

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

## Sistema Wisdom from Texas Marching Bands

By Jennifer Hay, Executive Director, B Sharp Youth Music, Fort Worth, TX

Deep in the heart of Texas, football and band are king. The size of our high school stadiums alone could make most colleges across the nation a little jealous. Two-a-days (and sometimes three-a-days) apply to the football team and the marching band alike.

This is my 4th year with B Sharp Youth Music. I had never heard of El Sistema before accepting this opportunity, but I quickly realized I had many of the tools I needed. I had become an expert in “kids, music, and leadership” through my time teaching band in Texas, and I’ve been able to use this expertise to push B Sharp Youth Music to the next level. Further, I’ve found that many of the skills kids learn in marching band are those most valued in Sistemaprograms.

For example, marching on the field at halftime (the real reason most spectators come to a football game) is an exercise in focus, multi-tasking, and control. Individual execution must be at the highest level; time management and preparation, therefore, are essential. Creating music requires commitment and discipline. And it takes endurance. In Texas, there is a rule that students cannot be outside once the heat index reaches 105. (Yes, 105!)

These are capacities that are equally prized in Sistema environments. At B Sharp, we teach perseverance in a class called Feelings from A to Z. Our students learn about their emotions and the best way to handle them. Each emotion is identified through a character and story that help our musicians learn that self-control on the inside is just as important as on the outside. Once a student can identify and control her emotions, she is ready for the endurance training that takes place daily in our ensembles and classrooms.

Here’s another example. In marching band, everyone belongs, and everyone participates. There are no “bench warmers”. The expectations are the same for all. To be early is to be on time, to be on time is to be late (and my own band director always added...to be late is to be very, very sorry.) Students put their trust in those around them to create excellence as a team.

At B Sharp, we pursue these same ideals. We teach a life skills class called Social Skills that arms our students with the skills necessary to contribute at the highest level, such as Following Instructions, Accepting Criticism or Consequence, Staying on Task, and

Getting the Teacher’s Attention. These skills allow our musicians to control their own behavior and decisions. This, in turn, creates a more cooperative environment that builds camaraderie in our program.

For a marching band the size of a small high school, assistance from students and parents is key. From drum majors to section leaders, music librarians to uniform crew, booster club leadership to pit crew – “it takes a village” certainly applies. The idea that



Happy Holidays from Teaching Artist Mr. Juan and the B Sharp Flutes Photo: Jennifer Hay

you need a title to define your contribution doesn’t exist. In band, everyone is a leader through her actions and decisions. Everyone has a responsibility to the team and is necessary to the success of the group. That feeling of ownership is created because EVERYONE is needed to keep the team going. Each individual job well done determines the success of the entire band.

These ideals and values are essential to Sistema programs as well. At B Sharp, we have realized that having a strong foundation through our social/emotional classes is necessary before taking the leap to learning how to become a strong leader. For our students who are ready for the challenge, we added a Leadership class. These students are learning successful habits, what it means to sacrifice, and how to have respect not only for each other but also for B Sharp Youth Music as an organization. We have created opportunities for our students to practice growing from adversity, staying flexible, and being humble “winners” and graceful “losers”. Additionally, through our parent engagement group, B Sharp Men ‘N Position & #sharpmoms, we are fostering conversations about how we can work together to help our students be more successful in school and at home. We are creating an environment where pride in our program and loyalty to the team are the new normal.

Sistema teachers and leaders sometimes think of our work as vastly different from school-based music education. But it’s important to remember that to find resonances between school practices and El Sistema, we need look no further than the marching band.

## FROM THE EDITOR

A U.S. El Sistema program made some national headlines this month: YOLA, the youth orchestra program of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, will be getting a new music center designed by Frank Gehry. Gehry is the celebrity architect responsible for Walt Disney Hall, the L.A. Phil’s famously fantastical concert hall. The YOLA center, at 17,000 square feet, will allow the program to double its participants within the next five years.

There are two ways I’ve heard Sistema folks respond to this announcement. “How great that YOLA is getting added capacity to make a difference for kids in L.A.!” – that’s one genuine reaction. But envy is another, and it’s understandable; there’s a huge gap between YOLA’s level of support and the more modest resources of most of the 100-plus other Sistema-inspired programs across the U.S. Most program leaders don’t have the luxury of doubling their capacity in a glorious new space designed by a luminary.

So I’ve been thinking: How do we, as a field dedicated to equity and shared access, deal with a big success for one program – a success that doesn’t, on the face of it, rebound to all programs? Does one program’s large profile simply dramatize the limited means of other programs?

I’d suggest there’s another paradigm we can adopt. Let’s look at how we teach our young people to respond their peers’ successes. If one of our kids wins an audition or a scholarship, and stays connected in some way to her program, her success can mean a boost that lifts all – by inspiring other kids, by providing a role model, and by drawing public attention to the program.

Similarly, good fortune for one program can spark inspiration and support around other programs. “This is how much Los Angeles values its Sistema program,” we can say – to funders, to civic leaders, to the media. “This is how much we matter.” Further, publicity for one program can mean greater exposure for all. When one program has a big win, there needs to be increased intentionality on everyone’s part about publicizing and reinforcing the national scope of our movement.

Such thinking doesn’t come naturally in our zero-sum-game culture. It’s up to us to model it. Bravo, YOLA. And bravi, tutti.

Tricia Tunstall

“Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent.” – Victor Hugo, novelist (including *Les Misérables*) and poet

## News Notes

Next summer, The Archipelago Project will host a summer leadership opportunity for students – the [Music Leadership Academy](#) in Traverse City, MI, from July 18-28, 2018. For students in grades 5-12, it will focus on musical/social leadership, improvisation, arranging, and creative composition. Students will perform almost daily in various community settings, with a focus on cultural validity and youth voice. The project will build on its 2017 success in bringing students from five Sistema programs across the country as well as from various local and nationwide public school programs. There's also plenty of time for everyone to enjoy the local beaches and national parks. More info: <http://archipelagoproject.org/mlatc2018>.

The [Atlanta Music Project's AMPLify Choir](#) performed the national anthem at Atlanta United FC's soccer game on September 16, 2017, at the brand new \$1.6 billion Mercedes-Benz Stadium at full capacity (also nationally televised).



*AMPLify Choir singing the National Anthem at Mercedes-Benz Stadium. Photo: Zachary Toth*

Aisha Moody, Co-Founder and Director of AMPLify Choirs, said, "We strive to provide our young singers with unique performance opportunities, and appearing at Mercedes-Benz Stadium for 70,000 people in our home town definitely fits that bill."

Kalla Ervin was selected as MYCincinnati's inaugural [Citizen Artist Fellow](#). (She was one of their original 11 students in 2011.) A member of their Ambassador Ensemble, she now joins the staff as Site Coordinator as part of her yearlong Fellowship. She will also work closely with academic and artistic mentors to create her own unique Fellowship path, and to develop new initiatives aimed at increasing student power and agency at MYCincinnati.

Parker Thompson, recently deceased, was a powerful community and arts leader and friend to the [Miami Music Project](#). To honor his life, the MMP is creating

a [Student Conducting Fellowship](#), overseen by James Judd, MMP Founder and former Music Director of the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra. Each year one young musician will be chosen as a Student Conducting Fellow, and will receive year-round conducting lessons, opportunities and master classes, with a chance to conduct a live orchestra during MMP's Season Finale Concert.

The [Harmony Program](#) in New York City celebrates its [10th anniversary](#). Celebratory activities include the launch of five new sites, the creation of youth orchestras in each of NYC's five boroughs, and an expanded partnership with Warner Music Group that brings world-class artists to visit Harmony Program communities to inspire students and families.

## Resources

The [Classics for Kids Foundation](#) helps build sustainable stringed instrument programs by providing grants for high quality instruments. CkKF offers matching grants to K-12 schools and nonprofit organizations throughout the U.S. to help purchase stringed instruments. Grants cannot exceed 50% of total instrument cost. Requests are reviewed quarterly; the next deadline is December 31, 2017. For more: <https://classicsforkids.org>

[Linda Nathan](#) is the first Executive Director of the Center for Artistry and Scholarship (CAS) in Boston, where she oversees key programs and works with the leadership of Conservatory Lab Charter School to support its development as a national model. Her new book, *When Grit Isn't Enough: A High School Principal Examines How Poverty and Inequality Thwart the College-for-All Promise*, challenges five popular but unproven beliefs about education that do little to improve schooling but instead blame the victims of poor and unequal schooling.

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## Developing Student Leaders

by [Alvaro Rodas](#), Founder/Director, [Corona Youth Music Project](#)

When I began the Corona Youth Music Project in 2010, I was already aware of two feelings: a fear of "founder's syndrome" and a conviction that young people can accomplish more than they get credit for. In addition to CYMP's musical and social goals, therefore, a third goal has always been to create an organization whose community can step in and move it forward.

The young people of CYMP have repeatedly proven that they are eager and capable mentors, from middle school students helping younger ones to advanced students leading full orchestral sections, with the support of their teachers. Recently, I've been seeking to make our mentoring aspect more formal.

Lorrie Heagy, founder of [JAMM](#) and my colleague in the Sistema Fellows program, has made me more aware that there is a technical aspect to music teaching – chops that have to be developed in the same way that instrumental technique is learned through practice. As with an instrument, it's never too early to begin learning teaching techniques. So my next step was to explore age-appropriate ways to teach music teaching to young people. In 2016, Lorrie and Sistema Fellow Christine Witkowski led workshops in music classroom management, basic pedagogy, and leadership and team-building.

This year, the Corona Youth Music Project received a grant to create our first pilot "Youth Fellowship." A selected group of students grades 6-11 will continue receiving training in different aspects of teaching (basic instrument teaching, pedagogy, classroom management, basic conducting, etc.) and leadership (leadership and social justice, orchestra and education program operations). We will provide stipends for them to work with their peers on a regular basis, and to become involved in organizing events such as concerts and even fund-raising campaigns.

This is the first firm step in moving to a self-run El Sistema program. We hope that in the coming years, more students will be involved in teaching, managing, and planning youth orchestras in Corona.

[Ed. Note: *Also, see News Notes on this page to learn of two other recently-launched student leadership Fellowships in U.S. programs – three new, related pioneering efforts just this autumn. Maybe a trend?*]

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

*Returning to our action of last spring, please write a note of thanks to Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski, who did what our letters requested: full funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. She is Chairman of the Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, knows of the national Sistema-inspired movement, and has visited Juneau Alaska Music Matters. In your thanks, remind her of the 100+ programs like JAMM around the U.S. that need her proactive help. See [here](#) for details of the email/letter to send.*