

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

## Sistema Growing above the 49th Parallel

By David Visentin, Executive Director Sistema Toronto and Inga Petri, President, Strategic Moves, a consultancy working with Sistema-inspired organizations in Canada

From coast to coast to (northern) coast, Canada is being swept along in the world-wide Sistema wave. In fact, with some of the oldest Sistema-inspired centres currently operating in North America, Canada has been leading the wave in a number of ways for six years.

In 2007, Gustavo Dudamel made his Canadian debut with the National Arts Centre (NAC) Orchestra. In 2008, The Glenn Gould Foundation ([www.glenn Gould.ca](http://www.glenn Gould.ca)) honoured Dr. Abreu with the international Glenn Gould Prize. This timely recognition brought about the 2009 Celebration of Music week in Toronto, with its impactful visit by Dr. Abreu and performances with Gustavo Dudamel and the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra (SBSO); the orchestra played in its largest venue to date before 14,000 school children at the Rogers Centre. In 2011 and 2012, Canada hosted some of the first academic conferences related to El Sistema.?

As in similar organizations worldwide, Canadian program leaders' inspiration stems from the social intent to provide transformative opportunities in underserved communities to children who would not otherwise have access to participate in music and the arts. Despite its status as one of the world's richest countries, Canada's population of 35 million includes about one million children who are living in poverty.

There are currently 13 programs operating in cities and rural or remote communities, and about that number gearing up to start within the next two years. Half of the current programs started in 2011-2012. The oldest programs turned toward Sistema-inspired teaching beginning in 2007.

Each program has its own genesis and context that reflects and celebrates the immense cultural diversity of Canada as a nation. One of the oldest programs in Canada began as the Iqaluit Fiddle Club program in the 1990s in Nunavut. It was transformed with Sistema values in 2007 and moved toward an ensemble-based instruction model, peer-to-peer mentoring, increased performance opportunities and an intensive music experience that adapted to the realities of this remote northern community. Recently, this program has partnered with the Leading Note Foundation's OrKidstra program in Ottawa (launched in 2007) through broadband video conferencing. See: <http://nac-cna.ca/en/orchestra/event/4285>.



Programs operate in some of the most disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods, for example the Saint James Music Academy in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Sistema Toronto, in its first centre in Parkdale, is currently serving a socio-economic mix of families. Sistema New Brunswick, an initiative by the New Brunswick Youth Orchestra, has achieved an unprecedented level of provincial support through the Department of Education, and has set up programs in Saint John, Moncton and Richibucto. Viva Sistema! in Montreal has recently established two school-based programs, including one on the Mohawk reserve of Kahnawake.

The Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra began a Sistema-inspired program in 2011; Edmonton, Saskatoon orchestras and Brott Music in Hamilton will follow suit during the next year. Three programs in London and one in Mississauga are led by musicians who seek to make a difference in their communities and in the lives of children from diverse backgrounds.

At the end of 2012, Canadian programs served about 1,400 participants, mostly in the 6 to 12 age range. Their combined annual budget was about C\$3.1 million, including both cash and in-kind contributions. The average current cost per student is just over C\$2,200. Not surprisingly, the majority of budgets go directly to supporting the costs of teachers, instruments and suitable work spaces, often in school settings. Programs reflect a wide range of organizational structures, from stand-alone charitable organizations to partnered and umbrella organizations. The National Arts Council, together with the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, a leading national funder of initiatives that promote a more innovative, inclusive, sustainable and resilient society, is presently serving as a catalyst for the exploration of a national Sistema organization in Canada.

## FROM THE EDITOR

### "Chasquido al talon!"

So said a teen-aged violinist in the top youth orchestra of Barquisimeto, Venezuela last week, when Eric Booth asked orchestra members for advice we could take back to the children in U.S. Sistema-inspired programs.

The orchestra had just played the fifth movement of Mahler's Fifth Symphony. The ensemble was so big and the room so densely packed that the front row of violinists and cellists narrowly missed jabbing us with their bows.

"Tell the U.S. kids: *Chasquido al talon!*" one boy offered, and others nodded. Our translators explained that the phrase means to dig into the string with the lower part of the bow, to create an intense, powerful sound.

After spending the day at the Barquisimeto nucleo, I understood the phrase to mean much more than that. We heard a "Baby Mozart" ensemble in which kids as young as seven played oboes and trombones; a marimba sextet who danced their way through their own arrangements of jazz standards; a percussion/vocal ensemble weaving together music from Afro-Venezuelan folk traditions. And we heard three full orchestras of varying skill levels and unvarying energy.

Energy: that's the unifying factor, and I think that's what the violinist's advice meant – energy, and also the courage to dig into a string with all one's power, even if the note might be a wrong one. We heard few wrong notes, but these children did not seem afraid of them; they have learned that an energetic connection with their instruments, the music and one another is the first priority.

We spoke afterwards with our Sistema guide, Victor Salamanqués, who played clarinet in the original Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra. "*Chasquido al talon!*" he said, smiling. "That is a phrase Maestro Abreu used to say to us often in rehearsals. He wanted to us to go for intensity of the sound!"

I love the idea that Maestro Abreu's exhortation to his orchestra members thirty years ago lives on among the young musicians of Barquisimeto – and that it's the advice they want to pass on to our students. Play hard, work hard; play with intensity and energy and courage. *Chasquido al talon!*

Tricia Tunstall

"Through music, the children of El Sistema become citizens of the world." – José Antonio Abreu

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## News Notes

In February, third year Sistema Fellow David France launched **The Roxbury Youth Orchestra** through his organization **Revolution of Hope**. It is an after-school community string orchestra with an embedded choir drawing teenage beginners from one middle and two high schools in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood. Most of the instruction utilizes peer teaching and the pedagogy of Ivan Galamian, Shinichi Suzuki, Sally O'Reilly, and Roland and Almita Vamos. The program is a fiscally sponsored project of Fractured Atlas and is made possible by a generous instrument donation from the foundation Hungry For Music and a grant from TUGG (Technology Underwriting Greater Good). Check out their *first day* here: <http://bit.ly/VXA4Fx>. For more information contact: [info@revolutionofhope.org](mailto:info@revolutionofhope.org).



*Musicians in The Roxbury Youth Orchestra practicing with David France. Photo: Craig Dwyer*

**Early Childhood Curriculum Materials** available! An original Paper Orchestra Curriculum from El Sistema at Conservatory Lab (Boston) outlines the path from pre-K general music to kindergarten orchestra. Recently presented at the ASTA (American String Teachers Association) National Conference, the curriculum was written by Rebecca Levi, inspired by Josbel Puche (Caracas), and filled out by strings teacher Levi Comstock. It's available free; please contact [rlevi@conservatorylab.org](mailto:rlevi@conservatorylab.org) if you would like a copy. [https://www.dropbox.com/s/budv178c0p3mqat/Paper\\_Orchestra\\_Scope\\_%26\\_Sequence\\_Final.pdf](https://www.dropbox.com/s/budv178c0p3mqat/Paper_Orchestra_Scope_%26_Sequence_Final.pdf)

Arts educators struggle to develop compelling advocacy frameworks and arguments that tell their story in a way that enables others to hear and change their actions. The metaphoric frame of "the ripple effect" positions a vibrant arts sector as a public good that produces a ripple of community benefits. Research finds that the existing definitions and default understandings of the arts that citizens carry inside – about great beauty and specialness, etc. – all work against the view of art as a public good. The new report **The Arts Ripple Effect: A Research-Based Strategy to Build Shared Responsibility for the Arts** by the Topos Partnership for the Fine Arts Fund in Cincinnati is available free at [www.theartswave.org/impact/research-reports](http://www.theartswave.org/impact/research-reports).

**The Sparkplug Foundation** primarily supports nonprofit organizations with start-up projects in the fields of music, education, and grassroots organizing. In the Music category, they support emerging professional musicians or music-development programs. In Education and Teaching, they fund projects that deal with "the whole student" and with learning as a community activity. Online questionnaires due by April 8, 2013. Letters of intent are due April 15, with final applications due by May 15, 2013. Visit the Foundation's website to review the funding guidelines and online application instructions. <http://sparkplugfoundation.org>

Looking for **back issues of The Ensemble**? A full archive of issues, with content listed for each issue, is now available at Tricia Tunstall's new website: [http://www.changingliveselsistema.com/?page\\_id=7](http://www.changingliveselsistema.com/?page_id=7). Scroll down to the middle of the page. The website also includes her new blog and other useful resources.

On March 22, the **Longy School of Music of Bard College** signed a formal partnership alliance with Fundamusical (El Sistema) in Venezuela to foster the coordination of future student exchanges and residencies, performances, and teacher training opportunities, including online courses and resource libraries. [http://www.longy.edu/news/press\\_releases/2013-03-27\\_el\\_sistema.htm](http://www.longy.edu/news/press_releases/2013-03-27_el_sistema.htm)

## Resources

**Recommended listening.** Peter Sellars' keynote speech at the March 13-15 Future Play symposium (presented by the Barbican Center and Take a Stand/LA Phil) is a powerful and provocative call to action. Over an hour, but stay with it: <https://soundcloud.com/barbican-music/sets/peter-sellars-future-play>. Also recommended from the conference is Richard Holloway's speech: <https://soundcloud.com/barbican-music/richard-holloway-mp3>

Americans for the Arts has just released the first volume of a new **Arts Education Navigator** series of e-books to support educators, students and advocates. The first volume is **Facts & Figures** on the benefits and status of arts education in the U.S. Copies are downloadable for free at: [http://artsusa.org/networks/arts\\_education/navigator.asp](http://artsusa.org/networks/arts_education/navigator.asp)

## Abreu Inspires Canada

*by Theodora Stathopoulos, President, CMEA; Board of Directors, ISME; Director, Viva Sistema! Montreal*

I believe that most Canadian music educators share José Antonio Abreu's dream to give all children the gift of music. Many of us also share his quest for excellence, his love for humanity, and his conviction that music is important in the development of self, character and ultimately citizenship.

As the El Sistema movement has grown in Canada, the Canadian Music Educators Association (CMEA) came to realize that it was important to articulate our position. Following internal discussion, document review and conversations with El Sistema stakeholders across the country, a **position paper** offering support for El Sistema-inspired programs in Canada emerged in November 2012. "It is felt by the review committee," the paper concludes, "that El Sistema has benefits that resonate with the mandate and mission of CMEA".

The paper clarifies that El Sistema programs should not be considered a replacement for school music programs, and that they "must not lessen the responsibility of governments at all levels to provide quality music education within school systems."

I am proud that during my term as CMEA President, our board of directors unanimously supported this endorsement of the El Sistema movement for its potential benefits to Canadian children and its relevance to music education in Canada.

I personally support El Sistema because I believe that the best form of advocacy for music education is seeing children performing frequently, happily and well. This is precisely what Maestro Abreu has done: he has demonstrated the students' joy in performing music. By doing so, he inspires skeptics, convinces funders, motivates musicians and teachers, and delights parents and students, thus creating a passion for music education compared only to the passion of sports enthusiasts for World Cup games!

I wish more of us music educators would advocate publicly with passion and zeal about the mission we are fulfilling through the teaching of music. This is what advocacy for music education should be.

Thank you, José Antonio Abreu!

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**"It's very important to have our complete continent together. No South, no North, no Central ... one America."  
– Gustavo Dudamel, Music Director, Los Angeles Philharmonic**