

As I reflect on the conversations about Take A Stand's initiative to form a national Sistema youth orchestra, I'm thinking about Marshall's insight. Conference participants discussed how the process of forming the orchestra should balance Sistema's core goals of excellence and inclusion, with alternatives that ranged from prioritizing children with the most dramatic life-difficulty stories to prioritizing musical technique and creating a knock-their-socks-off ensemble. Neither extreme seems right for us. To lead with social development drama would detract from the musical focus of the endeavor. On the other hand, we can't aim for sheer technical brilliance, since in our young field, most programs' oldest students are middle-schoolers.

But we don't have to abandon the idea of virtuosity entirely. Our students are already learning that performing is about reaching audiences with expressivity and passion. So what we can do, even at this early developmental stage, is to prioritize our kids' creative capacity for musical communication.

I vividly recall a performance by the Youth Orchestra of Colombia in which the kids arrived onstage with a speedy, choreographed precision and launched into their first piece immediately, before they sat down – as though they just couldn't wait to play for us. I don't remember whether they played perfectly; what I remember is being exhilarated by the hit of their feeling about the music.

The process of creating a national orchestra represents an important step for the U.S. Sistema movement; it's a key moment in defining our identity as a national field. Suppose we were to adopt the goal of creating an orchestra that is about the virtuosity of communication – making that a guiding priority for choices about selection, preparation, repertoire, and the nature of the performance events? Building a National Sistema Orchestra of the United States that is virtuosic in communication: we could do that.

*Tricia Tunstall*

**"There has never been a youth orchestra in Venezuela. So we are going to make one."  
– José Antonio Abreu, 1975**

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

## News Notes

**Sistema Tulsa** was launched in September by the Boston Avenue United Methodist Church in concert with supporting community partners including the Tulsa Public Schools. Starting with 47 students, it will continue grow into the new year. The daily after-school program teaches all symphonic instruments and hosts a faculty of



*Sistema Tulsa students try instruments in their first week.* Photo: Shari Goodwin

8 teachers. Housed in a National Historic Landmark church, it featured Wynton Marsalis as its first visiting artist. The innovative program is led by Sistema Fellow José-Luis Hernandez-Estrada. Contact: <http://sistematulsa.org>

On November 15th, David France, Founder of Revolution of Hope, is hosting a **free daylong conference in Boston for string teachers** who work in El Sistema-inspired (and El Sistema-spirited) programs. This is part of a series of free regional professional development convenings. To find out more and to register: <http://bit.ly/1KO6GGc>

**Indiegogo**, the world's largest crowdfunding platform, has charged nonprofits to launch projects on their pages. Their new program **Generosity** lets nonprofits use the crowdfunding service for free. To find out more: <https://go.indiegogo.com/blog/2015/10/generosity-by-indiegogo.html> In the same field, **Kickstarter** just changed from being a for-profit organization to being a PBC (Public Benefit Corporation), which legally requires to them to be defined by their public good, not their earnings. They pledge to invest 5% of post-tax earnings in arts education and social justice programs.

## Resources

The October National Endowment for the Arts webinar focused on the Chula Vista School District and its partnership with the Community Opus Project of the San Diego Youth Symphony (**the first such NEA webinar ever to focus on an El Sistema**

**partnership**). It has been archived, so anyone can view it. Go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqF07c3tMhg>

In the October issue, we urged readers to mark November 3 on their calendars to attend a **webinar about Sistema Scotland's recent research study** – perhaps the most important study in our field to date. To register/join at noon (Eastern Standard Time) go to: <http://tinyurl.com/qhkr2pk>

This short article from *Education Week* focuses on the ways that **out of school time activities**, especially those with more frequent participation, **ease the transition from elementary school to middle school** for low income urban adolescents. The "out of school time" feature seems to be critical, because in-school activities did not show the same benefits for students. Researcher Kate Schwartz says the key to the success of such programs is nurturing identity, competence and shared meaning. <http://tinyurl.com/ojib5qy>

For two years, **Animating Democracy** (a program of Americans for the Arts) has partnered with the **Art, Culture, and Social Justice Network (ACSJN)** and the Nathan Cummings Foundation to implement the **Evaluation Learning Lab** for arts and social change projects and programs, measuring social impact, evaluating artistic/aesthetic dimensions, and equalizing power in evaluation. They have created a **theory of change** and sponsored two convenings, and have just completed a blog salon led by nine of their members. Read their thoughts about crafting successful evaluation at <http://blog.americansforthearts.org/categories/blog-salon-category/evaluation-learning-lab>

**Greg Sandow** – author of *Rebirth: The Future of Classical Music*, faculty member at Juilliard, and busy consultant – is a progressive thinker and visionary writer about the classical music world. He has offered **free private consultations** to leaders of El Sistema-inspired programs. To schedule a half-hour with him, write: [greg@gregsandow.com](mailto:greg@gregsandow.com).

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## A National Orchestra

*By Mariesther Alvarez, Co-Director, Boston String Academy*

We are making history! For the first time in the United States, there will be a National El Sistema Youth Orchestra.

I remember the first time I performed as a member of the National Youth Orchestra of Venezuela. I was 13 years old, and the event was a performance for Pope John Paul II. That experience marked my life. I was immersed in intensive orchestra training with amazing fellow players, working on a challenging and fantastic repertoire. It was like another world; I felt I was part of something huge, something transcendental! I became friends with people from other parts of the country, which would have been impossible otherwise. It didn't matter how different our backgrounds were; we became one big family making music together.

My parents were very proud that my sister and I were both part of the orchestra. They would not miss a concert! Usually parents influence their children regarding career choices, but in our case it was the opposite. We had such an influence on them that they started taking music classes at the núcleo; they learned music history, theory, piano and were part of a choir.

Unlike El Sistema in Venezuela, programs in the U.S. are all independent from one another; they don't belong to a single institution. So the U.S. National Youth Orchestra opens the opportunity to bring them all together.

Even though we will not be able to fit every single student, programs from many regions will be represented by a selected group of young musicians, who after having a mind-blowing experience will return to their programs with a heightened enthusiasm that will inspire their classmates and everyone in their communities. In that way, this national orchestra's impact will reach farther than its members, raising the musical level nationwide.

In Venezuela and the U.S., the creation of a national youth orchestra responds to the same need: to unite children across the states, enabling them to share their talents and build a sense of family and unity, thus yielding deep social benefits and creating a model that will inspire thousands of children around the country for generations to come!