

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

Side by Side with Something New

By Elizabeth Moltroup, Program Director, *Paterson Music Project, Paterson NJ*

This past summer, as students and teachers across North America headed to beaches, pools and air-conditioned havens, many El Sistema students took to the road with their instruments. Three programs in particular offered unique experiences for students to collaborate with students from other places and find commonalities with people who were at first strangers. In each situation, an intense musical environment was the starting point for creating new bonds and friendships.

El Sistema New Jersey Alliance (ESNJA) held a 3-day sleep-away camp in rural Princeton-Blairstown. Almost 80 students from five urban programs across the state – [Sister Cities Girlchoir](#), [Union City Music Project \(UCMP\)](#), [Paterson Music Project \(PMP\)](#), [NJSO CHAMPS](#), and [Sonic Explorations](#) in Orange – slept in cabins, experienced

the outdoors, and rehearsed for an outdoor concert at the end. For many students, it was their first time in close contact with nature; they canoed, swam, hiked, roasted marshmallows, and did team-building activities. ESNJA Project Manager Shanna Lin noted the immense joy and freedom students experienced spending the three days outside, free to run, play, and create with their peers. After the outdoor activities,

students headed to rehearsals. Samuel Marchan, Music Director of UCMP, said, “It was great for the students to spend time together and bond during the non-musical activities, because those experiences transferred into the orchestra and choir rehearsals.”

Meanwhile, a few states north in Massachusetts, 85 students from nucleos from across Boston, Miami, Mexico, and Venezuela met together for the two-week-long [El Sistema Summer Academy](#), hosted at the [Longy School of Music of Bard College](#), Cambridge Campus. During the 8-hour days, students participated in classes such as orchestra, sectionals, musical theater, and African drumming. The program culminated in two performances at Longy’s Edward M. Pickman Hall and at Harvard Square in Cambridge. The days were pedagogically intense, according to Karen Zorn, President of the Longy School. “It’s important for the kids to see what happens when they work really hard,” she said. “They play repertoire that is brand-new

to them, and prepare it in two weeks. It’s a good opportunity to show kids how much they improve in an intense program in a short period of time.” The Academy was also an opportunity for exciting cultural exchanges between diverse cultures. Longy School Chief of Staff Kalen Ratzlaff said that by the end, many students from the U.S. were translating between Spanish and English for their peers.

Another such opportunity came the way of nine members of [OrKidstra](#), in Ottawa, who traveled from Canada to Sweden to work with young musicians from eight other countries and to perform side-by-side with the [Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra](#). The Canadian students spent rehearsals, meals, and free time together

with kids from all over the world. There were often three languages going on in one room at the same time. The students took turns writing blog posts each day. Fifteen-year-old-OrKidstra student Rinila Haridas said, “At first it was confusing meeting students who didn’t speak the same language, but we communicated a lot through actions and gestures.” Gareth Luke, also from OrKidstra, wrote about the camp’s opening

ceremony: “It was heartwarming to see so many people use music, motions and sounds as a way to join hands together. Seeing so many people from around the world who share the same goal is truly amazing.”

Musically, students were challenged and motivated by preparing for the final side-by-side concert. Tina Fedeski, OrKidstra Executive and Artistic Director, says, “There was an intensity we don’t normally get in the program at home.” The students also got to experience Swedish culture – the meatballs, they reported, are much better than the ones from Ikea!

All three of these summer programs captured the spirit of El Sistema. It’s joyful and inspiring when students and teachers go outside of their everyday contexts to create and collaborate in intense musical environments with new people. It expands our sense of self and our perspective on the world, and reminds us that we are part of something bigger, working toward a shared goal.



Campers Rahsaa Johnson (left) and Samoy Gordon (right) from the PMP. Photo: Shanna Lin

FROM THE EDITOR

Summer 2015 was a peripatetic season for Sistema programs: kids were crossing cities, states, and even oceans to make music with each other. As our feature article makes clear, these “seminarios” or “encuentros,” as Venezuelans call them, are more than fun holiday excursions; they are seminal experiences of musical intensity and social bonding.

Milan, Italy was the scene this past August of perhaps the most ambitious such gathering ever – ambitious not in total number of participants (200), but in the sheer number of countries they came from (twenty-six!). The occasion was the [Sistema Europe Youth Orchestra summer camp](#), which coincided for a week with a historic La Scala residency of six top ensembles from El Sistema Venezuela. At the summer camp, young musicians from all corners of Europe dove into long, rigorous rehearsals of no fewer than eleven masterworks, ranging from Shostakovich’s *Festival Overture* and Beethoven’s Fifth to Marquez’s *Danzon No. 2* and Bernstein’s *Mambo*. The rigor of this repertoire set the bar of musical ambition almost inconceivably high – but they reached it. Their week ended with a final concert in a famous hall, a rehearsal with Gustavo Dudamel, and a side-by-side performance at La Scala with the Youth Orchestra of Caracas.

International youth orchestras have long been a way for young musicians to join forces and create bonds across cultures. But an international Sistema ensemble is something new: children and young people who are there not by virtue of family status, private lessons or conservatory training but because they have gathered musical strength and social skills through ensemble learning. These young people come together already practiced in the inclusive, empathic habits of heart and mind nurtured in Sistema learning environments. They create a sonic grandeur of which they never knew they were capable. And they discover that the El Sistema project extends far beyond their nucleos.

Travel is expensive. It’s a challenge to find funding for taking kids on trips to play with peers elsewhere. But I would suggest it’s worth the effort. It doesn’t have to be international; uniting programs across a state or even a city can be just as effective. Seminarios of every scope and size can powerfully boost the learning that goes on in Sistema programs the rest of the year

Tricia Tunstall

“Only community trumps gangs.” – Father Greg Boyle, Executive Director of Homeboy Industries, based in Los Angeles

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News Notes

Young Musicians of Alamance (in Alamance County, NC) began six months after founder Beth Bader first heard about El Sistema. Her partner, the First Reformed United Church of Christ in Burlington, NC, provided space, funding, 501(c)3 sponsorship, and encouragement, while KidzNotes provided good counsel. YMA was launched on April 11, 2015, with two first-graders. A week later, there were five. In June, a cheer went up when the young musicians learned they could continue playing music in second grade; now their numbers have more than doubled. <http://www.ymofa.org>



Sporting her program T-shirt, Kimberly is one of the two original Young Musicians of Alamance. Photo: Matthew J. Pfeuffer, Program Director

The San Diego Youth Symphony's Sistema-inspired **Community Opus Project** has received many recognitions for its successes, and now the **National Endowment for the Arts** will feature this program and its partnership with the Chula Vista School District in a **webinar on October 14**. As the NEA puts it: "What started in 2010 as the Community Opus Project after-school music program for sixty-five 3rd graders has evolved into one of the largest and most rapid restorations of arts education in the nation with over 70 visual and performing arts teachers hired since June." Register: <http://arts.gov.adobeconnect.com/artsed-oct2015-webinar/event/registration.html>

In the June 2015 issue of *The Ensemble*, we reported the initial findings published by the Glasgow Center for Population Health on **Sistema Scotland's long-term evaluation**. The independent research strongly affirmed the program's methodology and outcomes, perhaps the most significant research findings in the global field to date. **Sistema Scotland** invites all those interested to learn more directly from the researchers in a **webinar on Tuesday November 3** at noon Eastern time. Mark your calendar, and we will publish a web link in the next issue of *The Ensemble*.

An update on the **Massachusetts Cultural Council** (MCC): It has **committed more than one million**

dollars of support for 18 Sistema-inspired programs over the next three years. In addition to direct grants to programs, these funds support an expansion of the **Johnson String Library**, which provides stringed instruments to Sistema students across the state. The MCC's three-year research study of executive function development in five Sistema programs (and a control group) is halfway done, and they are piloting a new Fellowship for early career teaching artists that uses the cultural ecosystem of Massachusetts as a campus for learning.

Doctoral candidate and former OrchKids teacher Timothy Hsu is doing a **research dissertation on violin pedagogy** in U.S. Sistema programs. His findings could be useful to us all, so we urge violin teachers and program leaders to complete his anonymous survey online – pass these links along to the teachers you know. Violin teacher link: <http://tinyurl.com/qemxwqh>. Program leader administrator link: <http://tinyurl.com/nw8n7nl> Contact: timothy-hsu@uiowa.edu

Resources

A number of U.S. programs are using TUGG screenings of Jamie Bernstein and Elizabeth Kling's film "**Crescendo: The Power of Music**" – the first feature-length documentary on Sistema-inspired work in the U.S. – as an educational and fundraising tool. Performances of local Sistema programs are often included as part of the event. To learn more about creating an event, please email Michelle Zei at: crescendopowerofmusic@gmail.com

Do you have an outstanding young volunteer in your program? The **Prudential Spirit of Community Awards** honor young volunteers in grades 5-12, with two recipients in every state winning \$1,000 each and a trip to Washington, DC. A few honorees receive higher awards. Deadline for submissions: November 3, 2015. More at: <http://spirit.prudential.com/view/page/soc>

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Men 'N Position

By Dorsey Griffin, Youth Music Program Coordinator, B Sharp, Fort Worth, TX

I joined the B Sharp Youth Music administrative team last year, bringing 25 years of experience in working with kids who needed some discipline and structure in their lives. The challenges I faced at B Sharp were that discipline referrals were on the rise and there was a lack of parental involvement in the program.

We had begun a new behavior management plan that was showing results; however, history has taught me that parent involvement is the key to making a lasting difference with kids. I wanted to start with the fathers and other males (granddads, uncles, etc.) who could help guide our kids and serve as role models for those without a father in the home. Our program data revealed that two out of every three of our African-American students were without a dad in the home.

My idea was to create a dads' club, to engage them in our program. In an initial meeting, we discussed our goals—to make the dads more visible, and to understand the value of positive behavior in the lives of B Sharp students. We also discussed the value of increasing academic and musical achievement – two goals of B Sharp. We decided on the name Men N' Position because we are going to be the men in a position to guide our kids and serve as role models for those without father in the home. I knew that if we could strengthen our fathers, our kids would become stronger as a result.

Men 'N Position establishes a rapport with our children by providing them with positive, trustworthy mentors who engage with them on a consistent basis. We want B Sharp to provide a therapeutic setting for fathers and kids to establish healthy relationships. We also want to develop a community support system by reaching out to local churches and child advocate programs, asking them to help mentor our fatherless children.

Our goal is to engage 100 Men N' Position who can work together as one. We recruit through word of mouth, and we meet once a month in a central location on the school campus, with the goal being strategic planning and developing our programs for the year. I believe this initiative is very important for our community, families and the future of our children.

**"I now had no room for this fear, or any other fear, because I was filled to the brim with music."
– Oliver Sacks, physician and author**