

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

Movement, Dalcroze Eurhythmics & Sistema

By Julie Davis, Music Director, Bridge Boston Charter School, Boston, MA

You're conducting a third-grade orchestra rehearsal, and while working on a difficult passage with the lower strings, you notice a violinist repeatedly tipping her chair back, rocking her body on two legs of her chair. You ask her to stop, not only in fear she will injure herself but also because this movement is disrespectful to the work of other orchestra members.

Fast forward to the next rehearsal, after you've read Eric Jensen's book *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, and instead of reprimanding your young violinist for her rudeness, you recognize that her specific vestibular-activation motion is actually the brain's natural response to stimulate alertness and attention. Your student is not demonstrating signs of boredom but in fact the opposite, an effort to regain focus by moving her body. You put down the baton and ask the third graders to rest their instruments while you re-focus their music learning to incorporate their bodies.

Books such as *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* offer us valuable research-based insight about actively engaging a young student's brain. Jensen emphasizes the link between movement and learning, and argues that incorporating physical activity into lessons greatly improves cognitive processing: "Movement can be an effective cognitive strategy to strengthen learning, improve memory and retrieval, and enhance learner motivation and morale."

Our own classical training often makes it daunting to diverge from the conventional model of still, stiff-backed orchestra players. We sometimes tend to mimic the professional symphonic orchestra, asking our young students to sit stoically in their chairs, urging only their eyes to move with the conductor's baton while their feet stay firmly on the floor. Where does movement fit into this rehearsal, and what does it look like?

Movement, of course, is not a novel concept to anyone who knows El Sistema Venezuela. One could argue that the excitement and effectiveness of Sistema orchestras are due in part to the vigor with which the musicians move while performing. However, while many have studied the musical pedagogy and curriculum within Venezuela's El Sistema núcleos, we know little about how or whether Venezuelan musicians are formally taught to incorporate movement with classical music. While exploring the Venezuelan model, we can also

benefit by drawing on great pedagogical traditions that rely on movement to help us begin to find our own ways of incorporating the benefit of movement as a stimulating means of music learning. Dalcroze Eurhythmics is one important such tradition.

About a century before the neuro-scientific research boasted the benefits of movement-based learning, Emile Jacques-Dalcroze developed the Dalcroze Eurhythmics approach of music education. A Professor of Harmony at the Conservatory of Geneva in 1892, Dalcroze strongly believed that a vital component of developing musicianship is training the body to feel the muscular sensations of time and energy as they are manifested in space. In Eurhythmics, the whole body becomes an instrument and 'performs,' or translates into movement, some aspect of the music. Students who study the Eurythmic Method internalize one musical component - duration, tempo, weight, dynamics, accentuation - into a kinesthetic image that can be recalled in future instances of reading, performing, or creating music. Eric Jensen would applaud Dalcroze's insight in activating the physical body and nervous system when teaching musical concepts.

What kinds of activities comprise a Eurhythmics experience? Students should have the opportunity to respond freely to music, improvising ways of stepping, clapping, swinging with their whole bodies to express the musical message they hear. Students may also be asked to move their bodies or props (balls, scarves, etc) to music. Activities often emphasize social interaction, heightening students' awareness not only of their own movements, but also of movements within an ensemble of participants.

The best way to learn the essence of the Dalcroze approach, and lead Eurhythmic activities in an orchestral rehearsal or sectional, is to participate in an Eurhythmic Workshop or Summer Institute, and supplement the experience with one of multiple method books. *Dalcroze Eurhythmics in Today's Music Classroom*, by Virginia Mead, known as "The Green Book" by seasoned Dalcroze teachers, serves as an excellent starting point in outlining movement-based activities that correspond to specific musical concepts. Elementary students and students in the upper grades can learn skills that will help them perform in an orchestra while incorporating movements of the body - making both neuroscientists and music educators smile.



Bridge Boston Charter School first graders swimming with Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*. Photo: Julie Davis

FROM THE EDITOR

In this issue, our guest writers explore the question of adapting Suzuki and Dalcroze methods for El Sistema-inspired programs. Sistema's compatibility with various pedagogies is a much-discussed issue among music educators, who sometimes see Sistema as a pedagogy in competition with others.

But the fact is that El Sistema has proven to be capacious in this regard: it can absorb many pedagogical approaches because it is a set of principles, of fundamental assumptions and understandings, rather than a strict pedagogy. In traveling widely to observe El Sistema programs in different countries, I have had the occasion to see children playing Orff instruments in Sistema Denmark; children dancing with Dalcroze-esque movements in Sistema Italy; in many places, children playing Suzuki repertoire; and even, in Sistema Bosnia, a child having an almost-individual piano lesson while another child played accordion and seven fascinated children watched and listened. (This last - very simply, because those were the only instruments around. Most of this young Sistema program's work is choral.) In every case, the particular pedagogy in play seemed to synchronize naturally with a Sistema learning environment and ethos of inclusion and group activity.

The intersection of El Sistema with Suzuki is especially interesting, because the Suzuki method has its origins in the quest of Shin'ishi Suzuki to transform the lives of Japanese children devastated by the Second World War. Suzuki's writings are sometimes strikingly resonant with those of Maestro Abreu: "I want to make good citizens," he wrote. "If a child hears fine music from the day of his birth and learns to play it himself, he acquires a beautiful heart."

Suzuki believed strongly that music has the power to expand people's emotional sensibilities, and he saw comprehensive musical education as a way to restore Japanese children's sense of wholeness, self-confidence, and connection with others. Including Suzuki methods within Sistema teaching, therefore, is really honoring a long-standing resonance.

In general, I think that teaching artists who adapt Suzuki, Dalcroze or other pedagogies to Sistema environments are examples of the flexibility that characterizes the best Sistema-inspired teaching. We're making small and large adaptations all the time, searching for what works best in specific situations, and adapting accordingly. By absorbing the best of many pedagogies, we're giving them new vitality as part of the inclusive, vigorous, and joyful learning environment that is El Sistema.

Tricia Tunstall

An interviewer once asked Maestro Abreu if he ever felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task. "Yes, sometimes, at the end of a long day. But as Pascal said, 'The greatest thing God ever created was the next day.'"

News Notes

Starting with an exploratory program with fifteen 1st-3rd graders a year ago in [Pittsburgh's Hill District, Orchestra on the Hill](#) grows to a full program this fall.

Founder Roy Sonne, a longtime Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra violinist, along with founding program designer/teacher Jim

Charleton, a 30-year public school music teacher, have added new students, strings, and advanced musicianship to their original start at St. Benedict the Moor School. Meanwhile, with a nearby new partner, the program will start with twenty 1st-3rd graders at the C.A.R.E.S. (Children/Adult Recreational and Educational Services) Center, an established after-school center, on bucket band/music fundamentals, plus a group of 4th-6th graders on strings/music fundamentals. The sites are close enough that the students can play together often. Contact: roysonne@aol.com

The Leading Note Foundation in Ottawa has introduced a [new concept for the field](#) in announcing that renowned international pianist Angela Hewitt will be the first [Ambassador for OrKidstra](#). The several-year relationship has culminated in this role in which Ms. Hewitt will lend her name to advocacy efforts, contribute performances, and work with students. OrKidstra leaders note that her honorary position affirms the professional standards their program is achieving; and they are kicking off the announcement with a joint concert. To find out more: ambassador@leadingnotefoundation.org

On Sept. 23, the [Longy School of Music of Bard College Sistema Side by Side Orchestra](#), comprised of 100 students from several programs in the Boston/Massachusetts area, performed for José Antonio Abreu at an [honorary ceremony](#) at Bard College.

Research from [Nina Kraus at Northwestern University](#) with the [Harmony Project](#) (a lead partner in YOLA at Expo) studied the impact of after-school music education on at-risk children's nervous systems and found that music lessons may help them develop language and reading skills. The study is the first to document the influence of after-school music



Jim Charleton leads rhythm games at Orchestra on the Hill.
Photo: OOTH.

education on the brains of disadvantaged children compared to affluent children receiving private lessons, and affirms that Sistema and Sistema-like music education is a promising way to close the achievement gap. <http://tinyurl.com/q8skavf>

Resources

The Santa Rosa (CA) Symphony has written an excellent [Simply Strings Faculty Handbook](#) that includes program descriptions, curricular frameworks, templates, and forms. It was created to align vision and practice, giving a common language for goals and priorities to enable teachers to flexibly bring their diverse perspectives into consistency and coherence to benefit students. The author, Community Engagement Manager Christina Penrose, offers it to anyone in the El Sistema-inspired movement. To request a copy: cpenrose@santarosasympphony.com. "Simply Strings Faculty Manual" is also available at Rep + Resource on Sistema Global: <http://sistemaglobal.org/search/simply+strings>."

The [Surdna Foundation](#) has launched the [Artists Engaging in Social Change program](#) that promotes the potential of artists as catalysts for social change. The request for proposals (RFP) goes to individual artists, culture bearers and nonprofit arts organizations to support projects developed in response to communities' specific challenges and to support artists and organizations whose long-term, deeply-rooted work has increased social engagement without necessarily being explicitly "activist." Grants range from \$25,000 to \$150,000 over one or two year periods. There is a November 12 deadline, and a free webinar on the RFP on October 21 at 1:00 p.m. (EDT). For more information go to: www.surdna.org/rfp

[MUSAIC](#), a new internet resource, has just been launched by New World Symphony in partnership with nine other conservatories. It provides many short videos of leading musicians and educators which may prove useful and inspiring for El Sistema students around the world. It allows for interactive engagement as well: musaic.nws.edu

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Suzuki in El Sistema

by *Shanna Lin, Curriculum Coordinator/ Viola Teacher, Paterson Music Project, Paterson NJ*

While the Suzuki Method is usually considered the leading methodology for beginning level instruments, many people have the impression that it's incompatible with El Sistema. For one reason, they think of Suzuki as a "private lesson" method; for another, they believe that since the initial emphasis is on rote teaching, note reading is taught much later. Ensemble playing is the core of El Sistema philosophy, they argue. And how can you play in orchestra without strong reading skills?

However, I think that with some adjustments, Suzuki and Sistema can complement each other. It's worth the effort, because Suzuki adds value to our work.

Suzuki's greatest advantage is that it provides a long list of technique-building, beautiful pieces that children around the world can play. Because of the frequency of Sistema instruction, students can easily remember the music. Dan Trahey, Artistic Director of [OrchKids](#), remarks that it is great for string students have a "songbook" they can all easily play together. At the first El Sistema New Jersey Alliance concert, Miki Hatcher, Artistic Director of [CHAMPS](#) in Newark, NJ, noticed students from different programs spontaneously playing together when they realized they knew the same songs.

The students at Paterson Music Project are always eager to learn new Suzuki songs because they can be mastered quickly, and therefore performances can happen more frequently. At PMP our violins, violas and cellos play the songs in the same key so that they can play together in orchestra. For beginning students, it's a great way to introduce ensemble playing without the pressure of having different parts.

For this method to work in El Sistema settings, it is important to include reading activities that allow students to develop necessary skills for orchestra playing. At PMP we perform Suzuki songs in unison from memory, then play 2-3 part songs with music. It's very possible for students to develop both their ears and reading abilities simultaneously from the start, beginning to create complete musicians from day one.

I strongly believe that the Suzuki method can be a great addition to any El Sistema-inspired program curriculum. It's a simple way to provide students with music that is wonderful to perform and also connects them to a larger network of musicians. How great it would be for all our beginning students to be able to come together and play!

**"Our children have so much music in them. If we show them the path, they can do anything!"
- Arturo Marquez, composer (of Danzon #2, among many other masterpieces)**