

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

National Take a Stand Festival & Symposium

By *Stephanie Lin Hsu, Founding Director, Yakima Music en Acción (YAMA)*

When visionary partnership combines with vigorous activism in the field, the sky's the limit. That was the feeling in Los Angeles last week, where the 5th annual Take a Stand Symposium ran parallel to – and intersected with – the [National Take a Stand Festival](#). Both symposium and festival were sponsored by the Take a Stand partnership of the [Los Angeles Philharmonic](#), [Bard College](#), and the [Longy School of Music of Bard College](#), a collaboration that has consistently provided the field with frameworks for creative inquiry and growth.

While our most accomplished students were together for the first time, deep in the life-transformative intensity of rehearsing with the Festival orchestra for their final concert, we – their program leaders, teaching artists, funders and supporters – were nearby in symposium conference rooms, discussing the central themes and urgent questions of our evolving field.

I remember that the first Take a Stand Symposium in 2012 was shaped by questions such as “How should we go about starting an El Sistema program?” and “What outcomes should we evaluate, and how?” This year's symposium, which included YOLA students as participants, was framed by very different questions, signaling our relative maturity as a field. Questions that arose from workshops, facilitated discussions, and organic dialogue included: “What tools can we use to facilitate our students' musical excellence while simultaneously achieving the social goals essential for their success?” and “How do the traditional conventions of orchestra coexist with the lived experience of our students?”

Two pedagogical threads ran through the entire symposium: “Creative Music Making,” with OrchKids director Dan Trahey, and “Strings – Finger! Bow! Go!” with Suzuki trainer Ed Sprunger; these, along with a site visit to YOLA at HOLA, kept us grounded in practice. An abundance of other presentation topics included redefining quality and excellence...helping students move through transitions...perspectives on the national and international movement...and more. I got to be a part of many conversations that were infused with humility, curiosity, a growth mindset, and

a spirit of collective responsibility.

An especially striking aspect of this symposium was its highlighting of substantial research initiatives that are currently underway and beginning to roll out valuable findings. No fewer than four prominent studies were featured, all of them partnerships between Sistema-inspired programs and academic or independent research enterprises. One of the studies, by WolfBrown, is the first to produce a truly nationwide perspective; the researchers studied 12 core sites across the U.S for three years, and in the process developed measurements and instruments specifically tailored to Sistema research – which they are making available for all programs to use. [*The Ensemble* will cover this research more fully in a future issue.]



The bass section of the National Take a Stand Festival Orchestra. Kiana Maria Gonzales (see article on page 2) fourth from left.

One exciting tension that arose from the TaS Symposium dynamic was the relationship between excellence and failure. The pursuit of excellence is a motor that propels most El Sistema-inspired programs. The symposium addressed our collective desire to strive toward excellence in every way, from the pursuit of musical excellence for and with our young people, to program excellence by our community's standards, to excellence as teaching artists and

program leaders.

Newer to many of us was the idea that frustration and failure play important roles in learning. From Sprunger's Suzuki workshops, I learned about the importance of “frustration tolerance.” From the results of the YOLA study conducted by the [University of Southern California's Brain and Creativity Institute](#), I learned about “failure mindset” – the belief that failure is necessary and helpful rather than debilitating and something to be avoided. If we never fail, is it possible to achieve excellence?

With the active presence of YOLA students throughout the symposium and the powerful performance of the Festival orchestra at the final concert, excellence was embodied and alive all around us. But we can learn just as much from the frustrations we experience on a weekly or even daily basis. What will *you* learn from a failure or frustration this summer, that will infuse your own pursuit of excellence in the year to come?

[For another perspective on the Festival, read Mark Swed's *LA Times* article: <http://tinyurl.com/lybtw4usp>]

FROM THE EDITOR

On Saturday night, July 22, there were 101 young musicians on the stage of the Walt Disney Concert Hall: the first-ever national Sistema orchestra of the United States.

One hundred and one – there is something intensely human about that number. It suggests that the organizers set out to recruit a hundred student musicians – but then there was that one more vivid, luminous youngster they couldn't leave out.

They were *all* vivid and luminous, every one of them, avid to play and work. As *L.A. Times* music critic Mark Swed wrote: “Music poured out of them.” They played Berlioz and Coleridge-Taylor and Tchaikovsky, with fire and flare. They began Elgar's “Nimrod,” from the *Enigma Variations*, with a pianissimo worthy of any seasoned orchestra. Their finale was Bernstein's “Mambo,” a Sistema favorite. And their encore was an improvisatory onstage jam, which gave the audience – on their feet, and equally on fire – a chance to fill Disney Hall with some serious dancing and clapping.

In the days before the concert, the two renowned conductors who were taking turns leading the orchestra gave informal speeches on that same stage; in the front rows each time were the kids, but we participants in the Take a Stand Symposium had the lucky chance to eavesdrop. Maestro Thomas Wilkins told the students that the true calling of musicians is to change the lives of their listeners. “You are giving them a great gift,” he said, “an invitation to yearn.” Maestro Gustavo Dudamel, asked by a student what motivates him, leapt out of his seat and said, “It is the *music!*” He added that if he were to take a vacation, very soon he'd be saying, “Where is the orchestra? I need an orchestra!”

Like everyone else in the hall on Saturday night, I was tremendously moved by the impassioned music pouring out of our first national orchestra. But I was also thinking about the rest of our kids, who weren't on that stage – the ten thousand (maybe 10,001?) students in the Sistema-inspired ensembles growing all across our continent. Their ability levels vary widely; their motivation levels do too. Most of them will never play Disney Hall – and really, that's not the goal of our larger endeavor. But how great it would be if many of them grow up to be doctors or salespeople or Fed Ex drivers who periodically, throughout their lives, lift their heads and look around and say, “I need an orchestra!”

Tricia Tunstall

“As schools that serve children in poverty have become increasingly focused on transmitting a discrete set of academic skills, the opportunity for socioemotional learning through arts education has become less frequent, even to the point of absence.” – Basmat Parsad and Maura Spiegelman, researchers at Westat

News Notes

The [Arts Education Partnership](#) published a guest blog by Dalouge Smith (San Diego Youth Symphony/Community Opus Project) and Chula Vista School District Superintendent Francisco Escobedo, plus a Success Story on the Education Commission of the States website. These are strong examples to the education community of the value of Sistema-inspired learning. <http://www.ecs.org/student-achievement-through-the-arts-in-education> and http://www.aep-arts.org/wp-content/uploads/Success_Stories_SDYS_Final_06.27.17_new.pdf

The [MYCincinnati Guitarmy](#) is an ensemble of guitar students (all are also string players in the MYCincinnati daily orchestra program) led by Teaching Artist Stephen Patota. The Guitarmy started in 2015 as a once-a-week elective option for MYCincinnati students, taking place an hour after their regular programming. Because of its popularity, the class evolved into two groups in its 2nd year, each rehearsing twice a week for an hour after orchestra. In early July, the Guitarmy performed a collaborative concert with experimental rock band Deerhoof. The Guitarmy caught the attention of Deerhoof when MYCincinnati posted an Instagram video showing the Guitarmy practicing Deerhoof's song, "Milk Man."

Also, in August MYCincinnati will host the 2nd annual Price Hill Creative Community Festival. This year they will showcase five Artists-in-Residence performing brand-new work in collaboration with MYCincinnati ensembles. Check it out: www.creativecommunityfestival.org/artists

Youth Service America and Disney team up to offer [Disney Be Inspired Summer of Service grants](#). Children and teens ages 5 to 18 can apply for a \$500 grant to create a project or expand an existing project using fun summer activities like sports, arts, or being outdoors to make their communities healthier, or stronger. This fall, 250 youth-led service projects will be selected and \$500 grants will be awarded to each winner's sponsoring organization to support their projects. The registration deadline is September 15, 2017; applications accepted through September 30, 2017. <http://tinyurl.com/y9kf2xf2>



Part of the Guitarmy at MYCincinnati rehearsing with Deerhoof. Photo: Eddy Kwon

Resources

If you have an early childhood program (or are thinking of starting one), you should know about the The Caplan Foundation for Early Childhood. Their [grant category for Early Childhood Education and Play](#) focuses on improving the quality of early childhood teaching and learning. The Foundation serves as an incubator for new, innovative projects and research with potential for wide impact. They do not fund the revision or implementation of existing programs or research, and do not fund equipment. See more at: <http://earlychildhoodfoundation.org>. Letters of inquiry are due September 30.

The report [The Socioemotional Benefits of The Arts: A New Mandate for Arts Education](#), a report by researchers at WolfBrown (Sistema researchers Denie Palmer Wolf and Steven Holochwost), the Johns

Hopkins Science of Learning Institute, and a cohort of the William Penn Foundation's Philadelphia-based arts education grantees, defines the impact of arts education programs on students' socioemotional skills. This report offers a brief summary of this research. <http://tinyurl.com/y8mtok8g>

Have you looked for [support to do some serious research](#)? If your program in an after-school setting is affiliated with a local or state education agency, or if it exists both in the classroom and in after-school settings, it would be eligible for The Arts in Education special topic grant from the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Dept of Education. The program is interested in researching results that are central to Sistema program goals. Move fast! – applications are due by August 17. https://ies.ed.gov/funding/pdf/2018_84305A.pdf or contact program officer Erin Higgins: Erin.Higgins@ed.gov

Subscription Information

To receive monthly issues, to arrange issues for others, or to delete or change names, contact:

TheEnsembleNL@gmail.com

Back issues are always available at:
<http://theensemblenewsletters.com/ensemble-archive>

Being a Servant and an Artist

by [Kiana Maria Gonzalez](#), *bassist, Take A Stand Festival Orchestra and El Sistema Lehigh Valley*

The National Take a Stand Festival has ended, and 101 students are returning home to over 25 states, each with an intimate and personal experience. Here is the experience of just one of those 101.

During my week at the NTaSF, I worked closely with the team's staff and with mentors at Soka University and at the American University preparatory school, exploring and refining the repertoire for the final concert. It was my first time working professionally with another group of talented bass players in tackling our section's challenges in each piece. For me, it was refreshing not only to find other bass players around my age (most at my program are young enough to be my student), but also to experience so many distinct personalities outside the practice room. Playful and yet stern, realistic and yet quixotic, and with a sense of optimism that was touched with a determination like my own. Many times, when I stumbled within a piece I felt more at home with them; as with my family, there was no criticism, only productive solutions. Making me even more empowered to step up my game in this project!

But what made this experience even more worthwhile was that this was present in every other member of the orchestra that I had the opportunity to interact with. Everyone there had a beginning and was carrying with them a glimmering hope of achieving some sort of end goal, whether it was the performance, their future career, or friendship. All of this dynamic energy was present at every moment, both in and out of rehearsals. Being able to work with Thomas Wilkins, the conductor of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra, for a long demanding week before finally being presented by Gustavo Dudamel has been such an honor. This orchestra demonstrated a persistence that other orchestras struggle for years to reach, and that we have achieved within a week – creating a warm community of different faces from different places to perform beyond the concept of musical excellence, to give the piece expression and life itself for the audience to truly connect with.

In the words of Maestro Wilkins, "We are first a servant and then an artist." He deeply expressed that we must give in a world that only takes. Now, as we return home after the final concert, these words truly resonate even more.