

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

## Sistema Thrives in Canada

By Tina Fedeski, Executive & Artistic Director of Leading Note's OrKidstra program; David Visentin, Executive & Artistic Director, *Sistema Toronto*; Laurel Ralston, Communications Consultant, OrKidstra

Sistema in Canada is thriving within its wonderfully diverse local communities, and also provincially, nationally and internationally. There are currently 15 Sistema-inspired programs across the country, reaching over 2,000 children; more will launch next fall.

A clear expression of international connection is the Sistema Music Education Exchange with Canada (SMEEC), created in 2012 under the inspired leadership of world-respected music educator Richard Hallam of Sistema England. SMEEC

envisions children from many countries from diverse social circumstances sitting side-by-side in musical experiences that will change their lives. Ottawa's OrKidstra program and Sistema Toronto became part of SMEEC along with programs in the UK and EU.

The SMEEC opportunity inspired many important activities, the largest one to date being the *Symposium on Instrumental Change* on February 12 and 13, hosted by Ottawa's Leading Note Foundation [OrKidstra]. In addition to an international partnership with the EU Culture Programme, the Symposium became a celebration of Canadian national and local partnerships, including Canada Council for the Arts, National Arts Centre, local universities, and school boards.

This national Sistema Symposium was a much-needed event, and brought together 140 participants over two days from across Canada, the U.S., Italy, and the U.K. As one delegate commented, "The grounded, experience-weighted presentations on fundraising, coupled naturally with workshops on creativity, improvisation and developing emotional intelligence, made for lively discussions and valuable exchange. The performances by the students of OrKidstra stood out as tremendously passionate and well-presented." The Symposium synchronistically coincided with the 40th anniversary of El Sistema, and the concert included an upbeat performance "Alma Llanera" – recognized as Venezuela's second anthem – in the presence of Canada's Ambassador of Venezuela. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYZue6gZMwM>

In the first day's keynote speech, Simon Brault, President and CEO of Canada Council for the Arts, urgently emphasized the importance of leveraging the power of the arts to address local, national, and international concerns, including:

▶ Capitalizing on the arts' inclusive nature to support safe, respectful integration of diverse linguistic, ethnic, religious, and aboriginal communities, through expressions of identity and a sense of belonging;

▶ Building communities and habits of participation through shared experiences and observations – fostering engaged citizens and critical thinkers;

▶ Supporting an emerging national identity across Canada's diversity;

▶ Building Canada's international connections through artistic initiatives.

These points resonate clearly with how Sistema-inspired programs are developing in Canada, using ensemble music-making to create safe and respectful places that will build identity and belonging in our

communities. Sistema-inspired programs are operating in Aboriginal communities as well as in many new-Canadian neighborhoods. The Iqaluit Music Society in Nunavut, says, "We have to be very sensitive in our approach to Aboriginal culture, as none of our teachers are Aboriginal (First Nations, Inuit, and Metis). We want to be respectful of their culture without presuming that we can authentically teach it to them." [Keep a lookout for a future *Ensemble* article on Sistema-inspired programs in Aboriginal communities.]

In 2014, following a two-year feasibility study, an excellent report was released that recommended the establishment of a Canadian national Sistema organization. To date, due to lack of funds, there is no legally declared Sistema Canada national association. Nonetheless, excellent groundwork has been laid, and Sistema-inspired programs across Canada are pursuing exciting projects together.

We are also building Canada's international relationships through Sistema-inspired activities. In June, some OrKidstra students will play Side by Side with Sweden's Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Gustavo Dudamel. And in July, 50 European children will visit Canada to play with Sistema Toronto!

Sistema is indeed thriving in Canada. As new programs emerge and established programs expand their activities, they are enjoying opportunities to learn from each other and play together. After all, in Canada, collaboration is part of our DNA!



OrKidstra's KidSingers perform at the National Sistema Symposium. Photo: Fred Cattroll

## FROM THE EDITOR

Etienne Abelin's column about Soundpainting in this month's issue has me thinking about the question of creative self-expression in relation to musical performance – and particularly in relation to El Sistema. Soundpainting offers instrumentalists and singers the opportunity to imagine and realize their own musical ideas on the spot. This adds a powerful dimension to the experience of young musicians-in-process, and I can easily imagine that Soundpainting sessions in Sistema-inspired programs could provide children with a lively way to exercise their musical imaginations.

The idea will resonate with many teaching artists in the U.S. and Canada who have been experimenting with various ways of introducing improvisation and composition into the Sistema curriculum, to encourage individual creative expression.

I think that El Sistema introduces another dimension of creativity: the possibility of *group* creative expression. There's not much research about this phenomenon, but Sistema is perfectly positioned to explore it, since the ensemble, rather than the soloist, is the core artistic agent. Group creative expression can occur in improvisatory settings like Soundpaintings, but it also central to the work of interpreting the worldwide repertoire of ensemble masterworks.

The Venezuelan Sistema has shown us that group creativity within interpretive performance is possible; we need look no further than the Simon Bolivar Orchestra for proof. That ensemble did not suddenly find its exuberant, no-holds-barred identity at the London Proms in 2007; the orchestra members had been creating it together for years. David Walters, a recording engineer for the Dorian label who worked on the first SBYOV recordings in the 1990's, told me, "They loved to laugh and dance, and that was they way they played." The group's ebullient expressivity developed naturally through the process of rehearsing and performing in a context of close personal connection.

How does group creativity develop? How can we nurture it? And can the personal and social connections between members of Sistema ensembles help to produce collective creative expression? El Sistema is the perfect laboratory for the exploration of these questions. I'm convinced that U.S. and Canadian Sistema ensembles can develop expressive identities as whole-hearted and distinctive as as those of our Venezuelan mentors.

Tricia Tunstall

"Music is immensely important in the awakening of sensibility, in the forging of values and in the training of youngsters to teach others" – José Antonio Abreu

## News Notes

The article “Tracking the Evolving Brain of the Young Musician” in the Pacific Standard Magazine introduces a five-year study underway (conducted by the Brain and Creativity Institute) that studies brain development in Sistema Students (in YOLA/ Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles) compared with students in an intensive after-school soccer program and students in a control group. Early results are promising; stay tuned: <http://tinyurl.com/pkk6zaj>

A report by the Pew Research Center asked Americans which skills are **most important for their kids’ success in life**. These sobering findings will probably not surprise those in the Sistema movement. Out of ten sets of skills, art is deemed least important and music second least important. But the most important skill set is communication, which is a key goal of Sistema programs: <http://tinyurl.com/m6dm5wz>

## Resources

Carnegie Hall’s Weill Music Institute is known for its ambitious commitment to youth development programs. It has recently launched the excellent **Music Educators Toolbox**, distilling years of in-depth teaching artist/teacher partnerships in a New York elementary/middle school in Harlem into useful resources Sistema teaching artists may want to use and adapt. The new website includes short sample lesson plans and activities addressing Rhythm and Meter, Form and Design, Expressive Qualities, Pitch, and Performing. The site includes links to related formative assessments (tools and rubrics designed to further the progress and development of students through reflection and revision) and summative assessments (culminating tasks intended to evaluate student progress at the conclusion of a unit of study). Go to: [carnegiehall.org/toolbox](http://carnegiehall.org/toolbox). Click on the “Sign Up” link on the right side to get regular updates.

The study **The Engagement Gap: Social Mobility and Extracurricular Participation among American Youth** examines the importance of rich extracurricular activities in shaping students’ life possibilities (probably greater than academic scores) and the increasing inequality in these offerings based on socio-economic standing. Good after-school programming can make all the difference in the life of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. <http://>

[ann.sagepub.com/content/657/1/194.full](http://ann.sagepub.com/content/657/1/194.full). This research study is cited in a compelling article from *The Atlantic* that covers the subject of underserved youth and extracurricular learning more broadly: <http://tinyurl.com/mxh6sol>

The **El Sistema USA symposium** in Philadelphia has three reports to download that share the key learnings and tools of the January ‘15 convening: Symposium Case Studies: <http://www.elsistemausa.org/userfiles/file/Symposium2015-CaseStudies.pdf>  
Symposium Executive Summary: <http://www.elsistemausa.org/userfiles/file/Symposium2015-ExecutiveSummary.pdf>

Symposium Final Report: <http://www.elsistemausa.org/userfiles/file/Symposium2015-FinalReport.pdf>

**Dealing with behaviorally-challenging students** is a complex issue Sistema teachers (almost all teachers!) struggle with. J. Stuart Ablon has worked with these young people for decades and presents a different and positive way of thinking about helping them succeed in this 19-minute TEDx talk. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zu0PZkFCLVs>

There are two excellent articles in the Winter 2015 issue of the Stanford Social Innovation Review; one about **the skills of leadership in collective endeavors** ([http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/the\\_dawn\\_of\\_system\\_leadership](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/the_dawn_of_system_leadership)) and the other about **“scaling up” small social service sector programs** ([http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/whats\\_your\\_endgame](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/whats_your_endgame)).

Most readers know that Tricia Tunstall’s book *Changing Lives* has been the catalyst for the start of many programs, and the first introduction to Sistema for many people. It is now available in Spanish. To order copies of *Cambiando Vidas*, please email [contacto@editorial-alfa.com](mailto:contacto@editorial-alfa.com), with a CC copy to [prensa@editorial-alfa.com](mailto:prensa@editorial-alfa.com), specifying how many books and the delivery address. Sales can be made by credit card, and the books will be delivered by FedEx. The book is also available in Turkish, Japanese, Chinese, and soon in French; to find out how to get these copies, contact [tricia.tunstall@gmail.com](mailto:tricia.tunstall@gmail.com).

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## Soundpainting

by Etienne Abelin, Co-Founder *Superar Suisse* and *Sistema Europe Youth Orchestra*

A few months ago, I had the fabulous experience of participating in a “Soundpainting” workshop in Vienna, along with a seventy-member European youth orchestra, the Sistema-inspired Superar Orchestra. My colleague Gil Selinger, an experienced Soundpainter of many years, led the workshop.

Soundpainting is a universal live-composing sign language for musicians, actors, dancers and visual artists. As used by musicians, it can be described as an improvisatory orchestral music activity that uses gestural signs to represent various elements of music. “Compositions” are created on the spot, as a conductor uses these signs to indicate a series of musical gestures, and players respond by improvising within the parameters of each gesture.

The kids of the Superar Orchestra were immediately open to this approach, even though it was completely new to them. Quickly, they learned the first signs: “whole group”, “long note”, “go!”, etc.; before long, they knew thirty signs. The Soundpainting vocabulary encompasses over 1200 signs, but thirty is plenty to start with! Gil conducted at first, but as the kids became more comfortable, they learned how to give the signs themselves, and a few courageous ones went to stand in front of the group to be Soundpainting conductors themselves.

I find the Soundpainting approach exciting and convincing, for several reasons. First, it’s very playful and fun. It’s a game rather than a rehearsal. And it’s very intuitive: the first signs can be learned and understood quickly, so the fun can begin right away.

Also, it’s improvisatory and therefore musically empowering; participants make their own choices, so everyone contributes to the spontaneous composition. Each participant has his or her own voice, as well as being a part of the orchestral whole. When kids take a turn as conductor, they get the thrill of influencing an entire group.

In addition, participants develop important musical skills, such as a sense of artistic form and an alertness to the conductor, that are essential to playing already composed music.

I think Soundpainting could be a brilliant part of the curriculum of Sistema-inspired programs. Spontaneous fun, taking turns, playing music together: doesn’t that sound like El Sistema?