

## Radical Self-Expression

by Eddy Kwon, Director of the El Sistema-inspired program *MYCincinnati*, Cincinnati, OH

We are tending to our aching bellies, sour from digesting the reality that was America's most recent political circus. We grow tired, heavy with the weight of the terrible unknown. But soon, this period of collective shock and mourning will be over. And then what? What do we do – as citizens, artists, teachers, and scholars – to steel ourselves and our communities for the coming struggle?

Here is one way: We dive more deeply into our personal artistic practice. Then, we engage. We allow ourselves to be consumed by what Jonathan Lear calls "radical hope," what bell hooks calls "love ethic," or what Reinhold Niebuhr calls "sublime madness." With this irrational, ecstatic energy, we teach, we do the daily work, and we continue to build our beloved community.

Community MusicWorks is one organization that is imbuing its students with this radical energy, largely thanks to the revolutionary vision of its founder, Sebastian Ruth. For one thing, CMW's teaching staff consists of active performers in classical, experimental, and folk traditions, and their two-year fellowship engages high-level, social justice-minded instrumentalists in an intensive immersion program of teaching, mentorship, and performance.

CMW's groundbreaking "Phase 2" program engages its teenage musicians in weekly meetings that combine music practice with discussions around issues of social justice. The program, though ever-evolving, was founded on the core values of fellowship, self-reflection, and making space for others. Each Phase 2 meeting begins with a rehearsal of chamber music; for the students, as for CMW's Residents and Fellows, engagement with their artistic practice is the foundation for everything that follows. After rehearsal and a delicious meal prepared by a community chef, the students are carefully guided through discussions on topics ranging from Nina Simone to indigenous song-lines, from art as politics to identity. It's within these conversations that CMW's staff encourages its students to reflect critically on their lived experience, using their shared artistic practice as an entry point. Finally, the annual Phase 2 Youth Salon gives participating students an opportunity to conceive, design, and present a culminating personal project.

In 2014, I created the Ambassador Ensemble Program

at MYCincinnati. This initiative grew out of a personal quest to connect my own evolving creative practice with that of my students, and to do so within a framework of social and political engagement. Like my students, I had many questions about my place in the world growing up as a young person of color. I created the program, in part, to provide for my students a safe, artistically-charged space to explore these and other important questions.

During that first year, I met with the inaugural Ambassador Ensemble (six students, ages 12-15) every week to engage in critical dialogue around issues of race, gender, class, power, democracy, and social change. As we learned more about ourselves, each other, and America's social, economic, and political systems, I encouraged my students to connect their personal experiences to larger structures and narratives. With persistent, critical thought, catcalling in the street revealed itself to be a symptom of patriarchy; our obsession with money was seen as an expression of class struggle; and a humiliating, false arrest was analyzed against the backdrop of America's historic criminalization of black bodies.

With these discussions as inspiration, I worked with the Ambassadors to create a 35-minute performance work for our instruments, voices, and bodies. Combining elements of diverse artistic traditions, the piece attempts to express the spirit of our struggle in a personal, meaningful way.

Over the past two years, we've presented our work and the accompanying documentary film throughout Cincinnati and the Midwest. This year, a second, new group of Ambassadors embarks on a similar journey of critical reflection, collaboration, creation, and collective action.

James Baldwin may have said it best: "Ultimately, the artist and the revolutionary function as they function, and pay whatever dues they must pay behind it, because they are both possessed by a vision, and they do not so much follow this vision as find themselves driven by it. Otherwise, they could never endure, much less embrace, the lives they are compelled to lead."

When we are consumed by the vision – be it hope, love, madness – our students become compelled to discover it for themselves.

## FROM THE EDITOR

On Nov. 8, the U.S. voted in a way that shocked and dismayed many people engaged in Sistema-inspired work here and across the world. Donald Trump's campaign had a complex appeal that we are struggling to understand. What we do know is that this country elected a man who, during his campaign, expressed misogyny and xenophobia and exhibited racist and authoritarian tendencies. His character stands at odds with the bedrock values of our movement. What does this mean for us?

We are all immersed in work that represents the exact inverse of Trump's message, work that prioritizes inclusion and compassionate connection. It's essential that we maintain positive, joyful learning environments. However, our students of color are experiencing new levels of uncertainty and fear. And the changes intended by the new administration will affect them and their families directly. We do not serve them well if we simply carry on as though nothing has changed.

It can't be business as usual. If we are a movement, we have the capacity to move – and to move together in intentional and concerted ways, to push back against this political tide.

What can we do? In the coming months, we'll be proposing a specific action in each issue that we think could be useful, both for our movement and for our country. (See bottom of page two.) And here are some general ideas:

1. Build more active alliances with our programs' extended families and with community leaders. Our programs are more important than ever within our communities, as embodiments of their strengths and assets blooming in celebratory ways.
2. Strengthen our collective movement. This is the moment to reactivate our "5% rule," with every one of us dedicating 5% of our work time to advancing the collective endeavor, always referencing the larger movement and articulating how our mission aligns with a more general vision of social justice.
3. Sharpen awareness about racial issues within our own programs. We feel this issue is important, and will devote next month's editorial to it. Stay tuned.

We've always been more comfortable with the "tocar" part of our mission than the "luchar" – and that's felt okay. But this national moment requires more. We need to galvanize our movement toward collective action – AND keep playing.

*Tricia Tunstall & Eric Booth*

## News Notes

To celebrate its tenth anniversary, **YOLA (Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles)** set out on a four-city tour of California, with a culminating performance in a sold-out 2,800 seat theater in Oakland, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel. To get a feel for the tour,

you can watch a short film (<http://tinyurl.com/h8hj3rw>) and read the review in the *Los Angeles Times*. (<http://tinyurl.com/j5ct3l2>).



On the YOLA tour. Photo: Sam Comen

Many of us are thinking politically, and with concern, in the wake of the U.S. national elections. Here is a **national cultural policy and action platform of recommendations prepared by the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture** (a non-governmental arts-activist organization). Written before the election, its ten points were informed by many voices and endorsed by dozens of organizations across the field. It proposes a unifying vision for the short- and longer-term. A summary, the full platform, and a link to endorse the platform can be found at [www.usdac.us/platform](http://www.usdac.us/platform). Opening remarks at the recent USDAC national conference present an inspiring context: <http://tinyurl.com/zpvd4o8>

The **Creative Youth Development National Partnership** invites programs to **join the national CYD network** by registering to put their program on a national map, include it in a database, and join exchanges and research. The CYD National Partnership is assembling a **Toolkit**, which will include original research on effective practices. To learn more about the Partnership, and to register, go to: <http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/creative-youth-development>

If you have some ambitious students playing at a high level, encourage them to consider **Carnegie Hall's NYO2** (for more, see last month's issue of *The Ensemble*). The application deadline is December 15. <http://tinyurl.com/z3q3gpx>

## Resources

You may not yet think about it in this way, but El Sistema-inspired programs are part of the growing **Creative Youth Development field**. To learn more about the history of that field and what defines it, read this article in the Arts Education Policy Review.

<http://tinyurl.com/jbcw3th>

New research from Michigan State University confirms what you already know – but solid research can be useful for your advocacy. It **connects early arts education with extraordinary achievement in science, technology, and engineering career** accomplishments. Successful STEM innovators have had eight times as much arts education in their backgrounds – especially in music. They can't prove the relationship is "causal," but the correlation is strong. <http://tinyurl.com/k7w8y7v>

**SpreadMusicNow** focuses its funding with the question: "In addition to teaching kids music, what effects will your program have on children's development over the course of their lives as young adults?" They focus on expanding access to music education, building awareness and support, and strengthening music education sectors. They do not accept unsolicited applications; to begin a conversation with them about your eligibility, go to <http://www.spreadmusicnow.org/grant-eligibility>

Sistema-inspired programs often claim they "build community." Here is an important and beautiful **essay by author-educator Parker Palmer** that describes how we should think about that mission. It starts with: "Community is not a goal to be achieved but a gift to be received." Our work can get draining; here is an article that helps you recharge. <http://tinyurl.com/zcr4sq8>

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## Mozart (& Kids) in the Jungle

By Terrence Thornhill and Elizabeth Moulthrop, *Paterson Music Project, Paterson, NJ*

"Scene 16, take 24, and....Action!" The camera rolled, Gael Garcia Bernal picked up his guitar and began strumming, and a group of Paterson Music Project (PMP) students began a clave beat, keeping their eyes glued on Gael. Bright camera lights beamed intensely down on the students. Watching were about 70 TV crew members. We were on the set of Amazon's hit TV show, "Mozart in the Jungle."

Another group of PMP students began a "Mississippi Hot Dog" rhythm on PVC pipe. Then everyone began singing "Palo Palo." Gael made his gestures bigger and sang louder. The music swelled and the energy in the room was alive. It didn't matter that we had been on set for ten hours, or that it was 10 PM on the night before the first day of 3rd grade for most of these students. The kids were just doing their thing, the thing they do each and every day in our program after school, joyfully making music.

The whole adventure began when our cello teaching artist Terrence got a call from a friend who was working on the set of "Mozart in the Jungle," asking if our students wanted to be on an episode. "We're taping it tomorrow. You have 24 hours to choose 10 students, prep them, and get them to Brooklyn."

When we arrived on set, we met Gael Garcia Bernal, who is one of the show's leads. Our kids were thrilled, and some of their moms even more so (FYI, Gael is a bit of a Latin heartthrob). In "our" scene, our students had to learn a Mexican folk song from his character "Rodrigo," who is loosely based on Gustavo Dudamel. In this episode, Rodrigo, the intensely passionate conductor of the fictional "New York Symphony," hopes to create a youth music program.

Creating the scene itself was meticulous work. The students and actors executed the same scene over and over for hours. Our students met the challenge with confidence, and ended with a sense of accomplishment and pride. The producers told us that everyone on set was "completely blown away by how present and patient the students were." They found it refreshing to work with real kids who clearly love making music. It was a powerful experience for all of us to see our students work so hard and succeed, using the skills they have earned from their time in PMP. The new season of "Mozart in the Jungle" premieres December 9 on Amazon.

## "WHAT CAN WE DO NOW?" ACTION FOR THE MONTH:

Write a snailmail letter to Congressman **Elijah Cummings**, the most outspoken Congressional proponent of El Sistema-inspired programs. He has visited OrchKids in his Baltimore district and recorded a message of support. Let's shower him with thanks and urge him to become proactive in seeking support for Sistema-inspired programs. Write him at: U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515.