

Sharing Our Work during COVID-19

Robert Saunders, Music Education Director, [Miami Music Project, FL](#)

As learning programs of every kind and in every part of the world find ways to respond to the global health crisis, El Sistema-inspired programs are doing what we encourage our students to do: we are learning from one another. At Miami Music Project, we quickly reached out to [El Sistema USA](#) about creating resources for other El Sistema-inspired programs. We were excited to learn that Monique Van Willingham, Director of the [Masters of Arts in Teaching \(MAT\)](#) program at Longy School of Music at Bard College, was already working to develop a webinar series with the goal of sharing field experiences and best practices of organizations that are successfully transitioning to digital programming. Since summer camp activities are the immediate concern for many El Sistema-inspired programs around North America, El Sistema USA President Katie Wyatt reached out to several program leaders to begin sharing their experiences and innovations in this area.

The result of these efforts is a [series of Zoom webinars](#) about Sistema programming online, offered to El Sistema USA members and sponsored by El Sistema USA in collaboration with the Longy MAT Program. These webinars focus on student learning and youth engagement during the summer.

Miami Music Project Executive Director Anna Klimala and I presented the first webinar of the series, on May 21. Titled "Setting up an Online Summer Program Structure for Your Organization Using Zoom," our workshop focused on three areas of developmental concerns: 1) securing funding and support, 2) curriculum and programming adjustments, and 3) applying "Collaborative Development" while responding to student needs. The session ended with a brief overview of the Zoom structure we have developed to re-create "Virtual Chapters" (virtual versions of the physical locations of our program).

The second webinar in the series, titled "Virtual Classrooms—Synchronous Learning," was a deeper look at the programming Miami Music Project implemented to address the sudden school closures. It was important to us to maintain live music instruction for all program participants, but that came with challenges—particularly the lag, or digital delay, that is inherent to all forms of distance learning. This makes traditional ensemble music lessons nearly impossible, so we created three classes to overcome this challenge. The most unique programmatic change we made was the switch from large ensemble rehearsal to Music Content Area (MCA) lessons. These MCA lessons focus on fundamental internalized musicianship skill development at the primary levels, and theory-based

comprehensive musicianship classes for intermediate- and advanced-level students.

Other programs have innovated during this crisis in a variety of ways. Some innovations go beyond the musical level. At [BRAVO Youth Orchestras](#), for example, while dealing with uneven distribution of distance-learning technology for students around Portland, OR, the program's administration and staff have also augmented program support to include food distribution, in partnership with [OurGivingTable.com](#). This nutritional aid program provides thousands of children with food regularly, and BRAVO has teamed up with them to assist in distributing the food to students in need. Teaching artists and BRAVO staff deliver food regularly to their students, while maintaining virtual music programming with digital resources such as Google Classrooms.

In a similar spirit, [YOLA](#) programming has included additional social services for students, teaching artists, and staff, making these services part of standard programming practices. YOLA has also taken a multifaceted approach to continuing music programming, using various digital tools such as Band.us, Google Classrooms, Zoom, and FaceTime, when available, to engage with students.

In addition to addressing food insecurity and social services, many other programs have transitioned to address the mental wellbeing of students by reaching out to specialists. Mindfulness and physical wellbeing are just as essential as instrumental technique and ear training while we practice social distancing. Although there are limitations to the new virtual space, creative programming and positive leadership can open doors to extra-musical learning.

Moving to virtual classrooms and meetings is taxing for everyone, and training has been a major concern for all programs in this new digital space. By committing to collaboration between like-minded programs and individuals, El Sistema-inspired programs will continue to share much-needed social and educational resources through this unprecedented time.

Remaining sessions of the El Sistema USA/Longy MAT [webinar series](#) will include topics such as asynchronous learning approaches, possibilities for chamber music practice, and overview of changes being made to annual music festivals such as YOLA National. To register for these webinars and to receive resources being presented, please contact Katie Wyatt of El Sistema USA or Monique Van Willingham of the Longy School of Music for more information.

EDITORIAL

Dennie Palmer Wolf, Researcher & Writer, [WolfBrown, Cambridge, MA](#)

On my COVID-era daily hike, I found myself behind a woman on her cell phone. At first, I resented the noise; then I began to listen. "Hello, this is Ms. F., Leila's violin teacher. How are you?...How is she? Does she know she has messages from her music class? We are doing song-writing, and she would be so good at it...Yes, I'd love to tell her." I realized I was hearing a new kind of musical alliance between teachers, students, and families.

Years ago, at [Community MusicWorks](#) in Providence, RI, we invited children to make musical family trees by interviewing at family events. They turned up all kinds of "ancestors": high school drummers, amateur guitarists, avid kitchen dancers. In this at-home time, why not ask students to investigate their musical histories? To hang their musical family trees over improvised music stands, make music videos in front of them, and send the results to faraway family members?

In the same spirit, teaching artists can share their own family lives. Many tutorials for online teaching recommend blank backgrounds, monotone clothing, and no ambient noise. Teaching artists at [City Lore](#), in New York City, have gone in the opposite direction, accentuating the human context of music-making. Hector Morales, a cajón player, taught a Zoom training session against a background of the plaza in Peru where he grew up, taking suggestions from his wife, a classroom teacher, while his son did the filming. The session was about Latin rhythms, but it was also about the human connections that make music possible. As online teaching continues, why not broadcast both lessons?

Jane Kramer, at [Enriching Lives through Music](#) in San Rafael, CA, has asked some families to keep music journals during the pandemic. What emerges is a portrait of how children's practicing and playing has motivated, punctuated, bonded, soothed, and entertained entire households. What if programs regularly collected such journals? What would they learn about families as partners, daily audiences, and people who long for music to be part of their lives?

Online teaching came suddenly, cutting into the natural intimacy of music programs. At the same time, it has brought families and teachers together as musical allies. We're discovering that homes and families are quite capable of supporting what we do in our programs. Let's use this time to deepen mutual respect and partnership between teachers, families, and students.

"Music doesn't lie. If there is something to be changed in this world, then it can only happen through music."

—Jimi Hendrix, rock musician

News Notes

We encourage you to [read this recent declaration](#) from Dr. Daniel Bernard Roumain (violinist, composer, teaching artist) in response to acts of racial violence against Black people, and join him in his [renewed commitment to support, honor, and celebrate Black people, Black communities, and Black culture](#).

The People's Music School has announced its [Performapaloozathon \(Virtual Edition\)](#) on June 21, 3-4 p.m. CDT on [Facebook Live](#). This culminates a series of 22 events across Chicago, a virtual showcase of over 800 students.

Do you know an [extraordinary teaching artist, or someone who works with TAs](#)? Nominate them for the [Annual ATA Awards](#) through the Association of Teaching Artists. Nominations are accepted through Friday, June 5, in three categories: Innovation in Teaching Artistry, Teaching Artist Ally, or Distinguished Service to the Field. Teaching artists of any artistic discipline are eligible for consideration. There will be an online award ceremony on July 23, streamed in collaboration with [Lincoln Center Education](#). Submit a nomination [here](#).

The Josiah Quincy Orchestra Program in Boston offers [three new ways for students to take charge of their own music-making at home](#). One page helps them [tune their own string instruments](#); another, [Music Tech](#), introduces tools and apps designed to stoke creativity and inspire musicianship; and [one directly supports special needs learners](#). Also, check out their [JQOP Creative Camp](#), which offers a variety of daily online classes this spring. Registration for summer classes is open now. (See the column in this issue by JQOP's Executive Director.)

[Atlanta Music Project](#) held a new first for the El Sistema field in May—a [Virtual Symposium for high school music](#) students focused on "[The College Years](#)." Over two days, and with panels of authoritative speakers, the sessions addressed a broad range of issues that music students wonder about. Recordings of the sessions are now available on [AMP's Facebook page](#) (scroll down), and soon all will be available on [AMP's YouTube channel](#).

Resources

With all El Sistema programs considering [options for fall activities](#), given uncertain health regulations, [this article](#) from EdSurge may be helpful. It details the four most prominent reopening plans that schools are currently considering.

As young people age and move further away from their primary relationships (parents, teachers, schoolmates), they feel less optimistic about their personal futures. [Art becomes a point of contact](#), an urgent communication, and a hope, according to this article with a multinational view in [The Conversation: "After Coronavirus: Global youth reveal that the social value of art has never mattered more."](#)

Could your Sistema program [partner with older people](#)? [Lifetime Arts](#) (the nation's leading organization in training educators to work with aging populations) offers Creative Aging 101, a training mini-course that details how best to engage older adults (55+) in "participatory, professionally run arts programs with a focus on social engagement and skills mastery." Like many of their resources, the mini-course is free during the pandemic; learn more [here](#).

Go exploring inside [Smithsonian Open Access](#), where you can download, share, use, and reuse millions of the [Smithsonian's images—right now, for free](#), without asking. For the first time in its 174-year history, the Smithsonian has created platforms and tools to provide easy access to nearly 3 million high resolution 2-D and 3-D digital items from their 19 museums, nine research centers, libraries, archives, and the National Zoo. This huge data dump is just the beginning; throughout the rest of 2020, the Smithsonian will roll out another 200,000 images, with more to come as the Institution continues to digitize its collection of 155 million items and counting. The Smithsonian collection includes hundreds of items pertaining to music.

Arts Connect International held its Arts Equity Summit 2020 virtually, during three days in late April. Its mission: serving arts and culture leaders who are [committed to collectively building equity, access, and inclusion](#). Over a thousand people attended the Summit in some way, and now ACI has posted recordings of all the sessions. [Here](#) is an overview of the Summit, and [here](#) are recordings of keynotes, sessions, and performances. Click [here](#) to find out more about ACI.

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Showing Up in Crisis Times

Christopher Schroeder, Executive Director, Josiah Quincy Orchestra Program, Boston, MA

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged our communities in unimaginable ways. It has exposed great inequities in our society, tested the financial stability of our organizations, and forced programs to rapidly explore new methods of connectivity, storytelling, and fundraising. On the other hand, it has also offered opportunities for programs to demonstrate their resilience. As many educators say, it's better to show than tell. Right now, our students are watching how we show up for them in times of crisis.

JQOP's adaptive process was driven by our founding principle—the power of music to build and anchor communities. Leading with this core belief made our next steps clear. In addition to providing weekly private lessons, we deliver online synchronous morning music class every weekday from 8:30 to 9:30 a.m. Our vision has been to retain our community's daily sense of connection, help maintain routines, and give caregivers an hour to themselves every morning.

The [community has responded](#) with overwhelming positivity and gratitude. Not only were we able to continue our programming with minimal interruption, we also retained our team of 28 teaching artists—many of whom were severely impacted by loss of freelance work.

El Sistema leaders across the country say that the first week of online teaching felt like their first year of teaching crammed into five days. Despite this frantic atmosphere, positives emerged. Lorrie Murray, Executive Director of the [Bay Area Music Project](#), shared that "our online private lessons provide focused attention for many kids who struggled in group settings, feeling embarrassed to speak out. Private lessons have provided an extra layer of self-confidence." Other programs have developed new ways to showcase teaching artists and students. "Our virtual concerts are setting the stage to build virtual 'friend-raisers' and expand our online audience hugely," explained [Soundscapes](#) Cofounder Rey Ramirez. "They are establishing a new platform to showcase student work and stay connected to our community." Here in Boston, JQOP has been practicing more student-directed learning, involving students and families in the planning of our spring classes and summer programming.

This spring and summer, take note of the positives in your virtual teaching. Be the creative problem-solvers you are hardwired to be. Use this time for thoughtful experimentation to find the silver linings and model the traits we aim to instill in our students. Now, more than ever, we must show up.

Action for the Month: Help Reduce Food Insecurity

In the wake of COVID-19, food insecurity has been revealed as a critical issue for many students in our programs; it has come up in more than a few recent The Ensemble articles and collegial conversations. Let's show our communities that we haven't forgotten them. If you find yourself with extra free time, or at a loss for ways to serve your community beyond music programming, consider volunteering at your local food bank. [Feeding America](#) and [Food Banks Canada](#) are great places to start, offering ways to get involved locally and on the national level.