

The El Sistema USA National Symposium

by Isaac Sinnett, Associate Director, *Reach*Teach*Play Education Programs, Ravinia, Chicago*

It was clear that the 2019 [El Sistema USA National Symposium](#) was going to be special when, in the midst of a historic cold spell, over 200 attendees representing 80 different El Sistema-inspired organizations braved sub-zero temperatures to attend. Attendees arrived early for the welcome and filled the ballroom with the type of vibrant energy surrounding a convening of friends for their annual trip. Christine Taylor Conda, the ESUSA board chair, chose to forgo the typical welcome and, instead, immediately had the entire room singing a three-part song to meet and welcome one another, setting a tone of collaboration and camaraderie for the symposium.

Over the course of the two-day event, it would become apparent that this sense of fellowship was a source of strength, creating a momentum that would contextualize itself through lively discussions, student-focused and student-led workshops, and interactive activities. The attendees became a collective, eager to build relationships and to explore the best way to achieve excellence together.



L-R, Christine Taylor Conda, Dan Trahey, Roberto Zambrano with award; Calida Jones, Katie Wyatt. Photo: El Sistema USA

However, a symposium – even among friends – cannot be entirely about a special feeling. At the conclusion of the welcome session, co-chairs Calida Jones (Project Music and ESUSA Board Member) and Tina Rowan (Accent Pontiac) laid out a menu of meaningful content that would provide opportunities for participants to learn, network, share and grow as educators and administrators. At the close of the first session, ESUSA honored Roberto Zambrano – a mentor to many ESUSA members and a founding member of the Simon Bolívar Youth Orchestra – for his significant contributions to the growth of the El Sistema movement in the United States. Epitomizing the teaching excellence of the Venezuelan Sistema, Maestro Zambrano worked with students from [Accent Pontiac](#) and [Detroit Youth Volume](#) during the symposium.

Throughout the course of the next two days, attendees explored the overall theme of “360 Degrees of Excellence” through several tracks or sub-themes, including “Teaching Excellence,” “Connecting with and Engaging Your Community,” “Telling Your Story – Sustaining Your Program,” and “Student Voice.” By design, many sessions were presented by collaborators from different organizations. Student leaders from

OrchKids guided attendees through the structure and process of creative composition. Monique Van Willingham (Longy) and Hillary Harder (Horizon Alliance) took attendees through an experiential workshop to explore culturally responsive teaching and creating safe and authentic spaces for dialogue. Seth Truby (Bravo), Nick Malinowski (Kidznotes) and Anna Klimala-Pietraszko (Miami Music Project) showcased how programs can tell their stories through words and images that result in support and action. Tom Madeja and the team from ChiMOP discussed their use of Education in Human Values as a common thread through every part of their program, which has brought tangible social change in their communities. Christie Gray and Alex McLeod (Sistema Toronto) spoke about developing an intentional social curriculum, and described how their program grew as they shifted from transactional teaching to applied and experiential learning strategies. Tricia Tunstall and Eric Booth shared the accomplishments and innovative practices of the global movement, providing inspiration and aspiration.

A two-part plenary brought the whole collective back together each day. With the guidance of Dalouge Smith as plenary coordinator, programs gave examples and shared stories of how they are engaging in partnerships at local, regional, and national levels. These partnerships seem not only to give kids fantastic opportunities but also to create positive change within the partner organizations. The stories of each session articulated that we can continually grow stronger by sharing best practices and learning from one another, discovering ways to implement and adapt these ideas to best fit our communities.

As the sessions progressed, it became clear that our national movement is moving into a new phase. We are no longer trying to define what it is we’re doing. We know we are here to stay. Our inquiry has shifted to discussing how we can take our work to the next level.

For me, “360 Degrees of Excellence” means the bar must be raised, both musically and socially, for every ideal that inspires our programs. It is not linear; it is a full sphere of excellence that empowers our students to become leaders.

FROM THE EDITOR

I am lucky enough to have been able to go to Venezuela and see El Sistema in action, during those golden years when the Sistema threw its doors open wide to an international multitude of visiting musicians and Maestro Abreu dreamed of Caracas becoming the Vienna of the 21st century. Sadly, it’s hard to visit Venezuela at all now, and El Sistema struggles with the same desperate economic and political crisis that grips everyone in that beautiful and beleaguered country. For the global Sistema community, the poignant silver lining of the crisis is the evolution of a kind of Sistema diaspora, with many Venezuelan master teachers, teaching artists and conductors working with programs around the world.

One of the most venerated of these master teachers is Roberto Zambrano, who came to the El Sistema USA Symposium in Detroit last month. I helped Roberto put together a session at the symposium in which he and his longtime mentee Aristides Rivas worked with a children’s string ensemble, in front of a group of attendees. The players were very young; their piece, by Vivaldi, was hard. Roberto and Aristides dove into the work. After 40 minutes of their sunny, tenacious energy, the Vivaldi sounded noticeably better, and I asked the attendees to distill some core elements of teaching excellence, on the basis of what they had just seen. With the help of Roberto and Aristides – and the kids – we came up with a list.

No, I haven’t forgotten what our Venezuelan friends always said when we asked them for a list. “Maybe someday we’ll write down how we do things,” they told us, “but as soon as we do, something will change. Sistema never stands still!”

But we make lists anyway. It’s how we endeavor to get our minds around the complex, elusive task of effective music teaching in the context of social engagement. Here’s the list we made on a frozen day in Detroit, in January 2019. I offer it in the hope that you will be inspired by it, utilize it – and maybe change it too.

1. High expectations of young people.
2. Insistence on musical excellence.
3. Balance between individual and ensemble work
4. Attention to the physicality of playing.
5. Prioritizing musical understanding.
6. High energy, high engagement.
7. Collegiality and teamwork between teachers.
8. Play without fear!

Tricia Tunstall

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” – Lilla Watson, Indigenous Australian visual artist and activist

News Notes

A new research study by a team from Florida International University found empirical **evidence of numerous meaningful social and emotional enhancements from participation in an El Sistema-inspired program**, in this case the Miami Music Project. The study found increases in the 5 Cs of Positive Youth Development (Competence, Confidence, Caring, Character, and Connection) over the course of a year; and it showed that Miami Music Project students gained in Character, Competence and Caring when compared to a group of youths who did not participate in music education. Read about the study here: <https://tinyurl.com/y9jq39r4>.

CAELI (Community Arts Education Leadership Network), entering its tenth year, is a program of the National Guild for Community Arts Education. It is an eight-month program for both seasoned and emerging leaders that begins with a five-day intensive in July, has a distinguished faculty guiding the program, and leads to participation in a lively alumni network. CAELI is widely recognized as a significant career-booster for those committed to social change through the arts. Applications due by April 5. <https://www.nationalguild.org/programs/community-arts-education-leadership-institute>

Resources

The **Hearst Foundations** support nonprofits that address significant issues in culture, education, health, and social service areas, looking for those achieving truly differentiated results relative to other organizations making similar efforts for similar populations – especially those engaging young people for lasting and measurable impact and those nurturing and developing artistic talent. They have a rolling application period, so programs can apply at any time. For more details on eligibility and application processes, visit <http://www.hearstfdn.org/funding-priorities>.

The **Power of Youth Challenge**, an initiative of America's Promise Alliance, supports youth across the country in leading social service projects. Teams made up of at least three young people, ages 13 to 18, have access to a mini-grant of up to \$250, with the amount determined by project needs. Teams who complete their projects are eligible to apply for an accelerator grant of up to \$5,000 to grow their projects over the next year. The deadline for team registration is March 31, 2019. To review the eligibility criteria and application process, go to: <https://tinyurl.com/y3ebr2kk>

Sistema programs are often part of informal **creative placemaking projects** that don't use that title. A new white paper summarizes years of experience at The Kresge Foundation, which has invested in many projects that transform communities with arts engagement at the center. Can your program tap into this major national arts funding trend? Read "Creative Placemaking: Rethinking Neighborhood Change and Tracking Progress." Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/ybpqf3po>

The **Global Leaders Program** (an initiative of the Orchestra of the Americas) is a nine-month intensive course, tailored for working professionals (there is a 10-day engagement in a program somewhere in the world, and a 15-day full cohort residence in Chile). Graduates get an Executive Graduate Certificate in Social Entrepreneurship, Cultural Agency, Teaching Artistry, Civic Leadership, & Organizational Management. A distinguished faculty includes Nobel Prize winners; students come from many countries, and graduates often take leadership positions in music for social change programs. The application deadline is April 1. Video introduction: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZp46HIJ3io&feature=youtu.be>. For more information: <http://globalleader-program.com>

Fund a commission? The Amphion Foundation promotes excellence in, and public appreciation of, contemporary concert music, particularly by American composers. It makes grants to nonprofit performing ensembles, presenters, festivals, and music service organizations that have a commitment to contemporary concert music. Applications from performing ensembles will be accepted through April 1, 2019. (The deadline for presenters, festivals, and music service organizations is September 15, 2019.) For guidelines: <https://amphionfoundation.org/>

When your program **launches an instrument drive** that asks the public to donate unused instruments lying idle in attics, how do you get the word out? Here's an imaginative way you probably never thought of – watch these young staff members at Orkidstra in Ottawa: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yb9OYvhu14c&feature=youtu.be>

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The Symposium: A Reflection

by Ismail Akbar, Teaching Artist, Atlanta Music Project

When I landed in Detroit, Michigan on January 29th for the El Sistema USA Symposium, warnings about the extreme winter temperatures were all over the radio, but I needed to find out on my own. So I took a short walk in my Atlanta "winter clothes": sneakers, a small coat, no gloves. At that moment, I realized that the next time I went outside in Detroit would be to catch the plane back to Atlanta!

Staying inside turned out to be no problem, because all the conversations between El Sistema supporters, activists and executive directors at the Symposium were incredibly engaging. I saw that the next two days were going to be completely different from my usual routine of teaching and performing. I was surrounded by amazing individuals who not only seemed to allow El Sistema to be a major part of their everyday active lives, but also were sincere about the creation of a more humane world.

The first session I attended gave me insight into the "behind the scenes" of an El Sistema-inspired program, hinting at the difficulties of finding financial resources. The two presenters were from different ethnic backgrounds, and both were openly discussing the prejudices that favoritism carries with regard to financial resources. I saw that once this uncomfortable issue was highlighted, the barriers of color in the room were lifted and we all felt a sense of comfort. Although El Sistema's biggest impact lies in the effect music has on children, all I could think about for the rest of the session was the impact social change can have on the cultivated adult mind.

Another session I was particularly struck by involved watching a Venezuelan master teacher demonstrate his teaching style with children, live! The energy was extremely intense; there was a clear sense of urgency to push the string ensemble towards its full potential. I enjoyed witnessing the enthusiasm of the children, parents and Symposium participants. I never knew that viewing a master teacher doing something I do on a regular basis could be so engaging and exciting.

For 25 years, I've felt that music is the biggest part of my life. The past six years with the Atlanta Music Project have vigorously enhanced my understanding of human nature and the positive effects of music. The El Sistema Symposium was the icing on the cake for me. Meeting so many people who feel the same way I do about efforts to uplift humans through music has refreshed my sense of hope!