

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE U.S. EL SISTEMA MOVEMENT

## Sistema USA at the Crossroads

By Marshall Marcus, Director Espiritu Barroco Venezolano and Southbank Centre's London International Sistema Programme, and Advisor Centro de Acción Social por la Música

The imposing Milanese Castello Sforzesco in northern Italy houses a fascinating museum of musical instruments; room after room of an astonishing variety of violin-like instruments that developed through the couple of centuries leading up to Stradivarius. Every shape of the nascent modern string family is present. It's a Darwinian sea of free evolution with dozens of creative tryouts before the modern violin family was finally established during the seventeenth century. Now in case you're wondering why I'm mentioning this, it's not simply to expose the musings of an eccentric Englishman, but because that sensation of wandering through the museum's rooms and marveling at the variety of human endeavour on view was exactly how I felt at the recent LA Phil 'Take a Stand' symposium in January. What was on show in 'Take a Stand' was definitely the equivalent of the Darwinian evolutionary soup that followed the creation of life on our planet. And fascinating it was too.

Armed with the luxury of being a visitor in U.S. waters, I tried to wander round the symposium with an open eye, to sense what was cooking in the U.S. Sistema world. And boy I can report there is plenty going on. What strikes me is how utterly different all the U.S. sistemas are, despite their all signing up to essentially the same set of Sistema values. Everything from big established metropolitan projects backed by world-class orchestras and eye-watering budgets to small humble new operations in sometimes almost rural settings. From big formal classical projects to street wise bucket bands, and everything in between.

Then there is the *oomph* of it; the U.S. sistemas are to be congratulated not only on their variety, but also their endeavor, application, enthusiasm and intent. The energy over the three days was palpable. Of course, context is everything, and the LA Phil's

partnership with Longy and Bard certainly provided that, with the jaw-dropping backdrop of the Disney Concert Hall, the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel, and plenty of Gustav Mahler. Empire Dudamel was just the ticket. And so it was that hundreds of delegates from Sistemas in 27 U.S. states turned up, alongside curious visitors from 13 countries.



Marshall Marcus (right) with El Sistema musician, after listening to and performing for Nucleo 23 de Enero, in Caracas, Venezuela

Photo: courtesy of Espiritu Barroco Venezolano

But what actually happened? Clear judgement can easily be a casualty as you get seduced by the heady combination of El Sistema USA's passion and enthusiasm; yet underneath the symposium's almost revivalist fervor there was some interesting undertow. The big subtext question I saw was, 'OK, this is all great, but how shall we organise ourselves and connect together nationally?' And with El Sistema USA, The Sistema Fellows, The League 360, Take a Stand, Longy, Bard, NEC and a new Association, there's a growing list of organizing umbrellas working at this question.

Far be it from me to give the answer, but I certainly have one observation to throw in: there's such a great Sistema ecosystem going on in the U.S., make sure you don't lose that delicate flora and fauna in the rush to organize. Don't over-institutionalize. The best examples are often the least institutional, and the danger as El Sistema travels into cultures like both of ours – where process has an eternal tendency to smother ideals – is that old chestnut: *Lost in Translation*. You chip away in the hope of successfully translating the model, and don't notice that its center is now thereby withering.

Take the Renaissance Arts Academy. For me that was maybe the preeminent U.S. model at 'Take a Stand.' Simple. Powerful. Great leadership, radical ideas, and inspirational, joyful teachers. 'Nuff said.'

## FROM THE EDITOR

Ever since the conclusion of the recent Mahler Project, I have been musing about the idea of "thinking big" – a phrase used by both Maestro Abreu and Maestro Dudamel to describe the way El Sistema Venezuela likes to operate.

Surely there can be no better example of thinking big – VERY big – than the Mahler extravaganza. Nine symphonies...two major symphony orchestras performing the full cycle twice, on two continents...singers numbering well over a thousand for the Symphony of a Thousand...All this was big indeed, but there was more. When the L.A. Phil members were in residence in Caracas, they were regaled by one astonishing children's orchestra after another: very small children – many hundreds of them – playing Handel and Tchaikovsky by memory.

In the case of the Mahler Project, of course, "big" meant big numbers – the kinds of numbers that we in the U.S., at our early stage of development, can't approach. But there's another dimension of ambition here that we can learn from.

Simply put, "thinking big" means aiming for the highest ambition within reach – so high that going for it feels like a long shot. That kind of huge aspiration with a wise sense of just-achievable limits is a signature part of the culture of El Sistema. Setting the bar very high, and then going for it with all-out energy and confidence, seems to be standard operating procedure – whether that means aiming to learn a complex symphony, or to perform in an unlikely venue, or to mainstream children with disabilities.

"The oomph of it" – thank you, Marshall Marcus, for that generous description of the energy of the U.S. El Sistema movement. At this stage, our oomph doesn't need to mean big numbers. For each of us, it can simply mean aiming at the highest goal we could possibly achieve – and then committing to it. It can mean being not just ambitious, but outrageously bold.

Tricia Tunstall

José Antonio Abreu, to the Sistema Fellows visiting Venezuela in April 2012:  
"What have you seen on the ground here, that we can further perfect?"

## News Notes

**Harmony Stockton** launched in August, 2011 at Marshall Elementary, selected in a competitive process among Stockton (CA) Title I schools. From school release till 6:00pm five days a week, 40 students (grades 3-5) receive an hour of academic tutoring and two hours of music classes. Equal time for violin and for chorus/recorder/general music concludes with 20 minutes of community time, reviewing, sharing and exploring together.

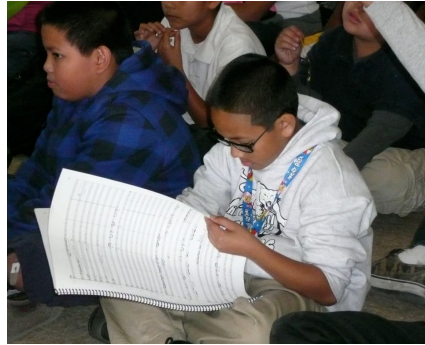
Harmony Stockton parallels an after-school enrichment program at all Stockton schools. The six Harmony Stockton instructors are all accomplished musicians, strings, vocal and piano/jazz. Two assistants tutor and assist in music classes. Music classes are each led by pairs of accomplished instructors (2 violin, 2 voice) who alternate days – to accommodate their busy lives.

Visionary leaders at the Stockton Symphony, University of the Pacific, and Stockton Unified School District laid the financial foundation. The galvanizing partner was United Way of San Joaquin County – CEO Andy Prokop offered five years of seed funding to launch the fundraising partnership. [rfisher@stocktonsymphony.org](mailto:rfisher@stocktonsymphony.org)

**New friendship agreement.** Joining the third class of Sistema Fellows (formerly called Abreu Fellows) in Venezuela at the end of their five week residency there, New England Conservatory President Tony Woodcock signed a new friendship agreement between NEC and Venezuela's El Sistema, affirming the commitment to continue the Fellowship through 2014 – to train fifty Fellows, "passionate for their art and for social development," to use musical training programs to transform children's lives in underserved communities. Also, NEC has commissioned their Composition Chair Michael Gandolfi to compose a piece for youth orchestra that uses the growth of

El Sistema and quotations from Dr. Abreu as base material.

*José Antonio Abreu (left) and Tony Woodcock at signing of the new Friendship Agreement*



*During Community Time, Matthew Timbreza studies the score of a piece by Avner Dorman, who visited just as students were beginning to learn to read music. Photo: Randy Fisher*

## Resources

**Research on arts learning benefits.** You knew it in your bones, and here is the research. A major new longitudinal study from The National Endowment for the Arts affirms that at-risk students who engage seriously in arts programs/classes do better academically, in workforce aspirations and planning, and in civic engagement. Significant learning achievements of arts-involved students appear in science, math, and language arts, as well as in college aspirations and graduation rates. **The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies** is available for download at: <http://www.arts.gov/research/Arts-At-Risk-Youth.pdf>

**Think like a funder?** A new study from Grantmakers for Effective Organizations suggests some changes in the ways funders think, including what inclines funders to give more general operating support and multi-year grants. For a free copy of **Is Grantmaking Getting Smarter?**: [http://www.geofunders.org/storage/documents/2011\\_geo\\_field\\_study\\_final.pdf](http://www.geofunders.org/storage/documents/2011_geo_field_study_final.pdf)

**And speaking of funding...** Do you know about Kickstarter?: <http://www.kickstarter.com>. Along with <http://www.indiegogo.com>, <http://www.rockethub.com> and others, Kickstarter may be a way to raise money for El Sistema-inspired projects. Kickstarter is predicted to distribute more money to arts organizations in 2012 than the National Endowment for the Arts will. Before you decide to launch a kickstarter campaign, be sure to study these tips for success from Barry' Blog: <http://blog.westaf.org/2012/04/ten-tips-to-help-you-succeed-on.html>

## Academic Theory vs. Practice

By Susan Siman, Program Director, Miami Music Project Orchestral Academy; former Director of Montalban, El Sistema's largest nucleo in Caracas

One of the most valuable opportunities provided by El Sistema in Venezuela is to start a career as a musician and teacher in parallel. At the age of 16 or so years, musicians begin to take on responsibilities for teaching younger children and passing on their knowledge, at the same time that they mature as performers. In this way, El Sistema generates its own teachers, thanks to a progressive structure in which older students train younger children, who will, in time, instruct even younger new students.

In the U.S., music teachers have a high level of academic theory and knowledge. But often, they do not have the chance to interact with students in the same way that aspiring teachers do in El Sistema. Our teachers are able to understand the educational process as an everyday and experiential matter.

In fact, the process of becoming a teacher is built into the very earliest experiences of learning within the Sistema. Even as children, students are encouraged to teach and learn from one another. If you want to express the Sistema pedagogy in one simple rule, it would be: put a child who is more skilled next to a child who is less skilled. In this way, every child comes to understand that he or she has the ability to teach as well as to learn.

This "side by side" program offers students the chance to count on their partners' support. The less skilled students receive help from those who are close to them, and can imitate a model that seems more attainable. The more skilled students learn to assume education as a daily activity and to model themselves as teachers.

The orchestral movement in Venezuela is like a big family reunion, with all students and teachers aiming at the same goal of realizing dreams through the ambition of musical excellence.

### Subscription Information

To ADD or DELETE names in the free subscription list for The Ensemble, send an email with instructions to:

[TheEnsembleNL@gmail.com](mailto:TheEnsembleNL@gmail.com)

**"What we have to learn from Venezuela is to be flexible, to respond to the moment, taking advantage of whatever is at hand." – Mark Churchill, Founder of El Sistema USA**