

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

Improvising with Visionary Young People

by Jeff Lederer, co-founder/director of the *Visionary Youth Orchestra* in NYC and Director of *Jazz Studies* at LIU Post

I co-founded the Visionary Youth Orchestra (VYO) along with Jessica Jones in New York in 2010. The idea of our project was to provide a workshop/ensemble of young musicians to explore structured free improvisation in a large ensemble setting. The results have been remarkable – this innovative group has garnered great praise in its eight years, and recently had the honor of performing at the Cecil Taylor memorial in NYC.

With regard to repertoire and musical approaches, this project is quite different from most Sistema youth orchestras. However, I have always attempted to follow the spirit of what I saw happening in the núcleos of Caracas many years ago. The Visionary Youth Orchestra is inspired by a model based on the transformative power of music in young lives. In our case, the engine of that transformative power has been musical improvisation.

Traditionally, the musical repertoire at the core of most Sistema youth orchestra programs has come from the Western classical canon, along with some folkloric sources. Many programs are increasingly supplementing this core with other musical forms and styles, from jazz and pop to diverse world musics. In addition, some programs have committed to using elements of improvisation in their curricula, including the *OrchKids* program in Baltimore, the *MakeMusicNola* program in New Orleans, and the *InTempo* program in Stamford, CT. But the movement to make improvisation a central element has been relatively slow to develop. *OrchKids* founder/director Dan Trahey observes, “Classical folks tend to be scared of improvisation, so sometimes they push it out of the way.” It’s interesting, he adds, that in our not-for-profit world, non-musical improvisation has become a common and necessary part of what we do as administrators, teaching artists and learners.

Much of the repertoire being played in the VYO is interactive – that is, the music can go in any number of directions during the performance. Therefore, the skill of really deep listening to the music happening in the moment quickly becomes the most important factor. Students need to hear the whole gestalt of an improvised piece of music, and to understand their place within that sonic landscape. This is a much deeper and broader kind of listening than just

tuning with your section leader or making sure you are playing in time with the drummer. In improvised music pieces, structured or unstructured, musicians need to make quick decisions based on constantly evolving musical settings in real time. These decisions will have an immediate effect on the whole musical organism, and the consequences are experienced right away. There are not many activities in life in which the decision-feedback loop is so fast and multifaceted. This experience is tremendously rich for young musicians, as practice for the kind of non-musical improvisation that happens in creative organizations.



Jeff Lederer leading the VYO.
Photo: Eva Kapanadze

An important aspect of VYO rehearsals is the student-led discussion that follows almost every piece in rehearsal. Our ensemble is a democratic musical community, and most important decisions about the music are made by consensus.

Students have been exceptionally

forthcoming in their reflective thinking. I think this is because we have always encouraged a workshop environment in which peer-to-peer learning is more important than instructor-led direction. This is quite different from the traditional social structures of ensembles playing classical music – and yet, in my own experiences in the núcleos of Caracas, I saw lots of peer-to-peer mentoring, support, and feedback that bypassed the traditional hierarchical structures of the classical orchestra.

We often start rehearsals with an “improvisation starter” – a piece of text, musical instruction, student-created graphic, or student-led conduction. It’s important to consistently stress that this type of music-making is just as disciplined as reading a traditionally notated score. It’s equally important to debrief the experience immediately with student-led reflections. Laughter is okay; in fact, it’s good. With consistent practice, students will learn the skills of big-picture listening, quick decision-making and critical thinking.

I’m convinced that the musical structures of large-ensemble improvised music have an impact on the way young people think about themselves and their place in the world. The experience of improvising together provides more than a metaphor for positive personal and social development; it is actually a direct pathway towards those goals.

FROM THE EDITOR

A few weeks ago, several dozen students from the Trenton, NJ Sistema program *Trenton Music Makers* began their New Year by visiting the campus of Princeton University, a 20-minute drive but a world away from their daily lives. They were jittery with excitement as they piled into a classroom in the university’s Woolworth Music Building, took out their instruments and began to tune. It wasn’t so much Princeton that gave them the jitters; it was the fact that they were about to play for one of the greatest maestros in the world.

Gustavo Dudamel is Artist in Residence this year at Princeton, which means he comes to the campus a number of times for musical performances and dialogue around issues of art, education and social change. It also means he’s able to have several encounters with East Coast, and particularly Princeton-area, Sistema programs.

When Maestro Dudamel walked into that packed classroom, the kids fell silent for a moment. Then several greeted him in English and Spanish, and the group played three pieces, with their music director, Lydia Veilleux, conducting. They played well, concentrating ferociously. “Wonderful!” said Dudamel, when they finished. “Did you enjoy it? Isn’t it fun?” The students looked a little surprised; in the pressure of the moment, they may well have forgotten that this was fun. Then Dudamel added: “So—play more! More!”

The students had only prepared three pieces for this occasion. But one student raised his hand: “Maestro! We can play ‘Babumba!’”

To the delight of everyone – including the Maestro, who was once music director in Gothenburg, Sweden, where the song was composed by a Sistema Sweden founder – “Babumba” it was. They played and sang with gusto, and we attempted the obligatory arm motions. And then it was the kids who wanted more. They played a song from *Moana*, and they were not only playing well; they were, in fact, having fun.

At the end, Dudamel chatted for a while and shook hands with as many kids as he could. They may not have realized it in that exhilarating moment, but it was clear that the single most motivating and inspiring word the Maestro had said to them was not “Wonderful.” It was “More!”

Tricia Tunstall

**“All good music has a complexity. But if you do it with discipline and love, it will be fun.”
– Gustavo Dudamel**

News Notes

On her first full day in office in 2015, Governor Kate Brown visited [Portland BRAVO's Rosa Parks School](#), and ended up conducting the students. This January, she invited [BRAVO students to be featured performers at her inauguration, at the beginning and middle of the program](#). Also, BRAVO is preparing their third [Crossing Borders](#) celebration for February, this year featuring artists from Ireland, Trinidad and Venezuela together with BRAVO students in a major concert hall.

Gustavo Dudamel is the Artist in Residence at Princeton University for the 2018-2019 academic year – and that is good news for students of some East Coast Sistema programs. As part of the residency, titled “Uniting Our World Through Music,” [Princeton has invited ensembles from the Boston String Academy and, closer to home, the Trenton Music Makers, to visit the campus, to perform for and talk with Maestro Dudamel](#). There's more to come in April, when hundreds of students across New Jersey will be involved in the residency.

The three-day summer professional development workshop [Undersanding El Sistema](#) will run at [New England Conservatory](#) June 7-9 at NEC. Led by Heath Marlowe, former Director of the Sistema Fellows program at NEC, the workshop features a team of experienced program leaders and founders, and is for Sistema teachers, administrators, board members and musicians considering the field. More information: <https://necmusic.edu/musiciansatwork>

For those who wish they had attended ITAC4 (the Fourth International Teaching Artist Conference) at Carnegie Hall last September, mark your calendar for [ITACS](#), which will happen on Sept. 15-17, 2020 in [Seoul South Korea](#). Hosted by [KACES](#), the South Korean government's arts education agency (Korea Arts & Culture Education Service: <http://eng.arte.or.kr>), South Korea's large Sistema-inspired program, the [Orchestra of Dreams](#), will be featured. Application processes will begin in a year. Information: <http://www.itac-conference.com> Also, the ITAC Collaborative now hosts a [free monthly Teaching Artist Think Tank](#), led by artists from different cultures. The first leader is from Ghana. To find out more, and to join, email Madeleine McGirk: madeleinemcgirk@hotmail.com

[The World Ensemble](#) (sister publication to this newsletter) has launched a new program called [Ambassadors](#). Ten Sistema students from 9 countries are taking a leadership responsibility to share news of their programs and to connect with other students around the world. They exploded out of the starting gate and are tweeting, Instagramming, Facebooking and texting up a storm about practicing, frustrations, music they love, and tips for solving problems. Meet the Ambassadors [here](#). Do you have students who would like to join the Ambassadors' Practice Challenge?: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsJBxMbgrA8/>

Musical America Worldwide recently announced its [30 Professionals of the Year](#): Innovators, Independent Thinkers, and Entrepreneurs, 2018. The field submitted nominations, and among the 30 selected are names familiar to the U.S. Sistema field. Congratulations to our colleagues for this honor: [Christine Taylor Conda](#), Chair, Board of Directors, El Sistema USA and Director, Reach*Teach*Play* Education Programs, Ravinia Festival; [Damien Crutcher](#), CEO, Crescendo Detroit; [Trey Devey](#), President, Interlochen Center for the Arts (he is paving pathways for many Sistema students to study at Interlochen); [Dantes Rameau](#), Co-Founder and Executive Director, Atlanta Music Project; [Abigayl Venman](#), Senior Director of Arts Leadership, Sphinx Organization. For more: <https://tinyurl.com/yao8qq8r>

Resources

You never know how this might be useful. An article on [children's hand games](#) sees games as a potentially powerful tool to teach resiliency, connection, and safe touch, especially for black girls. The authors cast familiar childhood games in a social-emotional learning framework, and these ideas might inspire some new practices in Sistema programs. <https://tinyurl.com/yarogttq>

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Collective Composition

by Cecille Elliott, Director of Creative Play, BRAVO Youth Orchestras, Portland, OR

At BRAVO Youth Orchestras, there are ongoing conversations about the impact of introducing collective composition – composing together as a group – often focusing on how it impacts the staff, our students, and our community, and on what it means to facilitate and support a collective musical voice. There's an active effort to establish equitable practices that reinforce a supportive environment for BRAVO students during creative projects. BRAVO's central goal is student empowerment to discover what it is they want to say through their music.

BRAVO's most recent project occurred in January 2019. Instead of setting an expectation to have a “finished” piece, the week was left more open to allow for student ideas to run and see where they landed. Students from three schools spent the week writing about nature, the creative process, and important people in their lives, among other things. They shared their musical ideas at a final presentation.

An equitable approach must include facilitators (adults in the room) giving students tools and ample time to ask questions and engage in trial and error-style collaboration, letting them discover how to translate their ideas from abstract to tangible. At my own teaching site, with my 3rd-5th graders, we brainstormed as a group before finding three topics they wanted to collaborate on. By the end of the week, there were four separate musical motifs. More than once, a student was able to tell me when I wasn't translating their idea “correctly,” and we collaborated until it was as close to their vision as possible.

If integrated thoughtfully and responsibly, collective composition has the potential to be one of the most equitable elements of music curriculum our students will ever receive. In recognizing this potential impact, we as educators and administrators have the responsibility to tread with care, mindfulness, and self-reflection when integrating collective practices into our programs. Our students deserve this from us. Their experiences will reflect what we bring to the table, and we must challenge ourselves to bring our best selves.

ACTION FOR THE MONTH: [Oppose Proposed Big Spending Reductions in After School Programming](#)

After failing in the last Congress to redirect federal education funding into private savings accounts for military families, The Heritage Foundation is now proposing to redirect \$1.2 billion from after-school programs into these private accounts. Write your Congressional Representatives now, requesting they oppose any reduction in after-school funding. Heritage demeans the value of these programs, so use [this collection of research](#) to support your request. Please write now. See sample letter and more, [here](#).