

## The 2020 El Sistema USA Symposium & Seminario

Patrick Scafidi, Managing Editor, *The Ensemble* and *The World Ensemble Newsletters*

Long before I joined *The Ensemble* newsletters editorial team a few months ago, I knew about El Sistema. I had read about it, listened to interviews, spoken with people inside the movement. But I hadn't lived it—had barely seen it up close. I grew up playing jazz and orchestral pieces, but my professional background is as an editor, not a music educator. So I arrived in Durham for the 2020 El Sistema USA Symposium and Seminario expecting to listen to a language I barely understood.

Instead, everything I experienced there was rooted in a passion for helping young people through music that I found immediately accessible and compelling. I heard and saw collaborative, expressive rehearsals; relentless enthusiasm for teaching; a clear throughline of social consciousness.

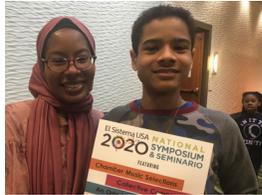
I wasn't able to attend the Pre-Conference day of immersive learning, but I arrived in time for the Symposium opening, in which El Sistema USA Board Chair Christine Taylor Conda led a three-part rendition of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" (with impressive audience participation, as many coffees sat unfinished). Carla Canales (The Canales Project) followed with a heartfelt keynote on identity, focusing on how our self-perceptions affect the ways we try to improve our lives.

Carla's keynote was the perfect lead-in to the following session, "Equity-Centered Pedagogy," led by Hillary Harder (ECoSistema Coordinator) and Monique Van Willingham (Director of MAT Program at Longy School of Music). This session kept the spotlight on identity and intersectionality, asking the important question of how to adjust one's attention to each student's level of ability and opportunity. One interesting solution focused on the concept of helping children to teach one another—and then, critically, to keep teaching.

This concept reappeared in discussions large and small. Mariesther and Marielisa Alvarez (Directors of Longy's Sistema Side-by-Side) made this point explicitly in their presentation "Raising the Musical Bar," during which they led a young string quartet in a fast-paced group rehearsal. It was clear that Mariesther's and Marielisa's enthusiasm for the work had as much impact on the students as did the music itself. These can be critical moments in a young person's educational career, when they see their instructors not only as teachers but role models. More than that, they see that teaching is both a pathway toward excellence and a worthwhile goal in its own right.

We were able to expand on this idea during a

presentation on "El Sistema's Principles of Scale," led by Tricia Tunstall (Founder/Editor, *The Ensemble Newsletters*) and Dalouge Smith (The Lewis Prize for Music). The issue of scaling up El Sistema programs in the USA is not new, and reasonable minds around the room disagreed now and then; the session was self-inquiring, competitive, collaborative and fiercely passionate. All agreed, though, that it's essential that students see their núcleos as worthy of investment, not only as students but also as future teachers.



Student musicians at the seminario. Photo: Katie Wyatt.

A second strong focus of interest involved expanding and exploring the music students play. "Repertoire Programming" (Adam Eccleston and Mark Woodward, BRAVO Youth Orchestras), "Creative String Playing" (Gwen Laster-Banks and Damon Banks, Creative Strings Improvisers Orchestra), "High School Programming" (Jessica Zweig, Play On, Philly! and Angelica Cortez, L.A.

Philharmonic) and "Defining Musical Excellence" (Tricia Tunstall) all charged us to reimagine what our musical goals and processes can look like. Numerous discussions touched on arranging pieces that challenge and engage young musicians and finding new vehicles for healthy self-expression. And in making "The Case for Space," Dantes Rameau and Aisha Moody (co-founders, Atlanta Music Project) framed the conversation around the challenges that organizations face as they develop a physical space. A lively discussion ensued as the room of educators considered the work they do within the context of their surrounding communities.

The symposium ran concurrently with a student seminario, a super-gathering of students from several El Sistema programs, and ended with the seminario's culminating concert, facilitated by Dan Trahey and Dr. Armand Hall and conducted by Scott Laird. The concert's highlight was a massive collective composition that even enabled students to instruct their audience, teaching us lyrics and body rhythms that allowed us to participate. This final performance showcased everything that makes the work of El Sistema so invigorating: high-level, interactive music-making, rife with joyfulness and student creativity.

Despite a packed schedule, the weekend was driven by unwavering enthusiasm and a willingness to share and listen among its attendees. The challenges facing El Sistema programs everywhere are best faced when its thought leaders are free to communicate and collaborate with one another. Experiencing all of this firsthand, I found that the language of El Sistema felt universal after all.

## EDITORIAL

Michael Angell

Institutional funders of El Sistema-inspired programs are typically limited to those dedicated to the arts and arts education. Foundations supporting social programs might think, "Why would we fund Sistema? That's arts, which we don't do."

We know, however, that El Sistema-inspired programs address much more than the arts. José Antonio Abreu indicated that the broad goal of the method he founded was to improve neighborhoods through music. Academic and social outcomes are natural outgrowths of the pursuit of musical excellence. This is something too seldom understood by funders outside of the arts realm. While the intrinsic value of the arts must be paramount in grounding our programs, social outcomes are valued among many funders, and must be made known to them.

Data is a compelling tool for engaging funders. Nationally, El Sistema USA gathers information through its annual census, and partners with Duke University to parse the results. Longy School of Music, along with WolfBrown, has been engaged for years in a longitudinal nationwide study of El Sistema Programs. Local programs like Play On, Philly! and YOLA are working with partners toward the same end. Even small organizations can collect and disseminate data. End-of-year surveys for teachers and parents are an excellent, efficient method. Better still are school attendance and GPA records, which parents and administrators may be convinced to allow access to, given the potential long-term benefits to their families and communities. This data must be published in letters of engagement to funders interested in education, youth services, and mentoring programs.

Our professional gatherings are underutilized as funder-engagement opportunities. Local and regional seminarios are perfect venues to showcase student performances, innovative practices, and núcleo site visits. Larger conferences can be used to make appeals for national groups and initiatives. Supporters need to be there with special sessions dedicated to their involvement.

Money is a necessary component to fuel our programs. Non-arts foundations can provide part of it. The components and methods for their recruitment are there. Let's get going!

*Michael Angell, a composer, is a director of El Sistema USA and of the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation, which directly funds 12 Sistema programs, sponsors ESUSA's PRESTO program, and has both Performing Arts and Social Causes programs.*

## News Notes

On March 30, the Americans for the Arts' Nancy Hanks Lecture will be given by El Sistema friend Vijay Gupta at The Kennedy Center in conjunction with the [National Arts Action Summit](#). This lecture is the centerpiece of an annual national forum for arts policy intended to [stimulate dialogue on policy and social issues affecting the arts](#). Vijay is a citizen artist, violinist, social justice advocate, and MacArthur Fellow—we also know him as the Founder/Artistic Director of Street Symphony, a former violinist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, a YOLA contributor, and a faculty member of Longy's MAT at YOLA at HOLA. This is the first Hanks Lecture by a teaching artist. To honor Vijay's El Sistema connections, [Sister Cities Girlchoir](#) from Philadelphia will perform at the event.

The YOLA National Symposium (July 7-10), offered by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, invites proposal submissions to [present at their gathering in connection with the YOLA National Orchestra Festival](#). Session proposals should foster meaningful active engagement around the theme of "Practicing Identity" for a variety of stakeholders, sharing strong practices and exploring challenges. [Proposals](#) are due by March 16.

If you have an idea for a significant research project, [The National Endowment for the Arts now invites applications](#) for two research funding opportunities within the agency's [five-year research agenda](#). Applications are due by March 30. [Find out more and read the guidelines carefully](#). [Research Grants in the Arts](#) funds research that investigates the value and/or impact of the arts. Matching and cost-share grants of \$10,000 to \$100,000 will be awarded. [NEA Research Labs](#) funds transdisciplinary research teams grounded in the social and behavioral sciences, yielding empirical insights about the arts for the benefit of arts and non-arts sectors alike. Matching and cost-share cooperative agreements of up to \$150,000 will be awarded.

The [Price Hill Creative Community Festival](#) (July 24-25 this year) has become a lively annual summer event in Cincinnati. The Festival offers paid positions for Artists-in-Residence (any arts discipline) to work with MYCincinnati to design and execute collaborative performance projects that will premier at the Festival with a small ensemble of MYCincinnati musicians (ages 9-18). While creating new music with the musicians of MYCincinnati this summer, the Artists-in-Residence will address this question: How

can we use collaborative performing arts as a tool to build more creative and inclusive communities? More [information on the residency](#) is available online. Proposals are due March 16. Questions go to: [phccf@pricehillwill.org](mailto:phccf@pricehillwill.org).

On January 19, a [clarinet quartet from Miami Music Project](#) was featured on NPR's [From the Top](#), the third time El Sistema students have been showcased. They performed Piazzolla's *Libertango*. The whole show is worth your time, but the MMP group appears near the end, from 46:36 – 54:56. Celebrating its 20th year on the air, [From the Top](#) features top young classically trained musicians on over 200 NPR stations, reaching half a million listeners weekly.

## Resources

The Braitmayer Foundation [supports innovative practices in K-12 education](#) in the US, especially curricular and school reform initiatives and professional development opportunities for teachers. Apply for seed grants, challenge grants, and matching grants of up to \$35,000. [Letters of inquiry may be submitted through March 15, 2020](#).

The D'Addario Foundation supports the growth and development of "high-quality sustainable music instruction programs on the frontline" to [make music education more accessible for kids](#), helping them play early, frequently, and for as many years as possible. Grants average \$2,500, and D'Addario awards product donations as well. [Applicants should submit a letter of inquiry](#); invited grant applications will be due March 31, 2020.

A [blog by Cynthia Adams of GrantStation](#) cites [trends in philanthropic giving](#), following up on her popular prediction blog from last year.

[Here is an inspiring four-minute film](#) with Anthony McGill, [first African-American principal clarinetist with the NY Philharmonic](#), about how he got there. Share it with all your students.

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## Guest Perspective

*Liam Barnstead, student, Soundscapes, & Brayden Hamilton, student, OrchKids*

*Two students who attended the El Sistema Seminario 2020, in Durham, NC last month, share their experiences at this super-gathering of student musicians from across North Carolina and the Southeast.*

### Please describe the Seminario.

*Liam:* It was a collaboration of multiple El Sistema programs, where students had the opportunity to meet and learn about other students and do music-based activities with them.

*Brayden:* We had a chance to interact with people all over the East Coast and share moments involving music. During the weekend, we worked on a collective creative composition and an orchestral piece called "Hear Her Song" by Katy Pfaffl.

### What were your first impressions?

*Brayden:* I was open-minded and interested in how everything we were doing was going to turn out. Getting ideas for the composition activity was the easy part. The more stressful part was organizing the ideas, making sure everyone was on the same page.

*Liam:* At first, I was tired from traveling. Once I rested, I got to enjoy rehearsing. I also found the composition activity interesting because I don't get to create a lot of music; I usually play what is assigned.

### What were the activities on the second day?

*Liam:* I spent time rehearsing with my Soundscapes chamber group. Then everyone joined together again for collective composition, which I enjoyed more, now that I understood more about the process.

*Brayden:* This was when the younger kids came in, and we had to teach them all the material we had created the day before. I learned so many things about being a better leader towards my peers and even kids younger than me.

### How would you summarize your experience?

*Brayden:* It was exciting to see everything come together. I was glad that everything turned out great and that I built lifelong friendships with kids from other programs. There were lots of great things going on that I have never experienced before!

*Liam:* By the end of the seminario, I felt like I had accomplished some musical and personal goals, such as learning to improvise. I think everyone had a lot of fun. I can't wait to do it again!

## Action for the Month: Support a Creative Generation

[Creative Generation \(Gen C\)](#) has launched its [Campaign for a Creative Generation: Arts & Cultural Education is a Fundamental, Civil, and Human Right](#). We urge individuals and organizations in the El Sistema-inspired movement to sign on to this initiative. (It's free, and contact information will not be shared.) The Campaign is dedicated to inspiring, connecting, and amplifying the work of individuals and organizations committed to cultivating the creative capacities of young people. [Learn more about the campaign, and sign on.](#)