

El Sistema and Professional Orchestras

By Jessica Balboni, Director of Learning Programs, League of American Orchestras

"Our El Sistema-inspired program is supported by community need and desire, partners that share a common vision, and an institutional commitment to artistic and social change. Without these, I don't believe such a program would be successful for an American symphony orchestra."— Steve Collins, Executive Director, Waterbury Symphony

For a symphony orchestra, launching and supporting an El Sistema-inspired initiative can be both challenging and rewarding. An informal survey of North American orchestras with El Sistema-inspired initiatives reveals that orchestras may need to develop and flex an entirely new set of muscles, ones that are far more education and community-focused than concert-centered. As the [L.A. Phil's](#) Gretchen Nielsen says, "These are ever-changing and highly complex programs; that's the fun and scary part about them!"

"They are entirely student-centered education programs within a symphony structure," says Dan Trahey of the [Baltimore Symphony](#). "Different kinds of personnel and infrastructure are necessary to run them." Sheila Evans of the [Allentown Symphony](#) reminds us that leadership, as always, is the key to success. "These programs require directors knowledgeable in El Sistema philosophy, with leadership skills that can cross boundaries among students, parents, school district, board and funders."

Several interviewees suggested that orchestras need to ask themselves hard questions, including: What is our intention in creating this kind of program? Where do our education and community programs currently live within our orchestra? Are they siloed, and not connected to our artistic core? If so, an ES-i program is perhaps not the best kind to consider at first.

Another major question is how to involve orchestra musicians in the program. "Remember that education is not what they were trained to do," says Trahey. Nielsen says it is important to engage orchestral musicians in ways that leverage their strengths and interests: "The more you can vary the kinds of engagement for your musicians, the better." Tanya Derksen of the [Winnipeg Symphony](#) asserts that involvement in an ES-i program can "help musicians and staff develop even more pride in their institution."

In addition, ES-i programs can significantly change the public perception of their orchestras. Jane Kenworthy



Marin Alsop, Music Director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, works with OrchKids musicians. Photo: Nick Skinner

of the [Stockton Symphony](#) says that the program "has helped dispel the widely held belief that the symphony only serves the white, affluent residents of Stockton." And Jennifer Barlament of the [Kalamazoo Symphony](#) talks about how her "community is starting to see music as vital to student success." Steve Collins of Waterbury says their program "elevates the WSO to a new level of relevance." According to Sheila Evans of Allentown, the ES-i program, "more than any of our other programs or concerts, has brought positive attention to the symphony, locally, regionally, and nationally. And it has caught the interest of the health and human services funding community as well as the symphony community."

At all of these orchestras, there is ample evidence that their ES-i programs are building meaningful connections with diverse students and their families as well as with other institutions in their communities. There is a strong and growing sense of "ownership" of the symphony on the part of populations that were previously underserved. In Baltimore, students like to say, "I'm in the BSO." In Allentown, some families are choosing to stay in their neighborhood so that their kids can continue with the program.

The vision in Kalamazoo is that "graduates will eventually join the KSO and transform the orchestra from the inside out." For this to happen, adult orchestras need to continue to be responsive to their communities in ever-adaptive and creative ways. They must start small, remain steady, and dream large, as the visionary Maestro Abreu did with his band of artist-teacher-citizens nearly forty years ago.

FROM THE EDITOR

A few months ago I was in Gothenberg, Sweden, home of Sweden's national symphony orchestra. It has also been a home for Gustavo Dudamel, who spent winter seasons there as principal conductor from 2007 to 2012, and is therefore the center of [El Sistema Sweden](#), one of Europe's largest national programs, sponsored by the orchestra.

"With Dudamel, the great ship that is the [Gothenburg Symphony](#) got a necessary push in a new direction," says Petra Kloo Vik, the orchestra's director of education. "We started to dare to dream big."

The El Sistema dream bloomed big at an afternoon orchestra side-by-side with the children of Gothenburg Sistema. The audience was filled with excited families; onstage, the full orchestra was surrounded by 150 children, who opened the show – in the space where Dudamel had honed his mastery of Sibelius and Nielson – by singing "Hey-ey-ey! Hey-ey-ey! Babumba, babumba, babumba hey-ey!" It was a robust, decidedly unclassical yodel, each stanza ending with three claps and a shout: "Hey!"

The concert proceeded to be the most child-centric, joyful side-by-side I've ever witnessed. The children played with the orchestra when they could, and sang when they couldn't. "Babumba" returned as the finale, with an orchestral score that turned the song into an unaccountably moving anthem. The audience, many of whom had never been in the hall before, stayed until after the children were led away to give a cheering, stomping ovation to the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra.

The "great ship" of the orchestra is moving on many fronts. Some musicians volunteer to work with the children; the full orchestra makes trips to community centers to play Mozart under the basketball hoops. There are plans for a weekly "Teen Fridays" hangout for the older kids of the Sistema and other music programs, housed inside the Symphony Hall.

"We want to open up this house to everybody," says Helena Westmann, the orchestra's director. "We want people who have never been here in their lives. We want them to know it's their home too."

Her words echo those of orchestra leaders here in the U.S. whose clear priority is to make sure their communities know: the house is wide open.

Tricia Tunstall

"Children in El Sistema dignify their existence by assuming, at a very tender age, the glorious identity of artists." – José Antonio Abreu

News Notes

Sistema Utah launches this August, out of Salt Lake City. Sistema Utah partners with a family of charter schools known as American Preparatory Academy. The program happens after school and targets K-12 for the first nucleo. Of particular interest is the site operating at the School for New Americans, a school that serves not only children from low socio-economic status families, but also children of families who are new immigrants to the U.S. Sistema Utah offers both orchestral and choral tracks and plans to be quickly and visibly integrated into the local community through a performance program. For more information, contact Victoria Petro-Eschler (vpetro-eschler@apamail.org) or “like” them on Facebook: www.facebook.com/elsistemaUtah

This August, The **Longy School** of Music of Bard College is hosting the first two-week seminario (called the **Youth Music Collaborative Summer Academy**). The 45 students from three Boston programs (Conservatory Lab Charter School, Josiah Quincy School, and Sistema Somerville) will spend eight-hour days in orchestra, choir, sectionals, musicianship, improvisation, dance, and yoga, preparing for a final concert on August 23rd. They hope not only to accelerate musical learning but also to nurture the sense of a larger community of Sistema kids in Boston. To visit or learn more about the Summer Academy, contact Miriam Eckelhofer at: miriam.eckelhofer@longy.edu. (617) 876-0956 x1632.

Also from **Longy** – they have launched their second MAT (**Master of Arts in Teaching**) class. The 18 full-time students come from four continents and are graduates of major conservatories and universities – even an LA Phil musician and a Sistema Fellow in the mix. This year’s class will work with YOLA students from the first week, and will join rehearsals and concerts with Dudamel. To meet the class, go to: http://www.longy.edu/mat/mat_bios.htm

Resources

The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) has released a new book, **Art for Art’s Sake? The Impact of Arts Education**, by Ellen Winner, Thalia R. Goldstein, and Stéphan Vincent-Lancrin – leading researchers in the field. The book, from OECD Publishing, authoritatively examines the

state of empirical knowledge about the impact of arts education on outcomes defined as: “skills for innovation”; subject-based skills, including in non-arts subjects; skills in thinking and creativity; and behavioral and social skills. The types of arts education examined include arts classes in school, arts-integrated classes, and arts study undertaken outside of school. The book is for sale or free download at: http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/art-for-art-sake_9789264180789-en

A report on **Sistema-inspired programs in Canada**, written by Erika Donald in 2012 (with support from Theodora Stathopoulos) entitled “Adopt or Adapt? El Sistema as an Inspiration for Music Education in Canada” is available online at: <http://www.qmea-aemq.org/news/adopt-or-adapt-el-sistema-as-an-inspiration-for-music-education-in-canada>

Three grant opportunities:

- ◆ The GRAMMY Foundation offers grants for “organizations and individuals working to **research the impact of music on the human condition**” – for example psychological and health-oriented studies. Letters of Inquiry are due by October 1, 2013. Selected applicants will be invited to submit full proposals. The Grammy Foundation website has guidelines and forms: <http://www.grammy.org/grammy-foundation/grants>
- ◆ El Sistema-inspired programs create particularly **engaging special projects**. Do you have one in mind that is especially awesome? Maybe there is some awesome funding available from the Awesome Foundation. <http://www.awesomefoundation.org>
- ◆ The Office Depot Foundation offers small grants for nonprofit organizations that bring **systemic change to the communities they serve**. The Foundation grants average \$1,000, in three categories, two of which match well with El Sistema-inspired goals: “Giving Children Tools for Success” and “Building Capacity to Serve Communities.” Applications are accepted through October 31, 2013. Review the guidelines at: <http://www.officedepotfoundation.org/funding.asp>

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Exponential Benefits

By Marin Alsop, Music Director, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra

As music director of the **Baltimore Symphony Orchestra**, I have an ambassadorial role: it’s my job to inspire our orchestra’s responsibility to find new connections with the community through music and through education. This is the reason I created the **OrchKids** initiative in 2008.

With Leonard Bernstein as my inspiration, I set out to develop a different perception of the orchestra, the organization, and the music we perform. What could be a better way to open up our art form, not just through exposure to orchestra music but through the sustainable experience of teaching a child to “DO” classical music?!

Many people ask me, “Is it a good idea for a symphony orchestra to start an initiative as intensive and grassroots as a Sistema-inspired program?”

My answer is always: The benefits are exponentially greater than the costs. To mention just a few of the benefits: First, the perception of the Baltimore Symphony has changed since the inception of OrchKids. It is now seen as a community-minded organization. Second, the fundraising capacity of the BSO has skyrocketed; we are seeing a diversity of revenue sources like nothing we’ve seen before. Third, the BSO’s audience has expanded, with OrchKids performing for over 130,000 people last year. And in general, OrchKids has increased the ability of the BSO to connect with non-orchestral musicians, amateur musicians, visual artists, community ensembles, music educators, retired musicians, and people from all walks of life.

As I think back to our early days of dreaming and strategizing, there are a few key points I would recommend to orchestras everywhere.

- You need a dynamic leader like our Dan Trahey, with passion, fortitude, and perseverance.
- Quality, not quantity. Educating 50 kids with consistency, intensity and commitment is better than light “exposure” for 500 kids.
- Listen to the community you wish to serve. How do they want to change their communities, their children’s lives? How do they experience music?
- Become an open laboratory where others can come to learn, explore and be inspired.
- Be patient. Change takes time.

I feel great admiration and gratitude for the beautiful work all of you do, and I invite you to visit our fair city, hear our world-class orchestra, and witness our “Citizens of the World,” the OrchKids.

“Our El Sistema-inspired program, more than any of our other programs or concerts, has brought positive attention to the symphony.” – Sheila Evans, Executive Director, Allentown Symphony