

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

## Venezuelan Impressions & U.S. Aspirations

By three current *Sistema Fellows* (at New England Conservatory) after their recent visit

### STUDENTS AS TEACHERS

By Aryiole Frost

Daniel did something most U.S. musicians would never imagine: he left a coveted position playing violin in the Simón Bolívar Symphony to teach violin lessons in a poor neighborhood near Barquisimeto. Why? In Venezuela, the pinnacle of one's career as an artist is to teach, and this idea is instilled in students from a young age.

I believe El Sistema inspired programs in the U.S. can do and are doing this as well.

It is enfranchising when adults encourage students to teach and learn from each other. In the Andean

town of Ejido, a few students were charged with giving me a cuatro lesson. They taught technique like professionals, and they not only taught me, but they were also helping each other to learn.

It can be scary to give up control of our classrooms, but giving students responsibility is an essential part of El Sistema. We can make teaching opportunities as routine as scales and posture. We can use teaching as a reward to equate teaching with success. When the student becomes the teacher, this makes teaching integral to the experience of being an artist.

### EXEMPLARY CHORUS PRACTICES

By Millie Downs

The Fellows had the privilege of meeting inspiring young musicians in Venezuela who challenge the traditional role of the choral singer. We saw how El Sistema supports young choral singers to be teachers who interact with their community. We were struck by several aspects of this practice. First, choral directors tend to have an informal teaching style, giving students the responsibility of teaching as soon as they are able. We saw one choir director training apprentices even as he rehearsed.

Second, we saw students team-teach, with roles including director, vocal coach, accompanist and

teaching assistant. Teams are often made up of students from the same advanced ensemble, in which they form close supporting relationships.

Third, the sequential curriculum they teach is unified among the choirs. The student teachers can feel confident about leading, since they have all learned the same repertoire. And since the extensive warm-up routines feature similar activities, members of the

choir can successfully lead warm-ups.

We have much to learn from these examples. They empower students to be peer leaders and effective role models, and redefine the role of choral singers in the community.



*The 2013-14 Sistema Fellows in Caracas: Aryiole, Millie and Aubree are the first, fourth and fifth from left, respectively.*

### GENEROSITY IN COLLABORATION

by Aubree Weiley

For three days this past November, choral teachers from the state of Lara came together to workshop new pieces, explore pedagogic styles, and share in the successes and challenges of everyday teaching.

The breadth of experiences these educators shared, and the honesty of their discussion, were electrifying. As they shared their stories with one another, it was clear they were forming common bonds, uniting as a team working towards attainable, mutual goals. "It starts with the eyes," counseled Maria Guinand, the country's most esteemed choral conductor.

There was joy in the sharing, and a sense of generosity of experience. Stories ranging from Claudia's frustrations with student behavior to Gustavo's triumphs in performance were met with empathy and laughter. Ego was left at the door, and filling its place was humility and openness. I watched as the most seasoned professionals took time to work with new recruits, and I wondered how we might better emulate this experience, this generosity, back home -- even though our time and resources may be spread thin. Through commitment to developing engaging and accessible partnerships, we may better explore the joy found in generosity and the powerful possibilities of alliance.

### FROM THE EDITOR

Bolivia Bottome met José Antonio Abreu when she was fifteen years old. At a political campaign event, she heard the young government official lead a workshop on oratorical skills. "I had never in my life heard anyone speak like José Antonio," she told me once, smiling in awareness of just how many people have uttered that precise sentence. As a student at the University of Caracas, she reencountered him at social gatherings where he was the dazzling fellow at the piano. "He could play anything you asked him to, absolutely anything!"

In 1981, after she had graduated with a psychology degree and began raising a family, Bolivia happened to meet Abreu on the street, and he asked her to come work with his youth orchestra program. She was surprised and hesitant. "I thought, what could I possibly do for El Sistema? I didn't feel qualified. I loved music, but I wasn't a musician."

As I join Sistema colleagues in Venezuela and across the world in mourning Bolivia's death on January 21st, I think often about this particular part of her remarkable story. Bolivia was a superb linguist, a cultivated intellect, and a lady of surpassing elegance. But she wasn't a musician. Those of us who were trained as musicians can forget what a formidable and intimidating club we can seem to be, to those who weren't. It took courage and a leap of faith on Bolivia's part to accept Maestro Abreu's request, and to dedicate her life to an artistic world in which she had little expertise.

Bolivia's brave choice was the good fortune of El Sistema. She planned, launched and directed the Sistema's first institute for higher music education. She hosted a long-running series of television programs about classical music and musicians. She represented El Sistema in a diplomatic capacity in countries across the world. And she translated the words of Maestro Abreu with precision and grace.

Maestro Abreu has always understood the fundamental role non-musicians can play in the development of El Sistema; often, as with Bolivia, he has understood this better than the non-musicians themselves. Let us remember that embracing the distinct talents and vision of non-musicians is essential to the flourishing of El Sistema.

And let us celebrate the bright spirit of Bolivia Bottome. Describing the series of daunting challenges she took on during her decades of work with El Sistema, she recalled that her response has always been the same. "I have never said no," she said.

*Tricia Tunstall*

**"We in Venezuela are moved by what we find in North American Sistema programs: your openness, your eagerness to learn. We feel our family has grown. We have much to learn from you." - Bolivia Bottome**

## News Notes

The [Children's Orchestra of D.C.](#) (CODC) launched in September with 22 students from Garrison Elementary School. Held after school every weekday for 2.5 hours, the program includes orchestra rehearsal, choir practice, homework assistance, and snack time – with a focus on keeping kids in school. After just four weeks, the ensemble performed their first concert, a joint performance with the ensemble-in-residence, [LeDroit Chamber Players](#) – an unusual partnership. The LCP brings collaborative concerts to D.C. neighborhoods, showcasing Washington D.C.'s local talent to bring out the passion and excitement in classical chamber music. The musicians are dedicated performers from the National Symphony Orchestra, Washington National Opera, United States Military Ensembles and other prestigious institutions; all are committed to the idea that every musical event is an opportunity to engage with the community through creative partnerships and virtuosic performances. For more information about the CODC, contract Program Director Graciela Briceno: [corchdc@gmail.com](mailto:corchdc@gmail.com)

Internationally-recognized research and evaluation firm, [WolfBrown](#), and the [Longy School of Music of Bard College](#), have jointly received a two-year grant from the Buck Family Foundation to conduct a [multi-site evaluation of U.S. Sistema programs, studying the impacts of these programs on the children they serve](#). The work will explore common approaches to data collection, as well as measures unique to specific programs. Currently in the site selection process, [WolfBrown and Longy seek responses from programs interested in participating](#) in the study. The timeline is as follows:

- ❖ February 20th: 9am-1pm Pre-Symposium Workshop attached to the 2014 "Take a Stand Symposium" in LA.
- ❖ Feb-May 2014: Preparation
- ❖ Sept 2014 – June 2015: Year One Study
- ❖ Sept 2015 – June 2016: Year Two Study

Please contact Dr. Judy Bose at [Judith.Hill.Bose@longy.edu](mailto:Judith.Hill.Bose@longy.edu) by [February 10th](#) to express interest and receive more information.



*After 3 months of learning in CODC, Jennifer helps first-week Trevon with D string fingering. The last 20 minutes of every rehearsal are devoted to peer teaching. Photo: Graciela Briceno*

## Resources

Listen to an informative [fifty-minute radio podcast](#) of the WBUR program "Open Source" with host Christopher Lyden focusing on the El Sistema program at Boston's Conservatory Lab Charter School, with Artist-in-Residence Kathleen Jara, researcher Larry Scripp, and Howard Gardner. [http://www.radioopensource.org/?powerpress\\_pinw=19328-podcast](http://www.radioopensource.org/?powerpress_pinw=19328-podcast)

Children in low SES (socio-economic status) communities consistently show evidence of an [achievement gap and an IQ gap](#) in their early years, as compared to their more affluent SES peers. New research shows that two years of an intensive early intervention program (like El Sistema) can advance the low-SES children so much that [the gap dramatically closes](#), and doesn't widen nearly as much through the rest of schooling. How early do our El Sistema-inspired programs start? – enough to make this critical difference? <http://jhr.uwpress.org/content/48/4/945.abstract>

The consulting group EmcArts held an unprecedented [National Innovation Summit for Arts and Culture](#) in Denver in October 2013, with a focus on transforming the way arts organizations run and connect to local communities. (The Twitter conversation during the Summit was the top "trending" topic, meaning most active, in the world on two afternoons). The Summit produced two documents that may be of interest for El Sistema-inspired leaders. Watch a series of short speeches by various leaders (<http://artsfwd.org/watch-summit-talks>) and a summary of the key principles that guide "adaptive change": <http://artsfwd.org/fueling-adaptive-capacity-mosaic-of-learning-from-summit>. Among the short talks, the El Sistema community might be particularly interested in the [three short speeches and ensuing discussion in the Citizenship and the Arts](#) section.

## Subscription Information

To ADD or DELETE names in the free subscription list for The Ensemble, send an email to: [TheEnsembleNL@gmail.com](mailto:TheEnsembleNL@gmail.com)

Back issues of The Ensemble are always available at: [http://www.changingliveselsistema.com/?page\\_id=7](http://www.changingliveselsistema.com/?page_id=7)

## A Mass Commitment

*By Erik Holmgren, Program Officer, Massachusetts Cultural Council*

"What are the key differences between El Sistema in Venezuela and in the U.S.?" This question appeared on the application for the Sistema Fellowship, and the most common answer was government funding. But I came to believe something different. Maestro Abreu built an entire musical culture in the absence of a deeply established one. In the U.S., we already have a rich community of musical organizations that are built for different purposes. Therefore, I think the fundamental difference is that our task in the U.S. is finding ways to align with that existing community. Also, of course, direct government funding hasn't existed for us. Until now.

The Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state arts agency that grants over \$9 million each year, has taken a bold and essential step to develop a support system for El Sistema-inspired work throughout the state. Through a new initiative, the MCC is now investigating a new set of questions for Sistema in the U.S: What contributions can a statewide ecosystem of music and learning bring to this work? How can a grant program provide needed financial support and be a vehicle for sustainability?

Over the past three months, the MCC has spoken with more than 50 organizations to build a pipeline of pilot programs and better understand how state government can effectively support programs and children. We've discovered a few unexpected things. First, for every self-identified El Sistema-inspired program, there are about two other programs doing remarkably similar work, some of whom have been at it for two or more generations of children.

Second, most of the musical ecosystem lacks a fundamental understanding of what El Sistema is. Finally, there is tremendous overlap and opportunity for alignment.

This spring, organizations throughout the state, from public schools to orchestras, will come together for the first time to understand how they might collaborate for the benefit of culturally underserved children. The MCC and its partners will broaden the conversation around El Sistema by working to align pieces of the musical ecosystem toward the shared goal of helping young people become excellent artists and civically engaged members of their communities.

**"A great teacher is one who can light a spark in you, the spark that sets you on fire with enthusiasm for music or whatever you happen to be studying." – Leonard Bernstein**