

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE U.S. EL SISTEMA MOVEMENT

Omnipresent Compositional Creativity

by Albert Oppenheimer, Director of YOURS Project, People's Music School, Chicago

As a composer, I've been curious about the role of musical creativity within El Sistema. Can composition and improvisation support a social mission? El Sistema-inspired programs instill a sense of responsibility and discipline within the structure of an ensemble, giving young musicians the opportunity to learn that steady, repetitive hard work yields big results. The lesson of success through continuous striving towards ever-larger goals is the magic of El Sistema, a magic that is transferrable to every part of a child's life.

The question remains: within this world of achievement through discipline and structure, is there room for personal choice, creativity, and ownership? I had the immense pleasure of visiting Venezuela last

spring as one of the Sistema Fellows. In every nucleo we visited, students approached me wanting to share their music with me. Or sometimes a nucleo director excitedly pointed me towards the 7-year-old who had just written a string quartet or the 17-year-old who was puzzling out how to harmonize the melody he had just written for violin.

I realized: composers are everywhere in El Sistema! There just isn't an official structure within the system to nurture them...yet.

The abundance of budding composers isn't surprising. Children in El Sistema are immersed in classical compositions for many hours a day, many days a week. The act of composition is role-modeled for them. The potential is exciting.

It's equally exciting that here in the U.S., we have the chance to incorporate and nurture that potential at the beginning of our young national movement. I know firsthand that this is happening at the YOURS Project in Chicago, which I direct, but in order to get an overall picture of what is happening elsewhere, I surveyed nucleo leaders around the U.S.

The majority of responders said that they incorporate improvisation into the very beginning of their students' experience, with some programs beginning improvisation games as young as three years old!

Only a small number of programs institutionalize improvisation as an independent musical goal, the rest trusting the individual teaching artists to mix in improvisation as they see fit.

Some programs begin with an improvisatory stage of music making, focusing on developing ensemble and aural skills with improv games and structured group improvisations before teaching traditional notation. One program reported that it waits for up to five years to teach notation, where another starts teaching notation in the first week of the program! Every program reported using elements of improvisation as students discover notation.

As in Venezuela, very few programs teach notation with composition in mind, though almost all responded

that students in their programs are spontaneously composing, and that group improvisations are commonly featured in concerts.

It appears that most music by living composers played in U.S. nucleos consists of show tunes and Hollywood scores. But a few notable composers, including Phillip Glass, Libby Larsen, and Michael Gandolfi, have been approached for potential commissions.

Can composition and improvisation support the social mission of our programs? The answers I received were enthusiastically affirmative. Responders said that composition and improvisation have the potential to help students express their relationships to their peers and their world, and are great ways to increase creativity and intrinsic motivation. Musical creativity, it was overwhelmingly asserted, furthers not only musical goals, but social goals as well.

Music is not just a language for instrumentalists to read off the page. It is also a language of creation, of personal ownership, expression, and exploration. Every pitch, every rhythm can potentially be reimagined into a unique composition. If music is taught with the understanding that it is as malleable as language, as fluid as finger paint, perhaps we can nurture a generation of composers: composers of music, and composers of life.



Albert Oppenheimer in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, works on a student's composition. Photo: David France.

FROM THE EDITOR

Did you by chance have the impression, as February took its long slow time being the shortest month of the year, that you were hearing the words "intrinsic motivation" from friends and colleagues more often than usual?

We at The Ensemble hope so. We tried something new this month: a book club for the El Sistema-inspired movement. We chose Daniel Pink's *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, and invited our readership to read it and join in an online conversation, via a LinkedIn Sistema Global subgroup, about what truly motivates people, particularly children, to learn and succeed.

Pink's big idea is that the most effective motivators are intrinsic, having to do with the inherent joys and rewards of the task itself, rather than extrinsic, delivered by the environment as rewards or punishments. Pink identifies the key intrinsic motivators as autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

Relating these ideas to our work, we agreed that El Sistema in Venezuela is remarkably free of the kinds of external motivators – grades, rankings, awards – that are prevalent in our typical learning cultures. Nucleos pulsate with passionate energy, but it's the very process of playing together, getting better together, that's the payoff. We speculated about a fourth intrinsic motivator: the desire to be a valued, contributing member of a group.

How can we create learning environments in which kids are fired up with intrinsic motivation? First, teachers can be powerful models. "Passion is teachable – or at least transmittable," as Reynaldo Trombetta of England's In Harmony has written. And second, by focusing on the goal of helping each child successfully "access the ensemble musical experience," in the words of In Harmony's Richard Hallam, we can tap into young people's deep yearning for social inclusion, for mastery within a collective endeavor.

Reading *Drive* along with many of you gave me a different way to think about what El Sistema has to offer all children, even those who don't live in material poverty: in a world replete with extrinsic motivators, we can nourish children's capacity to find ample intrinsic satisfaction in the work and play of making music together.

Tricia Tunstall

"All youngsters, without exception, should exert and consummate their right to an aesthetic education." – José Antonio Abreu

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News Notes

On January 28, 2013, the **Paterson Music Project** pilot program launched in Paterson, NJ, with 28 second-graders at the Community Charter School of Paterson. The program is a partnership between CCSP and the New Jersey Youth Symphony-Wharton Music Center. Meeting three days a week for two hours after school, the children have already begun learning to play violins, violas and cellos. In addition to ensemble instrumental instruction, students also learn general musicianship concepts, with a special focus on composition. An important feature of the program is a plan to develop mentoring relationships between PMP students and members of the New Jersey Youth Symphony. The first public performance by PMP students will be less than three months after the program's launch, at a New Jersey Youth Symphony gala on April 20, 2013. Visit the program's blog at <http://patersonmusicproject.blogspot.com>; for further information, please contact Liz Moulthrop: emoulthrop@verizon.net.

A one-week **Creative Leadership Immersion course** (March 16 -23) goes beyond the concert hall and into the surrounding Baltimore community to lead, create, perform and engage with music and a wide range of community participants. Creative practitioners from London will join Dan Trahey and Jill Collier in leading this experience-based course. The course culminates in a community project with a new co-created musical composition including Peabody Conservatory students, course leaders from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, The Baltimore Symphony's OrchKids, and other Baltimore City School students. Academic credit available. Contact Jill Collier with questions, at jkcollier@mac.com.

The Boston area will hold two multi-site projects this month. March 16th brings students from three programs together for a side-by-side rehearsal and concert, and on the 27th the Sistema Fellows host students from seven programs for a three hour-workshop on improvisation, singing, and composition.

Resources

During the December three day Play On, Philly! Symposium, five Sistema Fellows (Jessie Berne, Andrea Landin, Diogo Pereira, Elaine Sandoval, and Elise

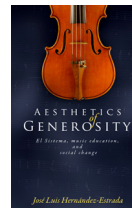


PMP teaching artist Terrence Thornhill helps students create their own compositions using the first notes they've learned.

Seymour) participated in the Teacher Track about promising practices in El Sistema-inspired teaching and learning. The Fellows distilled their copious notes down to key observations. They generously undertook the project in hopes of contributing to the ongoing growth of the field by sharing the highlights. Their report, including a reflective overview by Andrea Landin, is available

at: <http://elsistemasymposium.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Philadelphia-Symposium-Teaching-Track-Summary.docx>

Sistema Fellow (2012) José Luis Hernández-Estrada has published a valuable and inspirational book entitled **Aesthetics of Generosity: El Sistema, Music Education, and Social Change** which explores the philosophy, history, and practice he learned about during his time in Venezuela. Those who know him, know of his eloquence – which translates well to the page. To purchase copies visit www.joseherstrada.com/book for details. On the Faculty of Oklahoma City University and Wanda L. Bass School of Music, Jose Luis serves as Executive Director and Head of Learning of El Sistema Oklahoma (an initiative of St. Luke's United Methodist Church in partnership with OCU).



Also note that Tricia Tunstall's chronicle of the El Sistema movement, **Changing Lives: Gustavo Dudamel, El Sistema, and the Transformative Power of Music**, has just appeared in paperback, making it more affordable. Available at most bookstores and [online](#).

The **Ensemble Book Club** just completed its inaugural discussion, on Daniel Pink's *Drive*, online at Sistema Global. The provocative conversation about nurturing intrinsic motivation is now closed, but a collection of all postings is available at: <http://tinyurl.com/asl5qyw>

Children as Composers

by John Deak, Founder and Director of Very Young Composers, musician, composer, advocate, NY Philharmonic education faculty member

Since its inception in 1995, Very Young Composers (VYC) has asked, "What is children's music?" The answer fairly shouts back: children write music of great beauty, depth and complexity! And they can do it unedited by the adults who mentor and cheer them on. Through improvisation, group games, live instrument demos and one-on-one work, VYC helps kids develop individual styles and responses to the world around and outside them. With the help of teaching artists, who handle the mechanics of notation at first, and who treat these compositions with professional respect, children are empowered to take artistic risks and gain confidence throughout life.

For the past three years VYC, with the help of Dani Bedoni, has pursued a collaboration with El Sistema in Venezuela, working with children at the Montalban nucleo. Dani and I believe that El Sistema is uniquely suited to incorporating VYC techniques, since the care, love and teamwork that characterize the Sistema are the same values VYC needs as its own soil in order to grow properly. Not to mention the rich music that springs spontaneously from the hearts of the Venezuelan people: the children in my Montalban classes actually come dancing into the classroom, swaying to inner body rhythms. *Al!* When they try to write the rhythms they feel, sometimes square eighths and quarter notes emerge, more suited to Haydn or Mozart than to Gabriela, Maria or Luis...a delightful problem we enjoy helping them untangle.

We have learned from El Sistema that children can help each other grow. This is a novel concept in our field; usually, composing for concert instruments is hugely competitive at best and brutally discouraging at its common worst.

Another aspect of teamwork we have learned from our experience in Caracas is the effect of "La Cascada," the expectation that graduates will return to help younger students. VYC has turned this idea into a new layer of composers' involvement we call the continuum: as young composers develop, they remain part of the "family" of the NY Philharmonic.

The creative synergy between the El Sistema world and composing world share the goal of empowering children to produce creative miracles they have never thought possible.

"Children feel ownership about their own creative voices when they compose; even if it's just arranging four notes in a pattern, it's *their* pattern." – Terrence Thornhill, Teaching Artist, Paterson Music Project, Paterson, NJ