

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

## Meet, and Join, Sistema Connect

By Graciela Briceno, Executive Director, Josiah Quincy Orchestra Program, Boston, MA; Founder of *Sistema Connect*.

If you work in an El Sistema-inspired program, chances are high that you experience some sort of struggle on a daily basis, whether it's a grant deadline, finding quality teachers, or fixing a broken instrument moments before a concert begins. Without diminishing the weight of these struggles, we should be aware that there are emerging Sistema programs across the globe with greater challenges than anything we might face in our own backyard. These are programs with no instruments; no access to quality teachers for hundreds of miles, except for the founder who volunteers his or her time; and, for some programs, the psychological impact of war and famine, or refugee camps filled with children who have never felt a sense of belonging.

At the same time, there are many of us in the field with a giving heart, an area of expertise, and a sense of adventure. Sistema Connect ([www.sistemaconnect.org](http://www.sistemaconnect.org)) is a resource that aims to bring these two groups together. Through this website, Sistema programs can request volunteer services, and volunteers can sign up to be matched with those programs. To volunteer, simply fill out the form, indicate the type of work you can do, and your availability and preferences. Not all volunteer opportunities involve travel – there are many ways we can help each other from our respective locations (grant writing, strategic planning, etc.). If a match is made, volunteers will receive an email with more information about the program, followed by an e-introduction. If the project doesn't sound like a good fit, volunteers can easily pass and wait for another match.

Undertaking a volunteer experience in addition to your current work may sound like a major commitment, but I have found that the benefits of these experiences far outweigh the added tasks. You will find that the teachers and children in Sistema programs abroad have tremendous joy in what they do, even without instruments, or even when rehearsing in a classroom next to the city landfill. This joy is contagious and overwhelming, and it will bring a renewed sense of zest into your own work, and in turn spread to the rest of

your Sistema community. Taking time to help people in need and work with children from other cultures not only adds to the entire Sistema field, but also serves as a deeply rewarding, transformative experience. It can also make you a better teacher and leader. My volunteer trips to Kenya and the Philippines gave me a sense of flexibility and a can-do attitude that actually diminished the stress I felt whenever a daily struggle arose. Plus, the opportunity to travel to new places is an added bonus.

There are many ways we can help each other. Trips can last a week, a month, or even a year. Or perhaps there is no trip at all, and you share curriculum materials or strategic planning advice via email or Skype. You don't have to be a music teacher with ten years of experience to train others. Remember the El Sistema principle: *A child who knows three notes can teach a child who knows only two.* The same applies for this work. Whether you've been teaching for years or you're in your first year of running a program, there is so much that you can offer to others.



*Graciela Briceno teaching string pedagogy in Sistemang Pilipino, Cebu, The Philippines, 2013.* Photo: Lianne Sala

Simply signing up doesn't obligate you to do anything. But if a match is successful, it might be the beginning of an experience that will impact your life and work for years to come. At this time, Sistema Connect does not have funding to support volunteers' travel expenses; however, many programs are willing to provide accommodation. Our hope is that after several initial matches, the word will

spread and we can eventually find funding to support volunteers who cannot afford costly airfare. So don't let lack of funds stop you from signing up.

In my own volunteer experiences, I have witnessed time and again the passionate drive of leaders who believe in this work wholeheartedly and are determined to help children through music, no matter what the obstacles may be. Such leaders have been seeking our assistance through message boards, emails, and *The World Ensemble* (which I highly recommend you subscribe to). They are calling out, and now it is up to us to answer that call.

## FROM THE EDITOR

Here's a question. When your program is in high gear and the teaching is strenuous, the leadership challenges are complex, and the students' needs seem to be changing constantly (i.e., all the time), is your first impulse to spend an entire Sunday in a room with your colleagues, talking?

I'm going to guess not. But the reason I ask is that a few months ago, I was privileged to be part of just such a counter-intuitive endeavor, and it was one of the best days of Sistema in practice I've ever witnessed. The *El Sistema New Jersey Alliance*, a statewide consortium of Sistema-inspired programs, held a daylong retreat to discuss overarching goals, strategic priorities, and collaborative practices. The Alliance, now in its fourth year, holds regular meetings, but we had realized that because of the press of immediate decision-making in those meetings, the big-picture elements never got fully discussed. Planning the retreat wasn't easy; there was never a time that was just right for everyone.

But the event itself, on a gray day in February, was flat-out exhilarating. People shared frankly what was most important to them and what they found troubling; again and again, they surprised one another with the depth and thoughtfulness of their commitment to the overall mission. We couldn't have done it without the help of a skilled facilitator, who did the prep work of detailed phone interviews beforehand and, during the retreat, guided us gently and relentlessly to stay on task, think large, and include all voices. And a lot of actual work – decision-making, priority-setting, date-choosing – got done.

I came away convinced that for individual programs as well as networks like our Alliance, it's imperative to make time and space for this kind of reflection and frank sharing. The daily life of a Sistema program is rich and intense, but it rarely allows for fully collaborative reflection about what's most important and how best to work together. Devoting time to that reflection is vital. It will feel convenient to exactly no one, and it will require a leap of faith by all. But that one day of the year, if carefully planned and executed, will vastly increase your program's effectiveness, collegiality and even joy on the other 364.

*Tricia Tunstall*

**"Vocation is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."  
– Frederick Buechner, American writer and theologian**

## News Notes

The Kennedy Center, as a living memorial to President John F. Kennedy, honors his commitments to service, justice, freedom, courage, and gratitude as expressed in the arts by selecting emerging **Citizen Artist Fellows** who utilize their art forms for positive impact on communities. The recognition provides professional development opportunities for Fellows to deepen their inquires and impact. **Six 2017 Fellows** were recently honored, and two are El Sistema-connected. **Katie Wyatt**, a Sistema Fellow, founder of **Kidznotes** in Durham, NC, and Executive Director of **El Sistema USA**, has been selected. **Vijay Gupta** of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, founder of **Street Symphony**, contributor to the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (YOLA), and faculty member of the **Longy/Bard/YOLA MAT** faculty, has also been honored. In a movement brimming with citizen artists, it is a proud moment for all of us to have two of our colleagues win this national distinction.

The **Arts Education Leadership Award** from Americans for the Arts is considered the nation's highest honor in the field. The 2017 awardee is **Sarah Johnson**, Director of Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute. *Ensemble* readers will recall Carnegie Hall's contribution to the El Sistema-inspired field (see previous articles about **PlayUSA** and **NYO2**), and its relentless public advocacy for the power of social change through intensive music education.

The **2017 Take a Stand Symposium** from July 20-22 in Los Angeles is hosted by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Longy School of Music of Bard College, and Bard College. El Sistema practitioners and stakeholders from around the world will come together to discuss the future of youth development, with a special focus on Sistema teaching and learning practices. Thomas Wilkins, principal conductor of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra, will provide the keynote, and Gustavo Dudamel, music and artistic director of the L.A. Phil, will join a Q&A session and conduct the culminating concert on July 22, with the National Take a Stand Festival Orchestra, comprised of 100 students ages 12 to 18, from 34 El Sistema-inspired programs nationwide, at Walt

Disney Concert Hall. Register [here](#) or contact them at: [yola@laphil.org](mailto:yola@laphil.org) for more information.

## Resources

A new 20-minute video from San Diego Youth Symphony and UCTV (University of California TV) tells the story of the El Sistema-inspired Community Opus project and its success in inspiring the Chula Vista school district to invest \$15 million in arts education. The film, "High Notes," includes a number of students describing the impact of their music program on their lives, along with researchers and educators. Would you like your school or school district to invest in musical ensembles? Start by having them watch this video. <http://www.uctv.tv/steam> To learn more about High Notes: <http://tinyurl.com/lgn79bo>

*On Our Minds* is a publication from the research and consulting firm **WolfBrown** that shares insights from their recent work. Their most recent **Special Issue** has several articles of particular pertinence to El Sistema-inspired programs, as they deal with **measuring the impact of our work**. One article by Dennie Wolf and Steven Holochwost, who are lead researchers in the first national study of our programs, discusses aspects of human behavior that are particularly sensitive to what the arts and culture have to offer, such as socio-emotional development and risk mitigation in vulnerable populations. Read the issue: <http://wolfbrown.com/on-our-minds/oom-special-issue-impact-x-4/#impact2>

Summer learning loss: A music camp can prevent it and boost motivation, but without a music camp, students do lose ground. Do your students know about **Kahn Academy's self-teaching programs** exploring musical basics (<http://tinyurl.com/mrbp6aq>) and major orchestral masterpieces (<http://tinyurl.com/q7s8fwa>)? Maybe turn a loss into summer gain.

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## Professional Orchestras & Us

by *Jesse Rosen, President and CEO, League of American Orchestras*

In 1992 I travelled to Caracas with my colleague Tania Leone, the wonderful Cuban-American composer, to begin plans for an American Composers Orchestra festival of Venezuelan music at Carnegie Hall. Tania knew all about El Sistema and José Antonio Abreu, and of course we paid him a visit. It was inconceivable to me then that the principles of El Sistema could ever take hold in America. But since the movement has in fact arrived, its impact on American orchestras has been profound. El Sistema has been an amazing spark, awakening orchestras to their enormous potential for playing an active role in creating a just society.

I don't say this because hundreds of orchestras have created El Sistema-inspired programs. The number of those is actually about 20. But hundreds of orchestras have begun to use the incredible power of music to serve, bind, and heal their communities. And, of course, this is a two-way street. Musicians report that their engagement in myriad community settings, with young and old alike, stimulates their own growth as performing artists.

Provoked by a fresh awareness of both the responsibilities and the rewards of musical citizenship, orchestras have also turned their attention to the opportunities of diversity, equity and inclusion. At the League, we have tried to support our field through our "bully pulpit," convenings, and research. For "just the facts," take a look at our report *Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field*, and for an in-depth examination of orchestras' past efforts to diversify their musician ranks with fellowships for African-American and Latino musicians, check out *Forty Years of Fellowships: A Study of Orchestras' Efforts to Include African-American and Latino Musicians*. We have also set in motion four working groups of people in and around orchestras, each advancing a strategic path toward diversity in orchestras: mentorships; audition preparation and support; music education; and boards and staff.

The promise of the most vibrant orchestral experience lies in opening up connections to our common humanity. El Sistema has modeled just how that works, and in doing so, has been a gift to all of us in music.

## **ACTION FOR THE MONTH:** Help the Workman Middle School Orchestra recover.

*Workman Middle School in Pensacola, Florida lost its entire "portable" orchestra room to a fire – [here is the story](#). Let's help them recover. Why? The Golden Rule. If you can send a check for any amount, make it out to "ECPS Foundation" and write 'Workman Orchestra' on the notes line. Mail checks to Workman Middle School, 6299 Lanier Dr., Pensacola, FL 32504. Write Attn: Traci Sturgeon on the envelope. If you have extra musical supplies – sheet music, equipment, etc. – that you could share with them, please call (850) 494-5665.*