

The First Annual Symposium of El Sistema USA

By *Hermes Camacho, Teaching Artist, Austin Soundwaves, Austin, TX*

The symposiums I've attended in my professional career have run the gamut from too much academicism to too much mutual reinforcement among like-minded individuals. But neither was the case at the 2018 [El Sistema USA](#) (ESUSA) National Symposium, held during a surprisingly snowy January weekend on the campus of Duke University. There was certainly a prevalence of head-nodding among the nearly 200 attendees, but it was the kind of agreement that symbolized an eagerness to challenge and to improve.

One of the two themes of the weekend, racial equity, was powerfully conveyed in the keynote by David France ([Revolution of Hope](#)), titled "Dear White People: Use Your Privilege." A sort of "hell, yes" murmur permeated the room throughout his talk, fueled by his reminder that "inequality is intentionally built into the fabric of our society...so we have to be equally intentional to undo this." Adam Eccleston ([Bravo Youth Orchestras](#)) expanded on this idea, stressing that finding new ways to engage students only strengthens goals of racial equity already inherent in El Sistema. And Calida Jones ([Bravo Waterbury!](#)) challenged the audience to be present in the neighborhoods we serve: "Don't just drive by. Stay for dinner, have a conversation, and find common ground."

During a luncheon honoring ESUSA founders Mark Churchill and Stanford Thompson, ESUSA Board Chair and retired physician Bonnie Ragen ([Bravo Youth Orchestras](#)) proudly admitted, "The impact you have as teachers is more than I could have had as a physician." Indeed, the second of the symposium's themes focused specifically on Collective Impact, the collaborative model for making social change through a multi-organization, shared goal-oriented framework. Sara Zanussi ([ComMUSICation](#)) addressed the need for a reliable neighborhood infrastructure so that members can consistently access community programs. Anna Pietraszko ([Miami Music Project](#)) and Michelle Hospital (Florida International University) presented findings of their three-year study on the community-university partnership between their organizations. Tricia Tunstall and Melina Garcia ([El Sistema New Jersey Alliance](#)) and Helen Eaton (Philadelphia's [Settlement Music School](#)) touched on how regional collaborative efforts can benefit from and contribute to the Collective Impact



Dan Trahey leading a creative composition workshop at the El Sistema USA 2018 National Symposium at Duke University

model. Christine Taylor ([Reach*Teach*Play](#)) spoke on how ESUSA's Guiding Principles can help programs achieve Collective Impact.

A site visit to [Kidznotes](#), the El Sistema-inspired program in Durham, provided a close-at-hand example of Collective Impact. Kidznotes partners with the East Durham Children's Initiative and several other organizations across the area to provide the local underserved community with a breadth of programs and opportunities.

Interspersed between the formal TED-style talks were several breakout sessions aimed at encouraging dialogue between presenters and audience. Some of these focused on increasing student engagement, including a session on student-led learning, where ownership over learning outcomes is shifted largely to the students involved. Another workshop empowered students through collaborative composition projects, providing an opportunity for the students to own both the creation and the performance of the music.

The strength of the symposium was in the sense of community-building not just within programs but also within El Sistema itself. Bringing together El Sistema from across the country meant folks (finally) got to put faces to familiar names, share stories, and develop new networks of learning and support. Attendees were not just eager to learn; they craved the chance to work and try new things. Solutions were often met with "What would that look like with my kids?" rather than "Prove it." The plenary speakers didn't leave us just with awe and fuzzy feelings – they challenged every attendee, combining the inspirational with the actionable.

The snowstorm did cause some havoc with symposium logistics. But the El Sistema spirit prevailed; we all rolled with the punches, adapted, and realized nothing is perfect – and that's fine.

A speech by Calida Jones best captured the weekend's most important takeaway, exhorting everyone to "get comfortable with being uncomfortable." Judging by the vigor of the head-nodding in that room, I believe we are headed in the right direction.

FROM THE EDITOR

Every gathering of music educators gets amped up when, at long last, the kids play. The ESUSA symposium last weekend was no exception. After two days of talks and workshops, we gathered in a concert hall to hear actual students – from Durham's [Kidznotes](#), Baltimore's [OrchKids](#), Chicago's [ChiMOP](#) and Charlotte's [Project Harmony](#) – actually make music.

The concert began with a series of chamber groups that displayed the kids' musical and expressive skills in a variety of styles. And then something different began: a group composition they had all created together in the Creative Composition workshop, run by Dan Trahey, Calida Jones, Emily Smith and Joe Hamm, with help from many local musicians and Sistema teachers.

Group composition! The idea is hugely appealing to most Sistema teachers because it fuses two of our most core values, ensemble and creativity. But most of us don't have a clue how to do it. In his brief intro, Dan told us, "We are all about AND, not OR. Classical AND popular. Orchestra AND composing." He described the creative process: "We began by asking, 'What's on your minds?' And some kids mentioned their fears about DACA. So – D-A-C-A. We had a start. Then we agreed on the theme 'Now is the time.' And we asked, the time for what? Many kids contributed words and images. All of that – images, rhythms, melodic shapes – went into the composition."

Thanks to skill and trust on the teachers' part and spirited inventiveness on the students' part, the result was *music*. Those four seminal notes make for haunting minor-key motives, and the students clearly felt a musical as well as a real-life urgency. There were episodes of robust body percussion, fragments of solo song, coloristic textures; there was a 7-beat melody stretched across 8 beats.

Perhaps most striking was the fact that all the students, from the smallest beginners to the most accomplished teenagers, seemed secure both in their specific roles and in their value to the whole ensemble. Even a tiny bystander lifted onto the stage was given a precise musical job and gently mentored throughout. There was a sense that each student felt both ownership and fellowship.

Ownership AND fellowship. As the U.S. Sistema movement heads into our second decade, let's make "AND" our watchword.

Tricia Tunstall

"What's wrong with our children? Adults telling children to be honest while lying and cheating. Adults telling children to not be violent while marketing and glorifying violence. Adult hypocrisy is the biggest problem children face in America." – Marian Wright Edelman, children's advocate

News Notes

Side by Side by El Sistema is a gigantic summer camp in Gothenburg, Sweden, including (in 2017)

1500 young people from 16 countries in orchestra and choir tracks, 2000 people in open workshops, and 2000 audience members. The Gothenburg Symphony and



Musicians at Side by Side by El Sistema in 2017. Photo: Lennart Sjöberg

Chorus host the event in close collaboration with El Sistema Sweden, and they welcome U.S. and Canadian students. Take a look at their website to see how they organize six levels of orchestra and six levels of chorus, with students from many countries and a wide range of experience. Preview film for 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COsUX6n-GDs&feature=youtu.be> For more information: <http://www.sidebysidegoteborg.com>

The **Fourth International Teaching Artist Conference** brings together hundreds of teaching artists (and those who work with them) from around the world to learn from one another and to make connections across all art forms and many different kinds of practice. First time in the U.S.: September 13-15, 2018, in New York City. If you would like to propose a presentation (until February 16), apply here: <https://app.getacceptd.com/itacApply> To apply to be a delegate: <http://www.itac-conference.com> There will also be ways to participate online for those who cannot attend. Conference themes: What is the role of teaching artists as contributors to social justice? What is the responsibility of 21st-century artists as they engage in different communities? How can artists transform schools and institutions of learning in radical ways?

On January 18, members of the **Longy Sistema Side by Side Ensembles** performed the **Star Spangled Banner** at the TD Garden in Boston before the Boston Celtics basketball game. Inconceivably, the Celtics lost the game even after that inspiring start.

Resources

Helpful new research on retaining Sistema students has just been released in England: **What Helps**

Students to Continue Studying Music Past Primary School?: A Research Report on In Harmony, England. The authors cite ten factors that help. Read an article by one of the authors on *The World Ensemble* website: <https://tinyurl.com/yc8kbpt>

Many Sistema-inspired programs use **Giving Tuesday** campaigns to raise funds during the holiday season.

Read the research on whether that helps or hinders overall fundraising. <https://tinyurl.com/y99d42x2>

More than a few Sistema-inspired organizations are involved in **Creative Placemaking projects**. A new resource gathers essential information for those who would like to get involved in such projects. The Hub comes from the Bolz Center for Arts Administration at the Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison, partnering with Blackbaud and the Alliance for Arts Research in Universities. Go to: <http://tinyurl.com/yajs82tf>

Does your program work with **high school volunteers**? Maybe there is a win-win opportunity to do so. New research about youth volunteerism finds that those experiences foster lasting increases in self-worth for the volunteers. They also found that volunteering increases socialization, which reduces a sense of loneliness and isolation – by age 14, 25% of girls and 10% of boys struggle with depression. Read the research: <https://tinyurl.com/y7crlct>

Congratulations to **Music Haven** (New Haven, CT) on opening their **new state-of-the-art home** in the Fair Haven district. <http://wnpr.org/post/music-haven-has-new-location-bring-music-kids>

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Get Comfortable... ...Being Uncomfortable

by Calida N. Jones, Co-Founder & Artistic Director, Bravo Waterbury!

What a great opportunity it was to be together with over 100 leaders, teachers, students, and curious individuals this past weekend at the El Sistema USA first-ever symposium. You could feel the excitement, energy, and buzz around Duke University as we took over the Nelson Music Room with live performances, slideshows, and plenary presentations. I believe some of our plenaries really gave space for people to think, reflect, and then hopefully plan a course of action.

I had the honor and privilege to open my heart to all attendees and talk about ESUSA's new committee for Racial Diversity and Cultural Understanding. I shared my personal experiences growing up as a black female violinist, administrator, and now leader in the field of social change and advocacy. The key takeaways I wanted to leave our attendees with were:

- ❖ Once you make the choice to participate in this work (and really, it's a life choice), this is where personal sacrifice and growth come in. It's no longer about us. It's about embracing and understanding backgrounds, cultures, and experiences that are different than ours.
- ❖ Don't be defensive; don't simply react in conversations. Instead, reflect and try to understand someone else's journey. Listen, listen, listen to your community. Respond accordingly, and remember that what you think they need may not be what they actually need. Allow them in the kitchen to add to the recipe of love, hope, leadership, and social change.
- ❖ It's time to start being even more inclusive of black and brown composers, musicians, educators, and leaders. We are kidding ourselves if we think the work is actually done. We haven't even scratched the surface. This will require uncomfortable conversations with leaders who don't recognize the importance of this shift musically and socially. If we ever expect to see change, we must lead it with our actions, no matter how uncomfortable we may feel.

I'm convinced that with our voices combined, our actions will leave a strong foundation for our current students to stand on. As actor David Oyelowo said: "Unless you consciously decide you must do something about it, especially if you are in a position of power, it won't change." *Tocar y luchar!*

"An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity." – Martin Luther King, Jr.