

Starting Small for a Big Future

by Lorrie Heagy, Founder/Director, JAMM (*Juneau Alaska Music Matters*)

"Our aim needs to be the nurturing of children. The moment we rigidly convince ourselves, 'Education is what we're after,' we warp a child's development. First foster the heart, then help the child acquire ability. This is indeed nature's proper way." (Shinichi Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love*, 1993). In El Sistema-inspired programs, young children engage in music through movement, games, storytelling, singing and instrumental music. For this article, a number of programs generously shared insights and resources from their early childhood programs. All pursue similar musical goals focused on music literacy, instrumental fundamentals, and love of music. Social goals include building a caring, joyful and purposeful community through ensemble, peer-mentoring and co-teaching, and developing character strengths.

Most (though not all) of these programs follow an in-school model. "This is a cost-effective way of starting to build a musical culture in a school which may not have had a music program," said Seth Truby of [BRAVO Youth Orchestras \(Oregon\)](#). "It's a benefit for all... making the school day more engaging."

I was fortunate enough to observe early childhood programming in Venezuela as part of my Sistema Fellowship in 2009-10, and want to thank El Sistema Venezuela for inspiring so much of what has taken root throughout the U.S. and the world. In particular, the paper violin process shared by Josbel Pulche and the incredible teachers at [La Rinconada](#) has been adapted by many Sistema-inspired programs worldwide as a core component of their early childhood curricula. At [Conservatory Lab Charter School](#) in Boston (CLCS), the Paper Orchestra project helps students become familiar with stringed instruments. They perform a play called "Are You My Instrument?," based on P.D. Eastman's book "Are You My Mother?" Then, after choosing their instruments collaboratively with families and music teachers, students build paper versions using cardboard, foam core, papier maché and paint.

For Juneau Alaska Music Matters (JAMM), the [paper violin-building process](#) is a representation of children's growing skill levels: each time a child gains a new skill, we add another part to the violin that directly connects with that skill. We use this process to teach violin posture, self-control, and the introduction of string repertoire. In concert, families see their paper violinists joined by older students on stringed instruments.

Peer modeling is important in many programs. Julie

Davis of [Bridge Boston](#) said, "Younger students are consistently hearing older peers play what they themselves will play next. Last year, we performed 'We Shall Overcome,' and the younger children sang the verses while the older grades played it on their instruments. It was a magical experience."

At Boston's Conservatory Lab Charter School, Dave Cordes used solfège to teach a large orchestra. "In orchestra rehearsals of 50 first-graders at a time," he said, "students learn to become fluent in singing by scale degree and correctly translating from singing to playing the notes on their own instruments." For large group settings with real instruments, Megan Moran at [El Sistema Colorado](#) suggests using "accessories that help students develop positive habits and feel successful – pinky houses, train tracks, finger tapes. Such routines encourage confidence, safety, and leadership."

Building character strengths is seen as an essential goal by all the programs interviewed. [Kidznotes](#) in Durham, NC pursues this goal through PARTS: P=Be Prepared; A=Actively Listen; R=Respect Others & Property; T=Treat Others with Kindness; S=Show Self-Control. This allows students to take ownership of their learning, and helps foster positive interactions. At JAMM, we embed character-building using Carol Dweck's "growth mindset" concept, which sees intelligence as developed through effort, rather than simply as an inborn trait. At one JAMM school, the entire staff teaches character strengths linked to growth mindset, including curiosity, gratitude, grit, hope, self-control, social skills, and zest.

[In Harmony Liverpool](#), in England, has developed a continuum of early-years programming focused on emotional wellbeing, self-awareness, confidence, communication, and language and school readiness skills. Movement and singing games are central to building skills, teamwork, and joy. Teachers cite their story-telling skills as well as their nurturing skills as key to their effectiveness with this age group.

Suzuki said, "I play with children so that I can learn from them." Young children remind us that play is key to learning because it engages body, heart and mind. When we couple play with repetition, ritual and routine, teachers ensure that our youngest musicians have a safe and creative space to learn.

[Click [here](#) for a fuller version of this article, including programs' key "lessons learned" and resources.]

FROM THE EDITOR

"Classical music or pop music, in U.S. Sistema programs?" I read an essay recently that blows that perennial question out of the water.

The essay is by Venezuelan composer Paul Desenne, longtime El Sistema resident composer, and it reveals something essential about repertoire in El Sistema Venezuela: that from the very beginning, the Sistema put great emphasis on creating new orchestral music infused with the lifeblood of native folk and popular music. Did you know that?

One such piece is Desenne's *Hipnosis Mariposa*, based on a popular Venezuelan folk tune, which dazzled the audience with its bright, vigorous beauty when Dudamel and the Bolívars played it at Carnegie Hall last October. In his essay, Desenne explains that the back-story of this piece is thirteen million mouse clicks: "The millions of mouse clicks were a fraction of those required to create all kinds of works for El Sistema over several decades... children's symphonies, adolescent symphonies, large tropical and Mahlerian adult ones, Caribbean overtures, frog-and-mosquito bagatelles, Anacondas, Afro-pizzicato puzzles... A long story."

So El Sistema was never simply about teaching kids to play Western classics. Much more ambitiously, it was about adapting the instruments and conventions of the Western symphony orchestra to Latin American culture. Desenne writes of his decades learning the skills of "transposing intimate Venezuelan music, designed for the little four-string guitar – the cuatro – to a symphonic medium, keeping the freshness of morning dew on the leaves."

I think this offers North Americans a way to rethink the whole "classical vs. popular" dichotomy. It underscores the importance of commissioning new orchestral works from composers who can do for us what Desenne and his colleagues have done for Venezuela, weaving our vernacular musics into orchestral textures for student ensembles. Of course, composers often use such procedures in scores for film and TV. And in the concert realm as well: I think of Joel Thompson's recently premiered *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, a powerful work that uses classical choral textures and orchestral instruments but is laced with elements of spirituals and hip-hop. Let's find ways to support the composition of such works for Sistema ensembles, perhaps through joint commissions – and begin to build our own repertoire of orchestral works fresh with the "morning dew" of vernacular musical energy.

Tricia Tunstall

"The rich have a duty to the poor which they will never pay financially. But they can pay it socially: to deprive the poor of the beauty of the highest art is a terrible form of oppression."

– José Antonio Abreu

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

News Notes

Accent Pontiac, an El Sistema-inspired program in Pontiac, MI, launched its pilot program in January, with plans for growth over the years. The program is sponsored by Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church and partners with Walt Whitman Elementary School. Founded by Tina Rowan, Artistic/Program Director, with consultant Dan Trahey, Accent Pontiac will serve about 85 second-grade students at Whitman with bucket band instruction three days per week, and 30 students ages 6-10 will receive brass instruction twice a week, along with a snack and an hour of homework help, practice time, and community building activities. Website: accentpontiac.org. Contact: trowan@accentpontiac.org

Play On, Philly!'s Founder and Executive Director, Stanford Thompson, was selected as a 2017 TED Fellow. **Stanford will deliver a TED Talk** in April, at the TED conference in Vancouver, about the intersection of social justice and music education. It will be available through the TED site soon after that. [See Stan's column on this page.]

Resources

PlayUSA is a program from Carnegie Hall that offers financial and programmatic support to partner organizations across the country that extend the accessibility of high-quality instrumental music education programs to low-income and underserved K-12 students. Several El Sistema-inspired programs have won grants in the past two years, and received various kinds of assistance (see the January 2017 issue of *The Ensemble*). Online eligibility information and eligibility submission forms are available at <https://www.carnegiehall.org/PlayUSA> and are due by March 22. Selected organizations will then be invited to submit a full grant application.

There are **two grant opportunities from the National Endowment for the Arts** you may want to consider.

✓ **Challenge America grants** support small and mid-sized organizations for projects that extend the reach of the arts to underserved populations – for a maximum of \$10,000 with a minimum \$10,000

match. (<https://www.arts.gov/grants-organizations/challenge-america/grant-program-description>) The application deadline is April 13, and if you have questions, contact the program staff: ChallengeAmerica@arts.gov.

✓ **Creativity Connects grants** are designed to support collaborative, mutually beneficial partnerships between the arts and non-arts sectors such as agriculture, business and economic development, science, technology, healthcare, community, education, environment, military, and transportation. Applicants must have a partner confirmed at the time of application. Grants generally range from \$20,000 to \$100,000 and require a minimum one-to-one match. There is a webinar on guidelines on March 22, 2017, with registration on the NEA website. Until then, you can read the *Art Works: Creativity Connects Guidelines*. Questions? Contact specialists at CreativityConnectsGrants@arts.gov.

Americans for the Arts recognizes that arts and arts learning organizations increasingly seek and successfully establish **partnerships with chambers of commerce, businesses and community development sectors**. Americans for the Arts has produced a new toolkit as a part of their larger program entitled **the pARTnership Movement**; it pulls together much of what is known about establishing such partnerships. Available at: <http://www.partnershipmovement.org/for-arts-groups>

Two blogs by Eric Booth/Tricia Tunstall have been finding interested readers recently. One is about the stirrings to begin El Sistema programs in theater (<http://howlround.com/the-biggest-arts-education-phenomenon-in-the-world-but-not-in-theatre-yet>), and the other speaks to El Sistema teachers with an overview from the authors' experiences studying programs around the world. <http://ericbooth.net/to-teachers-in-el-sistema-inspired-programs>.

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SphinxConnect 2017

by Stanford Thompson, Founder/Director, Play On Philly!

In February, the Detroit-based **Sphinx Organization** recently launched its inaugural conference, **SphinxConnect**, to bring together artists and leaders to focus on diversity and inclusion in the field of the arts. For 20 years, Sphinx has championed this important work and has helped hundreds of classical musicians of color advance their careers.

Afa Dworkin, Sphinx President and El Sistema USA board member, opened the conference with a fervent call to action. "Sphinx did not invent the lack of diversity in our field," she said. "My hope and dream is that we will DO something about it." According to a September 2016 report from the League of American Orchestras, of the 7,283 orchestral musicians in American orchestras, 310 are African-American and Latino.

In almost every session, participants discussed how lack of inclusion stems both from inequitable access to quality music education and from hidden biases in a complex system of reward and advancement. Professional musicians of color from many ensembles, from the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra to the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra, shared experiences in which their white colleagues of equal ability did not encounter the same struggles they had. Despite the many champions these musicians have had, the question always remained: Who was going to extend that final hand of mentorship and support needed to overcome the next hurdle?

As the wider field reflects on its biases, and acts to remove barriers placed in the paths of musicians of color seeking professional careers, will the leaders and faculty of El Sistema-inspired programs realize our potential to *be* the change we would like to see? As our students continue to develop musically, are we ready to pass the baton to our partners and encourage them to provide the same equitable opportunities we fight for, each and every day?

In the last twenty years, our field moved from 2.5% to 4.3% minority musicians in American orchestras. Let's help the field move the needle from 4.3% to 35% in the next twenty years.

ACTION FOR THE MONTH: Email Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski, <https://www.murkowski.senate.gov/contact/email>

Lisa Murkowski (a Republican) chairs the Senate Subcommittee that determines the budget for the National Endowment for the Arts. Please read the full Action instructions (<http://theensemblenewsletters.com/action-for-the-month>) and then write a short message that describes your program, thanks her for her courageous advocacy for education, and asks for her commitment to support the National Endowment and the ways it sustains us. This is Arts Advocacy Month: let's join colleagues around the U.S. in supporting the NEA.