

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

Launching the National Take A Stand Festival

by Steven Liu, Director of Educational Programming, Miami Music Project

This year, I had the honor and pleasure of participating in the [National Take A Stand Festival](#) (NTASF) as one of the International Teaching Artist Faculty (ITF) members. Take A Stand's primary partners in this initiative – the [Los Angeles Philharmonic](#), [Longy School of Music of Bard College](#), and [Aspen Music Festival](#) – opened their doors to the ITF members and other leaders of the U.S. El Sistema-inspired movement, to begin the process of creating a National Youth Orchestra comprised of 200 students from our programs. During these planning sessions, a number of tough questions were addressed: Who is eligible? How old should participants be, and at what musical skill level? How can we ensure that programs across the country are represented, if a majority are in their first few years of operation? How can we maximize the social and musical experience of each participant? These important questions were constantly readdressed and reshaped throughout the year.

This summer, the Festival's first session was at [Aspen](#) in June (for students from Western U.S. programs); the second session was at [Bard](#) in August (for students from programs in the Eastern U.S.). It was exciting to see our planning turn into practice when the students arrived. Each session had about 100 students; they came from all over the country, and for many, it was their first travel experience. At first, nerves ran the full gambit from nervous excitement to raucous socializing. But once sectionals, choir, and orchestra began, anxiety dissipated as the students found their safe space in the familiarity of making music, despite the fact that everything else was absolutely foreign.

For me, the most interesting aspect of both sessions was a further move, from "safe space" to "owned space" – a move we hadn't fully anticipated during our months of planning. This was accomplished by creating an open space for student composition inside of one of the pieces, Astor Piazzolla's "Libertango." The idea arose among the ITF at Aspen, and we pursued it even though we knew full well how much focus the Brahms Academic Festival Overture would require. As a result, some students were able to experiment with their own instruments and compositional voices – and "Libertango" was a highlight of the culminating

performance, creating an irreproducible experience through the students' collective voice.

This brief experience piqued the curiosity of all involved, and became a more concerted effort at Bard. We asked ourselves: how could we incorporate all the NTASF elements – choir, sectionals, ensembles, and orchestra – in a student-composed section of the piece that would represent their energy and creativity and provide the sense of ownership that was so engaging at Aspen?



NTASF musicians outside Bard's Fisher Center before final performance.
Photo: Leni Boorstin

To this end, we scheduled a half-hour "exploration and composition session" for the orchestra, with light guidance from faculty (primarily led by Dan Trahey, an experienced veteran of large ensemble composition techniques). In this short time, the collaborative efforts of the students yielded melodies for soloists, background harmonies to support them, beat-boxing parts and vocal raps, and even a 2-part choral line with the students' lyrics: "Together, we take a stand / United, hand in hand." Words cannot fully express how engaged the students were, and how successfully they created something beyond what any professional musician or composer could have generated for them.

As it turned out, the students' creative energies simply could not be contained in that single piece. During the applause after "Libertango" (the last piece on the program), a tuba player, Lowrider James from OrchKids, began to play a funky groove. The percussion section immediately joined in. Within seconds, the entire orchestra joined the jam, exploring how they could engage with an onstage music-making process initiated by a single voice on a corner riser. The students were so hungry to occupy this spontaneous musical space that the jam continued for seven minutes – despite the fact that they had been playing for four hours that day, and for eight hours each day that week. The unbridled energy of the students bursting with their own sound was incredible.

While we must all strive mightily to plan our students' musical development, this experience at the Take A Stand Festival has reminded me that their ability to create, shape, and own the music they are performing is just as valuable as anything we could ever plan for our burgeoning student musicians.

FROM THE EDITOR

On August 18th, in an open-air pavilion in the woods of western New Jersey, I watched fifty children from Sistema-inspired programs across the state rehearsing together, at the El Sistema New Jersey Alliance-sponsored summer music camp. Arrangements of Beethoven, Bob Marley, and Katy Perry's "Firework" were on the music stands. The kids were young, and many were not used to rehearsing in an ensemble that big. "The beauty of an orchestra is that we can affect each other," their conductor, Samuel Marchan, told them. "Feel your friends' energy! Adjust your sound!"

It was a crash course in Ensemble Playing 101. When the viola section had trouble observing a rest, he said, "Feel that rest! Count it! Smell it! But don't play it!" He also gave them a vigorous primer in performance behavior: bowing, smiling, posture. "You have to honor your audience," he said.

On August 19th, at Bard College in New York's Hudson Valley, I watched eighty young people from Sistema-inspired programs across the eastern U.S. rehearsing together – the first-ever Sistema U.S. Youth Orchestra of the East, sponsored by the National Take A Stand Festival. (See the feature article at left.) These kids were mostly older than the New Jersey kids, and their musical skills more advanced; they were performing Saint-Saens and John Williams, Brahms and Piazzolla. They could easily have ended their week together sounding like any pretty good youth orchestra.

But that wasn't what their teaching artist leaders had in mind. These T.A.s were going for transformative experience. And for me, the following day's concert was a crash course in Experimenting With Orchestral Learning to Achieve Maximal Impact – Sistema-style. Every piece had a different concertmaster. Between pieces, kids read excerpts from the poetry they had collectively written that week. Conductor Juan Felipe Molano had the whole orchestra sing themes from Brahms' Festival Overture, in three-part harmony, before they played the piece. The Piazzolla opened up into an interlude of student-composed music and lyrics. And at the end, a tuba player and a percussionist broke into a riff that galvanized the whole stage-full of young musicians into celebratory improvisation.

It was exciting to see the young musicians in New Jersey learning to play into a bigger collective sound. Even more exciting to see that a regional field, eventually a national field, is evolving that they can grow into – a field robust with both musical and social ambition. In both cases, it was the act of gathering that brought insight and growth. I can't say it or write it enough: Keep convening!

Tricia Tunstall

*"Young professional musicians have obligations they may not have previously considered. It is not enough for them to love their instruments. They must learn to love their responsibilities as citizens."
– José Antonio Abreu*

News Notes

The Creative Youth Development (CYD) National Partnership, between the National Guild for Community Arts Education, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, and Americans for the Arts, launched on August 1. The Partnership's main three goals: "to strengthen community-based organizations working in youth development and the arts, sciences, and humanities; to develop and support adult practitioners in the field; and to benefit youth by increasing access to CYD opportunities throughout the United States." To learn more, and to join the CYD National Partnership email list: www.CreativeYouthDevelopment.org.

Resources

Artists in Sistema programs know how few funders are committed to **supporting artists dedicated to art and social change**. A Blade of Grass provides yearlong fellowships that enable artists to undertake serious community-based projects, with a lot of flexibility. Maybe this is the way for you to take your practice up a notch. Read more at: <http://www.abladeofgrass.org/application/guidelines>. Initial letters of interest are due by Sept. 19th.

Do you have a budding superstar in your program? Here's a resource to **support that budding talent**. The National YoungArts Foundation provides emerging artists (ages 15-18 or grades 10-12) with opportunities to work with renowned mentors and access to significant scholarships, national recognition, and other opportunities. Winners receive grants of up to \$10,000 each; have the opportunity to attend YoungArts programs; and partake in master classes, workshops, interdisciplinary activities, performances, and exhibitions. Application deadline is October 14, 2016. <http://www.youngarts.org/apply>

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The most recent issue of the *Arts in Education* newsletter – a publication from the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Office of Innovation and Improvement, Parental Options and Improvement programs – features an article that discusses the **impact of music education on learning outcomes for students**, particularly those related to literacy skills. The publication also provides news, information and resources on the latest developments for the arts in education. <http://us8.campaign-archive1.com/?u=9a3a0d5fcc698f0cc5dc787e8&id=595a9f5114>

Penny Brill is a 35+ year viola member and teaching artist leader with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. With a recent national award for her music in health care work, she has just launched a **resource website for orchestral musicians who are dedicated to community engagement**. MUSACOR (musicians as a community resource) is packed with musician-to-musician resources, and also features a blog. <http://musacor.com>

The world's largest **international conference on art and social change** will happen in Washington, D.C. this year (right before the election!) on October 14-16. The 2016 Creative Time Summit will be devoted to exploring the intersection of art and politics. For more information and registration: <http://creativetime.org/summit/dc-2016>

The Intercultural Leadership Institute (a collaborative program between Alternate ROOTS, PA1 Foundation, National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures, and First Peoples Fund) is launching a new, rigorous **year-long personal and leadership development program** for artists, culture bearers, and other arts professionals. The goal is to foster and support intercultural leaders and to promote a shift in the broader arts and culture field toward greater intercultural awareness, resourcing, and action. Apply by Sept. 13 to be part of the inaugural cohort, which begins in March 2017. <http://www.nalac.org/programs/nalac-institutes/ili>

Until Oct. 1, the GRAMMY Foundation is accepting Letters of Inquiry for their 2017 grants to support many topics, including **research projects related to the impact of music on the human condition**. To study the guidelines and letter requirements: www.grammyfoundation.org/grants.

Evaluating Sistema Programs

By Judith Hill Bose and Dennie Palmer Wolf, for the National El Sistema Evaluation Study

"After two years of data gathering from ten sites across the U.S, what have we learned about how and what students gain in El Sistema-inspired programs?"

As we near the end of this joint project between WolfBrown and Longy School of Music of Bard College to examine student growth across a slice of national samples of El Sistema-inspired programs, this is a question we hear over and over. As of July 2016, the data from this project are in.

We also hear, "Why does it take so long?" To address this question first: Research is slower than advocacy! We needed to find measures that speak to the heartbeat of Sistema-inspired work: engagement, music-making, and social learning. The resulting instruments had to work well with children of different ages, in their first languages, and in very different programs. As they and their teachers taught us what worked (and what didn't), we had to revise.

"What have we learned?" Our analyses are still in progress, but here are some early headlines:

- ✓ Some El Sistema students, as compared to similar non-El Sistema students, are more likely to see themselves as: 1) learners in music and in school; 2) able to continue learning and changing (a strong growth mindset); and 3) empathetic towards others.
- ✓ Young players' musical accuracy increases quite significantly over a year of participation.
- ✓ Individual sites that are monitoring how participation influences literacy, mindfulness and executive function have initial positive indications.

Areas where we are still in progress include:

- ✓ Processing data we collected about school grades.
- ✓ Processing the results of surveys of teaching artists and from classroom teachers in school.
- ✓ Working on observational measures to capture group music-making. (Our current music measures examine individual growth. But El-Sistema programs are centrally about playing as an ensemble.)

Early this fall, we will share a cross-site report for the field. These findings should be useful and relevant to every El Sistema-inspired site in the country.

In August 2017, researchers and participating sites will make a full presentation of findings and implications at the Take A Stand conference in Los Angeles. Finally, we will make all the field-tested measures widely available via a website, for any Sistema-inspired site to access and implement.

"When we let ourselves respond to poetry, to music, to pictures, we are clearing a space where new stories can root; in effect, we are clearing a space for new stories about ourselves." — Jeanette Winterson in "Art Objects"