

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

## The Roots of Art for Social Change

By Sebastian Ruth, Founder/Director of *Community MusicWorks*

One of the essential inquiries that drive me and my colleagues at Community MusicWorks explores the connection between our musical activities as classical musicians and the important issues in our communities and society today. Does being a musician in the art-music performing tradition necessarily put us in a rarefied space, disconnected from some of the immediate challenges of poverty, racism, and social barriers facing our communities? Can our work as performers and educators respond to social issues in effective ways, even if we choose to play and teach music that's not always overtly political?

These questions have led me to look into the approaches of philosophers and practitioners who have preceded us. Specifically, I have started

with John Dewey's landmark text from 1934, *Art as Experience*, in which he opens the question of how we may move to "restore the continuities" between art and the everyday world. He sees the impulse for aesthetic and artistic experience as a fundamentally human one, connected to our biology; it expresses our search for clarity and order in a chaotic world, and for experiences that bring satisfaction and meaning to our lives.

I draw two overlapping conclusions from Dewey's argument. One is that art, arising from a basic human impulse, is innate in everyone and accessible to everyone. The second is that the museums, concert halls, and theaters we associate with the arts are merely constructs to house artistic experiences. Dewey warns that when we think we must go to museums to understand art, we have missed the point. The true significance of artistic experience lies in bringing people closer to themselves, not the opposite.

From this starting place, the philosophies of Maxine Greene and Herbert Marcuse are an important next step. Greene's central insight is that aesthetic encounters can open people to new perspectives on their lives – and they can then begin to imagine possibilities other than their current lived experiences. For Marcuse, the aesthetic dimension is a place wholly separate from the logic of our everyday world, and the great advantage of entering into works of art is that we may be able to look back on our lives anew.

By implication, artistic experiences can lead young

people to see that life circumstances are not fixed, that it's possible to break out of convention and grow into new ways of being and interacting in the world. For us as educators, the question is how we can make these kinds of imaginative openings available to our students. In particular, how we do address issues of power and inequality, so that the artistic work is delivered not with missionary zeal but as genuinely reciprocal sharing?

The framework of Brazilian education theorist Paolo Freire is crucial here, helping us to consider how our educational practice

can respect difference and value collective inquiry over authoritarian instruction. The work of Robert Greenleaf, written on a different continent and in a different context, is also helpful, offering the idea of the "servant leader" who always leads from the perspective of how her work may improve the lives of others.

It's important to learn from community arts practitioners as well as theorists. I'm particularly inspired by the New Deal federal arts programs of the 1930s. As the United States was reeling from economic near-collapse and looking to rebuild, major funding for the arts became an important strategy not only to put artists back to work, but also to re-energize the spirit of the country. Interestingly, the architects of some of these programs were listening to Dewey's lectures and immediately implementing his ideas in national projects. Public murals in government buildings and schools, many of which are preserved to this day, are the best known of these projects. But equally important were the community arts centers, which were developed to ensure that people from any community or demographic background could access high-quality arts experiences.

As we strive to make our musicianship impactful in the world, the legacy of these visionary thinkers and initiatives can provide inspiration. They remind us that art is a way for all people to find and make meaning in their lives and a vehicle for reimagining lives and societies.



Sebastian Ruth teaches CMW viola student Joshua Rodriguez (now a college graduate).  
Photo: Jori Ketten

## FROM THE EDITOR

When the YOLA kids performed at the [Superbowl Halftime Show](#), what did you see? I ask, because I'm struck by how differently people saw things during those thirteen globally watched minutes. Some saw an exhilarating, first-time-in-history conjunction of El Sistema students with pop mega-stars, onstage before the largest television audience on earth. Others saw a disappointing missed opportunity for the world to learn about El Sistema, since the kids and Dudamel were never identified during the show. Some were delighted to see classical instruments and musicians included in a pop extravaganza. Others were upset that they weren't playing classical music.

So much for what viewers experienced. There's another story here – a more important one, I think – about what the kids experienced. "The twelve televised minutes were the least important moments of the entire process, from an educational standpoint," said Rebecca Sigel of the L.A. Phil Education Department. "There was so much learning and growth beyond the glitz and glamor." She cited the rehearsals and recording sessions in which the kids often had to summon both focus and flexibility to learn new parts instantaneously.

"Our students were treated as professional artists throughout, and this upped their game," said Rebecca's colleague Gretchen Nielsen. Leni Boorstin, Director of Community Affairs, added, "Think of the challenges and life lessons of bringing all this back to their own community and orchestra!"

So perhaps what the 116 million viewers saw is not as important as what the 41 young musicians learned. This perspective is especially important for those in the Sistema field (i.e., most of us) who don't have the capacity to put students on prime-time TV with superstars. Similar learning can be found in any experience that involves working with professional artists, focusing and adapting under pressure, and stretching beyond comfort zones to new genres and new kinds of expressivity.

One recent example of such high-octane learning was the OrchKids' participation in the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's Centennial concert, when they joined for the finale of Ravel's *Bolero*.

The mass media will always want stories about hugging Beyonce. But the real learning lies in stretching toward new levels of excellence and new levels of comradeship. Bravo YOLA, for keeping your eyes on that prize.

Tricia Tunstall

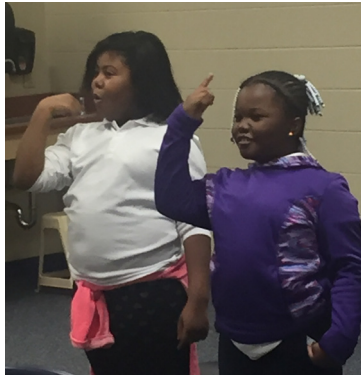
**"Tocar y Luchar? We also had to make the Sistema's bounties known – and not only the artistic benefits, but the social and community ones as well." – José Antonio Abreu**

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## News Notes

The **Cincinnati Choral Academy** is an initiative of the Cincinnati Children's Choir, the May Festival Chorus, and the Vocal Arts Ensemble.

This is the fourth all-choral Sistema-inspired program in the U.S., and perhaps the only one with three sponsoring partners. Founder/director and lead teacher Sarah Grogan and an accompanist on



*CCA singers use hand gestures to shape vowels for a richer sound. Photo: Trina Carter*

staff receive administrative support from the three partnering organizations. They recently started the program with 30 third-grade (mostly) children at two elementary schools in the Cincinnati public school district. Rehearsing two days a week for two hours a day at each school, they dedicate one hour each day to choral rehearsal and one hour to musicianship and music literacy, focusing on vocal technique, physical movement and aural skills. They plan to add a grade each year, and eventually to become a third- through sixth-grade program. [sgrogan@cincinnati choir.org](mailto:sgrogan@cincinnati choir.org)

**Sistema Toronto**, in partnership with **OrKidstra** (in Ottawa) and **Sistema Aeolian** (in London, Ontario), have created the **Sistema Ontario Association**, in response to the wishes and aspirations of the ten Sistema-inspired stakeholders in the province. The association is an effort to gain greater visibility and collective identity in the eyes of the provincial government and other funders with provincial focus. Future funding is one feature on a short list of responsibilities and roles that Sistema Ontario seeks to fulfill on behalf of member organizations, and significant interest has already arisen from some in the private and education sectors. A proposal as part of the 2016 Provincial pre-budget consultations is already underway, directed by a Provincial Parliament member.

Last month, despite a gigantic snowstorm, almost fifty percent of the **Sistema Fellows alumni** got together for a **reunion** sponsored by NEC's Sistema Fellowship Resource Center. 2014 Sistema Fellow Beverly Hiong wrote a blog that shares some of the experience: <http://sistemafellows.typepad.com/my-blog/2016/02/looking-to-the-future.html>

## Resources

Sebastian Ruth (Founder and Artistic Director of Community MusicWorks in Providence, RI – see first-page article) has been working with Yale University to create a free **online course on Music and Social Action** which is now available through Coursera. Exploring the contributions of key writers and thinkers over the past century, the course inquires into the role of performing musicians in the world, and their potential impacts on our cultures and societies. <https://www.coursera.org/learn/music-and-social-action>

A "white paper" from the National Center for Arts Research (NCAR) at Southern Methodist University examines **the distinguishing characteristics of arts organizations that primarily serve African-American, Asian-American and Hispanic/Latino communities**. The study provides insights, based on measurable data, about the operating contexts and unique challenges these organizations face, hoping to provide a more nuanced understanding of culturally specific organizations and to help establish a more equitable measure of their performance. The paper "Does 'Strong and Effective' Look Different for Culturally Specific Organizations?" is available at: <http://tinyurl.com/z3mp2kr>

Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute has just released a report by Dennie Palmer Wolf (who is also leading the first major research study of U.S. El Sistema-inspired programs) on **the importance of music learning in early childhood**. "Why Making Music Matters: Music and Early Childhood Development" is a valuable and readable compendium of research-based foundation knowledge. Available at: <http://tinyurl.com/ju7n6lb>

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## Asking Why in the M.A.T.

*By Katherine Swaydis, Music Teacher, Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, Los Angeles, CA*

I began teaching in an El Sistema-inspired program in 2011. After three years, I decided I needed to learn more about what it means to be an educator in an El Sistema-inspired setting. I moved to Los Angeles and enrolled the **Longy Masters of Arts in Teaching Program**.

In the MAT program, I am constantly challenged to ask "why"? Why use classical music as a vehicle for social change? Why an orchestra? How is El Sistema-inspired pedagogy different from what music educators have done for centuries? I had never really asked myself these questions before. I had simply thought, "I love playing my horn, and it brought me the opportunity to become the first in my family to earn a Bachelor's degree. My own life story is first-hand evidence that music education can spark personal and social change."

Now, I've begun to develop broader answers to these questions. Why classical music? Because it widens children's horizons culturally and artistically, which can lead to upward mobility for them and their families. Learning classical music may become a passion for some students. For others, it may be a steppingstone to explore other genres of music.

Why an orchestra? I believe that the orchestra provides an aural example of how each individual contributes to a whole. If a violinist misses a rehearsal, the orchestra sounds different. If a new horn player joins, the orchestra sounds different. Each person's contribution to the whole is an actual sound, which is missed if the person is not there.

Why group learning? Because learning music in a Sistema-inspired group setting results in an emphasis on community. I have played in many ensembles, both as a student and as a professional musician, and I have never experienced the feeling of musical community that I have witnessed in El Sistema-inspired ensembles.

As I continue to work in the field of El Sistema, I realize that asking myself "why" every step of the way is going to help me teach in a way that best serves my students.



*Applications are still being accepted for the Longy MAT that Katie Swaydis writes about here, including two full-tuition scholarships. Contact: [longy.edu/mat](mailto:longy.edu/mat).*

**"Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them." – James Baldwin, author**