

Harmonizing Across Many Languages

Ken MacLeod, President of New Brunswick Youth Orchestra & Founder of Sistema NB

At Sistema New Brunswick (NB) on Canada's east coast, we've recently faced a unique challenge with broad implications: How best to integrate students of disparate languages into one program? What began in 2009 with one centre and 50 children has grown to over 1,200 children daily, in ten locations, all learning and playing orchestral music. Until September 2019, however, all of these students worked in their own districts, using their own languages.

New Brunswick is officially bilingual, French and English. About 40% of the population is francophone. Schools are divided into francophone and anglophone districts. Anglophone districts operate in English but offer French immersion programs; in contrast, francophone schools operate only in French, due to a strong belief in preserving the language and culture of a minority population. First Nations communities, separated for generations, operate on-reserve schools.

In the words of Swan Serna, composer, violinist, teacher and Director of the Sistema NB Centre in the rural fishing village of Richibucto: "We started to have a nice problem. Some of the kids in the [First Nation] Elsipogtog program here could play at a more advanced level that the others... they needed more opportunity

[than their limited site could provide]." Nearby anglophone children also needed an advanced path. Could it work to create a joint program that combined anglophone, francophone and First Nations students?

We decided to combine children from four francophone communities, students from Elsipogtog First Nation, and French-immersion anglophone students from Rexton into a single program in Richibucto. Certainly, there were naysayers. But the larger issue was language. Bilingual operation was not an option, as the New Brunswick experience is definitive—when the majority language is in use, virtually all interactions default to that language. Our way forward was simple enough, on its face: we had to operate in French.

Though we incorporated French lessons for 30 minutes before each session—primarily for the Elsipogtog First Nation students, who had never been immersed in the language—most of the language learning came during rehearsal. As Sistema directors know, working with kids makes it easier to bring people together. Children quickly overcome barriers that adults find

insurmountable, and the bonds they forge can change the landscape of a space. As educators, we focused on a few key ideas in order to help the transition.

» Movement is a central component of both language and music. So teachers used gestures—the same gestures that we teach students to make as they play and perform—to convey meaning. Teaching artist Dulce Alarcon says that the first thing she did was to teach key words used in the orchestra and feedback words, in French. "I accompanied the words with a gesture, so the kids would not only learn the word by ear, but would also have a visual representation of the word."

» Never assume that anything is obvious. From the beginning, we had careful consultation with lots of people—parents, school leaders, community leaders. We started informal conversations. In this way, we established expectations for our children that enabled them to rise to the occasion.

» Repetition and common practice are key. We used these to emphasize that the students were all part of the same program. The children from Elsipogtog already knew the expectations, routines and ideology from their after-school program in Richibucto. In acting out their usual routines, students felt free to bring elements of their own culture to the session. The solid foundations of El Sistema helped students connect with one another through their work.

There were immediate signs of success. One of the most moving moments was at the end of the first day, when a child from Elsipogtog First Nation called out, "See you tomorrow, new friends."

Since then, says teaching artist Marisol Segura, "We see them every day enjoying learning a new language. Francophone kids often sit next to First Nations kids to help and support them. As soon as they begin to integrate some French phrases into their vocabulary, they are praised and encouraged to speak."

We are so grateful to our community for taking what felt like an unusual risk to provide new opportunities for their children. The benefits have been inspiring. Our children are thriving; by the end of the term, all of them had new friends, and many children had picked up some Mi'kmaq vocabulary as well.

"The crown of the season for me was the concert on December 4," says Swan. After only three months together, 90 children performed for more than 450 people. "All the different communities, enjoying a happy moment, sharing this magic—that's the power of music."



Viola section from the children's orchestra. Photo: Swan Serna.

EDITORIAL

Bonnie Reagan, Co-Founder & Board President, Oregon BRAVO Youth Orchestras, Portland, OR

Justice, health and music. What do they have to do with each other? I am a family doctor and a social justice person, raised by a social justice mom. I am also the co-founder of BRAVO Youth Orchestras, an El Sistema program now in its seventh year in Portland, Oregon. I helped start BRAVO because I love music and I know that, in the Sistema world, music strongly supports children to become good citizens and self-actualized people.

But health? Justice? In February 2016, there was an article on the front page of the *New York Times* headlined "Disparity in Life Spans of the Rich and Poor is Growing." The longevity gap related to poverty is increasing sharply, despite advances in technology and medicine. While the longevity gap (the difference between the average life spans of poor and non-poor people) was about six years in 2001, for men, there is now a distance of about 15 years between the richest and the poorest. For women, it is about ten years.

Let that sink in. This is truly unjust. Physicians are increasingly talking about the social determinants of health: the situational aspects of life that affect health—like poverty, housing, discrimination, food insecurity, segregation, educational opportunities, job opportunities and security, transportation, etc. These determinants cause situations that create stress, even chronic stress.

Cortisol is the body's primary stress hormone. We all know what stress feels like for brief periods. When we are stressed, our bodies produce cortisol, which elevates blood pressure and heart rate and increases sugar in the bloodstream so that we can fight or take flight. People with chronic stress experience overexposure to cortisol, with profound effects: increased anxiety and depression, elevated blood pressure, headaches, heart disease, weight gain, diabetes, sleep problems, and more. Chronic stress is especially problematic for children.

What can we do to alleviate the effect of chronic stress in children (besides changing their conditions)? Children traumatized by the conditions of their lives require caring adults, and a sense of belonging and purpose.

No surprise, then, that the kids themselves tell us that music helps. It calms them. El Sistema programs can bring joy and many musical and non-musical skills to our children. I firmly believe that they can also bring improved health and longer lives, and, thereby, a degree of social justice.

"Music is your own experience, your own thoughts, your wisdom.
If you don't live it, it won't come out of you." - Charlie Parker

News Notes

The application deadline for the [YOLA National Festival](#) has been extended until **February 17**. To apply to the Symphony Orchestra or the Chamber Orchestra, or for more information, [click here](#). The two-week intensive of learning, rehearsal and performance with world-renowned conductors and artist mentors is free. Travel, lodging, meals and programming are provided to students at no cost. Send questions to: YOLA@laphil.org.

The Sphinx Organization has announced programming for the [Sphinx Performance Academy \(SPA\) 2020](#). SPA will collaborate with Curtis Institute of Music, the Cleveland Institute of Music, and The Juilliard School to offer full-scholarship intensive summer chamber music and solo performance programs for violin, viola, cello and bass players, ages 11-17. The SPA curriculum includes lessons, coachings, master classes, recitals, career enrichment sessions and mentorship, tailored for each student. Applications are **due by noon EST, Tuesday February 11, 2020**. Learn more about [dates and details here](#).

The [Lewis Prize for Music 2020 Awardees](#) have been announced. The Lewis Prize believes that music in the lives of young people is a catalytic force to drive positive change in society. Each of the awardees is doing exemplary work to build community, foster engaged citizens and support the holistic growth of young people through music. Learn more about the ten inspiring changemakers [here](#). A special congratulations to Lewis Prize 2020 Awardee Sebastian Ruth, Founder and Artistic Director of [Community MusicWorks](#). Sebastian recently penned *The Ensemble's* editorial in November, which you can read [here](#). His Lewis Prize will support a new alumni fellowship and leadership of the MusicWorks Network of community-based music programs, which collaborate across the eastern United States to spread and deepen the work with and for the youth they serve.

Do you have a budding composer in your program (or an alumna/us)? Let them know about the [NAFME Student Composer's Competition](#). If your students aren't ready this year, they can listen to recent winning compositions on the website, in the symphonic or reed quartet categories. All submissions get a written evaluation of the work, and 10 winners get cash prizes and performances. Applications are **due by March 27**. Entry instructions are [here](#).

During February, Black History Month, the [Atlanta Music Project \(AMP\)](#) will perform a [month-long, seven-concert series showcasing the music of the African diaspora](#). The new series celebrates the vast musical contributions made by Africans and descendants of Africa, combining the history

and tradition of African music with its modern-day influence and cultural relevance. Pieces to be performed include *Shosholozza*, an Nguni song from South Africa; *The Battle of Jericho*, a spiritual arranged by Moses Hogan; and *Alegre*, by Cuban composer Tania León. In addition, classical music written by composers of African descent, such as Joseph Boulogne (also known as The Black Mozart) and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, will be performed.

Resources

A [Canadian study](#) of educational records for more than 110,000 high school students reports that [children who had engaged in school-based music activities or music education showed greater academic achievement](#) than did children who had not engaged in music. These differences, which appear independent of demographic and socioeconomic factors as well as prior academic history, were especially acute for students who played instrumental music versus those who did not. The authors of the study, published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, highlight potential differences in executive functioning, "motivation-related characteristics," and social-personal development as pathways enabling greater academic achievement for music participants. A summary of the study by *Forbes* is available [here](#).

[Socio-emotional learning \(SEL\)](#) is increasingly seen as an essential component of success for students in El Sistema-inspired programs. SEL skills like self-awareness, self-management, interpersonal relating skills, and responsible decision-making are naturally developed in strong programs, becoming key to students' success in fulfilling their life ambitions in or outside of music. Teachers know that to help young people develop these skills, they need intentionality and strong support from families. The [Social Emotional Learning Toolkit: Family Engagement](#) is a new guide from [Move This World](#), and may be particularly helpful to you. The 50-page report is practical-minded, aiming to provide everything you need to bring families into active support in strengthening SEL in students.

What are the most important [habits of an effective teacher](#)? Do you use all these habits in your daily teaching? Note that being good at explaining things is not that important to writer Carrie Lam. Her article is available [here](#).

Subscription Information

To subscribe for yourself or others, or to update your information:

longy.edu/ensemble-news/

Back issues are always available at:

theensemblenewsletters.com/ensemble-archive

Inclusion through Tiered-Parts Music

Zachary Bush, Co-Founder, Leading Tones Music, LLC

How to find repertoire that excites our students and invites inclusion of their many different skill levels? The [Harmony Project Phoenix \(HPP\)](#) has been exploring this question in the course of a several-year partnership with [Arizona State University \(ASU\)](#).

The collaboration began with the dissertation project of a doctoral student in composition, Melanie Brooks, who wanted to explore innovative models of music-making as a means for social inclusion.

Dr. Brooks, who is now the Director of Bands at Winona State University in Minnesota, commissioned 23 composers to write concertos that featured beginning musicians as soloists, accompanied by an advanced ensemble. In one of the concerts showcasing the new works, HPP students played along with students from the local school district and from Tijuana, Mexico. Bringing all these groups together for a weekend was challenging, but the resulting concert was incredible.

This success led us to continue collaborating with ASU and with local composers to commission the creation of mixed-ability chamber music works. Each piece contains an advanced part and an easy part for each instrument group (e.g., a string octet would have eight parts—four advanced and four easy). In 2018-2019, our program concerts featured 14 new chamber pieces. (All the music from the collaboration, and more music like it, is available on leadingtonemusic.com.)

Recently, we decided to include the students in the decision-making process about new works. In a brainstorming session, we explored what the students found interesting in music and what kind of topics they would like to see addressed in a piece. Composers used the students' ideas as the basis for new commissions. A few days after the concert, Harmony Project students met with the composers for a panel discussion. Each composer explained which ideas they liked and how they turned the ideas into a piece of music. Students asked questions about the composition process and the composers assisted students with their musical ideas.

One student commented, "Doing the side-by-side with ASU, I got the chance to play next to new people I had not yet had the opportunity to play with, and was overall a fun, positive experience I enjoyed being a part of."

Harmony Project director Diogo Pereira notes that for parents, seeing their kids on campus has been a cultural wake-up call. "It was important for them to see their kids being featured on stage at a major university," Pereira says. "I think it has broken some barriers in their minds. They know now that it is possible and feasible for their children to get here."