

the ensemble

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

Principles of Scale for Growing a Sistema System

By Dalouge Smith, CEO of *The Lewis Prize for Music*

In the early days of the U.S. El Sistema movement, Maestro Abreu regularly spoke at national conferences. Often during these events, he would state, "El Sistema is not a system." Yet we all marvelled at the interconnected structure of neighborhood núcleos, regional seminarios, state youth orchestras, and the multiple levels of youth orchestras based at Caracas's national conservatory.

Since then, we've spent immense energy and resources building local programs modeled on the núcleo design. We now have over 100 programs across the country utilizing

El Sistema's mix of musical, social, and community principles. However, we have not given similar energy to studying why Maestro Abreu created his nationally connected system and what lessons it has for us.

When he started, Maestro Abreu had the original Simon Bolívar Youth Orchestra members teach, recruit, hunt up instruments, start núcleos, and organize seminarios. They developed instrument making and repair workshops, compiled a library of orchestral music, and created a media library of guest artist master classes. They did all of this in order to grow El Sistema across all of Venezuela.

There is little doubt that we are awash in resources compared to the circumstances in Venezuela. We've not had to undertake the same grassroots effort because the U.S. has a mature music education industry comprised of certified music educators, university music departments, instrument manufacturers, music publishers, youth orchestras, and summer opportunities.

Yet our existing ecosystem struggles to meet the needs of today's diverse communities. National arts education data confirms that the lowest income students receive the least music and arts education in school. According to the Yale School of Music, "today's music teachers do not statistically reflect the diversity of their students: while 50 percent of U.S. students are non-white, only around 10 percent of music educators are teachers of color." Seeing these realities in our own communities has inspired many people to be part of the U.S. El Sistema movement.

However, to fully address the institutionalized barriers that have created this disparity, we need to learn lessons of scale from Maestro Abreu, just as we've learned program implementation. These new principles will be a complement to the

program principles we now recognize as fundamental to El Sistema work. The following preliminary principles of scale are inspired by my understanding of El Sistema's evolution and the opportunities that exist here. I welcome additions and refinements.

1. Aspire to influence public systems. Maestro Abreu did this by embedding El Sistema within the Ministry of Health. Our greatest opportunity is to work for the restoration of music education in schools with the inclusion of El Sistema principles.
2. Support and champion diverse music educators. Venezuelans were excluded from their country's musical life before El Sistema.

With so few music educators of color in the U.S., it is clear the same is true within the communities we serve. Sharing El Sistema practices with diverse music educators has the potential to give them new skills and relationships that are more relevant to the communities where they work than are the ones they get via traditional training.

3. Prioritize equitable inclusion. El Sistema's *White Hands Choir* demonstrates the importance of including every child. Our U.S. movement has yet to dedicate itself to serving differently-abled children with as much energy as do the Venezuelans. Developing this practice will strengthen our ability to scale. Also, we must prioritize early childhood music.
4. Put young people in the lead. Maestro Abreu named Gustavo Dudamel the Music Director of the Simon Bolívar Youth Orchestra when he was 17. From the beginning, El Sistema expected its young participants to teach. This grew capacity exponentially. We must do the same, so the young people in our programs begin to see themselves as teachers and leaders upon whom their younger peers rely, well before they undertake collegiate musical studies.

5. Be a knowledge creator and disseminator. The El Sistema movement has been creating and sharing knowledge since its inception. The openness with which that knowledge has been shared with us and others around the world affirms that knowledge is an essential characteristic of scaling.

We already have early-stage examples of these proposed principles in the U.S. What we don't have is a framework that articulates their essential place in our movement. I believe that pursuing these principles with intention will result in the El Sistema movement becoming an essential resource for all music education across the country, to the benefit of all children.

FROM THE EDITOR

On November 1, 2011, Eric Booth and I published the first issue of *The Ensemble* newsletter. In my inaugural editorial column, I quoted our Venezuelan friend Rodrigo Guerrero, who had said at the first gathering of U.S. Sistema practitioners: "Look around you. Look to your right. Look to your left. These are the people who are going to help you. Networking is incredibly important."

Throughout eight years of *Ensemble* publishing, Eric and I have been deeply engaged in the opportunity to look left, right, and center at the many extraordinary people in the U.S./Canadian El Sistema field, and to provide a forum for sharing ideas, questions, reflections, inspirations – the conversations that create community.

As of next month, a new team will lead these conversations. We are transferring leadership of *The Ensemble* and *The World Ensemble* to the Longy School of Music of Bard College, an organization with proven dedication to the Sistema mission and with greater capacity than we ourselves have been able to provide. Under Karen Zorn's visionary leadership, it is unique among conservatories in its consistent engagement with El Sistema. With the guidance of Dean Wayman Chin and COO Ann Welch, and led by Christine D'Alexander as editor, *The Ensembles* will flourish and grow.

Since 2011, our field has made real progress in fulfilling Rodrigo's mandate to strengthen intra-Sistema connections, through things like El Sistema USA, national symposia, and regional gatherings. However, we remain almost completely insulated from the rest of the music education ecosystem and the wider public. In the past month, I've heard radio and TV interviews with three different U.S. Sistema program leaders. All described the great work happening in their own programs. Not one of them mentioned that there are close to 200 programs driven by the same vision and mission, in the U.S. and Canada.

We like to call ourselves a movement. But this is not how a movement operates. It's why we remain impotent as a force for systemic change, no matter how much we help specific kids and families in specific places.

So my last advice as editor is this: Look outward. Connect to other music education programs, to elected officials, to thought leaders. Make our wider vision known to a wider public. We've become a field. Now let's become a movement.

Tricia Tunstall

"True heroism...is not the urge to surpass all others at whatever cost, but the urge to serve others at whatever cost." – Arthur Ashe, tennis player, humanitarian

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News Notes

Dalouge Smith's lead article on our first page identifies him as the CEO of [The Lewis Prize for Music](#). The Lewis Prize offers three multi-year awards of \$500,000 each, intended to uplift leaders of Creative Youth Development music initiatives in furthering the mission to create fair and vibrant communities through music. To find out more about [Lewis Prize eligibility criteria](#) and the Letter of Interest process (due by Sept. 16), go to the website (<https://www.thelewisprize.org>) where there are FAQ and a link to the Letter of Interest submission portal. For more information, write: info@thelewisprize.org

The kids are home – from Scotland and Portugal. ...On the opening weekend of the Edinburgh International Festival, Gustavo Dudamel conducted an open rehearsal of students from [Big Noise Raploch](#) (the first site of Sistema Scotland), [YOLA](#) (Youth Orchestra Los Angeles) and the [YOLA National Institute](#) (students from across the U.S.). The rehearsal culminated their weeklong Edinburgh residency with Bizet's Carmen Suite No.1 and Brahms' Hungarian Dance No. 5. And 20 students from the [Boston String Academy](#) (BSA) were been invited to join El Sistema Portugal and its advanced "Orquestra Geração" for a week. They were conducted by Ulysses Ascanio from Venezuela and Jan Wierzba from Portugal – a remarkable moment for the founders of BSA Mariesther and Marielisa Alvarez, because Ascanio had been their conductor when they were their now-students' age. The rehearsals ran Venezuelan-style, intensively, from 10am-7pm every day, but the BSA musicians did fit in some tourist adventures.

Many people in the Sistema field are concerned about the [hideous conditions for migrant young people](#) at the U.S. Southern border, and wish to help. The Tocando program in El Paso, Texas has laid the foundation for a new Sistema program that addresses the issue – in a school at the border where local students, migrants, and students who commute over the border from Mexico can create a musical ensemble. They seek a teacher-leader for this program. Please see [job description here](#) and distribute it to people who might be interested.

Resources

Thanks to Heath Marlow (leader of the [Understanding El Sistema Institute at New England Conservatory](#)) and his edited filming of Laura Jekel's June 2019 presentation, we have a full story of one program's extraordinary expansion from a strong Sistema program ([MYCincinnati](#)) into a remarkable Creative Placemaking community development initiative. Heath has broken Laura's presentation into three parts, lasting 9, 19 and 18 minutes, that detail this under-reported success story and provide an inspirational prompt for us all. <http://www.residencybuilding.org/blog/creative-placemaking-in-price-hill> For further information, contact ljekel@gmail.com.

Have you considered [starting an early childhood program](#)? The benefits to the children and your program are clear – perhaps this grant program could help you get started. [The Caplan Foundation for Early Childhood](#) supports nonprofit programs that enhance the development, health, safety, education, or quality of life of children from infancy through seven years of age. The Foundation's areas of interest include The Early Childhood Education and Play category, focusing on innovative curricula. The Foundation serves as an incubator for new, innovative projects and research. The upcoming deadline for letters of inquiry is September 30, 2019: <https://earlychildhoodfoundation.org>

Duke University psychologist Sarah Gaither finds that children (ages 6-7) get a [boost in their creativity when reminded that they have multiple identities](#) (e.g. sister, student, soccer player). Read the results here and think about making regular mentions of multiple identities to students so they internalize their many roles and boost their creative potential. <https://tinyurl.com/y5ftnc8>

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Community Trust

By Alex Rosales Garcia, Teaching Artist/Bassoonist

Undocumented immigrants share the unique experience of eventually facing the implications of their legal status. For me, that understanding developed in middle school – six years after I crossed the border into the U.S. in 1995, with only shoes, pants, and a sweatshirt. My revelation came on the day our class learned of a school trip to Washington D.C. My mother commented that I did not have acceptable identification for the school trip. Also, I would not be able to acquire a driver license, jobs with benefits, eligibility for college financial aid, or ability to travel outside the country. I was instructed to avoid interactions with police officers and be selective about to whom I told the truth.

Nearly 20 years later, I took the oath of U.S. citizenship at the Los Angeles Convention Center – marking the conclusion of an arduous, decades-long immigration process. By then, I was 26 and finishing a graduate certificate. It was not until I began teaching for [YOLA](#) that I became aware of the value of my past experiences, and the advantages they afforded me when connecting with students/families.

Undocumented students face the persisting adversity of feeling like a perpetual foreigners, especially as we hear increasingly divisive rhetoric about the evils of "illegal alien invasion." It results in the false perception of being a "sub-resident," with no place in society; often, they simultaneously lose connection to their home country. During my childhood, I felt most comfortable in programs where educators celebrated diversity by integrating similarities across cultures – encouraging students to feel a lasting sense of ownership and pride in their communities.

Language barriers, culture shock, and increasingly xenophobic rhetoric are the challenges that go with the immense courage and sacrifice it takes for undocumented parents to build a new home. At YOLA at EXPO, teaching artists are encouraged to meet individually with parents. This allows me to introduce myself and express gratitude to parents who have previously mentioned their undocumented status. Acknowledging and celebrating the parents of undocumented youth is crucial in the formation of a lasting community.

As we educators fight for compassionate change in our immigration system, we can focus our efforts on combining our shared knowledge into strategies that strengthen our programs and communities.

ACTION FOR THE MONTH: Join the Unified Response to the End of Data Gathering on Arts Education

In late July, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) announced its intention to reduce the subjects in the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) (NAEP), eliminating the next [Nation's Arts Report Card](#), the only nationally-reported measurement of what students know and are able to do in the arts, which is critical for closing gaps in access to arts learning. Join a [unified response](#). Follow this invitation from the national arts policy working group to [sign the letter](#) and to [write elected representatives](#). More [here](#).