

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

## In Alliance: More than the Sum of Their Parts

By Karen Deschere, Executive Director, Wharton Institute for the Performing Arts

"Hey, did you hear that other group playing our song? I wonder how they knew it?" said one incredulous young cellist to another, after hearing another El Sistema group play "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" at the Fiddle and FaLaLa Fest.

With that one simple question, a child's world opened up. If he had never heard "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" before he learned it as part of his journey with the Paterson Music Project, how could he guess that anyone else could play it?

This is the beauty of the [El Sistema New Jersey Alliance](#), a network of seven Sistema-inspired programs throughout New Jersey. Not only are children's lives opened wider; the Alliance also opens opportunities for teaching artists and administrators to share music, curricula, ideas, and best practices. Starting out in 2014 with five programs, the Alliance quickly developed a culture of sharing that embraced two newer programs and helped them launch smoothly.

New Jersey is ideal for this kind of collaboration because of its small size and high population density. Also, it happens to be the home state of El Sistema expert (and editor of this publication) Tricia Tunstall, whose knowledge and connections have been invaluable. Our program partners currently include the [Union City Music Project](#); [CHAMPS](#), a program of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra (Newark); [Keys 2 Success](#) (Newark); [Paterson Music Project](#) (PMP); [Sister Cities Girlchoir](#) (Camden), [Sonic Expressions](#) (Orange); and [Trenton Music Makers](#).

For the past three years, the Alliance has offered our students the chance to see and experience a larger world, by creating ways for them to come together and make music – most prominently the aforementioned Fiddle and FaLaLa Fest, which includes several hundred children and their families, and a three-day summer camp, which involves about 100 children. They've played in exciting venues they've never seen before, attended NJ Symphony concerts, celebrated Martin Luther King Day together, and forged connections with students from across the state. The Alliance has also enabled program leaders and teachers to visit one another and share guest artist appearances.

Creating a new collaboration isn't easy, and we quickly realized that we needed more resources. So with the encouragement of the program director of the [Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation](#), one of New Jersey's largest arts education funders, we applied to Dodge for support. Writing a grant proposal with five partners isn't all that easy either, but we did it! The first grant enabled us to hire a very part-time administrator at a very modest salary.

We were lucky that the Associate Program Director at PMP, Shanna Lin, wanted to add these duties to her already full plate. Working mostly through committee conference calls and at least two in-person general meetings a year, we have been able to provide more every year to our ever-growing number of students. Teachers, conductors, and other staff members from each program coordinate logistics, music and curriculum.

Since we are not incorporated, we need a fiscal sponsor. As Executive Director of the

Wharton Institute for the Performing Arts (sponsor of PMP), I arranged with our Board of Trustees for Wharton to be the fiscal sponsor. Wharton receives the grant award, pays the bills, and provides insurance and some financial staff. The Alliance has now received three annual grants from the Dodge Foundation.

Last spring, a daylong facilitated retreat gave us the impetus to reach even further. Goals beyond joint programming were brought to the forefront – especially, providing professional development for our teachers and creating the capacity to advocate for Sistema-inspired programs with our local and state leaders. That's a lot for a group of already overworked arts professionals to accomplish, and it won't happen all at once, but we are all committed to making this Alliance work. We have acquired some volunteer help; a now-retired ED has been working on finding additional funding, and a PR professional has offered her services. Our paramount reason for being has remained constant: the desire to provide the best music and social education for our students, and to continue to open their world.



Teaching artist Theresa Kemp leading a rehearsal at the 2017 ESNJA summer camp. Photo: Victoria Mc McCabe

## FROM THE EDITOR

Our issue this month features collaborative initiatives between programs that are Sistema-inspired or similarly oriented. The U.S. Sistema ecosystem is beginning to see more such collaborations, of varying degrees of formality and longevity. Often, the first impulse toward collaboration comes easily; it's later that questions can arise. How are decisions made? Do programs need to agree on everything? How much can they diverge and still be part of the joint enterprise?

As we reflect locally, it may also be helpful to look abroad at a particularly effective example of long-term program collaboration. [Sistema Europe](#) began in 2012 with an impromptu meeting of a handful of people in London. Five years later, it includes programs in nearly 30 countries, and is best known for creating summer camp/residency events that have enabled hundreds of young people from all over Europe to gather annually in one or another fabled city, for ten days of intense music-making together. These festivals have indelible effects on the teachers who lead them, the kids who participate in them and the many more kids who decide to practice harder, so they can get good enough to attend the next one.

We've been fortunate to be able to sit in on some of Sistema Europe's general meetings, so we have been able to witness a quieter aspect of its valuable work – its ability to sustain a vigilantly democratic process and a generous spirit. Very large programs collaborate with very small ones, with every program feeling included and supported. In 2015, the members decided to become a legal entity. Yet even with the extra layers of bureaucracy and expense, general membership meetings continue to be small miracles of good humor and collective democracy.

How do they manage it? Here are a few key practices. One, they keep their priorities simple and clear, limited mostly to summer camp and joint fundraising. Two, each program has equal voting representation. Three, time is set aside at every meeting for programs to announce their own news. And they are tenaciously non-parochial. "I'm a Finnish person," we once heard a participant say, "sitting in Austria at a Korean restaurant, speaking in English, talking to people from 20 countries. This is how we live. This is who we are."

Tricia Tunstall

"One definition of success might be: refining our appetites while deepening our hunger."  
- Yahia Lababidi, poet

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## News Notes

The Sistema-aligned [Iqaluit Music Society \(IMS\)](#) is based in the Canadian territory of Nunavut, on Baffin Island on Frobisher Bay. During their 22nd annual summer camp this past summer, they hosted a young fiddle group visiting from Pangnirtung (a community

with even less access to music education) for the first time.

The year-round IMS program is led by amateur/semi-professional volunteer music educators who provide free music lessons

to Iqaluit's youth (80% Inuit) in Inuit drum dancing, throat singing, fiddle, guitar, accordion, and singing. They augment these volunteer-run programs by providing multi-day workshops throughout the year with visiting professional musicians and music educators. Their summer music camp mentors teens in sharing their talents with younger children in an "each one teach one" strategy, to share the positive power of music with others. Contact: [iqaluitmusicsociety@gmail.com](mailto:iqaluitmusicsociety@gmail.com)

Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute is now accepting [applications for NYO2, Summer 2018](#). This is an extraordinary opportunity for top Sistema students, ages 14-17, to join a high-level national orchestra. So far, 18 students from Sistema-inspired programs have been in NYO2. More each year. Find out more at: <https://www.carnegiehall.org/NYO2>.

To honor the 100th birthday of Leonard Bernstein, the Leonard Bernstein office, Hal Leonard and Bernstein's children Jamie, Alexander and Nina have collaborated with El Sistema USA to create a [special arrangement of the song "Somewhere" from West Side Story](#). This arrangement has been created with El Sistema ensembles in mind, with tiered parts that

allow for players of different skill levels, with optional chorus parts. To register for printed copies (not available online), members can contact [ESUSA](#).

[US Conference of Mayors](#), a non-partisan organization of chief executives of cities with more than 30,000 population, recently unanimously endorsed a resolution supporting creative youth development programs, entitled "[Access to Creative Youth Development for At-Risk Youth](#)." This may prove useful for advocacy with your local mayor.



*Mollie and Mary throat-singing in the 2017 IMS summer camp finale. Photo: Frank Reardon Photos*

## Resources

Watch the short film in which Community MusicWorks (in Providence, RI) shares its [We Shall Overcome Project](#) in 2017. The project was the focus of their PlayUSA Collaborative Action

Research Project with WMI/Carnegie Hall. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMHeYk7e8zU&t=2s>

It is always worth checking to make sure you are taking advantage of [all the sources of funding](#) you might tap. Americans for the Arts has a handy listing that might show you sources you haven't thought about. <https://www.americansforthearts.org/by-topic/funding-resources>

[The Hearst Foundations](#) support nonprofits that address significant issues within culture, education, health and social service. They seek organizations achieving unusual and clear results relative to other similar organizations. The Foundations also look for evidence of sustainability beyond their support. Rolling application: <https://www.hearstfdn.org/funding-priorities>

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## Aligning for Impact

by Adam Johnston, COO, [The National Guild for Community Arts Education](#)

There are rooms in which arts education programs fight for airspace. In state assembly rooms, legislators apportion tax revenue to parklands, regulatory agencies, and (if we're lucky) arts councils. In school principals' offices, budget committees decide what is core and extracurricular, compulsory and optional. And in kitchens or living rooms, family decision-makers make similar hard decisions for their children.

But it is possible to fill a room with people who agree on a foundational ideology: that teaching young people the joy of making music is of enormous social and civic importance. In Philadelphia, an intrepid group of educators called the [Philadelphia Music Alliance for Youth \(PMAY\)](#) – made up of leaders of community music schools, Sistema-inspired programs, school district music personnel, youth choirs and orchestras, and others – has been filling meeting rooms and deciding to take action together. PMAY has hosted three annual music festivals, assembled diverse student ensembles to perform at other community events, and conducted a year-long research project studying arts education collectives in other cities. A white paper based on this research lays out a vision for the city to invest in: "a sustainable city-wide system for sequential music education that supports all children." Most recently, the 10 member organizations focused on K-12 orchestral instruction won a 3.5 year, \$2.532M collaborative grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to support promising young classical musicians from underrepresented communities along the pathway to musical mastery.

PMAY's newest project intends to support its most commonly-held assets, the music educators themselves. A 22-question survey about the training pathways and current needs of music teachers was administered to over 260 music teachers in the city; PMAY will analyze and share the survey results, and decide – collaboratively – how to act on them.

I had the incredible fortune of working with PMAY for the two years I served as Director of Strategic Initiatives at [Settlement Music School](#). I saw firsthand that its ability to prioritize the collective, and to focus on action, leads to real, tangible results. In a world of noisy battles over scarce resources, PMAY is the sound of everyone in the same room, playing together.

## ACTION FOR THE MONTH: Write to local candidates about music education

Nov. 7 is election day in the U.S. with many local and state contests decided by small margins in low voter turnout. Pick one "toss up" contest and write both candidates about their music education and after-school arts program positions – ask them to contact you or announce their policy before election day. They are attentive to swing votes right now, so let them know you represent a surprisingly large network of passionate music education advocates. Find more about the action, and a sample letter, [here](#).