

The Evolving El Sistema USA

by Katie Wyatt, Executive Director, *El Sistema USA*; Executive Director of *Kidznotes*

Having just completed my third month as the first Executive Director for El Sistema USA (ESUSA), I've been taking some moments to both reflect and look ahead. I joined the board of ESUSA in 2014, while we were still a virtual network, working through the departure from the New England Conservatory (NEC). As a former NEC Sistema Fellow, I appreciate the potential strength of a university partner, so I began to assess opportunities for a new home for ESUSA. Duke University, a center of "knowledge in service to society," has a rich history of incubating arts initiatives, including the Full Frame documentary film festival and the American Dance Festival. Through the alliance of two seemingly distant partners at the University, the Social Sciences Research Institute and the Office of the Vice Provost of the Arts, I found a strong partnership framework for growth. The launch of an incubated ESUSA at Duke began in 2016.

Duke acts as an incubation hub for ESUSA through faculty and student support, funding, guidance in business development, and opportunities for professional development. Partners within the university include the Office of the Vice Provost for the Arts, the [Social Sciences Research Institute](#) (SSRI), the [Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship](#), the [Sanford School of Public Policy](#), and the [Fuqua School of Business](#).

ESUSA's coordinated strategic plan features a major opportunity for the coming year: to understand and share our collective impact. To that end, we are embarking on a study in partnership with SSRI at Duke, to identify distinguishing characteristics that result in successful "community embeddedness" of El Sistema-inspired organizations. The National Endowment for the Arts has awarded partnership funding to support research on the organizational structure, social networks, and impact capacity of member programs of ESUSA. SSRI will undertake a "social network analysis" and mixed-methods study to identify organizational traits associated with member programs of ESUSA, and their intended outcomes of artistic excellence and community engagement through the adoption of El Sistema's model and philosophies.

August was an exciting month for ESUSA – as a partner in the Take A Stand regional festival at Bard College in New York, we hosted an information session in which members and friends provided feedback for our [national census](#), which is open through October 15. Your voice is important, please stand up and be

counted! The information you provide strengthens our movement, and adds weight and leverage in important conversations about music education and access for all nationwide (one entry per program, please).

Following the festival concert, we hosted the first Directors' Retreat, where 13 program and executive directors gathered in the Poconos for two days of discussion and sharing, exploring common challenges and possible solutions for the tough questions we encounter every day in our work. Our topics included ESUSA membership standards, cultural competency in our programs, growth strategies for maintaining quality while scaling up, and professional development for our teaching artists. As a pilot for future retreats, it was a great opportunity to learn from one another.

The new leadership of ESUSA includes:

ESUSA Board Chair: Bonnie Reagan, Board Chair of Bravo Youth Orchestras, Portland, Oregon

ESUSA Clerk: Leni Boorstin, Director of Community and Government Affairs, Los Angeles Philharmonic

ESUSA Treasurer: Anna Pietraszko, Executive Director, Miami Music Project

This month, we are launching our 2016-17 committees, and readers of *The Ensemble* are encouraged to sign up and participate! Our committees include:

1. Nominating and Governance: Recruiting new members for board nomination, reviewing and updating the bylaws, adding helpful board processes.
2. Membership Engagement and Support: Sharing information with members from ESUSA, supporting regional representation on the board
3. Development and Fundraising: Strategies for raising money for ESUSA and our members
4. Marketing and Communications: Building awareness of ESUSA and the missions of our members
5. Finance and Audit: Reviewing the financial health and practices of ESUSA on a monthly basis, and overseeing an annual audit

These committees will inform our work, and are a great way to get involved in the national movement. Please sign up online: <http://tinyurl.com/hb3kxvp>

ESUSA is making moves, and we'd love for you to be part of our future. Sign up, become a member, complete the census, get involved!

FROM THE EDITOR

"If El Sistema is so great, why is Venezuela failing?"

I don't know about you, but I have heard this question from well-meaning friends more than a few times recently. Reading about Venezuela's political and economic crises, and then hearing that Carnegie Hall is opening its season with Gustavo Dudamel and the Simon Bolívar Orchestra of Venezuela, they're confused. We need to have some useful answers to offer. Here's a start.

First, despite the vast reach and scope of El Sistema Venezuela, its students and graduates still comprise only about 5 percent of Venezuela's 30 million people. That's not enough to produce any kind of tipping point in the country's fortunes.

Second, it's important to recognize that significant cultural ideas are often born in turbulent places. The emergence of a major new understanding about human development doesn't mean that the country where it emerged will be automatically transformed by that understanding. The Montessori educational philosophy didn't reduce mob violence in Italy. Freudian psychology didn't make pre-World War I Austria immune to the social instabilities that helped lead to war. Great ideas make their way across the world, lifting levels of collective understanding and offering possibilities for civic progress. But they don't magically cure the problems of the places where they arise.

We need to remember that although El Sistema can't rescue Venezuela from its current difficulties, it can and does rescue children across the world. It's a vision that has inspired and galvanized people in over 65 countries. One life at a time, it's changing lives everywhere. Eventually, enough changed lives can perhaps lead to changed nations.

El Sistema is also a deeply Latin American vision. Sistema-inspired programs began in Latin American countries decades before the idea spread elsewhere, and they can be found in nearly every Latin nation. Sistema thrives there, because their cultures embrace a core conviction that music and the arts are essential to social wellbeing. It's high time we begin to think of Latin America not only as politically and economically volatile, but also as capable of global cultural leadership.

Tricia Tunstall

"All good art is an inquiry and an experiment. It is by virtue of being an artist that the teacher is a researcher. The artist is the researcher par excellence." – Lawrence Stenhouse, Education philosopher

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

News Notes

Sistema New Brunswick (Canada) is experimenting with a new program model. They currently have 7 centers and over 900 students, but demand persistently exceeds their capacity. So, in one rural school (near their oldest main program site in Moncton) that has wanted a program for years, they now run a streamlined program one hour a day, at noon, five days a week, working with kids on one instrument. The principal and music teacher serve as assistants to the teaching artist (one of their most experienced), and work with 25 enrolled students. The cost is one quarter of their other programs (3 hours a day, 5 days a week), and is reported to be as full of fun and rigor as a full program. For more information: Ken MacLeod, kmacleod@nbyo-ojnb.com



Left to right: Laura Bourque, Hillsborough Elementary School Music Specialist; Sistema NB Teaching Artist/Centre Director Sara Liptay; and Principal Susan Wilmot

Playing for Their Lives: The Global El Sistema Movement for Social Change through Music was just published by W.W. Norton. [Authors Tricia Tunstall and Eric Booth produce this newsletter.] The book is available everywhere and makes a strong case for the importance and effectiveness of Sistema programs – use it as an advocacy tool (put a notice on your website?). Many U.S. programs have already been using the book as a way to engage new potential funders and supporters. More at: <http://playingfortheirlives.com/>

Resources

The **Sistema Fellowship Resource Center Report: July 2014 – June 2016** includes updates on the 50 Fellows,

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their reflections and writing, overviews of the Sistema field in the U.S., and ideas about the future of the Resource Center at NEC. Available at: <http://necmusic.edu/sistema>

The Education Commission of the States (parent organization of the Arts Education Partnership) has published a report that can help arts educators understand how **the new Every Student Succeeds Act** and its requirement for a “well rounded education” for all students can be used effectively to promote music education. Music educators are eligible to receive federal funding, thanks to the new provisions in ESSA; find out more at: <http://www.ecs.org/essas-well-rounded-education>.

This may be a reach – but for bold programs, the **Multi-Arts Production (MAP) Fund**, administered by Creative Capital, supports the creation of original new artworks. They are especially interested in supporting “artists that question, disrupt, complicate, and challenge inherited notions of social and

cultural hierarchy across the current American landscape.” Forty grants, averaging \$25,000 each will be awarded. Round One applications are due by October 28, and Application details are available at: <https://mapfundblog.org/the-program>

Do you have young people who serve as dedicated volunteers in your program? The **Prudential Spirit of Community Awards** may provide a way for you to celebrate their work and encourage others. Young people in grades 5-12 are eligible, and each state gets awards for a middle- and a high-school student, who receive \$5,000 plus \$5,000 to donate to the nonprofit organization of their choice. Deadline is November 8. <https://spirit.prudential.com>

Lincoln Center Education has launched a series of beautiful short videos that might be useful for Sistema programs – to use in advocacy or even with students and family. The series, called **Think Like an Artist**, features one- to two-minute statements from prominent people about how learning in the arts made a huge difference in their non-arts professional success. Start with Condoleezza Rice about learning to play the piano, and see Chelsea Clinton’s thoughts: <http://lincolncentereducation.com>.

Take a Stand – Student’s POV

By Audrey Chung, 7th grade student in Youth Orchestra Los Angeles

My experience at the National Take a Stand Music Festival at Bard College in New York was exciting and memorable. This experience allowed me to play in an orchestra with amazing and talented young musicians and inspiring, engaging teachers. It gave me a chance to play in professional music practice studios and grand halls.

In our practice sessions and rehearsals, the teachers often stopped us to point out little things that we could change to make the music sound more professional, so we could play to our full potential. For example, they drew our attention to dynamic changes and the articulation of certain notes and grace notes. They also knew we needed breaks; they always had our best interests in mind.

The pieces that we played were a little bit more advanced than I usually play. When I caught myself making mistakes, I would be embarrassed and hang my head, thinking I couldn’t do it, but the teachers, conductors, and students would just give me feedback and advice, further encourage me, and continue on. I would look around and see people making mistakes and just trying again, having a growth mindset. I was in awe of their tolerance for challenges and uncertainties, and also of their leadership. Being surrounded by all these great people made me want to try and do better myself.

In addition to playing music, we also took a writing course for one hour every day. The teacher gave us mini-prompts to write about, and I just wrote whatever came to mind. We shared our writings with each other and compared them. One prompt was to create a storyline for the music that we were playing, as if the music was a soundtrack. When we read each other’s stories, we saw that most of them were pretty similar. We all had the same things going on inside our heads when we played! Maybe that was why we came together as one whole orchestra when we actually played the piece. We knew when the tension was going to build up and when the resolution was going to come.

I never really connected writing to music before. To me, they were completely separate and different. But after that class, I realized that when composers are creating a song, they are writing a story, just with a different language: music instead of words. Understanding this helps to make me a better musician, because I’m not playing just the notes on the page – I am telling a story through music.

“The artist is a researcher with his or her whole organism, inquiring, testing with the body as well as the mind, sensing and seeing, responding and retesting – a multitude of functions performed simultaneously.” – Anne McCrary Sullivan, *Notes from a Marine Biologist’s Daughter*