

On Being a Sistema-inspired Music Student

By Sebastian Schemmel, 9th-grade violinist with MYCincinnati, Cincinnati, OH

"What is the hardest part of being a musician? What are the benefits? What is the most enjoyable part?" These are questions that every music student encounters, and the answers can help young musicians get the most from music and find fulfillment in what they love.

Everywhere around the world, people are learning music, especially children. However, anyone of any age can study music. The benefits are endless, and continue to come throughout one's entire musical career. In speaking with Janet Garcia Maya, a

seventh-grade violinist in the MYCincinnati Orchestra in Ohio; Maya Arroyo, an eleventh-grade violinist in the [Austin Soundwaves](#) program in Texas; and many other music students, I learned that the benefits of music study vary widely and aren't limited only to the musical aspect of one's life. However, to experience this impact requires perseverance and devoted study.

For many musicians, including Janet, Maya, and me, the beginning is the hardest part. Practice and perseverance are two necessities that take some time to learn and get good at. In Sistema-inspired programs, we practice with others from the very first day, which can be an added challenge. For me, the greatest challenge was having good intonation when surrounded by other violinists playing a similar note. Because of this, intonation is something I have had to practice more on my own.

However, being surrounded by other musicians can also be helpful in the early stages. You can make great friends who provide support and other opportunities for practice in addition to full orchestra and individual sessions, like sectionals and smaller group practice.

Practice is something that gets easier for music students as they gain more knowledge and understand what to look for and focus on, to practice efficiently. However, it can still be a tedious process. For me, useful strategies include breaking the music down into very simple pieces. I also use resources like the internet and recordings. According to Janet, "When I find it boring, I decide to try something new or give lessons to those who need help." Talking to other

musicians about practicing is a great way to find out about new strategies to make practice more enjoyable and efficient.

Practice in the absence of a teacher is not always a solitary activity. You can practice with your orchestra mates, friends, and siblings in smaller group settings, without an instructor to guide you. This can be a more laid-back experience and a time for sharing ideas and trying new strategies. Of course, this style of practice can certainly be distracting as well as enjoyable, and does not always prove to be efficient!

Practice can also be stressful to many if there is an audition or performance approaching. But this stress can be channeled into motivation for the rewards of the process.

Studying music can become not only a passion but also a door opener to specific opportunities. Playing an instrument and being a member of the MYCincinnati orchestra has brought me many opportunities, including chances to play at the Aspen Music Festival and School, at Carnegie Mellon University's music conservatory, and onstage at Music Hall and Memorial Hall in Cincinnati, alongside talented musicians and under prestigious conductors. It is very satisfying to look back and see what you have accomplished, whether it's hearing a crowd's applause, being accepted to a school, or simply making yourself and others proud by mastering a piece.

Another reward of studying music is being a part of a musical community. Maya says that in learning an instrument, the single thing that has impacted her most is being a part of the Austin Soundwaves family.

Music brings people together and creates a connection. The connection can be between students and teachers, audience and performers, or students and peers. But these connections made in music are always special. Music can be a tool for change, a source of enjoyment, a subject to teach, and many other things. No matter what it means to you, it takes perseverance and hard work.

According to Maya: "Work hard and love it, and you'll see the reward."



Sebastian (second from right) with MYCincinnati Ambassador Ensemble in 2015. (For more on this ensemble see [December 2016 issue](#).) Photo: Michael Wilson

From the Editor & Publisher

"You don't get an education, you claim your education." – Adrienne Rich, poet

To students in U.S. and Canadian El Sistema programs: Greetings from *The Ensemble*! We publish this newsletter every month because we feel strongly that these programs give young people powerful tools for enjoying and succeeding in life.

Did you know that there are Sistema-inspired programs all over the world? Kids your age in Mexico, Sweden, Japan, Scotland, Korea, Australia, Brazil, and about 60 more countries are spending many hours a week making music together and helping each other get better. We visit and study El Sistema programs around the world, and we can tell you this: you would feel at home in all of them.

Your El Sistema-inspired music program doesn't "give you a music education." It gives you the opportunity to take ownership of the music education that we believe all people deserve. Music education is a universal human right. And good music education opens the opportunity for you to create your own musical life.

Taking ownership of your musical life doesn't mean that you decide to become a professional musician. Maybe you will want to do that. But it can mean many other things, too. Maybe you like to sing more often, alone and with friends. Maybe you listen to more different kinds of music than you used to. Your career interests may go in many directions – health care, robotics, engineering, teaching, who knows? But you will carry your love of music with you, whatever path your life takes. You may also carry with you some other things you've learned in your music program – like the confidence that you can accomplish really tough things if you try hard over time, and the certainty that if you work well with a community of others, you can accomplish remarkable and delightful things together.

To take ownership of your music education, join in the music-making with your friends and teachers. We also urge you to experiment as a musical artist. Try composing. Try improvising. Form a small ensemble with friends and practice the music that excites you. Take ownership of your learning – that's what artists do. Ask for the help you want and need; your teachers want to help you follow your interests, whatever they are. And write to us: theensemblenl@gmail.com. We would love to hear from you and learn from you. And let us know if you would like to get regular monthly issues!

Tricia Tunstall & Eric Booth

"I was, like, freaking out, bro. He's fresh." – Samuel Benaim, 13-year-old violist at Boston String Academy, upon learning he was accepted into the National Take A Stand Orchestra and would be conducted by Gustavo Dudamel

News Notes

The 2017 National Take a Stand Festival has selected 101 musicians from 455 applications. (In 2016, 170 were accepted, from only 200 applications, into the two regional orchestras.) Students applied from 59 U.S. programs, and 34 had students accepted. 146 violinists applied, with 36 being accepted, but the most competitive sections were flute, clarinet, and trumpet. Applications were reviewed twice, first by a group of experts in each instrument and again by others for a range of factors beyond the musical skills. Boston was a regional hotspot, with 18 students accepted (11 of them from the Boston String Academy); all 18 had participated in The Longy School's Sistema Side by Side program. Every applicant will get a personalized feedback statement. The Festival week is July 15-22 in Los Angeles.

Carnegie Hall's (CH) National Youth Orchestra (NYO-USA) is a high-profile international-touring orchestra for 16-19 year olds. Do you know about CH's NYO2, which is an annual national orchestra of less experienced but talented, underserved musicians, ages 14-17, from around the country? This year they selected 78 players from 24 states plus Puerto Rico; and 10 musicians from last year's NYO2 were accepted to join the NYO-USA. At least 7 musicians from El Sistema-inspired programs were accepted into NYO2 this year – see who they will play with.

Resources

How do most people first discover and get excited about Venezuela's El Sistema? Some think the TED talk by El Sistema founder José Antonio Abreu is the #1 way (https://www.ted.com/talks/jose_abreu_on_kids_transformed_by_music). Some say it is the CBS 60 Minutes segment called "Gustavo the Great." But most credit El Sistema's breakthrough to this fuzzy-quality YouTube video clip from 2007. It shows an encore by the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel, at the London Proms for an audience of 5,200, playing Leonard Bernstein's *Mambo*. It was amazing enough to have

a youth orchestra (from Latin America, no less!) play at that prestigious event, and play dazzlingly. But the audience went crazy at the encore to discover how much fun an orchestra could have. Check it out: <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2wrnn5>

Canadian students – did you give your country a musical happy 150th birthday wish? Sing it, play it, find an original way to say it. Thanks to the New Brunswick Youth Orchestra/Sistema New Brunswick, you can upload your video at: nbyocanada150.ca

Students, watch this 5 minute TED Ed film titled "How Playing an Instrument Benefits Your Brain." Fun and surprising. <http://tinyurl.com/mvjk4m9>

Four cool Internet-based music learning tools:

❖ **InTune** is a favorite of Sebastian Schemmel's (author of the front-page article) – it's set up like a game, and he is sure it helps him listen more critically to pitches and has improved his intonation. (Shhh...his teachers agree.) <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/intune-improve-test-your-intonation/id580791793?mt=8>

❖ **MusicTheory.net** has a lot of interactive training exercises on line. It's not necessarily oriented towards young musicians, but has interactive content to teach the fundamentals every musician needs. <http://www.musictheory.net>

❖ **The Rhythm Trainer** has two different ways to train your rhythmic dictation (by ear or by written interpretation) <http://www.therhythptrainer.com>

❖ **Fruityloops** (<http://www.appladdin.com/fruityloops>) is an all-in-one audio editing package (like GarageBand) with tools to edit, mix, record, and compose audio files. A great way to make your own beats.

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About Our Sistema Teachers

By Amar Marouf, 11th-grade cellist with OrKidstra in Ottawa, Canada

El Sistema programs educate young people in fantastic ways: unlike most schools, El Sistema programs help students learn who they are through music. In academic institutions, the main focus is on evaluating and grading students. In El Sistema programs, students can thrive in safe and loving environments while making music. The teachers at school are evaluators. The teachers at OrKidstra are motivators. This affects how we learn and grow.

Another difference is that in schools, teachers are positioned above students in the academic hierarchy. In El Sistema programs, teachers and students don't stand above or below one another. With smaller classes, and great respect between teachers and students, it is drastically easier to learn at a place like OrKidstra than at school, where teachers often recite facts from textbooks and have lost personal connections to their students.

However, as comfortable as it is to learn music at OrKidstra, there is still a problem. What teachers may not realize is that with such a level of comfort, it can be hard for students to approach teachers when they don't feel happy. It is an absolute privilege to be taught a musical instrument, so when an issue arises, we silence ourselves so as to not seem ungrateful. This unspoken difficulty is hard to resolve.

The most important thing that teachers can do to help solve this problem is to talk to us. Start conversations during rehearsals and lessons that allow students to share feelings with teachers. The group setting can help students to open up; it can be daunting to speak one-to-one with a teacher you really respect. A lot of the time, students' problems require only a short discussion, and sometimes it's just a matter of clearing up misunderstandings.

If El Sistema programs could implement such discussions between students and teachers on a weekly basis, not only would students' problems get aired, but it would also create a cohesive understanding and consensus among everyone. At OrKidstra, we find that we work amazingly when we all talk about how we feel. To have clear and good relationships between students and teachers, all you need is – to converse!

ACTION FOR THE MONTH: Musicians in our programs are activists – we take action together every month to advance ALL young people's right to great music education. This month, *you are the activists!* – and we need you to help us connect with some star power. No celebrities are more engaged in support of arts education than John Legend and Chrissy Teigen. We want them to hear your enthusiasm about what your program can do. So tweet or tag an Instagram using #WeAreSistema that shows or tells what you love about making music in your program (it can even be a video of you and your peers playing together). Tag John (@johnlegend) or Chrissy (@ChrissyTeigen) in your posts and ask them to lend their support to El Sistema-inspired programs! We need hundreds of mentions to get their attention. Let's do this.