

## Holistic Learning: Beyond the Music Stand

By Ros Giffney, Program Facilitator, *Sistema Aotearoa*, New Zealand

Somewhere in the goals, objectives and funding applications of every El Sistema - inspired program will be the magic word 'holistic.' The foundation of a holistic approach lies in addressing the cognitive, physical, social, emotional and spiritual development of children. For our program, the challenge lay in altering 'holistic' from a buzzword to an underlying philosophy, so that the synergistic relationship between these developmental factors is inherent in everything we do.

Students in El Sistema-inspired programs usually spend significant time away from their instruments. Every program involves a myriad of non-playing student activities such as registration, refreshments, moving from one activity to another, recreation time and chatting with teachers. However, although staff training, policies and protocols usually exist for the music teaching/learning process, seldom does a program have an equally clear direction and design for time not spent in music-making.

We undertook to pay as much attention to the structure and delivery of these associated activities as to curriculum and lesson plans. Adopting this overall through-design has required us to look in detail at each interaction and activity a child encounters, to ensure that learning is maximized.

For example, we asked: what skills and capabilities could be learned from our 'sign-in' process, through teacher contacts at break time, or while helping set up a teaching space? Our goal was to have a uniform, consistent approach from the moment the first student steps in the door to the moment the last student leaves.

Contrary to the perception that they enjoy getting away with misbehavior, children crave consistency. Many studies have shown that the best outcomes for children come from a reliable, dependable, and stable approach. We realized that to achieve the desired behavior from individual children and the group as a whole, it was vital to have consistency within our faculty team and within our program structure. Attaining such consistency is not always easy; all staff need to be aware of the expectations of behavior, and also need to have the skills to reinforce desirable behavior and rectify unwanted activity.

Basic program rituals are essential. A calm personal greeting on arrival, pronouncing their names correctly (with an expectation that they respond similarly) reminds students that this is now 'Sistema time.' Book-ending each section of the learning day with sung 'thank you's' provides a clarity that enables the learners to relax into maximum focus.



Informal games during break time at *Sistema Aotearoa* Photo: Sistema Aotearoa

Modeling is another important aspect that shapes how the children behave and promotes positive interaction. Children will copy their teachers and will aspire to behave in similar ways – both in the music-making context and in other interactions within the program. For a variety of reasons, students in El Sistema-inspired programs may lack good role models for guidance and inspiration. Therefore, positive role modeling from teachers throughout program time can have considerable impact on students' lives.

Put simply, every adult becomes a model student – speaking, interacting and behaving exactly the way every child should. This can include being silent when a teacher is speaking, or always using 'excuse me [teacher name]...' if necessary. We have been delighted at the powerful overall change that occurs when all adults involved with the program are modeling desired behaviors.

Attending an El Sistema-inspired program requires considerable time and resource commitment from the children, families and community. Therefore, in order for our programs to effect substantial change, it's helpful to have clear and considered end goals. If children are going to spend ten or more of their most formative years in our programs, what skills do we want them to leave with? How will we ensure that every child – even the most vulnerable – belongs, thrives and achieves? What values are important to our specific community and cultural base?

With these questions answered, programs can begin to embed common behavioral and learning systems to achieve those objectives. Four years into trying to ensure a holistic program with complete systems rather than individual parts, and firmly integrated with the community it serves, we are seeing promising and pleasing results.

## FROM THE EDITOR

During a visit last month to "Orquestrando a Vida," a venerable Sistema-inspired núcleo in Campos, Brazil, I repeatedly heard teachers and students quoting Roberto Zambrano, the Venezuelan núcleo director who has been a master teacher and guide for the work in Campos. "What is the main thing you have learned from Roberto?" I asked Marcos, a young conductor in the program. He thought for a moment, and then said: "When he conducts the orchestra, our *pianissimo* is better!"

I was struck by this answer. I had expected something like "We play more skillfully" or "We work harder together" – something related to the social or technical dimensions of Sistema training. But Marcos went straight to a dimension that I think of as fundamentally aesthetic. An orchestra can play *fortissimo* simply by increasing its collective vigor. But it can play a truly beautiful *pianissimo* only if its members are attending to artistic expressiveness.

This has me thinking about aesthetic experience in Sistema-inspired programs, in general.

The experience of responding expressively to great music is something many of us spent our formative years cultivating. But now, in our El Sistema work, we are deeply occupied with immersive ensemble training in the service of two goals: imparting the musical skills that will give children self-confidence, and developing the social skills they will need to succeed in collaborative endeavor.

I wonder if, in the press of this mission for transformation, we sometimes forget to cultivate the aesthetic aspect of our students' learning. It's easy to do, because the social mission is so urgent and the issue of technique so immediate. But I think it is also vital, in this work, to reach again and again toward that particular realm of human experience we call aesthetic – a realm of being in expressive, personal, emotional relation to art. We want our children to become citizens. An essential part of that process is nurturing and educating the human inclination towards artistry – what Maestro Abreu has called "the awakening of sensibility."

The Sistema inquiry includes not only the electrifying vitality of the *fortissimo* that comes of leaning into musical energy together...and the thrill of the *presto* that comes of technical accomplishment... but also the personal aesthetic awakening into the poignancy, mystery and grace that lies waiting in a *pianissimo*.

"The child becomes the role model for his father and his mother, and this is very important for a poor child." – José Antonio Abreu

## News Notes

The last time you told someone how many Sistema-inspired programs there were in the U.S., how many did you say? Your answer was wrong ... because no one knows. And the reason no one knows is that we have never had a reliable response to a census. Please take 20 minutes to complete Joe Hamm's new survey, and check that others have done so too. Let's get an accurate answer to this most basic question. It is crucial to our movement for you to complete the [2013-2014 Census Survey](#). The deadline is September 30th. Your contributing information strengthens the case for all programs and funders. Click this link to submit your data and single-handedly strengthen our movement. [www.ElSistemaUSACensus.com](http://www.ElSistemaUSACensus.com)

[Make Music NOLA \(MMN\)](#) is a string program in New Orleans 9th Ward and Central City. Learning violin, viola, cello, and bass, students attend classes four days a week, participate in workshops with guest artists, and perform up to eight community concerts a year – ranging from performing Adele's "Rolling in the Deep" at the New Orleans Food Co-op, to playing "You Are My Sunshine" for the Big Easy Roller Girls' half-time show. MMN began in a converted Walgreens in New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward and has grown to four different schools throughout the city, launching its first brass program in East New Orleans.

Summer is the time for get-aways and get-togethers – that's true for families as well as for Sistema programs.

- [Bay Area](#) El Sistema programs partnered with Carnegie Hall's National Youth Orchestra to engage over 70 musicians in rehearsals and activities at San Francisco's iconic Palace of Fine Arts, with a surprise performance under the outdoor Rotunda in the first annual "Bridging the North" seminario.

- In June, six El Sistema programs in the [NYC metro area](#) joined in "The Concert to Benefit El Sistema-Inspired Youth Orchestras in New York, New Jersey, and New Orleans" at the United Palace Theatre. Also in June, about 200 students from the five programs of the [El Sistema New Jersey Alliance](#) performed at a Family Concert of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra at the NJ Performing Arts Center.

- KidzNotes in Durham, NC hosted a 2014 [East Coast Seminario](#) in May with 200 kids from six programs stretching from Miami to Waterbury, CT. Faculty came from as far away as Scotland.

- Students in the eight [Boston area](#) Sistema programs enjoyed various summer camps, and then seven programs joined together in a two-week seminario at the Longy School of Music.

- In LA, [YOLA](#) held its first residential summer camp for a week in June, with 100 students coming together in the mountains of Idylwild to advance musicianship and leadership.

- Perhaps the biggest gathering was in [Istanbul](#). Over 200 musicians from nine countries came together in the [Sistema Europe Orchestra Camp](#). It included a concurrent teacher training program for 51 teachers from 14 countries. <http://tinyurl.com/mecakza>

## Resources

Want to become a better leader of an innovative organization? National Arts Strategies (probably the top trainer of arts leadership in the U.S.) now offers a [free online professional development course](#) about "Leading Innovation in Arts and Culture," through Coursera. First class is September 16. <http://tinyurl.com/0aa4qma>

The National Endowment for the Arts Office of Research & Analysis will make [awards to support research that investigates the value and/or impact of the arts](#), either as individual components within the U.S. arts ecology, or as they interact with each other and/or with other domains of American life. Might this be a subject for investigation for your program? For questions: [nearesearchgrants@arts.gov](mailto:nearesearchgrants@arts.gov). Deadline: October 21, 2014 <http://arts.gov/grants-organizations/research-art-works>

There are new things under the Sistema sun, at least the sun that shines on the Massachusetts Cultural Council. It has just offered two new RFPs (Request for Proposals): one to [researchers to study "executive function"](#) in MA Sistema students ([https://www.hireculture.org/jobdetails.aspx?job\\_id=20588](https://www.hireculture.org/jobdetails.aspx?job_id=20588)), and one to [create a new string instrument library](#) that will provide instruments, maintenance, and insurance for MA programs. [https://www.hireculture.org/jobdetails.aspx?job\\_id=20589](https://www.hireculture.org/jobdetails.aspx?job_id=20589)

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## The Stickiness Factor

by *Lorrie Heagey, JAMM (Juneau Alaska Music Matters) Program Founder and Director*

"Stickiness" – that's what Malcolm Gladwell calls the elements that make learning appealing to children. "There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible," he writes. "All you have to do is find it." In creating a successful lesson plan for young children, here are some sure-fire "stickiness" factors:

- ✓ Attention-Getting Hook: Rather than take attendance, find a way to hook kids at the outset of a class, through a song, story, or game.

- ✓ Use of Narrative: We are evolutionarily hardwired to think in story structures. For example, the bow hold can be a fox whose mouth needs to be wide enough to carry food home to his kits.

- ✓ Repetition: Regular repetition gives children comfort and predictability. Include class rituals in your lessons to help reduce stress. My classes come in singing as they are given their violins and walk on "stage" (the classroom).

- ✓ Well-Paced and Interactive: Consecutive minutes of direct instruction should not exceed children's age. For example, a seven-year-old should have no more than 5 to 7 minutes of direct instruction.

- ✓ Balance of Novelty and Repetition: Too much new content and process overstresses the brain, while too much familiar content and process gets boring. Either way, you may end up with misbehavior or disengagement. Go back and forth, and mix them.

- ✓ Fluid Transitions: Just as in performance, transitions can make or break a lesson. Whenever possible, make transitions fluid and connect them to the lesson. Use songs or chants as transitions.

- ✓ 3 P's - Positive Reinforcement, Prosocial Messages and Play: Whenever possible, turn lessons into games, affirm positive behavior before you see it and frame your directions in the positive, not the negative (i.e. instead of "don't talk," use "voices off")

- ✓ Movement: Build meaningful movement into lessons to help memory and information recall.

- ✓ Call and Response: Forward movement is greatly helped by giving directions in consistent rhythmic/sung patterns, which the children repeat back.

- ✓ Manageable Chunks: Present information in manageable chunks and acknowledge successes at each step through a "mini-celebration." We take a bow when we accomplish each goal!

"When we let ourselves respond to music, to pictures, we are clearing a space where new stories can root; in effect we are clearing a space for new stories about ourselves." – Jeanette Winterson, author