

## Crossing Borders: A Musical Passport to the World

Seth Truby, Executive Director and Co-founder, BRAVO Youth Orchestras, Portland, OR

Each spring, the students of BRAVO Youth Orchestras in Portland, Oregon take the stage alongside professional musicians with international backgrounds in a celebration of the world of music called *Crossing Borders*. BRAVO's young musicians have played jigs from Ireland, lullabies from Morocco, bossa novas from Brazil, Latin pop from Mexico, a French-Canadian fiddle concerto, and so much more. Their professional collaborators have included jazz pianist Darrell Grant, electric looping violinist Joe Kye, Trinidadian neo-soul singer Blossom, and world-renowned Irish fiddler Kevin Burke, among others. *Crossing Borders* is a highlight of BRAVO's program year and also serves as our primary fundraising event, generating needed revenue to support our rigorous after-school music programs in priority schools. Our audiences are delighted to see a full student orchestra (strings, winds, and percussion) playing music from so many traditions alongside their professional musical partners.



Singer Blossom with BRAVO Orchestra, March 2019, Photo: Rich Kolbell.

This annual tradition grew out of a practice BRAVO started just a month or so after the launch of our program in 2013. Each week, BRAVO invites volunteer Guest Artists to visit with our after-school ensembles to play favorite selections and talk about how music has shaped their lives. These visitors are professionals and amateurs, soloists and ensembles, representing a cross-section of genres and musical styles. Visitors include the international-caliber violinists Joshua Bell and Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, Imani Winds, the Miro and Harlem String Quartets, pianist Isata Kanneh-Mason, a barber shop vocal quartet, a Cello Goblin, and a beatboxing harmonica player. Over seven years, BRAVO has hosted about 200 Guest Artists. The goals of the Guest Artist program are to introduce to our students a wide range of music performed at a high level; to showcase an inspiring series of artists who represent the diversity in our school communities; to strengthen partnerships with area music organizations; and to establish relationships with local artists that lead to deeper musical collaboration.

The last goal developed organically, when a few Guest Artists left such a strong impression musically and in relationship with our students that we wanted more after their visit was done. In 2016, we secured government and foundation grant funding to expand the one-day volunteer Guest Artist visit into a multi-week Artist-in-Residence program for three

of our favorite musicians. Each of them would share their expertise in a particular genre of music, often representing the country of their birth. We planned for the residency to include a series of side-by-side concerts in the community, culminating in the first *Crossing Borders* concert, where we featured all three Artists in Residence alongside our BRAVO students.

For that first concert, we featured rancho and Latin pop from Mexico, fiddling from French Canada, and jazz, blues and spirituals from the U.S.

In 2020, the theme for the program is *Crossing Borders: Africamerica*, tracing America's musical heritage from Africa through the Caribbean and into the South. We will start our journey with traditional drumming from Ghana, then celebrate

the musical melting pot of Cuba, and arrive on the Southern shores of the U.S. with the blues, featuring Norman "Boogie Cat" Sylvester, a legend of Portland's blues scene who was born in Louisiana. Our host for the concert is Darrell Grant, one of our original BRAVO Artists in Residence and the chair of Jazz Studies and Portland State University. He will frame the musical journey in a cultural and historic context. Originally scheduled for April 5, our 2020 *Crossing Borders* concert has been postponed due to the COVID-19 school closure. We anticipate presenting this fantastic program in the summer or fall.

*Crossing Borders* and the Artist-in-Residence program weave together many beautiful threads in BRAVO's mission and work in the community: setting an ambitious goal of learning and performing challenging music; creating original arrangements of music that highlights and celebrates the racial and cultural diversity of our children and families; giving our students the opportunity to perform onstage at major venues in town alongside professional musicians; and inviting our community of families and supporters to share this vibrant experience with us.

Edna Vazquez is a Mexican-American guitarist and vocalist who was one of BRAVO's original Artists in Residence from the first year of *Crossing Borders*. Her music spans traditional and contemporary styles, and we arranged several of her original compositions for our students to perform alongside this dynamic vocalist. Edna sums up the spirit of this project beautifully: "We all have something in common that goes beyond cultures. Music can heal, and that's what BRAVO is doing."

## EDITORIAL

Hillary Harder, ECoSistema Coordinator, Elkhart County, IN

For the past year, I have enjoyed meeting with a group of educators and administrators from the [El Sistema USA](#) community who seek to collectively define "equity." Our goal is to educate ourselves about big ideas—systemic access barriers, intersectionality and identity, culturally responsive teaching—and articulate what they mean for us. At the core of these conversations is the idea that El Sistema-inspired programs are uniquely positioned to work toward equity. Maestro Abreu paved the way with his vision of universal access and social change through music education; today, in our North American context, the El Sistema-inspired field must engage with the dynamics of race, class, gender, ability, language, and social factors. If we seek to deeply know and empower our students, these conversations are crucial.

These monthly online conversations have solidified into the Equity-Centered Pedagogy [working group](#) through El Sistema USA, co-facilitated by me and [Longy's](#) Monique Van Willingham. Though "equity-centered pedagogy" is a broad topic, we hope that it unites, not divides, the El Sistema community—an invitation to engage rather than an alienating buzzword. While our takeaways are still forming, the following provides a snapshot of what we believe equity-centered pedagogy is:

**Research-based:** Research on culturally responsive teaching, like the works of Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings, helps us address the systemic barriers students face and how best to address them in our teaching.

**Excellence-driven:** All students have a right to access the many forms of excellence: musical, social, academic, behavioral, and emotional, to name a few (thanks to [Sistema Toronto's](#) Christie Gray and [others](#) for this way of framing "excellence").

**Centered on what we teach and how we teach it:** We work toward equity not only through repertoire and curriculum, but also through teaching strategies, classroom management, and learning activities.

Equity-centered pedagogy is *not*: promoting or devaluing specific styles or genres of music; a curriculum or method; or an impediment to music-making, as we believe equity and musical education go hand-in-hand.

We hope to continue the conversation on equity-centered pedagogy with the El Sistema community, and we extend an invitation to join us on our website and contribute to our ongoing dialogue.

"If we had a chocolate fountain at every performance, I could have them sounding like the LA Philharmonic in a year."

— Conductor Terrence Thornhill with the Paterson Music Project orchestra, playing at a gala fundraiser

## News Notes

Since 2007, [Music Haven](#), in New Haven, CT, has delivered strong learning outcomes through programs that primarily serve families living below the federal poverty level, 91% of whom are students of color. In achieving a 100% college matriculation rate, Music Haven built [lasting community loyalty](#) that led to it receiving \$100,000 directly from state funds—very unusual in the U.S. However, without explanation, their state funding was eliminated from the adjusted 2021 state budget, a devastating blow. Read about [what happened next](#). (Spoiler: the funding made it back into the budget. Community commitment made all the difference!)

The [Canadian Awesome Music Project](#), which includes teaching artists in [Sistema New Brunswick](#), [raises funds to address mental health](#) issues. They have created “The Awesome Music Project Canada: Songs of Hope and Happiness,” a compilation of intimate stories by Canadians from all walks of life and a tribute to the power of music to change lives. You can support their efforts [here](#).

## Resources

In case you missed it, check out the resources from [The Ensemble Newsletters’ COVID-19 Special Issue](#). If you are looking for [more resources](#) to help you through this pandemic, Americans for the Arts has prepared a [comprehensive list](#) as well.

Could your program use some high-powered consulting advice? Recognizing that U.S. arts organizations (including Sistema programs) will be hard hit economically by the current health crisis, the [DeVos Institute of Arts Management](#) at the University of Maryland (one of the nation’s leading training and consulting organizations) offers [pro bono hourlong consultations](#) for any U.S.-based non-profit arts or culture organization between March and June 2020. Contact them [here](#).

The [Latin GRAMMY Cultural Foundation](#) Scholarship Program will award over [40 students attending a four-year college or university](#) with scholarships from \$10,000 to \$25,000. Highly gifted musicians with an interest in Latin music genres are encouraged to apply. The deadline for consideration has been extended to April 13. Guidelines and application are [available online](#).

Have you heard good ideas from your students or young colleagues about ways they might engage in [music-making with other isolated students](#)? Now,

there just might be a grant to support that idea for young people ages 13-25: Peace First’s COVID-19 Rapid Response Grants. [Apply here](#).

A [sense of safety and connectedness](#) is the foundation of successful student learning, but natural disasters can cause turmoil. The impacts of the current pandemic have upended all our familiar routines and rituals, so we must re-dedicate ourselves to these practices. New York City’s [WHIN Music Community Charter School](#) cleverly addresses the issues of familiarity and routine for their disrupted students in a [video that welcomes students](#) to their online classes.

[Buffalo String Works](#) in Buffalo, NY has worked with refugee students from Afghanistan, Burma, Eritrea, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, and Syria. Though inspired by the international El Sistema model, the organization faced plenty of cultural hurdles in working to serve the diverse population. Eastman School of Music’s [Institute for Music Leadership](#) has written a [case study](#) examining the early years of BSW as it worked to adapt to the needs of the community. Read more to learn how they strived for [“cultural humility” and musical excellence](#) simultaneously—these lessons in inclusion can be applied to all programs, no matter their makeup.

[Free professional development clock hours](#) have been made available by the [National Association for Music Education](#) in response to the unprecedented cancellations of conferences and shift to online teaching. [These resources](#), including ten webinars from NAFME Academy, 14 articles from *Music Educator Journal*, and Live Professional Learning Community webinar series, are peer-reviewed and specifically developed for and by music educators.

“[The Science of Well Being](#),” the most popular course in Yale University’s history, taken by 25% of all students, is currently offered for free online at [Coursera](#). Could you use this upended time to get happier?

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## Online Learning In Denver Deepens Relationships

*El Sistema Colorado Staff and Teaching Artists*

As words like pandemic, quarantine, and social distancing enter our daily vocabulary, El Sistema-inspired programs everywhere are asking the same question: How do we continue making music in the midst of COVID-19? El Sistema Colorado, like so many other organizations, went online.

In making the seismic shift to virtual learning, we have seen how music speaks to the soul in times of confusion and separation. Now more than ever, our students rely on music as an important source of joy, normalcy, and connection—even as we work through technical issues to meet them regularly in 2-D.

Families are especially excited about remote private lessons, which many of our students have never experienced; they love the one-on-one engagement teachers are able to provide. What we didn’t expect, however, was how virtual private lessons would provide new insight into the lives of our students and families—encouraging more of the intimate interactions that lie at the heart of our ongoing work and success. Parents sit in on lessons, help their children tune, and even learn how to assist in practicing. They likewise enter our teachers’ homes and learn more about who we are as people. Barriers are broken down, deepening relationships.

El Sistema Colorado uses two platforms: Google Classroom for traditional assignments and Google Hangouts for video conferencing. We’re finding that these platforms are excellent for private lessons, direct instruction, or group classes. Additionally, our teaching artists are learning new skills daily by working with a local STEM music educator, Gregg Cannady, who specializes in remote education. In April, we are attempting our first remote concert with Denver-based Peruvian guitarist Alfredo Muro via Google Hangouts.

We draw ideas from other El Sistema programs around the country, like our friends at [Soundscapes](#) in Newport News, VA. They assign one staff member as tech support for families. This person calls each family to troubleshoot students’ technology before activities begin, then ensures successful follow-through. Implementing this Soundscapes strategy has saved our teachers time and provided critical support—practical and emotional—for families in crisis.

Beth Remming, a violin teaching artist with El Sistema Colorado, said it perfectly. “Families tell us that they have missed us, and we smile and say the same. Everyone feels that their spirit has been strengthened.”

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## Action for the Month: Strengthen the Network, Especially Now

*As Barack Obama said in the first weeks of his presidency, “A crisis is too good an opportunity to waste.” Let’s use this disruption to change a big weakness in our field; let’s build the connectedness we need to grow. Please reach out each week to at least two colleagues you are rarely in contact with—make a phone call, or host a Zoom lunch, or share a nice Skype end-of-day glass of something delicious with three colleagues. Don’t dwell on difficulties with them; share ideas and learn. Change the disconnected status quo to walk our talk about the power of ensemble.*