

Jazzing Up Sistema Relevance

By Laura Patterson, Executive Director and Matt Rhody, Lead Violin Teacher and Curriculum Development, *Make Music NOLA, New Orleans*

For many classically trained musicians, the way we were trained doesn't always feel relevant to the El Sistema model of learning in group classes and ensembles. However, the development of technique and discipline, and the understanding of music that comes with classical training, are just as important for playing in other genres.

Classical training provides a foundation that can be used for learning any style of music. The notes, rhythms, and instrumental techniques are the same in classical music as they are in jazz. Professional brass bands play the same notes and rhythms to Liza Jane as our students would, although in a different key, with open sections for improvisation and with a different sound.



Matt Rhody and Seva Venet, members of the Storyville String Band, working with MMN students to perform "My Bucket's Got A Hole In It" Photo: @keyes15

At Make Music NOLA, in New Orleans, there is a commitment to introducing local music to our students. Our curriculum includes "Liza Jane," "When the Saints Go Marching In," "I'll Fly Away," and Fats Domino's "I'm Walking." As a string program in a city of brass bands, MMN works to introduce our students to early jazz and even earlier string band music, in which the violin was originally the lead instrument. Our students grow up hearing the Second Line and dancing in the streets, but they don't necessarily associate those things with their violins. How do we teach students jazz and improvisation when they are also learning to read and master Bach minuets?

Over time, our program has developed a curriculum that we call "Suzuki Jazz," which is based on teaching beginning students the basics using the Suzuki method books, along with local New Orleans tunes that are in the same key as their current Suzuki pieces. MMN has implemented a system for teaching jazz, starting with the blues scale in D and our own Make Music NOLA Blues in D. We also incorporate Irish tunes, Cajun fiddle tunes, and blues, all in sharp keys. This process of improvisation starts around the same time that our students are learning Bach minuets. After several years, our students have a Suzuki book and more than a few tunes under their belts.

In conversations with other programs, we found that they are working out their own approaches to similar challenges. At Upbeat NYC in the Bronx, NY, students have the opportunity to play in a Latin Jazz Band. The jazz band students range in age from 5th and 6th grade all the way through seniors in high school. This is the ensemble's third year. Their repertoire focuses on Ellington charts, including "Main Steam" and "The Mooche," and Latin jazz tunes by composers like Paquito Rivera and Tito Puente. The ensemble has been in existence for three years; many of the students are learning how to improvise. John Austria, UpBeat NYC's big band director, teaches beginners to improvise

using just one or two chords and three notes to start with. Eventually, students start trading four's and eight's with their teachers and repeating patterns in a call and response technique. UpBeat NYC brings in local professionals to perform with the students and their teachers. They also encourage their students to listen to jazz as much as possible.

We also had the opportunity to learn about [Intempo Music](#) in Stamford, Connecticut, a Sistema program dedicated to teaching their students classical music and indigenous instruments. At Intempo, students learn the violin, charango, and native percussion, and sing in a multilingual choir. Each year, the orchestra puts on a cultural crossover concert. Like Make Music NOLA and Upbeat NYC, Intempo students learn through classical pedagogy. Once they learn how to play scales, they can play Latin American tunes.

All three programs have the same goal – to connect students with the culture and traditions of their communities. All are working to produce students who are strong improvisers and could potentially work in their cities. Giving students the foundation to be able to play whatever kind of music they decide to love is a key element of each program. Regardless of what genre we're working in, we can all teach our students to keep listening, keep learning, and keep playing.

FROM THE EDITOR

In this issue, we are taking the unprecedented (for us) step of adding a third page. We decided that a third page was necessary to honor and to mourn Draylen Mason, a young bass player and student leader in the [Austin Soundwaves](#) program who was killed in March. We also decided that the Action for the Month should be a symbolic action of mourning by all programs.

Your first thought may be: "It's terrible and tragic, but what does a tragedy in Texas have to do with my program?" For the most part, U.S. programs are in the habit of functioning as non-connected entities. This action requires us to commit to our interconnectedness – to move into symbolic alliance with one another. Can we do it?

I hope so. I feel strongly that as long as we are programs that function independently, within separate local orbits and occupied by always-urgent local concerns, we will be doing considerable good within our particular communities but absolutely nothing to effect change on a regional or national level. We can't accrue the collective power of a true national movement about music education for social impact unless we reach out, communicate with and identify with one another – and, for that matter, with the many non-Sistema-inspired organizations that are also dedicated to music education for social impact.

Until every one of us believes – and more than believes, truly feels – that a violent death in Austin is a loss for our program as well, and that a triumph in Tulsa (see our news section) is our triumph too, we will remain localized and incapable of change on a national level. We will not, despite our rhetoric, be a movement.

One unusual thing about this particular Action of the Month is that it will involve your students; a white rose on an empty stool in the bass section is not likely to go unnoticed. So it will mean talking with your students and their families about Draylen's death, and that can feel sad and awkward. Fortunately, young people have a great capacity to reach out empathically across distances; just look at the #Enough movement. Many of our students live with the threat of violence in their everyday lives; they are likely to understand viscerally that Draylen's death is their loss. Let's listen to them. They have a lot to teach us.

Tricia Tunstall

To honor all the teenage leaders: "Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you." – Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Supreme Court Justice

News Notes

New England Conservatory's [Center for Professional Development and Performing Arts Leadership](#) offers a [three-day workshop "Understanding El Sistema"](#) on June 1-3 at the NEC campus in Boston. It is recommended for teaching artists, administrators and those looking to enter the creative youth development sector; faculty will include Heath Marlow (Center Director), Erik Holmgren and Rodrigo Guerrero (from the Mass Cultural Council), Tina Hadari (MusicHaven founder), Laura Jekel (MyCincinnati founder) and other featured presenters. Tuition: \$400 (\$300 for NEC alumni and direct colleagues of Sistema Fellows). Details at: <https://necmusic.edu/musiciansatwork>

Students from [four El Sistema-inspired programs performed at The Kennedy Center](#) on April 16. They performed the arrangement of Leonard Bernstein's "Somewhere" created for Sistema programs by Jamie Bernstein to honor her father's centennial year. Students from the four programs – Soundscapes, Conservatory Lab Charter School, BRIDGES: Harmony Through Music, and Sympatico – were joined by the Kennedy Center Youth Fellows and were conducted by El Sistema USA Executive Director Katie Wyatt, who was honored as a 2017-18 Kennedy Center Citizen Artist Fellow, along with composer Reena Esmail, whose song "Take What You Need" was also performed by the Sistema ensemble.

[El Sistema USA starts a four-part webinar series](#) with Dan Trahey (Artistic Director of OrchKids) on his Creative Composition approach that many programs are using, May 31 at 11:30 Eastern Time. Webinars are free for El Sistema USA members, \$25 for non-members. You must register to get the recording and materials, even if you are not able to attend the webinar live. <https://tinyurl.com/ydx9Int4>

[Carnegie Hall's](#) summer national youth orchestra, [NYO-USA](#), is comprised of 106 members, who will perform in New York and then travel to Asia with conductor Michael Tilson Thomas and pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, performing in China, Taipei, Seoul, and Daejeon. Twelve NYO-USA members had

previously been in [NYO2](#), Carnegie Hall's preparatory national orchestra. This year, there are 79 members of NYO2, and this year, Carnegie Hall launches the first [NYO Jazz](#), with 22 teenagers.

[Sistema Tulsa](#) was recently given a Citation of Commendation and Congratulations by the Oklahoma House of Representatives at the State Capital, and Director Jose Luis Hernandez was invited to address the Representatives. <https://tinyurl.com/y7ts99gy>

Resources

The [Rachel Barton Pine Foundation](#) continues its work through the [Music by Black Composers](#) project, with the violin volumes coming later in 2018. They have just added the Living Composers Directory (with the request that you help them by adding black composers you know of, or correcting early entries) at <https://www.musicbyblackcomposers.org/resources/living-composers-directory> More publications of repertoire for student musicians will continually appear at www.musicbyblackcomposers.org. Join the project mailing list by emailing megan@rbpfoundation.org. You can also request from her a list of conservatory/professional-level violin repertoire by black composers from around the world and throughout history.

Do you have a student (or young graduate?) who is a budding global citizen? The [2018 Curtis Scholarship](#) is an annual leadership development program to support young people ages 16-20 from underserved communities in the U.S. or U.K. who embody the values of global citizenship. Curtis Scholars join a 10-day learning trip to South Africa, and an advocacy trip to Global Citizen Week Events in NYC. Apply before May 20th. <https://tinyurl.com/yanzrx8d>

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Engaging Families

by [Jamie Wolf](#), Program Director, [El Sistema Colorado](#)

Family engagement is central to the Sistema theory of change. But for many ES-i programs, it's difficult to move beyond limited communication and concerts for families a few times a semester. This year, El Sistema Colorado (ESC) invested in a staff position devoted to building deeper connections with our families and community. Within a few short months, we have already begun to improve communication, relationships, and family involvement.

Patty Segarra started in Fall 2017, salaried at 26 hours per week to be a single point of contact across all three sites. She has skills and assets that make her an ideal first Family Engagement Specialist. Not only is she bilingual, but she is also from Caracas, and worked for Sistema during its early days. She brings a passion and connection to the work that can inspire our families and keep staff on track with Abreu's vision and the adventuresome spirit of Sistema Venezuela.

Since El Sistema Colorado aspires to serve students from elementary through high school, it's essential that we work to build relationships with our youth and families. Patty helps our staff do this at each site. As a parent, Patty has the respect of adult ESC family members on topics from parenting strategies to good music practice habits at home. She is also building connections with other nonprofits in our neighborhoods to better serve our families. This year, Patty is managing two new efforts: 1) the opportunity for families to make voluntary financial contributions (suggestion is \$10/month per family), and 2) family conferences to discuss student progress in the program. Meanwhile, she fulfills traditional site coordinator needs like monitoring attendance and welcoming our families at performances. She shepherds parent orientations and works with the district-employed Parent Liaison at each school.

ESC believes this new position will improve student retention and increase family engagement. This will be important as students transition to schools outside of our núcleo, or move from elementary to middle school. We still have a lot to learn, but we are taking the first steps towards a stronger family connection, and seeing some success! To find out more, contact Patricia Segarra: segarra@elsistemacolorado.org

ACTION FOR THE MONTH: Honor Draylen Mason at Your Year-End Concert

The added third page of this month's issue describes the heartbreaking loss of Draylen Mason, an excellent bass player and leader in Austin Soundwaves. We ask that all U.S. Sistema-inspired programs remember him by placing an empty stool in the low string section in their year-end concert. This empty stool reminds all of us of Draylen, and of the senseless violence our students worry about, and that we dedicate our programs to reducing. See more about this Action [here](#) ...

Remembering Draylen Mason

Many people in the U.S. heard about the anxious days during March in Austin, Texas, when a series of packages turned out to be bombs that killed and injured people across the city. One of those killed was Draylen Mason. Draylen was a bass player and leader in the Sistema-inspired program Austin Soundwaves. According to Doug Dempster, the Dean of the University of Texas College of Fine Arts, Draylen was "a most remarkable talent in a most remarkable youth orchestra program called Austin Soundwaves" – he had been accepted into UT's Butler School of Music. Draylen never learned that he had also been accepted into the highly competitive Oberlin Conservatory of Music

We honor Draylen with this page of remembrance. In addition to his simply being a wonderful person, his life represents the best of our shared Sistema aspiration. And his loss embodies the worst of our nation's violence against young people. We have lost a beautiful colleague, brimming with promise; and so we pause to thank him for giving so much, trying so hard, and representing hopes we all share. Draylen's family hopes this article will encourage all of us to actively bridge differences through diversity, and to encourage non-violence in every way we can.

You will note that our Action for the Month requests that all U.S. Sistema programs add an empty stool to their low string section in their final concerts this year, in memory and celebration of Draylen. (Perhaps put a rose on the stool?) The empty bass player's stool will remind us of the precious fragility of our shared endeavor – within each orchestra, and across our network – to bring more peace, caring and beauty into the world.

Spoken at Draylen's Memorial Service, by Patrick Slevin, Executive Director of Austin Soundwaves

Good Morning. My name is Patrick Slevin. I want to say thank you to Draylen's family for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Austin Soundwaves (ASW) teachers and students. To Draylen's family: thank you from the bottom of our hearts for letting us into your son's life; thank you for raising such a kind, thoughtful and curious young man; and thank you for trusting us so much, even in the beginning when you had no reason to.



As other ASW teachers have remarked over the past weeks, Draylen wanted to be friends with all of his teachers. In fact, he wanted to be friends with everyone. Draylen, we were all so ready and eager to transition from being your teacher to being your friend and your colleague. Mr. Bowling looked forward to taking you out to dinner and having deep conversations about musical phrasing or vibrato technique; Ms. Seetha looked forward to teaching you how to meditate, something you had asked if she could do over spring break; Ms. Wygmans looked forward to telling people that she taught you before your voice changed. We all looked forward to following your career with pride and joy.

Draylen, I hope you know that to your friends, you were a lifeline: helping them to be resilient and positive, reminding them to hug their parents and to be proud of their roots and where they come from. You reminded a friend that a low SAT score won't determine her future; another low brass friend that playing a wrong note in a concert doesn't make you a bad person, and a percussionist that if your family does something to make you upset, it's worth trying to have a conversation with them about it instead of bottling up your anger. As I've said many times, you were wise beyond your years, Draylen, and as Sharrel has said, you are the definition of a true friend.

Draylen, I hope you know that you were already a member of Austin's art and music community. Everyone knew who you were and everyone was impressed, not just by the passion and intensity with which you played every note, but by the light and joy in your heart and your eagerness to learn. You reminded us that music is most especially about jamming with friends, about being fully in the moment and expressing something beautiful that words cannot.

Draylen, your legacy will play on through everyone in this room, through family and friends near and far, and through the countless musicians who taught, jammed with, and learned from you throughout your life. Draylen, we will tell your story, remember all the amazing times, and through reflection and dialogue, continue to learn from your example. We love you, Draylen.