

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

International Sistema Teacher's Conference

By Graciela Briceno, Founder, Josiah Quincy Orchestra Program, Boston MA

"Different countries, same struggles." While not listed as an official theme of the [2014 Sistema Teachers Conference](#) in Scotland, this was one of the primary takeaways. The opportunity to network with colleagues from around the world taught us that while we each tend to marinate in our own programs, seldom with time to come up for air, the challenges we face are in fact universal, from establishing disciplinary methods to working with difficult partner sites or fundraising. Every Sistema program, regardless of size or structure, has something to share, and we must value and seek out these collective experiences.

Two themes of the conference have been particularly striking. One is a focus on how to help young people "respond instead of react." We need to help children understand the difference between reacting instinctively to a problem and taking time to think through a response. To help children control episodes of aggression, we can help them think about their triggers – internal and external – and learn to manage their anger based on what those triggers are.

Teachers talked about using "P.A.C.E.," an acronym for words that describe how we should talk to students about meltdowns: Playful, Accepting, Empathetic, and Curious. The foundation of this technique is Acceptance, or a child's need to feel safe. It is always key to explain to a child the reason for a behavior rule. Next, discussions regarding negative behavior should use Playful and Empathetic language, instead of anger and annoyance. Finally, teachers should express Curiosity. Instead of asking, "Why did you throw your violin?" ask, "I'm wondering why you threw your violin down."

A second strong theme at the conference was the importance of creating community. Never have I seen "community" so valued as I did in Sistema Scotland. Big Noise implements a number of programs that bring the local neighborhood together, showing that El Sistema can and should reach far beyond the children we teach. One such program is "Take a Musician Home for Tea," something any teacher can implement with his students. Conference participants have had the privilege of attending some of these visits. The teacher brings his instrument, an instrument for the student, some sheet music, a small gift such as cookies or

flowers, and an open mind. No judgments are made, no matter what the home situation may be. In the 45 minutes I spent with a Big Noise teacher, student, and family, we sight-read simple pieces (performing for the parents with the child), learned about the child's school interests, chatted with the family about Scottish traditions, and enjoyed some tea and biscuits.



Sistema Scotland's Music Director Francis Cummings (center left), Board Chair Richard Holloway (center) and Board Member news reader Sally Magnusson (center right) with the 150 participants from 28 nations. Photo: Marc Marnie

Big Noise has also organized the Big Noise Adult Orchestra for family members of children in the program, teachers, and other community members who want the opportunity to play an instrument within an ensemble. This has become a very special part of the Big Noise family – once again, bringing together the entire community being served.

People from Sistema Sweden described a wonderful community event they have created, called Vänstay. Every Wednesday at 5 PM, all the children and families across Sistema Sweden are invited to come together for an hour to eat, make music, and celebrate being one large musical community. The Sistema Sweden team emphasized that these gatherings need not be complicated or stressful – they should be simple and fun, with families bringing different dishes to share, or just coming together to do some singing and dancing. Sometimes guest musicians will be invited to perform, or an open mic event will be announced, inviting anyone to perform.

What is most valuable about these community activities is that they allow for inclusivity, another major focus of the conference. All families are invited, and all children, regardless of physical, behavioral, or emotional disabilities, are welcome to participate. In general, we should strive to value community as much as we value our work with each of our students. We should make a greater effort to reach out to our colleagues around the world, both to gain ideas from them that will improve our own programs, and to have a sense of camaraderie when the going gets tough. We are all in this together, with the same passion to serve children through music.

To tell us more or to discuss the Conference with those who were there, go to: <http://tinyurl.com/p7k8px5>

Also, to visit a Conference blog by Elizabeth Moulthrop and Shanna Lin of the Paterson Music Project, go to: <http://patersonmusicproject.blogspot.com/>

FROM THE EDITOR

"Peer to peer learning," that staple of every El Sistema Fundamentals list and powerful ambient energy in every El Sistema learning environment, is not just for kids. Teachers who work together or in similar endeavors can be uniquely effective teachers for and learners from one another.

This issue of *The Ensemble* arrives just as Sistema colleagues around the world are heading home from a particularly immersive peer-to-peer learning experience: the International Sistema Teachers' Conference hosted by Sistema Scotland. The conference was described as "shaped for teachers by teachers," and I can't imagine such a project unfolding in a more appropriate place; Sistema Scotland's "Big Noise" program is seasoned in peer-to-peer learning. During its early stages, founder/director Nicola Killean and her staff eagerly sought counsel from Venezuelan Sistema leaders, and in recent years they have been generous in turn, lending their insights to beginning programs around the world.

Our great model for collegial generosity, of course, is El Sistema Venezuela, where teachers' zeal to learn from one another propels them across cities, regions and even the country on a regular basis to congregate, exchange experiences, and provide mutual infusions of support. The exceptional camaraderie among Sistema teachers in Venezuela is a key source of their exceptional stamina.

Even in El Sistema's most academic institution, the Simon Bolivar Conservatory, the spirit of camaraderie trumps the competitive energy that tends to arise in such places. Valdemar Rodriguez has spoken of the conscious decision by Conservatory teachers to minimize competitiveness about methods. "In that way," he says, "we grow as people. And our students play more beautifully."

I think that teachers and staff people in the North American Sistema movement are actually hungry for peer learning – witness the increasing number of regional seminarios that are flourishing as a result of informal partnerships between programs. Almost always, the impulse to create a seminario stems from teachers' desires to come together for peer learning, as well as to bring their students together for the same purpose. But sometimes the logistical challenges of making it work for the kids are so great that teachers aren't able to make it work equally well for themselves.

It's a challenge worth attending to. No one can help a Sistema teacher quite as much, or in quite the same way, as another Sistema teacher.

Tricia Tunstall

"Teach children the beauty of music and music will teach them the beauty of life." – José Antonio Abreu

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News Notes

An extraordinary free resource, [The Power of Music: P-5 Teaching Inspired by El Sistema](#), has just been released. It is a multimedia professional development course for music educators available on DVD and online, designed to help teachers understand the El Sistema philosophy, infuse its underlying principles into their practice, and implement Sistema-inspired strategies with their students. Eight half-hour videos and over 40 short clips of teaching artists at work explore a variety of Sistema-inspired programs and practices in diverse communities across the U.S. Accompanying the videos in eight course units are many online resources, including interactive tools, a facilitator's guide, and strategies aligned with the national standards. The Longy School of Music of Bard College served as institutional content partner on the series, working with producer Thirteen Productions LLC in association with WNET New York Public Media. Find it at: <http://www.learner.org/workshops/k5music> Join an online discussion of this new resource on Sistema Global at: <http://tinyurl.com/owf2rac>

The first feature film documentary of Sistema in the U.S. premiered at the Philadelphia Film Festival in late October. [Crescendo! The Power of Music](#) is directed by Jamie Bernstein and Elizabeth Kling. It focuses on students in [Play On Philly!](#) and the [Harmony Program](#) in New York. We will share more information as the film sets its national rollout.

[SistemaGlobal.Org](#) has published [the first directory of El Sistema-inspired program websites from around the world](#), designed to be a simple, self-maintaining contact point for research, media, leaders and funders. Marielvis Marquez (data collector) and James Allen (webmaster) did the groundwork to launch impressively from its start. Every program around the world with a website or Facebook page is urged to input their information – make sure *your* program is listed. <http://sistemaglobal.org/el-sistema-global-program-directory/>

[Shift: Englewood](#) is a new program launched in Chicago's Englewood area in October 2014 by Sistema Fellows Ayriole Frost, now Executive Director, and Albert Oppenheimer. Housed in Wentworth

Elementary School, the afterschool program runs for nine hours a week, and started with 30 children, studying the instruments that comprise an orchestra, musicianship, choir, composition and improvisation.



Ayriole Frost teaches the sign language to "Yonder Come Day" in choir rehearsal. Photo: Fred Bledsoe

The program seeks to highlight good news about and make good news for the community, which seems to get only bad press.

Contact: ayriole.frost@shiftyouth.org (872) 529-1743

Resources

The [Harry Chapin Foundation](#) funds U.S. programs in Arts-in-Education Programs and other approaches to educating young people. Grant sizes range from a few hundred dollars to the maximum of \$10,000. Applications are accepted throughout the year. http://www.harrychapinfoundation.org/focus_focusandguidelines.php

A study from Nina Krauss at Northwestern University shows that [even a few years of music study during one's youth still shows up as a cognitive advantage](#) forty years later in faster brain processing of language. <http://tinyurl.com/phy4ohz>

A new study by Michigan State University (MSU) professor Rex LaMore finds [a strong correlation between study of the arts and getting patents](#) in scientific, technological, engineering, or mathematical (STEM) arenas. Music seems to be especially important; three times the percentage of STEM MSU Honors graduates had musical training than do Americans in general, on average. <http://tinyurl.com/k7w8y7v>

The [Afterschool Alliance](#) has just published a new research report that shows an increase in student participation and demand for more opportunities. <http://tinyurl.com/m6rv4fh>

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Caracas & Greenland

by Ron Davis Álvarez, *Fundamusical Simón Bolívar, Institutional Development & International Affairs*; translation by Reynaldo Trombetta

Where I come from, we are multicolored birds and waterfalls, canoes in great rivers and prickly pears in the desert. We are the captivating chaos of dawn in Caracas, with stairways winding up the barrios and graffiti on the walls, and we are farms of rum and sugar cane. We are harp and cuatro and maracas, the Joropo of the plains, the drums of San Juan.

We are El Sistema. We are that smile that enriches the soul and spirit, and we begin with learning, discipline, and flexibility. El Sistema in Venezuela is characterized by the versatility of its structure and the diversity of its repertoire – always with a high level of technical and interpretive execution.

For nearly forty years, our núcleos have developed their musical initiation processes in different ways. Leaders and teachers creatively apply existing music practices and develop new ones, adapting to particular needs. This allows them to honor and enrich the local cultural traditions of each núcleo.

At the same time, they maintain the same overall mission, the same musical vision of social progress. Pedagogy everywhere is grounded in the struggle for excellence, and based on the sequential repertoire. We rely on a spiral model of learning: the students of each teacher pass along their knowledge to many others, thus multiplying the learning opportunities. This collective musical practice opens up a range of opportunities, especially for children and youth from the most vulnerable social levels.

I have worked in many countries, but one of my greatest experiences has been at the [Uummannaq Children's Home](#) in northern Greenland. So many things are different there: the way bread is made, the way people dance, the views from the windows.

But differences matter less when we remember that the philosophy and the vision first imagined by Maestro Abreu has the same meaning, everywhere in the world. Everywhere, we are showing children they can have a different life, in which they can sleep soundly, dream, and wake knowing they have something to fight for.

We are all fighting for the social rescue of children. How we teach through music will be different, in different places. But if we allow the music to sound among smiles, the teaching always fills the children with hope. My secret, whenever I teach in another country: I smile, and I become another student.

To read a longer or Spanish version of this article, go to: <http://tinyurl.com/kr7ks3h>

"This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before." – Leonard Bernstein