

Student Empowerment in Music Learning

By Karen Cueva, Manager of Learning & Engagement Programs at Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute

Students as leaders. Increasingly, teaching artists in U.S. Sistema-inspired programs have been thinking about this important idea.

In February, a group of music teaching artists and program directors came together for a [PlayUSA](#) workshop on "Empowering Students to Lead." PlayUSA is an initiative of Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute that supports quality instrumental instruction reaching young musicians in local communities across the country. The workshop brought together faculty from 13 PlayUSA grantee organizations, including Sistema programs and other instrumental music education organizations, to focus on student agency in musical learning.

PlayUSA partners arrived at this workshop at the midway point in a yearlong exploration of "collaborative action research inquiries," in which lead teaching artists identify a question that focuses on a challenging aspect of teaching practice. This part of the PlayUSA grantee partnership was developed in consultation with WolfBrown, an arts evaluation firm.

Teaching artists from five Sistema-based organizations took part in the workshop, having the opportunity to meet each other and learn from top educators and teaching artists in the field. Dr. César Cruz, co-founder of [Homies Empowerment](#), an afterschool program in Oakland, California for gang-involved youth, led a keynote session on the journey to becoming culturally responsive educators. His ideas resonated with Pamela Kihnley from [Tocando](#), a Sistema-based program affiliated with the El Paso Symphony Orchestra, who said, "Our collaborative action research focuses on courage, and this workshop gave us so many ideas on giving the kids more of a voice in the classroom."

Nick Malinowski, Executive Director of the Sistema-based [Kidznotes](#) program in Durham, North Carolina, was inspired by the workshop's focus on culturally responsive teaching. "I would like for our students to know about their heritage... so that they can be made to feel more at home in the U.S.," he said, "especially since many either have emigrated [themselves] or are from families who have emigrated from Mexico."

The workshop also included a session by composer and teaching artist Thomas Cabaniss that used instrumental improvisation and circle singing as ways to elevate student voice and agency. "We are already incorporating activities from Tom's session into our teaching," said Adrienne Taylor, resident cellist and Daily Orchestra Program Director at [Community MusicWorks](#) in Providence, RI.



Teaching artist Alison Loggins-Hull from Juilliard's MAP Program giving a session on cultivating meaningful teacher-student relationships. Photo: Stephanie Berger

Allison Loggins-Hull, flutist and teaching artist at [Juilliard's Music Advancement Program](#), led a session on cultivating meaningful student and teacher relationships. And an open rehearsal featuring students from Opportunity Music Project, an NYC Sistema-inspired program, was led by Randal Swiggum and Margaret

Jenks, who guided the students in playing a piece by their classmate, 13-year-old Arielle Arroyo, entitled "Going South."

Jessica Garand, Executive Director of [Opportunity Music Project](#), said, "When our students are given space to explore their creativity and have their voices sincerely heard, learning deepens. It creates a way for students to become not just recipients of information, but creators in their artistic spaces."

[El Sistema Oklahoma](#), another PlayUSA partner, is focusing its inquiry on exploring the instructional strategies used to transition students from sound to sight. This has resulted in rich dialogue across the program to reframe behavioral challenges in the classroom as opportunities to increase student engagement, through a variety of rehearsal strategies and diverse repertoire selection. Carnegie Hall will be sponsoring an inter-visitation in mid-April, bringing lead teaching artists from partner sites across the country to Oklahoma City to further discuss ways to impact the ways rehearsals and lessons are led.

This year's commitment to student agency and empowerment is part of PlayUSA's greater call to action to develop instrumental programs that are responsive to student needs and receptive to their voices. Through changes big and small, local and national, the PlayUSA community is looking at ways to improve student learning and give them the courage to take the lead.

FROM THE EDITOR

On March 24th, as I worked on putting this issue together, I listened to a live stream of the rally in Washington, D.C. I heard young person after young person speaking truth to power about their lived experiences of gun violence. And another voice was suddenly present in my head, more seasoned but still resonating with the urgent aspiration of the young people's voices. "Put a violin in the hands of a child," said that voice, "and the child will not pick up a gun."

In one of those wild coincidences that afterwards feel inevitable, it was at this moment that I got an email telling me that José Antonio Abreu had just died. This great visionary of our time, who could imagine a cultural outburst of music so powerful as to silence guns, had died just as a million children marched for the same purpose.

Abreu would have been utterly certain that the young people marching in D.C. and elsewhere would win their fight. He trusted young people simply and wholeheartedly. I once asked him in an interview why he had always believed that a national Sistema could be achieved. "I knew it would happen, because of the young people," he said. At every step in the process, he entrusted very young people with leadership positions.

As it happens, that's what our April issue is about: empowering our students to lead. Karen Cueva writes about the PlayUSA initiative "Empowering Students to Lead." Sharniece Adams, a student who has become a program leader, urges us to train our students to lead as well as to play music.

In forming our 130+ programs, we have created rich incubators for focused learning, cooperative learning, and music learning. Now, those of us with older students need to take the next step and begin to learn from them. We need to listen to them, to hear how they themselves experience the intersection of music and social justice. Sometimes, we need to get out of their way, give them agency, and follow their lead.

As we mourn the passing of our great Maestro, we can honor him by following his example of empowering young people. "Trust the young," he said. "They are always stronger and braver than we are. If we give them the tools, they will create a future more beautiful than we can imagine."

Tricia Tunstall

"Starting today, let all of us encourage, with all our might, a World Youth Musical Movement, a wisely instituted, proud symbol of a genuine and unprecedented Universal Culture of Peace..." – José Antonio Abreu

News Notes

This spring, **El Sistema USA** is launching a new support program for emerging El Sistema-inspired organizations in the U.S. **PRESTO (Program for Rising El Sistema Organizations)** will provide awards to 12-15 organizations and their leaders, by competitive application. Organizations must be in their first two to five years of operation and have membership in El Sistema USA. The three years of the award provide unprecedented support to emerging programs. PRESTO goals include increased student enrollment, organizational stability, and effectiveness in achieving excellence in musical, social, and academic outcomes. Each award includes grant money (to be matched by grantee), cohort learning for leaders, and mentorship of leaders and their programs by experienced heads of well-established, thriving El Sistema-inspired programs. PRESTO is supported by a one-million dollar, three-year grant from the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation. The online application process will be available in early April 2018, with applications due in early June. For more information and updates, go to <https://elsistemausa.org/presto-2018/>

OrchKids (a program of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra) is now accepting applications for a new program, their **two-year String Fellowship**, September 2018 - May 2020 (summers are off). String Fellows (seeking violin, viola and cello) will gain experience in teaching, administration and performance. They will teach in private and large group settings, learning OrchKids' educational philosophy, which simultaneously fosters both students' creativity and instrumental skills. Each Fellow will also learn non-profit management skills in a chosen area – development, education, operations or marketing – working with a mentor and taking on projects. As players, Fellows will program, curate, and perform at least two community engagement concerts a year, and they will have opportunities to learn from BSO musicians. Fellows get \$18,000/yr (plus additional paid summer work options) for 30 hours/week. Apply by April 20th, and find out more about application materials at: <https://tinyurl.com/ydykr5nu> Submit application to: orchkids@bsomusic.org

The **Conductors Guild** just launched the **2nd Conductor Training Workshop in Coro, Venezuela, with the Falcon Symphony Orchestra**, June 24 - 29. It is a training opportunity for Sistema conductors to practice with an orchestra of Venezuelan Sistema musicians and leaders, in the heart of one of its premier programs, with Music Director Rubén Capriles, a founding member of the original El Sistema youth orchestra, and lead instructor John Farrer. Tuition: \$1600, plus application fee and some travel costs. Find out more at: <http://www.conductorsguild.org/conductors-guild---coro--venezuela-workshop> Questions go to: guild@conductorsguild.org

Miami Music Project has had funders step up to fund two new kinds of opportunities for their students. 1) Forty **Miami Music Project** students were funded to attend the March 24th *March for Our Lives* gun control rally in Washington DC with students from Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL. Students supporting other students – a profound Sistema belief in action. 2) Funder Dan Lewis will support 46 Miami Music Project students with full scholarships to attend the prestigious **Interlochen Summer Arts Camp** in Michigan this summer.

Resources

The **Composers Equity Project from Chamber Music America** seeks to increase awareness of the diversity of composers. They have created a database of ALAANA*, Women, and Gender Non-Conforming Composers. (*The acronym ALAANA indicates composers who identify as African/Black, Latinx, Asian/South Asian, Arab/Middle Eastern, and Native American.) Find the database at: <https://tinyurl.com/y8hrynnk>

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Interning Into Leadership

by Sharniece Adams, Lead Site Coordinator at Lockerman-Bundy, OrchKids, Baltimore

At the age of ten, I was chosen to be part of Tuned In, an El Sistema program at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore. During my eight years there, Dan Trahey, the director, gave the students opportunities to intern with other programs. As a middle school student, I was able to choose between going to band camp and interning at the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra Orchkids program. I loved Orchkids in particular, so I chose that program, and started my first summer internship there in eighth grade. Orchkids was also an El Sistema program, so it felt like home. The students were like me; we faced the same problems and challenges, we had the same interests, and we all just wanted to play music. I interned at Orchkids every summer through high school, and I learned so much not only about music but also about administration, skills I could use in the real world.

Interning at Orchkids was the best choice I ever made. In 2014, I graduated from high school and attended community college. In 2015, a position opened up at Orchkids. This was great news! I went for an interview, and have been a program assistant at Orchkids for the past three years. Recently, I became Site Coordinator of an Orchkids site. Being a part of Orchkids at an early age helped with this whole process.

I believe there are many other young students waiting to become leaders in our El Sistema programs. Students should be given a chance to intern at a young age, and should constantly have mentorship opportunities in place. Programs should have intern opportunities available for outside students as well. Students should be given a variety of internship possibilities and be able to make the choice themselves.

We should train our students to become not only musicians but also leaders. Don't let any student miss out on an opportunity – you may miss your next leader! And maybe the last person you thought would be interested will become the next leader of an El Sistema program.

[Editor's note: To our knowledge, Ms. Adams is the first student in a U.S. El Sistema-inspired program to grow into fulltime program leadership.]

ACTION FOR THE MONTH: Publically Honor the Life of José Antonio Abreu

On March 24, José Antonio Abreu, founder and four-decade Director of El Sistema, died in Venezuela at age 78. We urge every El Sistema-inspired program in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere to offer an acknowledgement/appreciation in their written programs, newsletters, and publicity, and to speak a tribute in all public occasions, for the next few months. Information on Abreu is available here (http://theensemblenewsletters.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/April-18_Action-for-the-Month.pdf).