

## Inside the National Symposium

By Nicole Negrete, Teaching Artist at YOURS Project (Chicago), Take a Stand Symposium Ambassador

I recently spent three packed days in downtown Los Angeles with more than 300 other musicians and teachers, all of whom shared the goal of using music to change lives. At the 2012 Take A Stand Symposium, co-sponsored by the L.A. Philharmonic, Bard College, and Longy Conservatory, I was fortunate to be one of 25 "YOLA Ambassadors" (teachers from El Sistema-inspired U.S. programs who received free admission in exchange for contributing roles at the Symposium). I represented the People's Music School's YOURS Project in Chicago, and participated in numerous workshops, lectures, and discussions.

With over 25 U.S. states and 12 other countries represented at the Symposium, there can be no doubt that the values and practices of El Sistema are spreading quickly and widely. While

our programs differ in many ways, we are all united in the belief that music is an inherently social art and a uniquely powerful medium for creating nurturing communities for children, especially those who are at risk and underserved.

At the YOURS Project, we work towards this vision by focusing almost exclusively on group rehearsals, with both full ensembles and smaller sectionals, and by having peers teach one another whenever possible. Throughout the Symposium, I was delighted to find these principles affirmed: group focus, intense immersion, and peer teaching are core tenets of the El Sistema teaching philosophy in programs across the country. I learned about creative, high-engagement ways to keep children playing, such as bucket bands (as used in Baltimore and Philadelphia) and paper

orchestras (as used at Juneau, Alaska). During a presentation by members of Venezuela's Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar, I learned that the first orchestras of El Sistema relied on peer teaching, partly out of necessity but also to help the program grow quickly and become a community of musicians.

There were many good ideas exchanged and hard questions asked during the course of the Symposium. How can we evaluate our programs in ways that are both rigorous and responsive to community and psychosocial needs as well as musical factors? Can we begin to compile a collective database that would

include things like shared repertoire and best teaching practices? How can we continue to connect with one another – regionally, nationally, and inter-

nationally? These were just a few of the intense and ongoing conversations I found valuable.

On the Symposium's last day, we received the immense privilege of hearing Maestro José Antonio Abreu speak on behalf of the amazing program he began 36 years ago. It was truly inspiring to hear him speak of the immense opportunities he foresees for the Sistema in this country, where we have such an abundance of resources and skills.

I left Los Angeles with more questions than I arrived with, and with no definitive answers to any of them – but with the distinct sense of being part of a larger movement asking the same questions and moved by the same vision. While I am still searching for more of the elusive secrets of an El Sistema formula, I am more than ever convinced that it *does* work.



*Symposium participants on the steps of Disney Hall* (Photo courtesy of the Los Angeles Philharmonic)

## FROM THE EDITOR

It's an article of faith within the U.S. El Sistema-inspired movement that our work involves the deep alignment of social and musical goals. We are inspired by this ideal of alignment, and we talk about it...only all the time.

Yet the language of our conversation tends to be one of duality: we think of these goals as two separate ones, and it's our task to connect them. A cultural tradition of pursuing social and musical goals as separate spheres of endeavor and separate professions, even with separate funders, tends to destabilize our article of faith.

At the Take A Stand Symposium this week, I was freshly reminded that in the language of Venezuela's El Sistema the two goals are inseparable – they are in fact one goal. Venezuela's FundaMusical Bolívar Executive Director Eduardo Méndez told us that "we are not simply about children in a room together, doing something. We are about children in a room together, *making music*. And without the striving for musical excellence, there is no social transformation."

The same "one goal" thinking was clear in remarks by Juan Antonio Cuéllar, Executive President of Colombia's twenty-year-old Sistema program "Batuta," who spoke movingly about musical education as a "fundamental, constitutional human right," and at the same time stressed a focus on "quality and excellence" as integral to that right.

It's an invigorating gift to be reminded firsthand of the wisdom of our Latin American colleagues: our task is not to integrate the goals of social transformation and musical excellence –but to reimagine them as one goal.

*Tricia Tunstall*

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**"Working together, we can multiply this by millions, to really make an international Sistema."  
- José Antonio Abreu**

## News Notes

**El Sistema Colorado** launched in January 2012 at Garden Place Elementary, a Title 1 Denver Public School. The program began as a grassroots effort by three professional Denver women with a shared passion for music and education. Providing essential startup support: Denver's Piton Foundation, the Colorado Children's Chorale, Colorado Public Radio, Metro State College School of Music and the Colorado Institute of Music Instrument Technology (CIOMIT) They launched with 110 students – all 73 kindergartners receive daily, in-school music instruction, and 37 third graders participate in the after school program Monday through Thursday. Students and families also meet one Saturday per month. Students learn basic musicianship, strings, singing and native Mexican music and instruments. [mvischer@elsistemacolorado.org](mailto:mvischer@elsistemacolorado.org); [website: www.elsistemacolorado.org](http://www.elsistemacolorado.org)

**Kalikolehua – El Sistema Hawai'i** has opened its first nucleo, at Ka'a'awa Elementary School, on the Windward side of O'ahu. The school serves 150 children from grades K-6. The program offers intensive violin and general musical training four days a week after school and one day in school to all students in grades K and 1, and will expand to the entire school in the next school year. Kualoa Ranch, a longtime supporter of the school, is a corporate sponsor of the project. [Louise King Lanzilotti, kalikolehuamele@gmail.com](mailto:Louise.King.Lanzilotti@gmail.com); [website www.kalikolehua.com](http://www.kalikolehua.com).

## Resources

**Grants for music commissions.** New Music USA, through Commissioning Music/USA, provides grants of between \$10,000 and \$20,000 to commissioning organizations for the composer's fee and copying expenses. The 2012 grant round considers applications for collaborative works that involve music with other visual, media, or performing art forms in integrated and inseparable ways. Applications may be submitted by a single commissioner or consortium of commissioning organizations – what about an application from a group of El Sistema inspired programs? Application deadline is March 19, 2012. <https://www.newmusicusa.org/commissioning-music-usa>



Photo: Brigid McAuliffe

*Maria D. Duran helps her son, kindergartner Daniel Avalos-Duran, and 3rd grader Esmeralda Cordero-Rodriguez during the paper orchestra process in the first week of El Sistema Colorado.*

**Grant Opportunity from Muzak Heart & Soul Foundation** for music programs that match well with El Sistema-inspired priorities. These are modest-sized grants (up to \$6,000) for basic materials such as instruments and sheet music for programs that serve economically-disadvantaged students, with innovative programming and established partnerships. Application deadline is April 30, 2012. <http://heart.muzak.com/what/grants.aspx>

**Two new video advocacy tools.** More sites are creating compelling videos about their work which may be useful to others in the movement. Two new videos have recently been made available by their creators, with the generosity characteristic of this movement.

Co-Producers Jamie Bernstein and Elizabeth Kling have posted a trailer for their film in progress, *El Sistema USA* (working title), which documents the birth and development of Philadelphia's Play On, Philly! site, and presents a stirring case for the value of El Sistema work. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3lTy1KEifs>

Lorrie Heagy, founder of the El Sistema site Juneau, Alaska Music Matters (JAMM), offers a new film filled with the voices of younger students and reflections on their learning. <http://juneaumusicmatters.blogspot.com/2011/11/parents-students-teachers-share.html>

## Virtuosic Empathy

By Jamie Bernstein, author, musician and concert narrator

A few years ago, a friend sent me a YouTube link of a Venezuelan youth orchestra playing the "Mambo" from "West Side Story" by my father, Leonard Bernstein. I found myself crying with excitement. Who were these brilliant, joyful kids? And that amazing curly-haired conductor?

And where was my father to see all this?! This was everything he'd ever meant, right there on my laptop screen.

I had to go to Venezuela – not just to see for myself, but also to be my father's eyes and ears.

I was invited to Caracas to narrate a concert of my father's music with one of the city's premier high school-age orchestras. As the concert began, the clarinet player added an extra note to his opening solo, thereby putting himself one disastrous beat behind the rest of the orchestra. This had never happened in rehearsal. The conductor stopped the players, waited for the clarinet player to collect himself, and then started the piece over. The same thing happened. Again the conductor stopped and restarted. And the clarinet player did it again. He'd gotten stuck; it happens sometimes. This time the conductor just kept going, and things eventually righted themselves. But the clarinet player fled offstage before the final bows.

At a lunch for us after the concert, I was startled when the musicians burst into applause: the clarinet player had come in. They surrounded him with hugs, back slaps, and words of encouragement. Embarrassed as he was, he couldn't resist his friends, and he was soon smiling and returning the hugs.

Toto, I don't think we're in Juilliard any more.

I had never in my life seen such a magnificent demonstration of support and compassion for a fellow musician in trouble. Truly, this was the essence of El Sistema. As a staff member said afterward: "We don't build musicians; we build human beings." You can bet my father would have said amen to that.

**"We should take a lesson in long-term thinking from Maestro Abreu, who is 36 years into it and no doubt thinking 36 years ahead." – Dalouge Smith, Pres./CEO, San Diego Youth Symphony**