

A Countywide Sistema

By Karen Zorn, President, *The Longy School of Music of Bard College*

On a frosty day in January, several of my Longy colleagues and I attended a day-long workshop at the [Goshen College Music Center](#) in Goshen, Indiana. This was no ordinary workshop, and no ordinary collection of attendees. The 100-plus gathering included 2 mayors, 2 college presidents, 50 community leaders, donors, the owner of the local co-op, high school students, local music teachers, and music majors from Goshen College. The workshop – hosted by [Horizon Education Alliance](#), along with the support of partners Conn-Selmer, Inc., Elkhart Community Schools, and Goshen College – was called “Music for Social Change.” Its topic was nothing less than the idea of putting El Sistema at the core of the curriculum of every school in Elkhart County.

Why Elkhart County? Located approximately 100 miles east of Chicago, Elkhart County manufactures half of the recreational vehicles on the road today and is the home of Conn-Selmer, the largest manufacturer of band and orchestral instruments in the U.S.. This community was devastated during the 2008 economic recession; its unemployment rate skyrocketed from 4.7% in 2007 to 18.8% in 2009, the highest in the country. President Obama made Elkhart his first presidential visit outside of Washington, as part of his economic stimulus plan.

As daunting as these challenges are, I can't imagine a more ideal situation for a county-wide El Sistema initiative. In addition to the presence of Conn-Selmer, which places the very notion of music study at the core of its industry, this region has a vibrant musical culture, alive with orchestras and marching bands, and a deep tradition of congregational part singing. It is also the home of Goshen College, a small liberal arts college (my alma mater, I am very proud to say) whose motto is “Culture for Service.” All Goshen students are encouraged to engage in community projects and trained to become responsible global citizens.

The recent economic challenges served to galvanize Elkhart's community and its leaders to action, using education to transform the lives of its population. More than 200 community leaders joined together and identified education as the single most effective strategy for strengthening Elkhart County. This led to the founding of Horizon Education Alliance (HEA), which aims to support the community through innovative, evidence-based programming from birth to adulthood.

So how did El Sistema become a part of the solution for Elkhart County? It may be a logical answer for readers of *The Ensemble*, but it is not necessarily an obvious choice for everyone. I believe that two qualities –



Karen Zorn giving her keynote speech in Goshen, Indiana. Photo: Horizon Education Alliance

experience and leadership – are necessary to make such a bold decision. Brian Wiebe, the Executive Director of HEA, witnessed El Sistema firsthand when his son Caleb performed side by side with the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra under the baton of Gustavo Dudamel. Wiebe, a music educator and arts administrator, was impressed by both the technical proficiency and the passion of these young musicians. His colleague John Hill, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction at Elkhart Community School and also a musician, joined Wiebe in identifying El Sistema as one of the innovative educational programs that will make a difference in the lives of their community.

Hill's leadership was key in turning the Roosevelt Primary School into the [Roosevelt STEAM Academy](#) (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math), the first school in the county to put El Sistema at the core of its curriculum. Three full-time music teachers were hired to lead the program, and all third-graders at Roosevelt are learning to play instruments using the El Sistema method, with more grades to be added. The “Music for Social Change” workshop was organized to support the Roosevelt program and to generate more awareness about the transformative power of El Sistema.

It has been a privilege to return to this community, witness their work, and participate in developing a shared vision for the future. Thanks to the leadership of Jim Brenneman, President of Goshen College, and Beverly Lapp, Chair of the music department at Goshen College, the school has rethought an open conducting position in order to pursue a candidate with El Sistema experience. In addition, Longy will create an El Sistema pedagogy course at Goshen, and a Goshen College graduate, who will begin [Longy's MAT](#) program this summer in Los Angeles, has already been promised a full-time job in Elkhart once she completes the degree!

Something inspiring is taking place in Elkhart County, and I think it will not be long before we will look to this small county in Indiana as one of the visionary leaders of the El Sistema movement in the United States.

FROM THE EDITOR

“Community” can be a blurry word in our day and age. Politicians from the far right to the far left routinely trot it out to support their positions. As a noun, the word can be appended to anything – from your neighborhood playground community to “the Star Alliance community” – to lend it a non-specific warm glow. As an adjective, it's automatically likeable: who could argue against the value of community playgrounds, or input, or leaders?

In the world of El Sistema, the idea of community is deeply embedded in our primary mission – not only because the musical ensemble is a metaphor for a harmonious community, but also because the communities of our students are essential to our transformational goals. Across the world, Sistema programs prioritize “community involvement” in mission statements. It's important, therefore, to insist on specificity about what we mean.

Both articles in this month's *Ensemble* are instructively specific in this regard. In Diane Kline's column on El Sistema Somerville, Massachusetts, the focus is on a single ensemble that has evolved since the program began; in Karen Zorn's piece about Elkhart County, Indiana, it's on a coalition of interests gathering to shape and launch a program. But it's clear that in both places, program leaders and organizers have a clear understanding of what they mean by “community” in relation to El Sistema.

There's no one right answer about how Sistema involvement with community should look; it can develop in as many ways as there are programs. It can mean parent potluck dinners or regular neighborhood performances, steps-of-the-statehouse rallies or institutional partnerships.

It's important for us to be both bold and specific about what it means. We need to be specific about whom we're trying to reach; is it simply our students' parents and neighbors, or is it also their schools, churches, grocery stores and clinics, maybe even the jails where they may have relatives? Engagement is real only when it's specific.

And we need to be bold in how we understand what engagement means. At its best, Sistema engagement with community means the slow and patient process of hearing what feels urgent in the lives of those communities, and integrating that understanding into our work. At its best, El Sistema is a great laboratory for experimenting with how to take “community involvement” from intentional glow to specific and vivid reality.

Tricia Tunstall

“No longer putting society at the service of art, but instead art at the service of society, at the service of the weakest, at the service of the children.” – José Antonio Abreu

News Notes

Congratulations to Pacific Chorale in Santa Ana, CA. Their El Sistema choral program, the [Pacific Chorale Academy](#) for 4th-6th graders at two local Title I schools, [won Chorus America's Annual](#)

Education and Community Engagement

[Award](#), honoring the best emerging program in the U.S. Making the celebration even better, three Sistema Fellows who run choral Sistema programs have been accepted



Pacific Chorale Academy singers use their Eurythmic practice in performance. Photo: Molly Pontin

to join Molly Pontin, Director of Education and Community Programs at Pacific Chorale, to present at the [2015 Chorus America Conference](#). Aisha Bowden of the [Atlanta Music Project](#), Alysia Lee of [Sister Cities GirlChoir](#), and Sara Zanussi of [ComMusication](#) will join Molly in a presentation on Sistema choruses. The presentation will raise awareness of the presence of Sistema-inspired choral programs in the U.S, as well as take a look inside successful program models.

The Boston String Academy's [El Sistema Summer Academy](#) will be held August 3-14, 2015 at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, MA. For students (all instruments) ages 8-15, with many teachers from Venezuela, the academy is described by some as the closest thing to Venezuelan El Sistema one can find in the U.S. Overseas applicants welcome. Tuition: \$500. Application deadline is May 15. info@bostonstringacademy.org

The [California Institute of the Arts Summer Residency for Teaching Artists](#) will be May 18-June 19, 2015 – specifically designed for artists who want to deepen their teaching skills and for active teaching artists. Drawing upon the 25-year history of the CalArts Community Arts Partnership (CAP) program, this 5-week residency will include courses on creative curriculum design, child and adolescent social and cognitive development, creativity, imagination, and learning theories. Applications are due by May 9 at www.calarts.edu (click on "Academics"). More information: Glenna Avila at glenna@calarts.edu

Resources

[In Harmony Liverpool Year 5 Report](#) contains useful perspectives on evaluation and research (like factors contributing to resilience, and the evaluation instruments use to study it), plus strong findings about the impact on their own students. Available at: <http://tinyurl.com/kwgfutx>

Sistema programs directly and indirectly [address issues of poverty](#) in talking about the benefits and urgency of their work. This article recommends ways to frame and discuss issues of poverty to bypass the disinterest or deafness of people in power. http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/promoting_government_action_on_income_equality

A report from the [OMG Center](#) about [relationships between community organizations based in diverse communities and foundations](#) finds that funders can do much more to advance diversity, equity and inclusion. Pass it on. <http://tinyurl.com/omzssg6>

The Gladys Brooks Foundation provides support to nonprofit organizations in 17 states for major expenditures, generally between \$50,000 and \$100,000. Funds are for capital projects, including equipment and endowments – there just might be an unconventional fit for some Sistema organization projects. Applications must be postmarked by May 29, 2015. Visit the Foundation's website to request the application materials online. <http://www.gladysbrooksfoundation.org>

A blog from Beth Kanter reminds our busy and invaluable Sistema leaders: [The Single Most Important Asset That Nonprofit Leaders Need To Protect To Ensure Success](#). Enough sleep is essential for creative thinking, for healthy immune system function, for problem solving. Beth says these are our two top necessities – passion and sleep – and we know you have passion. <http://tinyurl.com/nm4yggg>

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The Community Ensemble

Diane Cline, Director, El Sistema Somerville

Open. Friendship. Musical. Happy. Laughter. Peace. Instruments. Improvising. Beautiful. Together.

These are the ten words provided by the members of El Sistema Somerville's all ages, weekly Community Ensemble to sum up their experience in just one word. The members of the group are extremely diverse: a photographer and community activist who took up violin as an adult, a former member of our daily program who has moved out of the school district, two current students and their mothers, and a handful of other interested Somerville youth who love music and want to play more.

The first iteration of the Community Ensemble, called "Community Orchestra," began in El Sistema Somerville's first year, to provide an additional access point for music making in the Somerville community. We had many great moments of mentoring between musicians of all ages, but also had big challenges with the range of ages and levels. We tried various experiments and also became clear that the name of "Community Orchestra" was a poor fit for what we were aiming to create. Rather than striving to become a full symphony for adult amateurs and semi-professionals, we wanted to create an open and welcoming space for all.

Now in its third year, the group has found its stride and niche under the leadership of Rachel Panitch, founder of the [Rhode Island Fiddle Project](#), and frequent collaborator of [Community MusicWorks](#) in Providence, RI. We opted for the name Community Ensemble in order to be more flexible about the genres, approaches, and intention of the group. The group remains an access point for those not served directly by El Sistema Somerville's daily program while remaining open to eager and motivated young musicians from our daily program.

The challenge of teaching diverse levels within the group has not disappeared, but it has been balanced through a special, staggered schedule. The younger students meet first for a half-hour, followed by an all-ages combined session for a half hour, and then adult members are given a session targeted to their needs and maturity level.

Rachel brings a diverse repertoire of traditional tunes and improvisational approaches and crafts multi-layered options of bass lines, melodies, and harmonies to provide multiple challenge levels appropriate for each participant. In addition to performing these unique fiddle arrangements, the ensemble learns and performs with the El Sistema Somerville Youth Orchestra in large-scale works.