

Developing Creative Capacity

by Andrea Landin, Program Director of *New West Symphony Harmony Project*, and Megan Moran, Lead Teaching Artist with *El Sistema Colorado*

El Sistema-inspired programs aspire to help students develop the capacity to lead happy and fulfilling lives and to positively affect their communities. An essential part of this aspiration is that children must be able to make choices that are genuine, free, and uniquely their own. Alice Kanack, founder of the [Creative Ability Development \(CAD\) method](#), defines creativity as essentially “the art of making choices.” Twenty years ago, Kanack began to develop CAD, based on the belief that creativity can and should be fostered in children, and that musical improvisation is a means of doing so. The CAD formula is: freedom of choice (or freedom from criticism) + disciplined practice and repetition of making choices = creative ability.

This past summer, Alice Kanack visited New West Symphony Harmony Project in Ventura, CA, for a two-day workshop on CAD. Since then, teachers have been finding ways to incorporate this methodology into their classes, from beginning strings to advanced chamber music and jazz. Communication between students has notably improved, since a unique connection is formed when students improvise together. Students also play more freely and are more engaged when they are making their own musical choices.

Other Sistema-inspired programs around the country have also been opening the doors to creativity development, utilizing techniques such as free or guided improvisation, creative collaboration, and integrated arts. The El Paso-based program [Tocando Music Project](#) partnered with the [El Paso Museum of Art](#) and [Carnegie Hall's Play USA](#) to provide students with a free and guided improvisation experience that explored connections between music and visual art. Since many students and teachers had not improvised before, the common language of these two media – including terms like line, color, impressionism, and realism – was used to help guide conversations and musical goals, based on a curriculum established by museum staff and Tocando teaching artists. The exploration was such a success that Tocando has continued the collaboration, in the belief that the parallels between life and improvisation, and visual art and music, are too important not to incorporate on a regular basis.

At [OrchKids](#) in Baltimore, creativity development is featured in both their more traditionally structured ensembles, such as brass and jazz bands, and in their

creative music-making groups. The approach to music-making is based in creativity – whether through their intensive Creative Connections project, playing “Frere Jacques,” or writing a new composition with students. Students are comfortable taking risks and soloing, sharing their ideas, and collaborating in a non-hierarchical way with classmates and teachers because of this ethos. Every performance strives to be musically-driven and artistic for students, incorporating groove, harmony, improvisation, and arrangement. This allows for student ownership and engagement, and aids in giving voice to the communities OrchKids is serving.

In the birthplace of jazz, New Orleans-based [Make Music NOLA](#) has been strengthening the jazz aspect of its string program, in addition to growing its woodwind and brass jazz ensembles. After initial learning in a Suzuki framework, string students dive into improvisation with an arrangement of the tune “Shoo Fly,” first learning the melody and then experimenting with how to improvise in different sections of the piece, just as jazz players do with a standard. In incorporating jazz into programming for young string players, teaching artists at Make Music NOLA have also been able to discuss with students the importance of the role violinists historically played in New Orleans dance bands. Right here, at the intersection of Sistema, Suzuki, and improvisation, is “Suzuki jazz.”

While many Sistema-inspired programs across the country hold special workshops or design creative projects that incorporate improvisation into rehearsals, it is rare to find programs that take a curriculum-based approach to developing creativity through improvisation, devoting as much time and energy to this goal as they do to instrumental technique and traditional repertoire. One reason for this may be the lack of training, resources, and comfort level that many teaching artists have in the area of improvisation. Nonetheless, the idea of improvisation as a tool for developing creativity is remarkably similar to the idea of using music as a tool for social transformation. It is worth the investment of time and energy to address both the analytical and the creative sides of our students' brains, especially in our rapidly evolving world. When both parts of the brain develop to their full potential, young people have the ability to work together with powerful results, and to become free-thinking agents of change.

FROM THE EDITOR

Our guest columnist emphasizes one of the most appealing aspects of teaching in Sistema-inspired programs: the collegiality of working with other teaching artists, in contrast to the standard situation of the in-school music teacher, who is frequently the only musician in the school. This has me thinking about a more general issue: how should Sistema-inspired programs connect and interact with in-school music teachers?

Eric and I have sometimes envisioned Sistema-inspired programs as “generous laboratories.” Sistema teachers have more time, more pedagogical autonomy, more access to students' families, and more staff reflection time than do most in-school music teachers. These advantages make the Sistema classroom a potent laboratory for experimenting with the musical and social dimensions of various pedagogies, curricula, and repertoire.

It can be difficult to figure out how such experiments can relate to the conventional music classroom setting. Still, we feel certain that some of the findings of the “generous lab” of Sistema can be valuable for in-school teachers – and that the boots-on-the-ground experience of in-school teachers can be valuable to our teaching artists.

If you are a teaching artist in a Sistema-inspired program at a venue where there's also an in-school music teacher, it's important to think about how you and that teacher can connect. You need to be as relentlessly positive and generous with these fellow teachers as you are with students who are wary beginners in your program. Can you reach out to them as colleagues who share a mission and some students? Invite them to your students' performances? Can you attend theirs? Even invite them to jam with you and your colleagues?

I see these relationships as important, even crucial, because I believe the Sistema movement in the U.S. will flourish only if it is widely connected to school districts and in-school arts initiatives. We need to frame our movement not as a special, insular pedagogy, but as a flexible model that supports and augments in-school arts efforts, and that adds important dimensions of access, inclusion and intensity. For other music educators, as well as for students, then: radical inclusion!

Tricia Tunstall

“The solution is not to run away from a place. The solution is to change the place. You have to have projects first and the resources will come.” – Favio Chávez, Founder of The Recycled Orchestra of Catuera

News Notes

NYO2 is Carnegie Hall/Weill Music Institute's new summer program for talented students ages 14-17 from groups underserved by and underrepresented in the classical orchestral field. After an extraordinarily successful inaugural year, [applications for the second season of NYO2](#), a sister program to the National Youth Orchestra of the USA, are now open. Coming together just outside NYC for three weeks (all expenses paid) starting

in early July, NYO2 players will work with superb faculty and professional musicians, and perform with players from The Philadelphia Orchestra. For application information, go to: <http://tinyurl.com/jvhkkv>



NYO2 side-by-side at Verizon Hall with Philadelphia Orchestra musicians; Josue Chavez, trumpet player from YOLA, in foreground. Photo: Will Figg.

The [Canadian Broadcasting Company's new 45-minute documentary](#) telling the story of Ottawa's Orkidstra program is now available for viewing (only for Canadians) at <http://watch.cbc.ca/absolutely-canadian/season-2016/episode-4/38e815a-00acb055c00>

Resources

Createquity is a web-based resource of penetrating commentary and reliable research-based observations on the arts and arts education, now with over 50 writers contributing to the collective knowledge gathering for the field. Their recent essay [Making Sense of Cultural Equity](#) is perhaps the most clarifying thinking we have seen on this major trend in our field: <http://createquity.com/2016/08/making-sense-of-cultural-equity>

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The National Endowment for the Arts recently launched two milestones: [Creativity Connects: Trends and Conditions Affecting U.S. Artists](#) and the [Bright Spots interactive digital graphic](#) (showing innovative connections between arts and non-arts sectors) – both part of the [NEA's 50th anniversary initiative Creativity Connects](#). The publication marks the culmination of a year and a half of work by the NEA staff and its research partner, the Center for Cultural Innovation. Both at: <https://www.arts.gov/50th/creativity-connects>

The Thriving Cultures program of [The Surdna Foundation](#) believes that communities with robust arts and culture are more cohesive and prosperous, and benefit from the diversity of their residents. Grants are provided to nonprofit organizations in four categories: Teens Artistic Advancement, Artists Engaging in Social Change, Artists and Economic Development, or Community Engaged Design. Online inquiries about this program are accepted at any time. Contact: <http://www.surdna.org/what-we-fund/thriving-cultures/artists-engaging-in-social-change.html>

[Puffin Foundation West](#) seeks to open doors of artistic expression by providing grants to artist-activists and arts organizations often excluded from mainstream opportunities due to race, gender, or social philosophy. The foundation gives special consideration to communities and school districts underserved by the arts. They consider projects from individual artists and organizations working within the arts, and nonprofit educational, cultural, and social justice organizations. Applications accepted now through Dec. 16; to study the guidelines, go to: <http://puffinwest.org/2016-grant-application>

The [Arts Education Partnership](#) (AEP) has released its newest publication, [ESSA: Mapping Opportunities for the Arts](#), as a companion piece to the previously released Education Commission of the States' report [ESSA: Quick Guides on Top Issues](#). Both are good guides for arts programs to tap opportunities in the new national education law. Find these and other publications, (and their invaluable [artsedsearch](#)) at: <http://www.aep-arts.org>

Teaching Artist Collegiality

By Patrick Hudson, Director of Music at the Kipp Adelante Preparatory Academy, San Diego, CA

In 2012, after graduating from college, I moved to Boston and stumbled upon the El Sistema world in the heart of Chinatown. I joined a team of musicians who were five years ahead of me in the field, and whose musicianship exceeded my own. When I moved back to San Diego the following year, I was again able to work with a Sistema-inspired program, and challenged to grow by those around me. In those years, my cello was more important than my computer, and I was using it daily.

For the three years I worked in the El Sistema world, talented musicians surrounded me. Their ideas and talents pushed me to be better. We were constantly sharing those ideas in practice. With many chances to watch my fellow teaching artists at work and absorb their tricks into my arsenal, and with their help in connecting me to new performing opportunities, the atmosphere created in the Sistema world was a deeply, distinctly musical one.

In 2015, I stepped into an in-school music classroom, excited to have my own program. During the past two years, this experience has pushed me to grow, but in different areas, for example classroom management and cultural relevancy. I have seen myself develop a stronger presence as a teacher. I've learned how to run a program, and what it's like to be the one in charge of a concert. I've been blessed with the opportunity to change a program's curriculum in ways that I think better suit the needs of the students I teach.

But I also feel a lack of something I hadn't thought about in college, or in El Sistema: the opportunity to interact with other musicians on a daily basis. When I was working as a teaching artist, it was easy to focus on the sectionals, the individual lessons, and the diversity of programming. These were the things I consciously celebrated as joys of the job.

In my current job, there are few opportunities to interact with other musicians and music teachers. I have realized that I miss these opportunities, and that I took for granted the awesome opportunity to be around other teaching artists who share my passion for music education. Personally, I have begun to try and replicate these opportunities in my life. And I have a new appreciation for how El Sistema, which has developed through the shared talents of musicians striving to better our world through music education, has along the way created a program that is remarkably rich in collegiality among teaching artists.

"By concentration, I mean a particular state of awareness: penetrating, unified, and focused, yet also permeable and open. ... In the wholeheartedness of concentration, world and self begin to cohere. With that state comes an enlarging: of what may be known, what may be felt, what may be done." – Jane Hirshfield, poet