

Sistema as School: WHIN's Ways of Being

By Charles Ortiz, Executive Director, WHIN Music Community Charter School

As the world has seen El Sistema stretch far beyond the barrios of Venezuela, musicians, educators and citizen artists around the globe have been experimenting with how to use the principles and ideologies of Maestro Abreu in new and exciting ways. In northern Manhattan, that experiment takes the form of the WHIN (Washington Heights & Inwood) Music Community Charter School, an inclusive full-day charter founded on the principles of El Sistema.

At WHIN, all students (currently K-3, growing to K-5 in 2021) have two periods of music instruction every day, alongside English Language Arts (ELA), Math, Science, Social Studies, and Physical Education.

There is no "General Music" at WHIN.

Rather, each student has two music ensemble classes a day, one choral and one orchestral ensemble. The

focus on ensembles allows students to develop their musicianship while reinforcing the three WHIN Ways of Being:

- We are lifelong and life-wide effective learners.
- We are empathic and compassionate community members.
- We are agents of social change.

At WHIN, we often reflect on the uniqueness of our model and on our responsibility to further the work that has reached the lives of so many. As a fully inclusive school, we are proud not to audition or screen students. We accept students from a public lottery as long as seats are available. The Washington Heights communities are largely Dominican; to help support our English Language Learners, we have a flexible model of push-in and pull-out services provided by six English as a New Language (ENL) teachers and one ENL Interventionist. Most of our families live in poverty, and 22% of our students have special needs. We offer a wide array of counseling and therapeutic services, both in-house and through partnerships with outside agencies, to meet the needs of each of our students and families.

WHIN's goal is not necessarily to create great musicians, but rather to create citizen artists who use their skills to make the world around them a better place. This spirit stretches beyond music into all classes, as we work to achieve a cross-content approach to learning. Our school-wide lesson plan template is guided by Enduring Understandings (teacher-facing) and Essential Questions (student-facing), inviting students to make connections across subject areas and to develop both the skills and the knowledge necessary for mastery. For example, articulation can change the



2nd grade cello students enjoying a pre-show rehearsal, photo credit: Jaak Cushing-Savvi.

perceived intent of the user. Imagine kindergarten students learning the phonetic skills necessary to articulate a short vowel sound as compared to a long vowel sound in their English Language Arts (ELA) lesson. In their vocal music class, they are learning the skills necessary to articulate a staccato passage or a legato passage. Now, imagine both the ELA teacher and the music teacher using an Enduring Understanding like, "Language is an ever-changing way of interacting with ourselves and the world around us," as well as Essential Questions like, "How does the way I speak and play help others to understand me?"

We haven't fully realized our goal of a cross-content curriculum; this is still in process. A big challenge of

this work is that it requires a complex skill set on the part of all staff, so we are always in the process of training ourselves. We are constantly asking: Does this higher-level, knowledge-based learning impact the student? How can the Essential Questions help students understand the complexity of language, whether English, Spanish or musical, in an ever-evolving social construct?

These ideas are extended through our WHIN Ways of Being—three big habits of character with many observable practices: responsibility, listening, integrity, service, self-control, collaboration, resource-seeking and growth mindset. We put these habits of character front and center. We state the specific WHIN Ways of Being that are actively developed in each and every lesson. In a third-grade orchestra rehearsal, how does a student playing the melody on viola need to show up for herself and her ensemble? Moments later, when she is playing a supporting part, and it is the cello's turn to play the melody, how does she—and the entire ensemble—need to adjust? What active listening skills are necessary for every citizen artist? What are the necessary skills of responsibility, collaboration, self-control and service? And when the ensemble transitions to its math class, how do they practice those same skills while working together to solve a complex math problem?

By giving a name to these skills and focusing on them through lesson planning and instruction, WHIN strives to support students as they learn what it means to be a good ensemble member, classmate, family member, friend—and, ultimately, an engaged citizen of the world who uses art, math, science, words and music to make the world a better place.

EDITORIAL

By Christine Taylor Conda, Director of Reach*Teach*Play Ravinia; Chair, Board of Directors of El Sistema USA

Right on time, after ten years of start-up and growth, Sistema programs in the U.S. are entering a new phase, in which we are ready to embark on an exploration of the "Q" word: quality—an essential building block of excellence.

When El Sistema first came into our collective consciousness, everything about it seemed to answer a yearning we had as music educators and social justice pioneers. We jumped in with both feet, young El Sistema devotees betting their futures on new programs. Established organizations risked reputations and stretched resources on this new and expensive venture. We embraced the totality of El Sistema, the "Tocar y Luchar" level of intensity that converted us from once-a-week lesson folks to devotees of a four- to five-days-a-week ensemble training model. Inspired by Maestro Abreu and his colleagues, we were able to meet the challenges of the early years while building a strong, congenial community.

I'm pleased to see that the field is diving in with that same enthusiasm to the conversation around the quality of our curriculum, instruction, and goals. Some may be frustrated that it has taken so long to take this risk, but, from my observations of other holistic arts initiatives, I think the quality discussion is taking place at just the right time.

Organizations around the country are engaging in discussions about quality teaching and learning, and asking lots of questions. *What level of proficiency should our students be expected to attain, and how fast? Where will we make room for the inclusion of student voice and leadership? How can we design teaching experiences that lead to an increase in students' knowledge, technique, delight and musical expression? How do we infuse each lesson, each rehearsal, each performance with the joy of making something beautiful together? How can we communicate to our students that, as they say in El Sistema, "We believe they can achieve, and so they do!"*

To help us catalyze the "quality" conversation, we are fortunate to have an influx of El Sistema maestros, teaching artists and program directors (some, sadly, in temporary exile) working with our programs and offering loving constructive criticism.

Writing for *The Ensemble* several years ago, I enthusiastically identified El Sistema-inspired initiatives as a potential civil rights/social justice remedy. This next phase—of exploring how high standards of quality, pursued collectively, can improve our programs—will help us not only to excel but also to achieve our most ambitious goals of social change.

"Do your little bit of good where you are;
it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world." - Desmond Tutu

News Notes

Creative Youth Development (CYD) is a theory of practice integrating creative skill-building, inquiry and expression with positive youth development principles. These principles can fuel young people's imaginations and assist in building critical learning and life skills. **CYD is hosting a free one-hour webinar to share strategies for integrating CYD and social justice practices into your own teaching and programs.** The webinar takes place on December 4 at 6:30PM EST/3:30PM PST. [Learn more about the webinar \(and register!\)](#)

Calling all composers. **Noteflight**, the online music notation software, and **El Sistema USA** have partnered on a new call for compositions and a new contest. **Noteflight asks composers to provide original compositions and arrangements of public domain works.** Five winners will be selected, and the grand prize winner will have their work performed live by an El Sistema ensemble. [Click here for more information including contest rules and submission info.](#)

Were you one of the many readers fascinated by the lead article in *The Ensemble* October 2019, about **"Attributes of Excellence In Arts for Change?"** You can delve deeper in [this video webinar](#), in which author/researcher **Dennie Palmer Wolf** and members of the **Global Leaders Program** discuss the crucial importance of creating new kinds of excellence in our work.

Since 2006, **The World Alliance for Arts Education (WAAE)** has been committed to advancing arts education for all learners, at all age levels, in formal and informal settings, and across all arts disciplines. This past October, WAAE convened in Frankfurt, Germany, where 180 leaders from 47 nations produced a document that was published a few weeks ago called **The Frankfurt Declaration**. The declaration calls for **"transformative action for arts education** as being integral to sustaining communities and meeting the needs of all people in the face of critical global challenges." This unifying statement of collective purpose marks a new phase in global awareness and social change.

Chicago Metamorphosis Orchestra Project (ChiMOP) launched a **new pilot program** in partnership with San Lucas Church in the Humboldt Park area. This new program site will focus on Latin and Afro-Cuban musical styles at a beginner level (students ages 8-13). The neighborhood is a musical epicenter for those musical traditions but is gentrifying; on Sundays the park is packed with performances by master elder musicians. ChiMOP will work with local musicians, seeking to preserve the local community

music traditions with the new program. For more information, contact **Thomas Madeja**.

Resources

If you are inspired by the lead article in this issue of *The Ensemble* and are interested in starting an El Sistema-inspired school, the **Walton Family Foundation: Innovative Schools Program** grant can help. They support educators who open all types of K-12 schools, particularly schools that look and feel truly different, achieve unprecedented outcomes, serve high-need students, and embrace successes and challenges to share with other schools. **You can be awarded a grant of up to \$325,000. Deadline for submitting online pre-applications is January 15, 2020.** Visit the Foundation's website for more information about the Innovative Schools Program.

Lyft is committed to empowering nonprofit organizations doing work to make communities stronger, healthier and more equitable. The company is currently offering **Lyft Community Grants**, which **support nonprofit organizations** working in selected locations in the U.S. and Canada. Each quarter through June 2020, the program will provide Lyft ride credits to three nonprofit organizations in all participating locations. The ride credits average \$1,000, but in select cities will range from \$5,000 to \$20,000. Interested in learning more? Check out Lyft's [blog](#) and apply for the **Lyft Community Grants here**.

Do you have students interested in electronic music technology? **Blackball** strives to inspire students in marginalized communities through the music to which they listen and relate. First launched in Toronto in July 2015, Blackball gives students **hands-on access to synthesis, beat programming and sampling**. Founder **John Copping** describes Blackball as an all-electronic nucleus and says they are expanding. [Check out their YouTube channel HERE](#). More questions? Contact blvckbvl@gmail.com.

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Teaching Habits of Mind

By **Lorrie Murray**, Director, **Bay Area Music Project**

Nearly a decade ago, I helped transform a public elementary school in Alameda, CA into an arts-integrated elementary school, **Maya Lin School**. Through this, I learned about the Studio Habits of Mind (SHoM), a framework for learning. Developed by a team of researchers and educators at Harvard's **Project Zero**, the eight SHoM are: develop craft, engage and persist, envision, express, observe, reflect, stretch and explore, and understand arts worlds.

Bay Area Music Project formed two years later in Alameda, and partnered with Maya Lin Elementary to provide intensive music education after school. Although the principles and practices of SHoM were originally formed in the context of visual arts education, I observed that our teaching artists were instinctively using some of these practices in their ensembles already.

During a virtual collaboration between our choir and children from Haiti in 2016, I realized we could incorporate SHoM more intentionally. Our goals included promoting student engagement and creativity, and helping students to appreciate the interconnectedness of children from around the world. SHoM provides a common language and guidance throughout the process, which resulted in a broader, deeper understanding of our collaboration by our students.

SHoM helped empower our students to demonstrate and extend their musical understandings. For example, our beginner violin students learned SHoM dispositions through the paper violin project at the beginning of the year. Because art is a familiar medium of expression for children, this allowed the teaching artist to encourage respectful peer-feedback discussions.

At the midway point of the project, the studio habits of "envision" and "observe" were reinforced during a paired, peer-review exercise called "the ladder of feedback." Through this process, students provided and received constructive feedback, resulting in positively making adjustments to their work. These skills translate to the creative process of giving and receiving feedback and setting goals to make improvements in their ensembles.

Although we are fortunate to partner with a school already implementing SHoM as part of its culture, it is adaptable to any music program. SHoM is an opportunity to view teaching through a different lens and empower students to view themselves as critical-thinking artists.

Action for the Month: Actively support the Family Friendly Schools Act

On November 6th, **The Family Friendly Schools Act** was introduced in the U.S. Senate to fund the lengthening of the school day from 3PM to 6PM for low income and working families who cannot afford after school childcare. This act seeks to add "electives in music, arts, athletics, writing, and engineering." The bill is a rare chance to raise awareness about the importance and opportunity of after-school time learning in the arts. **Urge your Senators to co-sponsor this act and show your support for after-school learning opportunities for low-income neighborhoods.** [Read more here including sample letter.](#)