

## Sistema Leaders on Addressing Funders

By Jack Schwimmer, MA/MBA Arts Management Student, Southern Methodist University

El Sistema-inspired organizations can take advantage of current funding trends through the careful use of measurable data in their grant-writing narratives. In interviews exploring funder priorities and grant-writing strategies, leaders and fundraisers of various Sistema-inspired USA organizations discussed funders' general desire for evidence that their grantees are making a measurable difference in their communities.

First, interviewees concurred that funders increasingly emphasize the necessity for programs to track concrete outcomes of their work. Arts organizations often struggle with the idea of measurability, and several interviewees representing smaller organizations expressed concern about dedicating sufficient resources to evaluation until their organizations have grown. However, all suggested that Sistema organizations are in fact well-suited to provide data that can serve to both attract funders and improve program effectiveness.

Second, although many U.S. Sistema organizations are too new to have substantial longitudinal data on their own programs, some interviewees said they are able to reference relevant statistics of other Sistema organizations in their funding applications. Some of the more established Sistema programs in the U.S. and Canada, as well as Sistema programs in Scotland and England, have produced positive measurable results that can usefully

be cited in applications. In addition, says Seth Truby, director of Oregon BRAVO Youth Orchestras, it's possible to draw on the Venezuelan model to show the potential impact of music education. "Even though we're just scratching the surface of what's possible," Truby says, "we are fortunate to be aligned with a movement that has such wide recognition."

Sistema-inspired organizations can also reference the many non-Sistema-specific studies on the benefits of arts education. Dalouge Smith, President and CEO of the Community Opus Project and San Diego Youth Symphony, says, "There's plenty of information out there, from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Arts Education Partnership to state enrollment data, and much more." Such studies lend further credibility to grant proposals for Sistema-inspired work.

Third, all organizations, regardless of size, can implement their own minimal evaluation that appeals to funders, particularly quantitative measurements of qualitative categories. For example, an organization

can distribute student surveys with questions such as "Has this program helped you learn how to work better with other students?" Results from such a survey can be used in an application, i.e.: "97% of students said that the program has helped them improve teamwork skills." This kind of research is low-cost but effective for young organizations beginning to track and report data, since it touches on the values that matter most to both Sistema organizations and many funders.

Stanford Thompson, founder of Play On, Philly! calls these values – such as focus, memory, attention, and grit – "executive functioning skills," and says that his organization spends most of its data collection capacity on measuring them. "Sistema kids practice these skills every day," Thompson says. "Some side effects are that attendance improves, grades go up, the kids get in less trouble." Since Sistema programs affect such side effects only indirectly, it's the executive functioning skills that

programs should concentrate on measuring. Says Dantes Rameau of the Atlanta Music Project, "There are way too many factors that determine test scores and academic success to be able to say with any credibility that my program is what's raising those. But what I can prove is that daily music instruction teaches students to pay attention for longer, which means they can do homework for longer, which probably

eventually raises those scores and grades. So let's focus on what we know music does – it molds a strong and resilient character, which in turn probably helps in other areas."

Finally, Conover Hunt, a consultant with Soundscapes in Newport News, VA, has found it useful to draw on community resources to help with data collection. "We rely on data made available through our partnership with the local public school system – testing scores, attendance, financial issues, etc.," she says, "and use it to track students' progress in our program."

All interviewees agreed that for Sistema organizations to thrive programmatically and financially, they must embrace the field's emphasis on data tracking. Sistema programs are well positioned to align available data with program effectiveness. And hard numbers, while they are clearly not the whole story, can help tell the story of El Sistema's powerful impact on personal transformation and social change.



"An Atlanta Music Project violinist searches a world map during homework time at the Gilbert House." Photo: Carlton Mackey.

## FROM THE EDITOR

In the town of Sfantu Gheorghe, deep in the Transylvanian mountains of Romania, children were singing last week. "I've got music in my soul!" they sang. And: "Henehene ko 'aka..." (it's Hawaiian, about the contagious laughter of friendship). And: "Al shlosha d'varim..." (Hebrew, about justice and peace).

The children of El Sistema Romania – which is actually called ((superar)); the name of the pan-national association of Sistema-inspired programs in Central and Eastern Europe is always punctuated with those sound-wave parentheses – sing in many languages. They sing with vigorous gestures and evident pleasure in the sounds, even if not quite perfect comprehension of the meaning of the words.

When I visited ((superar)) Romania in the course of a recent tour of European Sistema programs, I asked why the children don't sing much in their own language. Director Elana Andrews told me, "Some of the children in this region speak Romanian; others speak Hungarian; others are Romany. There have been literally centuries of hostility between these ethnic groups." The children have learned to distrust those who speak the language of the "other." To help them learn mutual trust, she said, it's best to develop new, shared languages of song.

Two days later, I was in the mountains of Bosnia visiting Srebrenica, the site of the 1995 genocide of Bosnian Muslims by Serbian military and paramilitary forces, when 10,000 people died in two days. In this town, in the desolate schoolroom that is the site of ((superar)) Bosnia, we heard Bosnian Muslim children singing side by side with the children of Bosnian Serbs. Unimaginable. But in fact that is what they were singing: "Imagine all the people..."

Here, too, I was told that the children's ethnic languages are avoided. Here, too, they sing "Hene hene ko 'aka". And they sing "Un poquito le-lo-la," even adding some timid hand gestures.

Observing programs in Central Europe, I didn't encounter vastnesses of ethnic hostility so great that the children's very languages were tripwires for trouble. But in every city, I did hear children as young as five singing in seven or eight or ten languages. It was a powerful reminder that Sistema choruses can literally expand children's communicative universes, helping them come to know and love the manifold musics of the languages of the world.

Tricia Tunstall

"Let us reveal to our children the beauty of music and music shall reveal to our children the beauty of life." – José Antonio Abreu

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

## News Notes

The **Tocando Music Project** in El Paso, TX begins its second year in one of the oldest immigrant communities in the nation, El Segundo Barrio. Tocando will now reach 60 students (up from 35 students in 2013-14) at Hart Elementary School, located across the street from the El Paso, TX – Juarez, Mexico border. The program hosts an intensive week-long summer camp in July, in partnership with the El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestras, and will introduce winds and brass to twelve 4th & 5th graders next year. In May, at the first annual benefit concert, the Tocando Orchestra performed with the youth Mariachi group “Mariachi Sangre de Mi Tierra” and Ballet Folklorico dancers. Contact: [www.tocandomusicproject.org](http://www.tocandomusicproject.org) or Karen Peters, [kpeters@epsyos.org](mailto:kpeters@epsyos.org)

The **National Alliance of El Sistema Inspired Programs** announces a new **web-center** which will serve as a clearinghouse for resources and a think tank for the U.S. movement. Visitors will notice links to Sistema Global, Rep + Resource (now hosted by Sistema Global), and other key resources, as well as new complementary networking tools such as a dedicated Sistema video portal, a calendar for regional, national, and international events, and improved program map and job bank features. Grassroots content-sharing, interaction, and story sharing from the trenches are encouraged to provide inspiration and support. Watch for notice of the launch in early July!

The **Ensemble Book Club** invites you to join colleagues in reading and discussing Paul Tough’s 2009 bestseller **How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character**. The book focuses on the importance of non-cognitive skills, such as executive functions, and character qualities, such as perseverance, optimism, and self-control, for children living in poverty, which are especially relevant to El Sistema programs worldwide. Start reading in July, and in August Sistema Fellow Graciela Briceno will facilitate discussion threads on Sistema Global about ways that the book’s research and insights apply directly to our work within entrenched cycles of poverty. Readers will learn what it takes for children in poverty to succeed well in life, and can discuss in detail what this means for practice in Sistema programs. Paul Tough will provide a video interview to Book Club participants.



*Tocando Orchestra plays with a high school Mariachi group “Mariachi Sangre de Mi Tierra” and a Ballet Folklorico dancer. Photo: Pam Segura, El Paso Symphony*

## Resources

The **Charles Lafitte Foundation** supports organizations that help people help themselves and others around them to lead healthy and enriched lives. Their grant categories: education programs, children’s advocacy programs, arts programs, or medical research and initiatives. <http://charleslafitte.org/grants/overview>

No wonder Sistema students do better in school. University of Warwick (in the U.K.) researchers report that that being happy can make people 12% more productive. “The key lesson from our research is that more happiness will not result in more distraction,” says primary researcher Eugenio Proto. <http://tinyurl.com/qz23vp9>

LinkedIn now offers a new (not free but inexpensive) tool to help nonprofits recruit qualified volunteers. At the **Volunteer Marketplace**, nonprofits can post volunteer opportunities and LinkedIn members can search for volunteer opportunities in their local communities. The service is offered at a discounted rate of 90% off LinkedIn’s standard rate for job postings, thus \$19.50 for a 30-day volunteer posting. To begin, a nonprofit must first set up a LinkedIn Company Page and then visit **LinkedIn for Nonprofits** to post volunteer opportunities.

**Digital badges.** Do you know what they are? Might they become a useful/fun feature for your El Sistema-inspired programs? Learn more: <http://tinyurl.com/oa2xz5n>

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## Maslow Upside Down

by *Camille Kolles, nonprofit executive, social entrepreneur, musician; Chair of the Website Vision and Implementation Committee, National Alliance of El Sistema Inspired Programs/El Sistema USA*

“Some of these kids don’t have a bed to sleep on but they have a violin to play.” Since my first encounter with El Sistema, when my professional adult choir from Minnesota was riveted by the astonishing quality of a youth orchestra in Caracas, I have been pondering what Abraham Maslow, the theorist behind “self-actualization” and the famous **Hierarchy of Needs pyramid model**, would think about El Sistema. Maslow’s model, developed in the 1940’s-50’s, ranks human needs as follows: level 1, physiological needs; level 2, safety; level 3, belonging; level 4, esteem; and level 5, self-actualization. The theory posits that the more basic primary-level needs must be met before individuals can strive for the secondary or higher-level needs. Maslow’s theory has endured as an important foundational model for understanding human needs and motivations.

I would propose that, except for the lowest level (physiological necessities) in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, El Sistema flips the hierarchy pyramid upside down. One could argue that El Sistema’s starting point is the self-actualizing experience (5th level) of connecting to a sense of personal potential via organized human interaction that “agrees to create beauty” (to paraphrase Dr. Abreu). Then, having experienced this glimpse of self and potential, students are guided by the spirit and philosophy of El Sistema to work through the model in the opposite direction. They are motivated toward mastery (4th level), better relationships with family and community (3rd level), and building a more secure community (2nd level). Perhaps, therefore, when we provide kids with a chance to dream of a bright future using music’s power to speak to the core of their being, they are better able to seek and fulfill other aspects of their lives (Level 4 through Level 2).

In the film *El Sistema: Music to Change Life*, a young girl gets shot in the leg on the way to rehearsal but proceeds to attend anyway. Could it be that playing music has motivated her to transcend the need for safety and security? Further, could it be that kids who have no bed, but an instrument to play, survive in part because the motivation of music in their lives enables them to leap over even a basic need for proper shelter? Something worth considering further...

“El Sistema programs aren’t expensive. Keeping people miserable in programs that don’t change poverty – that is what’s expensive” – Richard Holloway, Chairman, Sistema Scotland