

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

## PlayUSA Grantees Focus on Artistry and Belonging

By *Eli Rumpf*, Public Relations Manager, [Weill Music Institute](#), Carnegie Hall

This year, the fifteen organizations supported by [PlayUSA](#), a national grant-making initiative of Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute, are focusing on how to maximize their students' artistic potential while building environments centered on trust and creativity.

[Buffalo StringWorks](#), a new grantee this season, works directly with refugee children arriving from Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Thailand, Sudan, and Somalia. In an effort to foster a stronger sense of rootedness for refugee and immigrant families, they have started offering 'Informances,' informal concerts that include food and conversation, for parents and families. They are also translating their materials into four languages, to increase interest and investment among those families. Three parents have even started taking violin lessons with their children, noted executive director and co-founder Virginia Barron.



*Students of Youth Orchestra of St. Lukes, New York. Photo: Fadi Kheir*

[Kalamazoo Kids in Tune](#) (KKIT), a program of the Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra, is also thinking about ways to better engage families. This spring, they are launching 'Families in Tune,' giving parents the opportunity to join their children once a week to learn a simple blues piece together. "I believe a key to our program's success lies in the relationships we build with our families, as well as with the students," said KKIT's orchestra director Ben Gudbrandson.

At [Scrollworks](#) in Birmingham, AL, a free 'Munch n' Music' program on Saturdays brings together students, parents, teachers, and members of the community over a simple meal. A group of committed parents plan, shop, and cook meals for the larger group, and help to welcome new families. "Our Saturday free lunch has become a lynchpin of the larger Scrollworks community... and we are stronger and more effective for it," observed CEO Jeane Goforth.

Older, more advanced students can also serve as important role models for younger musicians. [INTEMPO](#), in Stamford, CT, gives older students a chance to gather in a safe space to discuss potential age-appropriate improvements to the program. Within class, they are also given opportunities to organize sectionals and assist students with difficult passages.

By bringing older students into the teaching process and challenging them to serve as mentors for younger players, the program keeps them engaged while strengthening their musical environment.

Building a rich community also requires conversation, listening, and dialogue among youth. The PlayUSA network visited [Community MusicWorks](#) in Providence, RI this year, and many partners spoke about the

importance of providing space for non-musical interactions. "We have learned the value of creating an atmosphere where students are encouraged to have more open dialogue," reflected Averil Taylor, from Atlanta Music Project. "Seeing the conversations at Community MusicWorks led us to reflect on what this would look like at AMP." Todd Krueger, from Kidznotes in Durham, NC, had a similar reaction: "It's fantastic to see how deep student connection can go,

even when they are not playing music. Some of the discussions around social justice and equity promoted an amazing level of engagement in the classroom."

Improvisation and composition are other ways to help students feel empowered and heard. This year, the [Youth Orchestra of St. Luke's](#) in New York City launched a residency with African-American composer Trevor Weston. The aim is to expand the youth orchestra repertoire while giving students the chance to work with a composer of color who can be an inspiration for them. Youth participants will be able to create their own music as well as thoughtfully approach new repertoire created specifically with them in mind.

At Scrollworks, a music technology project is giving kids the opportunity to arrange songs of their choice using computer software, and then lead the group in rehearsing and performing their brand-new arrangements. Having ownership over repertoire can be a powerful motivator for young musicians.

Across the PlayUSA network, music educators and administrators are grappling with the same issues around community building and artistry. Evan Conroy, of the [Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra's Music for Life](#) program, spoke about the value of exchanging ideas: "Inspiration has been the greatest gain. Each community has challenges that have been overcome with such creative – and often very simple but elegant – solutions."

## FROM THE EDITOR

This issue focuses on engagement – of students, parents, and families. In our lead article, leaders of Carnegie Hall's [PlayUSA](#) initiative describe how their grantee organizations this year are experimenting with many engagement-fostering activities. In the personal column, a parent of two students in a U.S. Sistema program describes how the life of her family has been changed by her daughters' engagement with the program.

Of course, the strongest engagement tool of all in Sistema programs is the music itself. From the beginning of human time, music has been a key motivator to involvement – one of the simplest, most primal ways to get people to engage together in non-musical activities like working, playing, or celebrating.

A lot of creative thought in the U.S. Sistema field is currently being devoted to helping students increase musical engagement by finding their own musical voices, learning to improvise and compose by themselves and with others. It's an essential inquiry; there's no pursuit more engaging than developing and claiming one's own expressive voice. At the same time, we need to help students to engage more fully with music written by others. And the right repertoire, played with combustible energy, will also be highly engaging for their family members in the audience.

Juan Felipe Molano, conductor of [YOLA](#) and former artistic director of Batuta, the Colombian Sistema, once told us that in order to really engage audiences, programs must include the following four things in every concert:

- a piece that knocks people's socks off. (This usually means a musically complex piece, preferably loud and definitely fast.)
- a piece that creates a surge of emotion in people. (Sadness, happiness, transcendence... often, tears are involved.)
- a piece that makes people feel patriotic. (This is not necessarily about national patriotism; it's more about a feeling of pride in belonging to a shared place, whether that place is a neighborhood, a city, a state – or a program.)
- a piece that makes them dance. (Always best if the players are dancing too.)

Wishing you all highly engaged spring concerts – lots of socks off, tears flowing, hearts touched. Lots of dancing!

*Tricia Tunstall*

"We played for people who first thought 'Most refugees are bad people,' but after we played, some of them came to us and said, 'We love you.'" – Timor Sultani, El Sistema Sweden, Ambassador for [The World Ensemble](#)

## News Notes

Check out these **award winning Sistema programs**:

✓ **Boston String Academy** was named one of four Commonwealth Awards Winners by the Massachusetts Cultural Council. The award recognizes exceptional achievements in the arts, humanities, and sciences; the award ceremony was keynoted by Gustavo Dudamel, and featured a student performance. <https://massculturalcouncil.org/blog/announcing-the-2019-commonwealth-awards-finalists/>

✓ The Kennedy Center named **Alysia Lee** one of its eight 2019-2020 Citizen Artist Fellows. A Sistema Fellow, Alysia is founder and Artistic Director of Sister Cities Girlchoir, based in Philadelphia, PA and Camden, NJ. The Fellowship recognizes artists who have used their artistic practice to create positive social impact. <https://tinyurl.com/y53xs2rg>

✓ Prior to their first performance at the Massachusetts State House on April 25, Boston's **Josiah Quincy Orchestra Program** was recognized for outstanding music education by the NAMM Foundation with its national Support Music Merit Award. <https://www.jqop.org/blog/jqop-receives-namm-award>

✓ **MYCincinnati's Creative Community Festival** is one of the ten national finalists for Americans for the Arts' Robert Gard Award – see "Action for the Month" below, to help them win. The award honors remarkable achievement in community impact.

The **repertoire requirements for the 23rd Annual Sphinx Competition** have been announced. Applications for the 2020 Sphinx Competition will open in Spring 2019. Find the repertoire here: <http://www.sphinxmusic.org/sphinx-competition>

**Carnegie Hall's national youth orchestras** have just announced their **2019 members**. One significant number is that 22 new members of NYO-USA, our nation's top national youth orchestra, moved up from NYO2, Carnegie Hall's training orchestra that reaches out to support students from underserved communities. Congratulations to the People's Music

School for being the **first PlayUSA grantee program** to have a student accepted into Carnegie Hall's NYO-USA, and to Oliver Talukder for being that student. Read the story here: <https://tinyurl.com/y2vqatrk>

## Resources

*Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change* features 11 aesthetic attributes of excellence defined by artists; these aspects can be observed across a spectrum of community engaged arts and culture. A webinar on May 14, 2019 at 3:00pm EDT explores what this pioneering framework can provide for assessing social impact. Free for members of Americans for the Arts, \$35 for all others. Register at <http://tinyurl.com/y539svs9> Framework materials available at: <http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives>.

The **National Alliance for Audition Support (NAAS) Black & Latinx Orchestral Musician Database** is a national database developed to connect qualified musicians of color with future orchestral opportunities. To join the NAAS Musician Database, Black and/or Latinx orchestral musicians may submit their information here: <http://www.sphinxmusic.org/naas-musician-database>. Please invite orchestral musicians of color you know to register, to build the support network for future orchestral players.

It isn't only musicians who make embarrassing mistakes; every administrator does, too. Unless we handle apologies well, the problem can get worse. This article from *Fast Company* magazine points out **the five most common mistakes professionals make when they apologize** (and advice on how to avoid those blunders). <https://www.fastcompany.com/90329416/5-mistakes-people-make-when-they-try-to-apologize>

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## Sistema Parenting

by Yubelly Erika Vasquez

Since kindergarden, my daughters Geanelly and Haley have attended the **Paterson Music Project (PMP)**. Geanelly plays the viola and Haley plays violin. At first, it was hard for both of my girls to get comfortable with their instruments. For me, the hardest thing to get used to was the extra time I needed to support my daughters in the program – taking them, picking them up, coming to concerts, etc.

After my daughter Geanelly had been in the program for a while, we noticed that she started improving in her academics. She also became a much better communicator. She was learning to reach out to her peers for help, or to share her comments. I think this is because at PMP, students learn to express how they feel about music, and to express their emotions. When my younger daughter Haley had been in the program a few years, we started noticing the same changes in her. Her academics became better too.

After a few years, both of my daughters were in orchestras and were playing more complex music. They had to increase their time for music. There are a lot of concerts – they sometimes have ten performances in a year. There is a winter concert and a spring concert, where the kids show the families in the audience everything they've learned to play. There is also a "Fiddlefest" and a summer camp every year with students from programs all over New Jersey.

This is when the real changes in all of our lives began. Most important, we had to make sure that every day in our home, we dedicate time to music. My daughters are in the PMP Honors program and receive free private lessons, so they practice a lot. They discover more techniques on their instruments. They take their own time to explore and play the music because they love to do it. Haley's favorite composer is Britten. Geanelly's favorites are Vivaldi and Bach.

Since they entered the program, our lives changed completely. It was one of the biggest opportunities that has ever come to my family – like entering a new door that was just waiting for us. Together, as a family, we give time for the music program. And together as a family, we get to explore different places and people, and interact with other musicians and parents. I feel like my daughters are going to enjoy their futures more, because of the opportunities PMP has given them.

## **ACTION FOR THE MONTH:** Vote by May 3 for a Program to Win a National Community Impact Award!

For the first time, a U.S. Sistema program has been selected as a top 10 finalist for a major national award, not for its education achievements but for its community impact. Help them win. Americans for the Arts' (AftA) Robert Gard Award is decided by votes from its members. Please rally everyone you know who might be an AftA member to vote for MYCincinnati's Price Hill Creative Community Festival – it would be a win for our movement. Learn more [here](http://www.americansforthearts.org/gardaward). Vote here: <http://www.americansforthearts.org/gardaward>