

AN INQUIRY INTO CREATING INTENTIONAL SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH ENSEMBLE-BASED MUSIC PROGRAMS

From the 2014 class of Sistema Fellows at New England Conservatory

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Introduction

The Fifth Class of Sistema Fellows has written this paper together as a culmination of a year of inquiring, discussing, observing and experiencing. We hope this document will be viewed as our contribution to the ongoing discussion and dialogue around using music for social change, and we see our audience as the leaders and instructors working in the El Sistema-inspired field, as well as those interested in joining the field.

Following research by Elaine Sandoval (Class of 2013), many previous Fellows “express the need to develop pedagogy that is specifically designed for a socially-orientated music education program”¹. Although we have dedicated a section of this paper to pedagogical practices, we see this paper as more of a general inquiry than a handbook. Our main objective is to promote questioning, reflection and discussion around ensemble-based music programs that are focused on social outcomes.

We have also chosen not to suggest a definition of social change or what it looks like. Instead we offer a selection of mission statements (see Appendix) that show how other organizations have defined what social change means to them. These organizations are among those we have had the pleasure to visit during the fellowship. Throughout the paper, we draw on examples of best practice from the many socially driven initiatives we have encountered during the fellowship: Venezuela’s El Sistema, El Sistema-inspired programs, community music schools and arts programs. These programs include many different forms and models, a variety of artistic genres, and international settings. The collection of examples has been selected as experiences that particularly resonated with us, and have not necessarily been evaluated for their effectiveness. Rather than presenting scientific research, we hope to encourage new perspectives and reflection.

Following the spirit of an inquiry, this paper poses questions and considers some possible answers. The questions raised by this inquiry have been organized into the following sections:

- I. Social Impact - “How can we consider the impact of intentional social change in a wider context?”
- II. Community Engagement - “How can a program involve all constituents and become an intrinsic part of the community?”
- III. Organizational Culture - “How can a program reflect the social change it wants to see?”
- IV. Artistic and Educational Practices - “How can a program cultivate social change through its artistic and educational practices?”

We hope that by considering these questions, ensemble-based music programs can better determine what social change looks like in their community and how it can be reflected in their programming.

¹ “Wish Fulfilled: A Sistema Fellows Program Interim Report” (Boston, 2013), 28.

Executive Summary

Social Impact

First, we challenge programs to question what exactly the intentional catalyst is that drives social change in their program. We then ask programs to think of their impact not only on individuals, but to consider how they are building social capital in communities. In addition, we posit that taking a longer-term view of impact could lead to short-term decision-making that would align better with the program's vision. Finally, we take a broad view of social programs and put music programs in that context. We ask if music programs are more efficient than other social programs in reaching particular goals, and question if there are the unique outcomes a music program can achieve that will ensure the sustainability and advancement of the field.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is a dynamic, collaborative process amongst music organizations and its constituents. By aligning respective organizational mission and community needs at the outset, in-depth musical experiences can be directed toward a sustained, evolving continuum of intentional social change. At the basis of these efforts are the building, maintaining and managing of relationships through the perpetual dialogue of all stakeholders in the design of the program. We explore three fundamentals: Leadership, Ownership and Partnership.

Leadership in the context of community engagement requires patience, flexibility and creativity. In addition to embodying the vision and mission of the organization, leadership structures need to embrace the community's capacity, the time, the place as well as the sequence of potentially scaling the growth of the organization as appropriate.

Authoritarian Leadership is a style of leadership where the executives clearly define tasks, closely track processes and results, and are responsible for making main decisions.

Facilitative Leadership focuses on taking a step back and allowing people to be at their best. With the perspective of the "best outcome being the group outcome", facilitative leaders value the expertise of their team, and contribute through providing support, advice and resources.

Ownership, in the context of community engagement, invites all the stakeholders to safeguard shared intrinsic values. By taking responsibility with cultural sensitivity and awareness, respecting and protecting identities and associations, organizations and its constituents are able to meet with equal footing.

Broad Base of Ownership: Ownership of the partnership should go beyond the initiators and primary leaders. It is essential that those most directly involved in implementing partnership activities - instructors, artists, parents, administrators- have a strong sense of involvement and control.

Partnership, in the context of community engagement, is a collaborative effort between an arts organization and some manner of constituent(s). This can include other arts organizations, performance venues, schools and even the community at large. A shared vision, joint needs assessment, and clear goals fuel these partnerships from the very beginning.

Organizational Culture

Many programs identify the students and the effect the program wishes to have on them as the main priority in their mission. However, even if it is not implicitly included in the mission statements, most programs that we

visited had the view that social change does not just happen with the students, but it is part of the entire organizational culture: students, staff, parents and other constituents.

To what extent is there a sense of collective ownership in your organization?

There should be a collective commitment to the shared mission and vision of your program to create a positive working culture. It is also important to maintain a collective understanding of expectations and objectives, from using team agreements to clear agendas for meetings. Consider a set of agreed criteria for collective consensus making.

How do members of the organization relate to and collaborate with each other?

Your organization should be in agreement on the guidelines and expectations of the group's behavior, and there should be space given to reflecting on how the group is working. Foster a sense of omni-directional mentorship, where all constituents are treated as colleagues and empowered to come up with their own ideas or projects. Encourage self-awareness of the varying skill-sets, strengths and weaknesses of the group, along with the personal communication and working styles of your team. Record how the organization unifies communication and understands staff-student boundaries, cultural awareness and students' experiences outside of the organization.

What needs to be considered when hiring a new member of staff?

When bringing on new people, consider the strongest skill sets of individual, identification with the mission/vision/core values and identification with the community. The hiring process will shape the kinds of candidates you encounter and what skills you can glean during the process. Consider the background you want in a candidate, and the compensation required for the various backgrounds. Be intentional about the orientation process for new members of your organization, whether staff, student, or volunteer.

How can your program support professional development and spirit of lifelong enquiry?

Offer opportunities for colleagues to reflect on and research the issues of their community, to share new ideas and collaborate on their delivery. Facilitate dialogue and harness collective experience in moving towards a greater understanding of how to serve your community through music.

How do you support the teaching and artistry of your staff?

If you have staff members who have less classroom teaching experience, it is important to prepare them for the classroom before they enter. Provide feedback on a regular basis in order to give instructors the opportunity to reflect on their work. Support planning time for your instructors. Create opportunities for your staff to get together and share teaching strategies.

Encourage staff members to create art together. Allow for performing opportunities at your organization. Extend the opportunities for your students to your staff members.

How does your program integrate the ideas of students into its fabric?

Some programs have one-on-one meetings with students, so that each student's concerns and needs are met throughout the year. At several organizations, staff members take the time to discuss their students with all the staff present. Involving students in your decision-making process is a powerful way to stay connected to the main constituents of your program.

How can interpersonal relationships be strengthened among all members of the program?

Food can always bring people together. Find appropriate ways to celebrate your participants and socialize outside of programming and meetings.

How do you collaborate with organizations doing similar work?

Consider exchanging instructors or staff members with a nearby program for a short time. Collaborate on group performing opportunities with other organizations. Share repertoire resources, pedagogical practices and other

strategies for improving your program. Collaborating on professional development can spread the wealth of knowledge in your region while diffusing financial responsibility between several organizations.

Artistic and Educational Practices

As the field expands and initiatives take shape across the United States and abroad, artistic and educational programming of various programs will diversify and mold to the culture and community from which they come. However, what remains constant is the field's unifying desire to identify and develop the social outcomes they hope to see in their students through music. As such, how can artistic and educational programming be intentionally shaped such that they reflect this mission of social change?

How does one create a positive classroom culture?

If El Sistema-inspired programs truly strive to instill a sense of ownership in the students, it may be critical to involve them in creating student centered, value-centric set of expectations. In modeling the behavior that we hope to see in our students, instructors should use positive language, such as consequences with empathy and enforceable statements. An instructor can exercise both approachable and credible demeanors to effectively create a productive and positive learning atmosphere. The structure and pacing of lessons, using hooks, kinesthetic release and effective transitions, can keep students engaged. Incorporating student input can encourage students to learn from each other.

How can one support development of social skills in the classroom, rehearsals or performances?

In rehearsals, instructors may incorporate different styles of peer-to-peer teaching to enhance student learning. In rehearsals, instructors may create space for student-centered rehearsal practices, such as sectionals, rotating seat order, conductor-less playing, student conducting and collaborative interpretation. In performances, students might moderate the concert, lead an interaction with the audience or write program notes.

Some community arts organizations incorporate non-musical programming, in which students explore and ask questions about nonmusical issues, such as identity, leadership and social change. These non-musical programming take many forms, including weekly dinners, discussion in rehearsals, and student centered workshops during conferences.

How might one incorporate creative music making, and why?

Improvisation can be used within the musical ensemble-based learning environment in order to achieve a diverse set of skills or values, such as listening, responding to the environment and promoting positive social interactions. Composition, unlike improvisation, is a lasting and tangible evidence of creative accomplishment. Through composing, the student can have the power of ownership, in addition to the learning, responding and performance.

How does the choice of repertoire influence the social impact of our program?

Familiar and unfamiliar music may have equally important but different places in programming. Classical music education, by virtue of being associated with a higher status, may be one way to access more educational and financial opportunities for many. Because repertoire shapes the learning of an instrument, transmission of emotions, and storytelling, it may influence pedagogy. Classically trained musicians may find teaching different styles of music unfamiliar. Given that authenticity is important, classically trained musicians may benefit from scaffolding in developing the capacity to teach different styles of music. Repertoire choice may affect how a particular program can engage and collaborate with other music programs and instructors.