

The First West Coast Seminario

By Adam Johnston, Program Director, ICAN Music Program

On February 2nd, 2012, members of the VYMA Music Project in Pasadena, CA, the Opus Community Project in San Diego, CA, and the ICAN Music Program in Santa Barbara, CA came together at Longfellow Elementary School in Pasadena for a "Seminario" – an El Sistema Venezuela-inspired day of musical collaboration.

What does it mean to have a transformational experience? We all believe that making and experiencing art can be transformational, and El Sistema is vivid proof of this truth.

But we also know that transformation doesn't happen every day. The daily work of music learning usually has a more gradual rhythm: we strive to build skill, knowledge and passion in our students over long arcs and in discrete chunks, so that they make orderly progress.

Last month, we deliberately disrupted that rhythm. Shortly after dawn on February 2nd, the ICAN teachers and I boarded a bus with 45 sleepy students and 25 parents. In San Diego, a group from the OPUS Project did the same, and we all headed for Pasadena, where VYMA teachers, volunteers and parents were our hosts for the day.

We all took a collective risk that day: we mixed our students together. Over a hundred young musicians from three cities, some with only four months of musical experience, mixed with one another as an orchestra and as a choir. They mixed with new stand partners, and in large sectionals, and as hungry children at lunch. They rehearsed string/choral arrangements of Ode to Joy and Hunter's Chorus. They worked with new teachers, new peers, and new contexts. Their parents picked up recorders – some for the first time in their lives – and learned a rousing rendition of Hot Cross Buns.

The day culminated, of course, in a concert. The children performed beautifully and with huge excitement (as did their recorder-playing parents!). And then we all went home.

In the days and weeks since the seminario, we have seen our risk pay off in many ways. Our children



Stand partners Nathaniel Monsivais (left, from San Diego) and Miguel Alvarado (from Santa Barbara) prepare in rehearsal

Photo courtesy of ICAN

have new confidence in themselves as successful collaborators and successful performers. They know they belong to a musical community that stretches far beyond their program doors. The excitement of that day continues, and re-energizes daily learning.

Three days after the seminario, the OPUS Project students performed a concert in San Diego. They played all their pieces well. But their teachers noticed something different about the students' rendition of Hunter's Chorus. In Carina Voly's words, "Their sound was suddenly enormous! They were reproducing the sound they had heard when the whole seminario orchestra performed that piece. It was incredible!"

Amazingly, the OPUS Project children have internalized the grandeur of the sound produced by the seminario orchestra. They have a new aural image of the sound they are capable of making: the sound of a hundred-piece orchestra!

That is transformation – of a kind we never imagined. I think I speak for all involved when I say that we can't wait to see what new and transformative adventures our next seminario will bring.

A four minute video of the event is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OjYjBRwjw>

Ricky Rynearson's photo essay on the Seminario (and also on the LAPhil's trip to Venezuela, click on Caracas: Day 7 in left column) is available at: <http://supersnappyphoto.com/the-pasadena-seminario>

FROM THE EDITOR

As the Sistema movement grows in the United States, we have a quiet but continuing perplexity about how often to use the Spanish words we've inherited from Sistema tradition. Sometimes we drop the word "Sistema" from our program names, or we refer to our "sites" rather than our "núcleos." We gain in clarity about our North American identity, but lose the rich web of associations that cling to the Spanish words.

Seminario! What should we do with that one? Dictionaries translate the Spanish word as "seminary" or "seminar." What we witnessed in Pasadena in February (and in Baltimore last spring) certainly had nothing to do with ecclesiastical training or academic wheel-spinning. It's likely that the Venezuelan Sistema builders simply appropriated this mellifluous word for their own exuberant purposes. Which leaves us wondering whether there's an English word we might hijack that would do the trick.

A wildly ambitious, necessarily under-planned but infectiously high-spirited gathering of children's orchestras and their parents and teachers to create a one-day fusion of musical hearts, minds, bowings, and phrasings, culminating in an enormous joint concert: how do you say THAT in English?

I can't think of an English word that would do justice to the many layers of this experience: the particular intensity of all-day rehearsing, the wealth of spontaneous peer learning, the healthy performance pressure...all toward a goal NOT of competing to see "who's best," but of collaborating toward a powerfully communal event through the creation of beauty together. We have no adequate language for this, just as we have no experience with it.

So we're making it up, following the Venezuelans' inspirational lead and our imaginations and courage. Let's stick with "seminario," and continue to add our own layers of meaning to this vivid word and grand tradition.

Tricia Tunstall

"For children, making music together is precious because it forges the roots of a common identity." – José Antonio Abreu

News Notes

Imagine Syracuse's Young Musicians Project launched in September 2011 at Cathedral Academy at Pompei parochial school on Syracuse's impoverished North side. The core program serves 68 refugee students from 17 countries speaking 27 different languages. Five days a week, K-6th grade students receive an hour of instrumental instruction in violin, viola, cello, French horn, trumpet, flute or oboe, and an hour of enrichment in African drum and dance, Brazilian rhythm ensemble and the El Sistema Vocal Program. To create sustainability, the organization launched the Suburban Schools Music Initiative in January 2012, offering weekly, after-school group strings lessons at an affordable rate to K-3rd graders in suburban elementary schools, where music budgets have also suffered. All surplus income subsidizes tuition for other needy suburban students as well as the inner city refugee program. Founder/ Executive Director Jessie Keating is a former journalist and youth minister. jessie.keating@imaginesyracuse.com; website: www.imaginesyracuse.com



Yesutor Kotoka-Wiley, Director of African Dance and Music, Cultural Council Leader, leads dance class with Imagine Syracuse

Kalamazoo Kids in Tune is a unique partnership between Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra, Communities in Schools of Kalamazoo, and Kalamazoo Public Schools. The pilot launched in fall of 2011 at KPS Woods Lake Elementary: A Magnet Center for the Arts. The program infuses the existing CIS after-school program, designed to surround children with a caring web of support, resources and mentors from the community, with El Sistema philosophy and methodology. The curriculum includes paper orchestra leading to violin and cello study, choir, bucket band, and a weekly dance class. Wind and brass exploration are planned for later in the spring. Students receive a hot meal and homework help daily. Currently 26 1st and 2nd graders attend Monday-Thursday from 3:45-6:15; next year, to up to 100 1st-5th graders. Through CIS, students also have access to counseling, medical and dental services, clothing, weekend food packs, and other means of support. The collaboration enables each partner to focus on what they know

best; the mission melding has been organic. **Liz Youker, KSO Education Director:** eyouker@kalamazoosymphony.com

Resources

Online site for exploring quality in teaching. Big Thought (BT), one of the most important arts/creativity learning organizations in the U.S., has just launched a new website called Creating Quality. BT persistently encourages their broad community of practitioners and stakeholders to study and experiment in improving quality

in arts learning. The site helps people define and assess quality and improve teaching and learning practices. The site shares the tools they have developed and use (including The Six Dimensions of Quality, which is a key to their research), and short videos of practitioners and researchers talking about key issues. It also invites participants to respond to blogs, engage in dialogue about key issues, and to share their own resources, favorite articles and questions. <http://www.creatingquality.org>

Grants for Community Youth Development Programs. The RGK Foundation tries to be a catalyst for progressive change in humanitarian concerns by providing support to nonprofit organizations throughout the U.S. in three areas: Education, Medicine/Health and Community. The broad guidelines for the Community category include explicit support of youth development programs. Interested applicants may submit an online letter of inquiry via the Foundation's website; invited proposals are reviewed quarterly. <http://www.rgkfoundation.org>

During his fall internship, **Abreu Fellow David France** worked with 400 students in four El Sistema project sites across Costa Rica. He has prepared a beautiful photo journal of images of his experiences there, which can be viewed free at the link below, or purchased through blurb.com. Proceeds from book sales will fund his further work with the Costa Rican initiative which began in 2007. "El Sistema: Costa Rica": <http://www.blurb.com/books/2708406>

Seminario: One Parent's View

By Roberto Gonzalez, Opus Project parent

I live in San Diego, and I work for the Navy, for the Department of Defense. My son Cesar is nine years old. He plays the violin in the Community Opus Project here in Chula Vista, where we live. This is his second year in Opus. They put a violin in his hands on the very first day. He loves his violin, and we are really happy that he's in this program.

On February 2nd, 2012, my wife Isabel and I took the day off from work, and along with Cesar, we got on a bus with some other students and parents of the Opus Project and came to Pasadena for the seminario. We didn't know what to expect, but we were all excited. Even the parents felt like kids! And I really liked the opportunity to accompany my son and see what he was doing.

In Pasadena we met parents of Pasadena kids and parents who had come from Santa Barbara. We felt welcomed, like part of a big family, right away.

When the kids went to rehearse, the teachers taught us to play the recorder. We were so happy to learn how to move our fingers to make tones.

It was great to see the children from different places rehearsing and playing together in the playground during breaks. Every chance they got, they played together in the big mix of kids.

The best part was the concert at the end of the day. With our recorders, we had a chance to be a part of the symphony! Everybody felt like part of this whole big group making music together.

And the sound was so great, so beautiful!

The seminario was a great day for us. And for Cesar too -- he told me he loved it and wants to do it again. He really learned from joining in and participating with kids he didn't know. Because every one of those kids we met -- all of them are excellent kids and excellent musicians.

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"The beauty of El Sistema is that it is anchored in youth empowerment. Nowhere is this more evident than with the seminario." - Dantes Rameau, Co-Founder/Executive Director, Atlanta Music Project