

Student Voices Take the Lead during YOLA National at Home

Tricia Tunstall, Executive Editor, [The Ensemble Newsletters](#)

For close to a decade, the month of July has meant national Sistema gatherings hosted by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and this year was no different—except that it was extremely different, because it was all virtual: [YOLA National at Home](#).

The switch to digital led to a big increase in attendance. Attendees this year included 320 students and 1,142 non-students, some tuning in from Latin America and Japan. But the differences went far beyond numbers. Many of us are responding to pandemic times by hewing closely to what we've always done in person, moving as much of it online as possible. That's exactly what the L.A. Phil did not do.

We often talk about El Sistema as an inquiry—and YOLA National at Home was a remarkable example of imaginative inquiry around three hot buttons in the current U.S./Canadian Sistema field: youth voice, professional development, and partnership.

The inquiry was grounded in a decision to forgo the established structure and to create a flexible, open, multi-layered experience for all participants.

What has traditionally been the "Festival"—a ten-day seminario that brings together students from Sistema-inspired programs across the country to rehearse and perform—became an intensive summer learning program with open-source courses, masterclasses, project-based learning, and ongoing work within three symphonic student ensembles. A new layer was added, the YOLA National Institute, to provide in-depth training for young musicians interested in pursuing musical careers.

What has traditionally been the "Symposium"—a three-day conference for Sistema professionals—morphed into a three-week array of keynotes (by Gustavo Dudamel and Thomas Wilkins), presentations, and panel discussions around four themes: Community Voices, Teaching Insights, Pathway Explorations, and the Young Artist Series. All events were available free to both students and professionals, livestreamed on Zoom and YouTube.

"As we began to shift everything online," YOLA Manager Angelica Cortez told me, "it became clear that we couldn't say, 'These things are for the students, those things are for the grownups.' Things that we had traditionally separated out, we saw no reason to separate out. We decided it was not so helpful to have separate spaces for adults and children; they need to be in the same room. In the end, we invited everyone to participate in everything."

This was a crucial decision. It meant that instead of students working in one set of spaces and adults in another, they were all often in the same

conversations. Youth voice was not only prioritized—it was empowered, and it was consequential. Professional development, too, was galvanized by this new dimension: in most sessions, there were students in the room, students at the table. (And isn't it interesting that this happened once there were no more actual rooms and tables?) The conversations changed. Issues of social justice, youth voice, and concepts of identity were front and center.

Another part of the L.A. Phil's experimental inquiry was the development of several partnerships to further open up conversations. [Classically Black](#), a podcast produced by violist Katie Brown and double bassist Dalanie Harris, worked with clarinetist Alex Laing in moderating sessions that centered Black voices and pathways in classical music. [Project 440](#), founded and led by Philadelphia Orchestra double bassist Joseph Conyers, was another partner, offering YOLA National Symphony musicians a series of trainings with a dual focus on career-building and working toward the goals of music for social change.

A third partner was [El Sistema USA](#), which contributed several sessions on best practices and helped organize forty 3rd-5th grade children from six member organizations across California to take part in a weeklong virtual seminario of their own. That seminario was led by the L.A. Phil's fourth partner: [Collective Conservatory](#), launched this year by Daniel Trahey in response to the pandemic. The CC staff worked with California students to create their own miniature DJ booths and record and collect "found sounds" around their homes. Their sonic output was edited to make elaborate collective soundscapes that were aired at a livestreamed drop party.

What's the takeaway here, for those of us (i.e., all of us) without the L.A. Phil's heft and resources? We can't, of course, reproduce what they did. But we can note and aspire to the spirit of bold inquiry and experiment that guided their choices. It takes courage to commit to inquiry rather than to predictable results, especially when the predictable results are usually good. But our movement's most remarkable results are often the outcomes of experiments that feel risky and unpredictable.

I believe that the L.A. Phil's crucial experiment in blending student voice with professional development doesn't have to end when we go back to in-person gathering; indeed, it will become more powerful. "We invited everyone to participate in everything"—just imagine what that scenario would look like and feel like in physical spaces filled with people. For Sistema inquiry, I can't envision a better experiment than that.

EDITORIAL

Calida Jones, Director of Engagement, [The Hartt School](#); Managing Partner, [CNJ Associates](#)

Since March 13, life has changed drastically. Arts institutions and businesses across the country shut down. Schools emptied. Everyone turned to the internet for visibility, accessibility, and relevance.

Suddenly, people who wouldn't normally worry about their circumstances were experiencing uncertainty, unrest, frustration, and fear. But in our students' communities, many fared worse. More people became homeless; domestic abuse rose; advocacy for children became intensely difficult.

In many of our programs, I've observed a frantic push to be the best virtual learning environment possible. I applaud everyone who has successfully moved to virtual teaching and learning. But we need to remember that many of our families' basic needs—food, water, electricity, gas, etc.—are threatened.

So if you're healthy and able, TAKE THE NEXT STEP. Lean in deeper. Push through the discomfort of uncertainty. Go physically—responsibly—into the community and serve freely with your whole heart.

The isolation of the pandemic has been devastating for me. At the same time, the experience has highlighted my privilege to complain while working from home, or to obsess about small things. The moment I stepped outside of myself and focused on others, those feelings disappeared. My mindset shifted to deep and meaningful change.

A friend shared this quote: "Transformative networks do not live within our current framework of understanding." It's true. The current social and economic framework requires dismantling if we want to bring about real transformation. I would challenge us to consider these next steps:

- Radically change our communications approach. Reach out to families to connect about life as well as about music. Create a rapport that can be an example for our students.
- Challenge donors to rethink their mindset when it comes to giving. Encourage them to expand their idea of excellence to include social learning, and to create openings for students to lead conversations rather than just listen.
- Expand outside of music. Create opportunities for students to build on other skillsets and to share cultural experiences of their communities.

This massive global plot twist has highlighted what will no longer be acceptable. If we make the choice to work within communities that are historically silenced, we have an immediate responsibility to redefine and redesign the platform. We have no choice. Our children are depending on us.

News Notes

The Caplan Foundation for Early Childhood supports U.S. nonprofits offering programs that enhance the development, health, safety, education, or quality of life of children ages 0–8. El Sistema programs looking to start new, [innovative projects that might have a nationwide impact](#) may want to investigate the Early Childhood Education and Play category. The deadline for letters of inquiry is September 30; click [here](#) to learn more.

The Sparkplug Foundation provides [grants to start-up nonprofits or new projects of established nonprofits that address the fields of music, education, and community organizing](#). El Sistema programs have been awarded grants from Sparkplug in the past—several of its grant categories are a good fit. The first application step is to complete the online questionnaire between September 15 and October 5, 2020. Please review the Foundation's mission, funding guidelines, and [application instructions](#).

The Collective Conservatory has introduced another innovative program [to support those looking to strengthen their sense of community and creativity](#) in these times of pain and trauma: The Collective Conservatory Fire Circle. These two-day workshops have a \$25 registration fee as well as opportunities to sponsor someone who may not sign up on their own. All are welcome—you do not have to be an “artist” to participate, and all ages are encouraged. There are three sessions to choose from, beginning on September 5; learn more and [register here](#).

While quarantined at home, nine young musicians (ages 10–17) in New York's [Harmony Program](#) worked online with Jon Deak (Founder/Director of [Very Young Composers](#)) and other teaching artists of the New York Philharmonic to [compose their first original piece of music](#). Titled “[Transitioning](#),” the string arrangement expresses their experience of living through the coronavirus crisis. This ten-minute film premiered online in June 2020 and includes both the performance and student reflections.

Resources

The [Miami Music Project](#) has debuted a [new town-hall webinar series](#) in collaboration with [ReEnvision Harmony](#), titled “Discomfort Discourse: Taking Action for Racial Equality.” Taking place on Facebook Live once a week, this series is designed to give arts and community leaders the tools for anti-racist practices. View the first session, “The

History of Racism: Why We Say Black Lives Matter,” [here](#).

In 2018, the Creative Youth Development (CYD) National Partnership, funded through the National Endowment for the Arts, began researching [ways to spur collective action to advance CYD](#). One part of the research studied the experience and attitudes of current and potential funders, developing a Skill/Will Map and a set of case stories illuminating partnerships between funders and CYD programs. This useful new tool for the field is presented in a new report by Jeff Poulin (Managing Director of [Creative Generation](#)): “[Mapping Skill To Will: Approaches To Funding Creative Youth Development in the United States](#).” To find out more about the CYD National Partnership, go [here](#).

Sphinx has compiled [a list of action items](#) designed to [bring about a more just and equitable present and future in the presenting arts world](#). Recognizing that the list does not purport to be exhaustive, Sphinx offers this as a starting point for coordinated actions across the field. And remember that applications are still open for [The Sphinx Venture Fund](#), which rewards ventures that address a challenge in cultural diversity with annual funding of up to \$300,000. Applications due by September 30, 2020.

Longtime El Sistema leader Emily Kubitskey has launched a [professional development workshop series](#) with her new endeavor [Global Arts](#). The fall series (two-hour sessions, on alternate Fridays) focuses on social equity and culturally relevant teaching in the classroom. Multi-session discounts are available for the \$50 registration, and Global Arts can be flexible if you contact them. Click [here](#) to learn more and register.

Editor's Note: We sadly report the death of Sir Ken Robinson, probably the world's foremost advocate for creativity and arts in education. His wit and wisdom inspired many and contributed to change around the world. We share his 2006 TED Talk [here](#)—the most widely viewed TED Talk in history—to galvanize, inspire, and guide your work.

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True Cultural Responsiveness

Victor Sawyer, Senior Fellowship Coach, Memphis Music Initiative; Instrumental Music Instructor, Stax Music Academy

When the pandemic exposed our nation, much of our work evaporated, leaving us only with what we have done, what we planned to do, and the reality of where we are. Undistracted, we began to address systemic racism with the urgency and furious passion it deserved. My heart swelled to see friends from all backgrounds join the fight, vocally and physically. With no gigs and a shrinking amount of teaching artist work, I felt less afraid of being blacklisted and freer to eradicate systemic racism.

At the Memphis Music Initiative, I work primarily on curriculum planning and teaching-artist development; at Stax Music Academy, I am an active teaching musician. As reality sank in and both organizations pivoted to digital learning, I asked myself that dreaded question: “Is what I currently do valuable?” Then I asked a better question: “Is what I currently do valuable the way I am doing it?” With that, I saw nothing but opportunity. Focusing on the context, messaging, and impact of their music, I began teaching about artists' lives, to help place their music in history. The positive response shocked me and filled me with optimism. Students wanted more.

Suddenly, the harsh truths of history were more than “context.” They became the centerpiece of my work, even if I had to carve out space for them. For instance, I could trace the sound of Black American Gospel to the Slavery Era, when Pan-African styles of singing—with their bends and “blue notes,” as we later called them—merged with traditional Western European hymns. Sacred music was often the only music enslaved Africans were allowed to sing, as the last overt vestiges of African culture were forcibly stripped away. As uncomfortable as this truth may be, our work should leave students with a full understanding of the art they study.

Becoming an anti-racist educator is not easy, but it isn't impossible, either. We work through stages: Culturally Hostile, Culturally Aware, Culturally Responsive, and finally Culturally Proactive, building systems and mindsets that promote anti-racist spaces in perpetuity. Through our teaching, educators must now move beyond Cultural Awareness and into the dismantling phase.

We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reform our world. Will we take it together? If teaching artists are authentically concerned with breaking the wheel of oppression, we can build a more equitable world, where the idea of racism is so reviled that citizens root it out before it takes hold. “The work” is ours to do—but only our collective efforts will lead to a liberated society.

Action for the Month: Consider Endorsing Federal Arts Policy Proposal

Please review this federal arts policy proposal from [Americans for the Arts](#) and other national partners and, if possible, officially endorse it as an organization or as an individual. This action is time-sensitive because of indications that the Presidential campaigns are studying policy options like those in this proposal, including a national workforce program, and we want to make sure creative workers are part of the plan. Please consider endorsing at: americansforthearts.org/creativework.