

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

Preparing Students for “The Big Event”

By Ryan LaBoy, Music Director, and Sara Zanussi, Executive Director, of *ComMUSICation*, St. Paul, Minnesota

ComMUSICation, a Sistema-inspired choral program in St. Paul, Minnesota, performed “America the Beautiful” at the Super Bowl with Leslie Odom Jr. in February 2018. The experience was enthralling. Families were beaming with pride, and the singers themselves were singularly focused; in the words of characters in the musical *Hamilton* (in which Odom has starred), they were “not throwing away their shot!”

A number of Sistema-inspired programs across the country have had similar experiences, with students playing in large public venues for wider audiences than they’re used to. All have found that preparing kids for these events is a complex and challenging process.

This article attempts to distill some of our learning, and the insights of colleagues in other programs, to share with the field— in the hope that all of us will have such opportunities come our way.

1. Focus on process over product. ComMUSICation’s greatest challenge was keeping our students focused on the process of learning hard repertoire in a short time, rather than on the “product” – the Super Bowl itself. For an event that is so grandiose and product-based, we worked hard to stick to process-based teaching.

Other programs we spoke with agreed with this approach. *OrchKids* director Dan Trahey, whose students have played at a Ravens game and other public events, said, “We encourage the kids to think about every single event, large or small, as ‘the big event.’” Gretchen Nielsen, former L.A. Phil Vice President for Education Initiatives, oversaw *YOLA*’s appearance with Gustavo Dudamel at the 2016 Super Bowl half-time show. “*YOLA* is building a culture of performance,” she said, “that applies to all performance occasions, small and large.” And Longy Conservatory president Karen Zorn said of *Longy’s Sistema Side by Side* orchestra, which performed at a Celtics game, “All the smaller performances along the way add up to the ability to do a big public performance. And we try not to make it a big deal, not to ramp up the kids’ anxiety.”

How to redirect that anxiety? “By focusing on the music,” was Karen’s answer. “The focus needed for big performances is huge; there are so many distractions!

So some practice with chaos around can actually help.”

The importance of learning to concentrate is something everyone we spoke with felt strongly about. Dan said, “We try to set up an environment of concentrating, listening, and reflection.” Gretchen spoke of developing “pocketed times” of intense learning. “We can’t just SAY we’re going to be focused,” she said, “we have to actually practice being focused.”

2. Prepare kids for special aspects of public performance. According to Dan, “On the big day, there’s going to be a lot of time spent just waiting. Prepare kids for that. Also, work on exaggeration, so

the performance ‘reads’ to a large crowd. We tell them, ‘Look at how you exaggerate when you’re on the playground – and bring that to the music!’”

Gretchen also mentioned this issue. “We had theater coaching for the Super Bowl. The kids were asked, ‘What do you want to share with the audience about what you’re feeling? Your expressions will help the audience enter your world.’”

Karen spoke about the importance of anticipating the non-musical moments when things can go wrong. “We often try to physically create the set-up the way it will be in the space, so kids can practice things like entering and exiting smoothly.”

3. Remember the people who aren’t onstage. It’s important to include, as much as possible, the people who aren’t performing – other students, families, and community. “With big public performances,” said Gretchen, “we have to communicate more with families. They need a lot of context about the big picture, and they need to know the details too.”

At ComMUSICation, we feel it’s important to make sure everyone can celebrate, not just the performers. *YOLA* had a Super Bowl watching party for their students; we had an after-party for everyone, combining it with our birthday party. Ensuring that all feel celebrated is really important, to avoid cliques and hurt feelings.

Why do big performances? The news stories often say, “Chance of a Lifetime!” But the publicity doesn’t always result in anything tangible. Remember this, and be ready to be okay with it. Say yes for the experience offered, not for the potential future results. We can assure you: the experience is enough.



ComMUSICation sings with Leslie Odom Jr and Angelica Cantanti Youth Chorus at Super Bowl LII Photo: ComMUSICation

FROM THE EDITOR

“Cell phones and social media.”

That was the succinct answer I got from a Sistema teacher I spoke with recently, when I asked her why she said her job is getting harder, not easier. She added, “And this year, it’s really ramped up; the problem is worse than it’s ever been.”

We’ve heard similar comments from other Sistema teachers – and not about kids trying to sneak screen time during orchestra rehearsals. The real problem is the way kids’ minds – their brains, to be exact – are being shaped by their extensive screen time experience *outside* of school and music program. It’s no secret that social media is designed to fragment attention and engineered to be addictive. As a *New York Times* Op Ed article put it, when you “use social media in the way it’s designed to be used...it becomes hard to give difficult tasks the unbroken concentration they require, because your brain simply won’t tolerate such a long period without a fix.”

Learning to play the William Tell Overture tune-fully, ardently and together requires a lot of unbroken concentration. As does learning to play a fluent B-flat scale on a clarinet, or counting the beats of the rests in a percussion part, or working with peers to create a collective composition. But during their non-student hours, more and more of our kids are systematically *un*-learning the skill of unbroken concentration.

And it’s not just our kids. As my friend who teaches middle school English told me, “Cell phones and social media are the worst things that ever happened to teaching and learning.” She says she can no longer get her 8th graders immersed in books that completely captivated 8th graders ten years ago. “They just can’t focus,” she said.

How can we help kids learn to focus? Modeling is key; if teachers themselves are dynamically focused, children can catch and internalize that energy. Intrinsic motivation is also key. When kids are solving problems and making things they care about, their ability to concentrate blooms.

These things we know. But we are up against greater odds than we’ve known. More than ever before, Sistema programs need to be crucibles for inquiry about concentration. I believe we must – because we can – become leaders in this inquiry.

Tricia Tunstall

“I believe that each note I write or play is a story.”
– Josiel Perez, Teaching Artist in the Harmony Project Phoenix

News Notes

The **Sphinx Competition** offers the nation's top Black and Latino classical string players a chance to compete under the guidance of a renowned panel of judges, and to perform with established professional musicians in a competition setting. Its primary goals are to encourage, develop and recognize classical music talent in the Black and Latino communities. Applications now open, through Nov. 5, 2018. The complete repertoire is available here: <http://www.sphinxmusic.org/2019-competition-repertoire>

Longy's 6th El Sistema Summer Academy will run July 30-August 10, with Sistema students from across the greater Boston area and beyond – with Harry Potter music featured. Last year, over 100 participated. For info: Ryan Welsh rwelsh@longy.edu

On June 27-28, Goshen College hosted the **Great Lakes El Sistema Seminario** in Goshen, Indiana. They included students at various musical levels from **Archipelago** (Traverse City, MI), **Kalamazoo Kids in Tune** (Kalamazoo, MI) **Sistema Ravinia** (Chicago, IL) and **Roosevelt STEAM Academy** (Elkhart, IN). This event was sponsored by **Goshen College**, **Horizon Educational Alliance**, and **El Sistema USA**.

In 2017, **charitable contributions rose 5%** over 2016 to \$410 billion, the highest level in **Giving USA's** 63-year history. While rising stock market values partly explain the strong increase, we note that even in politically acrimonious times, Americans agree on the importance of personal philanthropy.

Resources

The **Country Music Association (CMA) Foundation** is dedicated to shaping the next generation through music education in all musical genres. They provide grants in five categories, three or four of which apply to many Sistema programs. First-year grant requests should not exceed \$20,000. Applications will be accepted until July 31, 2018. Find out more: <http://www.cmaworld.com/foundation/grant-application>

The **SpreadMusicNow Fund** does not accept unsolicited grant applications, but encourages you to submit your organization's story so they can get to know you and your vision. They may or may not be able to fund you, but they may well share your organization's story on their blog and/or social channels, reaching hundreds of thousands of fans on a weekly basis. <https://www.spreadmusicnow.org>

Here is an updated version of **Music Matters from the Arts Education Partnership**, a short summary of research findings for music education advocates, with support from the NAMM Foundation. It comes from data in AEP's ArtsEdSearch, the handiest (and most comprehensive) searchable database of arts education research. <https://www.ecs.org/music-matters>. Speaking of ArtsEdSearch ... AEP has launched a redesigned website for it: <http://www.artsedsearch.org>

Fractured Atlas (an independent organization that supports artists as entrepreneurs) has a White Caucus that supports its white membership to learn, think and talk about issues of race. Staff member Nicola Carpenter has gathered a list of resources that the White Caucus has found valuable: <https://tinyurl.com/y8c86n5l>

The next time you hear someone dismiss the arts as "fluff," respond with these recent findings from the U.S. government (from 2015, the latest year for which totals have been calculated): **The arts contributed \$764 billion to the U.S. economy** in 2015, with 4.9 million workers, who earned \$372 billion in total compensation. That's four times more money than agriculture provides the country, and \$200 billion more than the transportation sector. The arts have an average growth rate that is faster than the overall U.S. economy, and have a \$20 billion annual global trade surplus. <https://tinyurl.com/ybhrvd7d>

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Music Therapy & Sistema

by Virginia Eulacio Cierniak, Director of Education and Creative Arts Therapies, Union City Music Project

I've worked as a teaching artist at Union City Music Project (UCMP) for a number of years, while also finishing graduate school and certification for music therapy. I decided to focus my thesis on Community Music Therapy (CoMT), and to try to integrate music therapy services into our program.

There are a number of parallels between El Sistema and CoMT. Both address goals beyond the musical, working toward social, emotional and communal as well as musical outcomes. Both are flexible and adaptable in structure. Social justice is a primary goal for both; the emphasis is on access and community.

Last year, UCMP secured a contract with a local Care Management Organization, and we began to get referrals. The children who come to UCMP for music therapy services face a number of difficulties, including Autism Spectrum Disorder, Down Syndrome, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, ADHD, depression, and anxiety. Our first step is a formal assessment of a child's abilities, areas of need, and interactions with different kinds of musical stimuli. During this process, we learn the child's preferences in music and sound, as well as preferred ways and style of interacting with the world. The assessment leads to the formulation of a treatment plan to address specific non-musical goals, such as socialization, communications skills, impulse control, emotional regulation and expression, coping skills, and fine and gross motor skills. Musical goals are also a focus at times. Additionally, there is an emphasis on forming a strong therapeutic relationship, which is essential for successfully working together. Therapy involves using four main types of interventions to address our goals: songwriting, improvisation, recreation/orchestration, and receptive experiences.

The positive responses from the children and their parents have been both humbling and empowering. My vision is to expand to include all modalities of creative arts therapies, including dance/movement and drama. That will take time, but every day the children inspire me to keep moving forward.

ACTION FOR THE MONTH: Speak of the national Sistema network 3 times this month

Being part of a national movement makes us stronger, but we usually forget to mention this larger context in which our programs grow. In the summer, we often speak to new people about our work – remember to mention the national movement when you tell people about your program. We lose nothing by doing this; we gain in strength, visibility and numbers. Make a new habit to honor your dedicated colleagues across the country. We are stronger together, and we need all the strength we can get. Read more [here](#).