

Teaching Sistema-Style

By Dan Trahey, Artistic Director, *OrchKids*

A colleague of mine recently told me that teachers in the El Sistema-inspired movement can only really succeed "if they are bleeding the work" – in other words, if commitment and dedication are flowing through them and pouring out of them. This is a tall order, but almost all music teachers begin with that ambition. For those of us who manage, direct and coordinate El Sistema-inspired programs, the challenge is to create environments that support teachers in developing the skills they need to sustain high levels of commitment and energy.

Around the country, I have seen several things program leaders do to support that commitment. Most important, they foster a "family" of teachers. Every teacher needs to know that he or she is not in the fight alone, but is part of a common endeavor with everyone else on the team. Sometimes, this simply means providing teachers with administrative support and then getting out of the way, allowing teachers to put all their energies into doing what they do best.

More generally, teachers should always feel that they are part of a group process. They need to be able to watch each other work, and to support each other. And they need to spend time together. Many successful programs create regular and formal times for discussing the work together, not just solving logistical or behavior problems, but thinking deeply together. At [San Diego Youth Symphony's Community Opus Project](#), teachers partner to discuss and deepen their practice, and the faculty uses an "activity report" in their weekly meetings to foster discussion about teaching style and goals. Fostering informal staff time together is just as important: teachers need to hang out together as much as possible. "We go to each other's performances, hit the bar, or grab a bite to eat after class," says Stanford Thompson, director of [Play On, Philly!](#) At *OrchKids* in Baltimore, we have a Holiday Party and a Maryland Crab party to keep things loose and informal.

Teaching in El Sistema-inspired programs requires a complex set of skills. Because of the volatility of many of our students' lives, our teachers need both strong advance-planning skills and also the capacity to be flexible in the moment, to be willing to go off-track, to improvise as the need arises. At [Bravo Waterbury](#), director Calida Jones says, "Often we scrap a piece after months of preparation, only to introduce a new piece and play it three days later."



On Nov. 22 Dan Trahey, Artistic Director of OrchKids, with 8th grader Asia Palmer, received a 2013 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award, the signature recognition of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, from Michelle Obama. In accepting it, Trahey said, "Music education can change lives. And this award substantiates the success of the Venezuelan El Sistema model in the U.S."

Flexibility is key in many ways. Our teachers need to be able to teach in a variety of genres. They need to adjust to the performance priorities of El Sistema. If we are truly going to be performance-driven, then the quality of the performances will vary. Even if a concert is not going to be a really high-quality musical event, it's important to go ahead and do it anyway because of the social benefit that comes from setting up, tearing down, getting the parents in the door, and building community.

In addition, our teachers need to do some parenting as well as teaching. Because it's really about the kids' lives. Only after that is it about playing pianissimo or forte, legato or staccato. Our teachers need to be able to lead orchestra rehearsals where parents are there, and toddlers in diapers are running around – because it's always more than an orchestra rehearsal. It's about the lives of kids and families.

How can our programs support teachers in developing all these skills? Eric Booth has written about the students of El Sistema, "The moment a person totally commits to something, everything changes." This is as true for faculty as it is for kids. We need to create environments that encourage teachers to "totally commit." If we support our teachers well, they can focus on their teaching. We can create hangout time, so they can build deeper relationships with their colleagues. We can delegate real responsibilities to them, and let them lead. And we can encourage them to welcome serendipity and thrive in confusion. Most important, we need to remember that we are all part of an experiment together. And we are learning as we go.

FROM THE EDITOR

One day early in the winter of 1975, José Antonio Abreu announced to his newly formed youth orchestra of 70 or so young music students that they were going to play a public concert on April 30th at the headquarters of Venezuela's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The orchestra was only weeks old and had no real repertoire yet. Some members could read music well; some, not so well. Some could play beautifully...some were only aspiring to do that. But their maestro's call was unequivocal. He would work with them as much as he possibly could – but there were many times he would not be available, due to the demands of his government job.

How could they possibly succeed in this wildly ambitious endeavor? The more skilled members realized that they had to teach the less skilled. First-rate players understood that they needed to become mentors to the novices among them. And everyone realized that they needed to rehearse and work together many hours a day.

On April 30th, the orchestra performed for a large Ministry audience. They played Bach and Vivaldi; they played the overture to Mozart's *Magic Flute*, and Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*. They were received with overwhelming enthusiasm.

Peer learning, ensemble learning, mentoring, immersive intensity: we all know these are touchstones of El Sistema practice. But there is sometimes a tendency to think of them as philosophical mandates that precede practice. In fact, they evolved in the Venezuelan Sistema as imaginative solutions to great challenges. The fundamentals did not appear first as pedagogical ideas; they were invented as ways to scramble towards an improbably high goal. And over time, it's become clear that they constitute a rich, humanistic pedagogy with unprecedented transformative potential.

It's important to remember that the challenges we encounter are opportunities for creating further "fundamentals" in our own practice. At *OrchKids*, for example, a problem with managing snack time became an opportunity to make good nutrition a program priority. At a 2012 West Coast seminario that involved bussing children and families long distances, the problem of what to do with parents while their children rehearsed was solved by creating an on-the-spot parent chorus. Necessity is not only the mother of invention; it's also the wellspring of creative solutions that can guide and inspire us into the future.

Tricia Tunstall

"We need to create a new way of thinking in classical musicians: that they will become totally committed to culture." – José Antonio Abreu

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE U.S. & CANADIAN EL SISTEMA MOVEMENT

News Notes

Following a six-week pilot program last spring, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra (NJSO) and University Heights Charter School (UHCS) in Newark recently launched **NJSO CHAMPS** (Character, Achievement and Music Project). Fifty UHCS fourth through seventh graders join after-school group string lessons and full ensemble rehearsals three days a week, with NJSO Education & Community Engagement Conductor Jeffrey Grogan leading orchestra rehearsals and concerts. The NJSO also connects CHAMPS with their established youth



NJSO Education & Community Engagement Conductor Jeffrey Grogan works with CHAMPS players. Photo: Fred Stucker

orchestra through mentoring (providing community service credits) and joint performances. After just a few weeks of practice this fall, the CHAMPS orchestra performed at the NJ Performing Arts Center with the NJSO, playing "Variations on Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." www.njsymphony.org/champs

Sistema Global's Literature Review is the first research study of the of the international El Sistema movement, and provides a foundation for future research. It is now available in full format (204 pages) or executive summary at: <http://sistemaglobal.org/litreview>

A new idea to fund inclusive professional development: Sistema Fellow David France has launched an Indiegogo **crowdfunding campaign to provide professional development for free** to Sistema-connected faculty and others dedicated to social change through music in the Boston and Cambridge area. (Half the total goal of \$8,000 was raised in the first 48 hours!) Take a look: <http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/paul-b-hunter-teaching-artist-development-fund>

Resources

The report **A National Sistema Network in Canada: Phase 2 Feasibility Study and Strategic Plan** brings to fruition a yearlong process of exploring the formation of a national organization to support the Canadian

El Sistema movement. The report documents their exemplary process, which can serve as a thoughtful and inclusive model for other countries without a top-down national structure. The report includes recommendations for five key areas of responsibility that Sistema Canada will take on, and the eight core values they all agreed they share. To get a copy, go to nac-cna.ca/sistema and scroll to the bottom of the list of available documents.

A new essay by Eric Booth and Tricia Tunstall introduces **five views of El Sistema work as it grows around the world**, presenting the work in Sweden, Korea, and Japan, as well as describing the triumph of Venezuela's El Sistema orchestras at the Salzburg Festival, and the emergence of Sistema Canada. <http://ericbooth.net/?p=526>

Being – In Tune is a "provocation paper" by Peter Renshaw, a writer and researcher of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the Barbican Centre in London. The whole paper is bold and illuminating, but Section 4 in particular is important reading for the El Sistema movement, directly addressing the social-artistic aspirations of El Sistema-inspired work. "Socially driven practice without an artistic core is mono-dimensional – it lacks the raison d'être of being an artist." http://network.youthmusic.org.uk/sites/default/files/research/Being_In-tune_Report_Oct_2013.pdf

Something to Say: Success Principles for Afterschool Arts Programs From Urban Youth and Other Experts is a new report from The Wallace Foundation. It addresses ways that high-quality arts programs can attract and retain low-income urban tweens (ages 10-12), drawn from interviews with young people, families, and leaders of exemplary programs. The report includes ten principles for effective programs. Available free: <http://tinyurl.com/lfw68hy>

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A Student of Teaching

By Monique van Willingham, MAT student, 2012-13 Sistema Fellow

"Children learn more from what you are than from what you teach." (W.E.B. Du Bois).

South Africa, my home, is alive with possibility and hope. There is so much work to be done with regard to youth development, social transformation and the arts. My quest has been to gain the skills needed to accomplish my dreams for change. After experiencing the transformative process of the Sistema Fellowship, I realized that teachers are ultimately the key point of change. That is why I joined the **Masters of Arts in Teaching Program**.

The MAT program is a partnership between Longy School of Music of Bard College, YOLA at HOLA and the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. The highlight of this program, for me, is being immersed in the YOLA at HOLA El Sistema Program, which has a family-like culture of positivity, love and excellence. This is constantly displayed in the way the teachers interact with their students; I have been impressed by the way teachers build relationships by finding time to validate each student individually. I have also learned what authentic leadership looks like. I am inspired by program director Christine Witkowski's strong yet empathic and perceptive leadership.

Every MAT student is both a mentor and a mentee, which creates a unique learning cycle. With my mentor, woodwind specialist Emily Kubitskey, I have the opportunity to teach and gain feedback.

I have learned that teaching in an El Sistema setting is not as much about one specific pedagogy as it is about the way you apply that pedagogy, the intention behind it, and what you aim to achieve. It is crucial to be aware of the connection between how we teach and who children become.

Recently, we underwent the eye-opening Michael Grinder "Non-Verbal Yardsticks" training with Lynn Williams, who taught us how to use non-verbal indicators, such as voice level and eye contact, more effectively in the classroom. Williams emphasized that "Teaching is not about you; it's about the kids."

I have the same feeling that I had last year as part of the Sistema Fellowship: I am in the right place at the right time. The MAT program is an invaluable 'training ground' for me that will influence the way I help to effect social transformation in South Africa.

"Something about music urges us to engage with its larger context...it seems to be part of our genetic makeup that we can be so deeply moved by this art form." – David Byrne, *How Music Works*