

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

From the Student's Point of View

By Rodas Hailu, YOLA a 16-year-old violinist with YOLA at EXPO Center

As a product of an El Sistema-inspired program in Los Angeles, I've noticed how my life has changed since the day I picked up the violin. In 2007, I joined the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles, which was created as a partnership between the Los Angeles Philharmonic; the Harmony Project, a non-profit organization serving low-income students with free music lessons; and the EXPO Center, which provides space for students and music instructors to have sessions. Since that day, I've developed a wonderful relationship with my instrument. I've learned how to produce tear-jerking sounds; I've learned how to demonstrate emotion while playing; and I've even developed a sense of confidence.

However, YOLA has taught me more than just how to play an instrument. My time with YOLA has given me a sense of welcome and a chance to create long-lasting relationships with students and faculty. At YOLA, I fit in easily among the crowd, something I struggle to find at school. But one student's

perspective isn't enough to fully understand how countless young people have had their lives changed because of an El Sistema-inspired program blossoming in their town. I was given the opportunity to interview six students across North America to understand what they think of their local music program, and how they've fallen in love with the beauty of providing music for all.

In Ottawa, violinist Yoshuna Chan began learning her instrument when she joined Orkidstra at the age of eleven. Yoshuna found out about the program when Orkidstra sent out letters to children in elementary schools to see who would be interested in playing an instrument. Once she joined, Yoshuna was introduced to choir and violin; although things were challenging at the beginning, she adapted to her new instrument. "When I began playing the violin, I was frustrated because I couldn't get it right. Then one day, things just clicked in and became a little bit easier," Yoshuna

said. Her five years in Orkidstra have taught her dedication and commitment to her craft, and have also given her a sense of support. "If someone asked me why I'm in the program, I'd tell them it's because I love the feeling of acceptance and community. Orkidstra gives opportunities that lead to more opportunities."

Sheila Esquivel participates in the Youth Orchestra Uptown Rita Simo in Chicago, also known as the YOURS Project. Having played the violin since 2010, Sheila understands what it feels to put one's heart and soul into a project. "This program has changed my



Author Rodas Hailu interviews Josue Chavez, a YOLA at HOLA student, for this article. Photo: Rebecca Sigel, YOLA/Los Angeles Philharmonic

life because I've never been so dedicated to something so important. I've never had the opportunity to get something so great and helpful," Sheila explained. She aspires to show the world that with practice comes success, and the people to thank for her future successes are the people at the YOURS Project. Sheila finds that she wants her fellow musicians to be successful in their music education, even if that means her stepping in and assisting

them. "While playing in the orchestra, I find it hard not to be stressed out about others who need more help with the music or don't know what to do. But I cope with it by helping them and trying to get them to a new level."

Bostonian Ben Lee joined the Conservatory Lab Charter School Program as a violinist three years ago. Although he was waitlisted the first time he applied, he was chosen in a lottery process during his second attempt. Ben is at the program every day after school, and appreciates the fact that he is given the opportunity to play an instrument, even if it is outside of school hours and isn't available to everyone. "At my school, I wouldn't do any of this. Everyone should be open to have the time and the materials to play music," Ben elucidated. His three years at the Lab School have given him the chance to meet many new faces, and to learn the skill of cooperation within this community of musicians. *(continued on next page)*

FROM THE EDITOR

We are proud this month that our eloquent lead article was written by a student in an El Sistema-inspired program, Rodas Hailu of YOLA. Rodas's descriptions of individual students in programs across the continent are powerful and particular expressions of the transformative quality of music learning in the El Sistema environment.

As I reflect on the words of Rodas and her peers, it strikes me that none of them mentions the issue of musical genre. That's interesting, because as movement leaders and teachers, we are much preoccupied by this issue; many of our liveliest conversations concern questions about the centrality of classical music. How relevant is classical music to our students? How can we bring our kids to love classical music? And if we play pop, jazz, or show tunes, are we still El Sistema?

Clearly, Rodas's interviewees are not similarly preoccupied. This could mean that the classical repertory they play hasn't made a notable impression. More likely, I think, is that they are experiencing their classical and non-classical pieces as part of a musical continuum in which genre differences are not so important. What is important is that when they play music -- different kinds of music -- in orchestral community, they are engaged, stimulated, and immersed in feeling. Increasingly, Venezuela's El Sistema provides a model for this kind of continuum, as it expands repertoire to include more folk and jazz around its classical core.

My own experience supports the idea that including other genres reinforces rather than threatens the compelling vitality of classical music. I do believe that the expressive power of classical music, and its capacity for aesthetic evocation of feeling, is uniquely wide and deep. And as a longtime piano teacher, I know that most students exposed to different kinds of music will respond to the thrill and emotional power of classical music. Beginners may ask for "The Pink Panther" and Taylor Swift songs (and they do)...but eventually, and almost inevitably, come the requests for *Fur Elise*, *Clair de Lune*, and "that Turkish song by Mozart." All great music, of any genre, is part of the "gift," as Rodas says, "that should be given to everyone."

Tricia Tunstall

"By playing together, children create a different reality for themselves." – José Antonio Abreu

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Ten-year-old Sean Wray has been a violinist for four years in the Soundscapes program in Newport News, Virginia. One of Sean's favorite memories of playing violin in Soundscapes is being concertmaster of the orchestra. "My last concert, I got to wait offstage until everyone else was on, and I thought it was pretty cool



Sean Wray warms up to perform as concertmaster at Christopher Newport University in Newport News VA. Photo: Louis Fisher

that I was the last person to come out. My parents were like, 'Where's Sean at? He must have gotten in trouble,'" Sean recounted exuberantly.

Although Sean is quite young, he embraces the underlying message of Soundscapes. "I think the thing I've learned the most is how to play music, when to play music, and where to play music; it changed the music aspect of my life. I play the violin because it's a unique instrument and because I can do many things with the violin. Soundscapes tells me how to do these things," Sean explained. Through Soundscapes, Sean has learned not only how to become a leader, but also how to be an interpreter of music; he can use what he has learned at the program and teach others how to play. "There is someone out there to teach them how to play music," Sean said. That teacher will be Sean.

Durham, North Carolina is home to KidZNotes, a program that violinist Xavier Best joined in October 2011. "Some of my earliest memories since joining the orchestra are meeting old friends and meeting new ones, my first improvisation, and my first full concert," Xavier said. This program has been life-changing for Xavier because it opened up his mind to the idea of expression through music. However, there is something else KidZNotes offers him that school or family can't: in his words, "advanced education, thanks to the brain-enhancing gift of music."

And in my hometown of Los Angeles, I met Josue Chavez, a thirteen-year-old trumpet player in YOLA at HOLA, a partner site of YOLA. Although he started playing trumpet at another program, his aunt told his mother about HOLA, and he joined immediately. The transition from Josue's old program to HOLA was particularly challenging. "I remember playing flats and sharps and solfege. At my other program, they

didn't teach us sharps and flats. They just showed me the fingerings," Josue explained. His time with YOLA at HOLA gave him the chance to perform at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, and even with Gustavo Dudamel at the Hollywood Bowl. For Josue, to perform at such famous venues with a world-renowned conductor who also happens to be a product of El Sistema has led him to become devoted to playing trumpet. "It teaches me to try your very best and never stand for less. It has taught me that music is a beautiful thing to play and hear," Josue said to me. YOLA at HOLA allows students like Josue to know how it feels to learn new things, conquer struggles, and develop abilities they never knew were in them.

Gustavo Dudamel once said, "Music is a fundamental human right." And you know what? It is. All six of these students, regardless of their ethnicity or social class, believe that music is a gift that should be given to everyone. And part of me thinks that they believe music has no price tag to it because of these programs they are in. For many of these children, playing a musical instrument would have never been an option. But because El Sistema has grown and is reaching more people around the continent, students can have the opportunity to play an instrument free of charge, and start the journey towards becoming successful musicians. Although these students have fallen in love with their instruments, they have also fallen in love with the idea of being in a program that can change everyone's lives. El Sistema-inspired programs have created a sense of appreciation, dedication, and wonder in the minds of these six students; without the support and unity from the community and the programs, many of these students would not have realized that they could exceed their potential and reach towards the stars.

News Notes

Viva!Sistema in Quebec is the only El Sistema-inspired program founded by and taught by a school music educator's association – the QMEA, the Quebec Music Educators Association. Implemented in late 2012, and taught by retired, pre-service, and in-service music teachers and string specialists, the bi-lingual programs at the Kahnawake Mohawk Territory Reserve and in the neighborhood of Point St. Charles (at St. Gabriel School) meet for two hours a day, four times a week.

The QMEA members have been active advocates to advance music education throughout Quebec since

Stories of Overcoming

by Juan Felipe Molano, Director, YOSAL, Salinas, CA; Batuta (Colombia) National Director of Orchestras

Since I was a child, I have been entranced by stories. I love the stories of my fellow Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and this year I took the reins of YOSAL, El Sistema Salinas...the land of another great storyteller, John Steinbeck. Both Garcia Marquez and Steinbeck write about heroes who overcome the hopelessness of their environments. This is the theme of the real-life stories I have collected in my 22 years in Batuta, Colombia's Sistema-inspired youth orchestra program, and now at YOSAL.

In El Sistema, music is the "magic potion" for transcending hopelessness. Here is how YOSAL student Anna writes about this: "Orchestra is my escape, my home and my passion." Her father has recently passed away, and the orchestra is a place to express her feelings and find comfort.

I think of Camilo, a Batuta student in the dangerous port city of Buenaventura (similar to the city in Garcia Marquez's fictional land of "Macondo") who faced the same catastrophe of losing his father. He wrote, "All I wanted was to join the illegal armed group – or to end my own life. But one day I was surprised to hear the Currulao folk music I love, played not by a traditional folk ensemble but by a symphony orchestra. I joined Batuta. Since then I realized I can change my behavior...Now my violin playing makes my friends, family, and the Buenaventura port proud of me. I dream of being Concertmaster of the National Symphony."

Kids in the U.S. and Colombia confront similar social challenges. What El Sistema-inspired programs offer is not just musical training but the possibility of becoming part of a healthy and prosperous "gang" where values are the basis of family.

Those values of teamwork, discipline, rigor, confidence, and flexibility are learned through hours of rehearsing together. As Steinbeck emphasized in his work, the existence of any paradise is conditioned upon the necessity of people depending on one another.

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"If it's 'Spring', it'll make me happy. But if it's something like Mahler, it will make me a little sad."
– Zhiarah Griffin, age 8, student at MYCincinnati

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1939, and struggle against limited school budgets, timetable challenges, and teacher allocation, trying to bring strong music education to all children. Their proactive launch of Viva!Sistema enables them to provide well for students in these programs, serving to inspire by example. Contact: qmea.aemq@gmail.com

The **Sistema Global Literature Review** process, our field's first research project, is underway, led by an international team of researchers. Their analysis will provide a solid research foundation of what information the El Sistema-inspired field outside of Venezuela has and doesn't have, preparing us for stronger learning as a field. We urge all programs to send their basic program information; and if you have evaluation data or instruments or aspirations, please send any/all to Andrea.Creech@ioe.ac.uk. Don't delay; the research is underway. Even if you don't have rich evaluation data, send basic program information.

Chicago's North Park University has teamed up with The People's Music School to offer two new programs:

1) A **tuition-free, four year scholarship** for applicants who grew up in El Sistema or El Sistema-inspired programs. The Rita Simo Scholarship (named for the founder of People's Music School) is given to an undergraduate candidate who is a music major – one of the stipulations is that the recipient spend the last three years of his or her education working within The People's Music School Youth Orchestras, known as the YOURS Project.

2) The North Park University School of Music is offering an eight-credit **Certificate in Music for Social Change**. The curriculum focuses on violin, viola, cello and bass, and includes El Sistema history, string pedagogy, and youth orchestra techniques, as well as three semesters of Internship in an El Sistema-inspired setting. For more information about the Certificate or scholarship programs, contact Dr. Rebecca Ryan, at NPU School of Music: 773/244-5623 or rryan@northpark.edu

The University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) launches a new program in Fall 2013. Collaborating with the Baltimore Symphony and its El Sistema-inspired program, OrchKids, the **Certificate in Music Entrepreneurship** includes an immersion in the management and teachings of OrchKids, with internships. Applications are still being accepted. For more information: <http://www.umbc.edu/music/programs/entrepreneurship.php> or contact KristinJurkscheit@umbc.edu

The **Ensemble Book Club** springs back into action; you only have to read an **essay** to join the online conversation **about the relationship between El Sistema-inspired programs and the larger ecosystem of music education and schools**. Dalouge Smith's lead article in the May issue of The Ensemble sparked this Book Club meeting, hosted by Sistema Global. Three leaders kick off the Club meeting with a lively recorded conversation – hear Dalouge Smith of San Diego Youth Symphony, Monika Vischer of El Sistema Colorado, and Dan Trahey of OrchKids for 18 minutes: <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/46123703/BookclubPreview.mp3> Then join the online conversation – check in often and add your thoughts. The essay we are all reading: <http://ericbooth.net/?p=454>. The address to join The Book Club: <http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Ensemble-Book-Club-4814362/about>

Resources

The fourth group of ten Sistema Fellows just graduated from their New England Conservatory program. As with previous groups, this cohort wanted to "give something back" to the field, for the help so many provided them. Four Fellows pulled together their learning about assessment and evaluation in the El Sistema-inspired movement to answer the question: **What do we really value, and how do we help tell our story?** The report by Andrea Landin, Carlos Roldan, Elaine Sandoval, and Sara Zanussi proposes a series of sequential steps for carrying out documentation as the first step to evaluation and assessment. **Say Yes to Assess: An Exploration in El Sistema-Inspired Assessment Practice** is available through their blog, with a link at the bottom: <http://sistemafellows.typepad.com/my-blog/2013/05/an-exploration-in-el-sistema-inspired-assessment-practice.html>

Sistema Sweden has completed a nine-minute film centered around an **interview with Gustavo Dudamel**. He is eloquent in his native language, with English subtitles; the film may be useful for advocacy purposes. Available at: <http://youtu.be/UWQtwBB76c4>

The Fender Music Foundation provides lightly used instruments for eligible nonprofit music instruction programs. The Foundation mostly provides guitars but sometimes has string, woodwind, brass, percussion and keyboard instruments available. <http://www.fendermusicfoundation.org/grants/grants-info>

What Growth Looks Like

by Rebecca Levi, El Sistema Program Director, Conservatory Lab Charter School, Boston MA

At the beginning, the transformation was palpable. Each bow hold, note, and cut-off felt like a revolution. We were delighted the day our first graders stopped putting their bows up their noses. Our first December concert felt like the end of an odyssey: we had finally arrived at Orchestra Land.

Of course, that was when the real work began. We could no longer ride the wave of novelty; we had to create a permanent, portable culture that would involve everyone and could exist anywhere. Our most advanced ensemble, which at the time could only play "Ode to Joy," became our ambassadors, performing frequently. Their focus on becoming better musicians grew fierce, and after every concert, they walked a little bit taller. Now, the Dudamel Orchestra sight-reads Fauré and practices during recess for chamber music gigs. After a recent performance, one of our trumpet players, who used to spend rehearsals crying with his head in his shirt, walked up to a former governor with a greeting and an outstretched hand. He then offered the governor a go on his trumpet.

At the same time, our 4-year-olds worked hard to earn egg shakers, castanets and eventually papier-mâché instruments. Now, at 6 years old, they are an exceptionally serious string ensemble working on slurs, extensions, and Mahler excerpts.

Focus, responsibility and pride unquestionably improve our students' musicianship, and vice versa, but they have also crept into home life. Many students provide the entertainment at family parties, and parents who once used TV as leverage now hold orchestra concerts over their children's heads when they misbehave.

At our school, we say "we are crew, not passengers," meaning we are cooperative, responsible, perseverant, reflective and empathetic. Pursuing true empathy is difficult, but it is the most important piece of our portable culture. While organized peer mentoring helps, the best moments often occur without adult intervention. Watch our Dudamel Orchestra walk off to a gig: 3rd graders link arms with 6th graders, wind players carry their friends' basses and cellos. The culture is theirs to carry with them wherever they go.

**"Tell U.S. El Sistema students that they aren't just learning music. They are learning life – how to live their lives."
– Cellist in the Regional Orchestra of the State of Lara, Barquisimeto, Venezuela**