

Getting the Right Instruments

By *Avi Mehta, Artistic Director of Josiah Quincy Orchestra Program and conductor of the Margarita Muniz Academy Wind Ensembles*

Getting the instruments right: this is one of the most important goals for leaders and teachers of Sistema-inspired programs. It's not an easy job. Balancing factors of brand, quality, size, and condition, we often make compromises to meet the demands of our growing programs and our growing students.

There are many ways to go about it, including organizing instrument drives, building relationships with local music stores, and applying to instrument granting organizations. Each of these comes with its own complications and even philosophical dilemmas, which makes obtaining the right instruments a complex subject to explore.

Most programs start out with some donated instruments. And most program staffs dream of the ideal instrumentation. There's usually a lot of distance between these two points. As the ideal gets adjusted to the reality, we sometimes scale down our ambitions.

Many programs don't start with a complete string orchestra, symphony orchestra, or wind ensemble, due to lack of resources and teachers.

However, a key element of our programs is to create the symphonic sound that motivates our kids to participate. That means including wind, brass and percussion sections whenever possible. Getting to your ideal instrumentation is easier to fantasize about than to accomplish. So how can we get there?

Instrument drives are one way. Sometimes the donations are low-quality instruments, or the wrong ones for our program. But by being specific about our needs, we can start steering donors toward helping us realize our ideal instrumentation goals. Eight organizations in Austin, Texas, including [Austin Soundwaves](#), recently collaborated on a large-scale instrument drive geared towards getting instruments into the hands of 1,000 of Austin's underserved youth. The event lasted 5 days and included 6 drop-off locations, an easy-to-use online interface, a corporate

sponsor, plenty of media coverage, and a ceremonial first donation. For more resources about how to organize an instrument drive, please visit: <http://www.hispanicallianceaustin.org/asw>

The D.C. Youth Orchestra Program asks every donor to sponsor an instrument for an individual student, and to make a continuing connection with that student and take responsibility for the instrument's repair and maintenance. They also encourage families to swap or sell instruments to one another as kids' sizes change (and even to do the same with concert shirts).

Purchasing instruments is another way. The dilemma here is always cost versus quality. Buying cheaper instruments can provide every child with an instrument, but it also comes with hidden costs of early replacement and constant repairs – as well as inferior sound. Many programs only purchase a few instruments each year, renting higher quality instruments to cover the rest of their needs. As they slowly build their own inventory of higher-quality instruments, they find long-term savings in lower repair costs.

In programs where it's not feasible to let students take their school instruments home, students often crave having their own instruments, and families are often excited to help them. We've all seen the proud student who returns after a holiday with a new instrument purchased on eBay for 89 dollars. It's important for programs to educate families about investing in a high-quality instrument. If a family is unable to afford one, it's better to recommend that they rent an instrument through a rent-to-buy program.

Creating partnerships with local music stores is always a good idea. In its first year, [MyCincinnati](#) obtained 20 instruments on loan for free – a formidable way to combat the pressure of raising funds at the very early stages of a program. After obtaining a grant, MyCincinnati was able to purchase most of those instruments the next year, along with a guarantee of free instrument maintenance and repair.

Sample prices for Josiah Quincy Orchestra Program at [The Instrument Place](#): (inc. case, bow, basic accessories)

Model	Instrument	Retail	Discount
Eastman 80	Violin (any size)	875	295
Eastman 80	Viola	975	350
Eastman 80	Cello	N/A	630

Sample prices for Margarita Muniz Academy from [Washington Music Center](#)

Model	Instrument	Retail	Discount
Yamaha/YTR2330	Trumpet	1,197	468
Yamaha/YCL255	Clarinet	967	369
Yamaha/YAS26	Alto Sax	2,082	897

FROM THE EDITOR

"Do we have to rehearse *again*?"

This question was posed one evening by a few campers at the El Sistema New Jersey Alliance summer camp, which had its inaugural session this summer. The 80-plus campers, who hailed from five different Sistema programs in cities across New Jersey, were nearing the end of the second day of the three-day camp. They had already had two vigorous three-hour rehearsals for the end-of-camp concert – and they had also enjoyed the woods-and-lake splendors of the locale by swimming and boating, hiking and playing games. Rehearse again? They wanted to hang out by the lake.

But rehearse they did. Some of the teachers later wondered whether it would have been better to simply let them relax in nature, an experience their urban environments don't often allow. But camp orchestra conductor Samuel Marchan, a [Union City Music Project](#) teacher who grew up in El Sistema Venezuela, gently offered a different perspective. "The nature setting was great, and I'm so glad we could give it to them," he said, "but the main thing here is for them to set a high musical goal and find out that through working really hard together, they can achieve something they never knew they could." After all, he reminded us, the kids weren't familiar with the new expectations. "It's okay to ask kids to stretch outside of their comfort zones," he said, "as long as we do it with kindness and care."

On the last camp day, I watched Alysia Lee, the founder/director of Sister Cities Girlchoir in Camden, end her campers' final rehearsal by asking, "When did you learn this music?" *Yesterday!* they answered. "And when are you performing it?" said Alysia. "Today!" "Are you proud of yourselves?" "Yesssss!!!" they shouted.

Our guest columnist this month writes of how students from New York City Sistema programs, on a recent trip to Caracas, rehearsed many hours a day with their Venezuelan peers – and found it exciting. Our Venezuelan exemplars consistently remind us that challenging comfort zones and raising expectations is sometimes essential to our project. I'm imagining that next year at the ESNJA camp, the "Do we have to...?" question might be answered by fellow campers: "Yesssss!"

Tricia Tunstall

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

News Notes

The launch of **Encore!Sistema Quebec** follows the end of a unique three year pilot project (Viva!Sistema) spearheaded by Theodora Stathopoulos, former President of the Canadian and Quebec Music Educators Associations. Considered the world's only Sistema program supported by certified music teachers, the Montreal initiative is now an independent organization with 80 students in two sites, including an emerging high school program on the Kahnawake Mohawk Reserve. <http://www.encoresistema.org>. For more information: encore.sistema@gmail.com

Facebook has just added the capacity to **put a "Donate Now" button on your organization's Facebook page**. To find out how to do it: <http://www.wikihow.com/Add-Donation-Button-to-Facebook>

Tech experts predict that **live streaming of events** with handy mobile apps is appealing to younger philanthropists. Imagine streaming your concerts to funders, as a way to share the excitement and palpable impact, and make them feel more involved – Periscope, Meerkat and Blab make this increasingly easy to do. Learn more: <http://tinyurl.com/nc99pkf>

Resources

Bringing together artists, scientists, and educators, the National Endowment for the Arts has published *How Creativity Works in the Brain* to better "understand the anatomy of our 'aha' moments, and how they can be nurtured, optimized, and deployed." The report begins to fill the large gap between abundant cognitive-behavioral research on creativity and the paucity of neuroscience data. Full report available at: <http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/how-creativity-works-in-the-brain-report.pdf>

A case for early Sistema involvement? A research team led by Damon E. Jones at Penn State reports that **social competency skills in kindergarten are a powerful predictor of outcomes** in young adulthood. Each single-point increase in a child's social competency score in kindergarten doubles the likelihood of graduating college and increases by 46% the chance of having a full-time job by age 25. Conversely, each single-point decrease in a child's social skill score in kindergarten correlates with a 67% higher chance of being arrested in early adulthood, a 52% higher rate of binge drinking, and an 82% higher chance of being in, or on a waiting list for, public housing. Teaching emotional intelligence matters as much as academic skills, and early instruction makes a life-changing difference. <http://tinyurl.com/onm548b>



T-shirt designed by Kahnawake Mohawk territory Sistema students for the 25th Annual Pow-Wow, celebrating the transition from Viva!Sistema to Encore!Sistema Quebec by giving themselves the Mohawk name Ratirennenhá:wi, which means "They carry the music with them." Photo: Nicola Miller

Neuroscientist-pediatrician Kimberly Noble of Columbia University undertook "the largest study to date on **associations between socioeconomic factors and children's brain structure**." She discovered a strong connection between income and the surface area of brain regions related to language and executive functioning. The variations they found were the "steepest" at the low end of the income ladder. As the researchers put it, "for every dollar in increased income, the increase in children's brain surface area was proportionally greater at the lower end of the family income spectrum." Writing about the research in The New Yorker, Madeline Ostrander bluntly states the conclusion: "At the lowest end of the income spectrum, little increases in family earnings could mean larger differences in the brain. At the middle and upper income levels, though, the money-brain curve flattened. In other words, wealth can't necessarily buy a better brain, but deprivation can result in a weakened one." Read about it in Citylab from The Atlantic: <http://tinyurl.com/qy9kod4>

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Our Big Trip

By Liza Austria, Director, *UpBeat NYC*

"You must play like you are the best in the world!" said the violin teacher. He sawed his bow back and forth with wild abandon, exaggerating self-confidence; his intentional silliness grabbed their attention while emphasizing the importance of playing with pride and conviction. The teacher, José Scolaro, was kind, playful and fearless, and he worked to develop these same qualities with the students. After leading them headlong into 4-octave major scales, knowing some of them had never tried more than two, he said, "What's the worst that can happen? You won't hurt yourself. You'll survive."

These violinists belonged to a newly formed 200-piece orchestra of young people from NYC and Venezuela rehearsing to perform with Gustavo Dudamel in Caracas in July. They had 3½ days to prepare 11 pieces; rehearsals lasted as long as 9 hours per day. The New York delegation included 30 kids from the UpBeat NYC Children's Orchestra, 4 from the [Corona Youth Music Project](#) and 5 from the [Washington Heights Music Project](#). They were there by invitation of the Venezuelan president; the trip was sponsored by CITGO, with technical support from Fundamusical. The young Venezuelan musicians were from Núcleo San Agustín, Núcleo Guatire and the National Children's Orchestra.

Jose's teaching style was his own, but it incorporated elements common to all the Venezuelan instructors: a formidable work ethic, high artistic expectations and an unwavering belief in the ability of the kids to achieve. The Venezuelans' attitude was that with enough time and will, anything is possible.

It was the longest our kids had ever rehearsed, but after the first day they were beaming as they talked about how their new friends and stand-mates had offered help and encouragement. The bus ride back to the hotel that night had the feeling of a celebration. That excitement carried over to the following days, and our concerns about how the kids would deal with the intensive work fell away.

The overall experience has transformed our students' perceptions of what is possible, both personally and as a group. They were immersed in an environment that demanded rigorous learning with peers who demonstrated high levels of personal and musical maturity; it was a first-hand introduction to a powerful culture of community and achievement. We hope they return to NYC empowered with a sense of possibility and responsibility to cultivate the beautiful spirit that embraced us all in Venezuela.

"Music creates order out of chaos; for rhythm imposes unanimity upon the divergent; melody imposes continuity on the disjointed, and harmony imposes compatibility upon the incongruent."
— Yehudi Menuhin, violinist