

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

## Indigenous Student Programs in Canada

By Kari Chastko, Teaching Artist, *Sistema Winnipeg, Canada*

As Sistema-inspired programs have become increasingly numerous in Canada, several programs have been established in Indigenous communities where leaders have identified this model of intensive, group-based musical instruction as a means to tackle social challenges and effect positive change in their communities.

The incorporation of traditional forms of music is an essential feature of these programs. As Darlene Nuqingaq of the *Iqaluit Music Society* points out, the content of curriculum and programming demonstrate where value is placed. Accordingly, the Iqaluit Music Society offers Inuit throat-singing and drum dancing as important components of their programming, along with other instruments and genres. Open engagement with students and community leaders is essential to programs in Indigenous communities, since many instructors and program administrators are from outside the community. To non-Indigenous educators, Nuqingaq advises, "Find the time to learn about the Inuit/First Nations' world-view and perspective. This kind of work is difficult; it takes wisdom to recognize the importance of learning about and showing respect for students' traditions before teaching them another culture's traditions."

The presence of Indigenous communities in Canada's Sistema-inspired movement has also created many opportunities for cultural engagement between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous Canadians. In 2013, students from *Ottawa's OrKidstra* participated in an exchange with students from the Iqaluit Fiddle Club in Nunavut, visiting Iqaluit in March to participate in performances and cultural activities, including Inuit throat singing and dog sledding, and to visit the Nunavut legislative assembly and Nunavut Research Institute. Iqaluit students visited Ottawa in April, performing alongside OrKidstra students with the National Arts Centre Orchestra, and touring Ottawa's landmarks and museums. This exchange offered students from both programs a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to discover what makes each community unique and what values are common to both.

Sistema New Brunswick's nucleo at the *Mah-Sos School in Tobique First Nation* is another inspiring example of cross-cultural engagement. Community leaders

in Tobique invited children from the town of Perth-Andover (many of whom had never been to Tobique, a ten-minute drive away) to join their nucleo. This visionary decision to integrate both communities into a single program has created a new relationship between the town and the First Nation, as students form friendships and family and friends attend



*Traditional native drumming is incorporated in the music program of Sistema New Brunswick (Canada) at its Tobique First Nations Centre. Photo: Dave Halpine*

performances together. There is now a greater awareness of and respect for Maliseet culture, with traditional drumming songs incorporated into the repertoire. By bringing children together to work toward common musical and social goals and create a pattern of respectful, constructive engagement, Sistema Tobique proves the potential for Sistema-inspired programs to build collaboration and understanding between divided communities. This is extremely relevant for Canadian society, as we grapple with the legacy of colonialism and try to create new, positive relationships between Indigenous peoples and other Canadians on the basis of truth and reconciliation.

*Sistema Winnipeg* works in an urban context with a diverse group of students, including approximately 40% First Nations and Métis students. The program seeks to reflect the diversity of the entire student population, and has incorporated First Nations and Métis culture into its programming for all students. Some important aspects of this initiative include using the Seven Grandfather Teachings of the Anishinaabe as a guide to community life; including Métis fiddling and repertoire in the curriculum; and collaborating with a school Pow Wow club. In a comprehensive longitudinal study of the program conducted by Dr. Francine Morin of the University of Manitoba, students scored high on an assessment for ethnic identity and respect for cultural differences, and families report an increased sense of inclusion within the school community.

While the social goals of Sistema-inspired programs in Indigenous communities are the same as those worldwide, it is inspiring to see the many ways programs respond to local needs and opportunities through creativity, collaboration, and cultural engagement.

## FROM THE EDITOR

Our lead article this month highlights the challenges and opportunities, for Sistema-inspired programs, of serving communities with rich and vital ethnic music traditions of their own. Embracing those traditions wherever they exist, and helping students develop musical skills inside them, is an essential part of Sistema work. In Brazil, we heard kids in Sistema-inspired programs move effortlessly from Mozart to samba. In Colombia, we saw written Sistema arrangements of music in the folkloric traditions of various regions. In Mexico and California, some nucleos include mariachi in their repertoires. In Venezuela, we heard cuatro ensembles alongside orchestras, and choirs singing both joropo music and Latin motets.

All of which leads me to wonder: where are *our* communities' ethnic musical traditions?

Of course, with our melting pot populations, we encompass students from literally hundreds of ethnic traditions. But most of them grow up with only a dim idea, if any, of their musical heritages; these traditions tend to be obscured by the avalanche of commercial pop music that blankets our students' daily lives. The blues, jazz and gospel of African-American traditions; the many forms of Latin American traditional dance music; instrumental and choral traditions such as bluegrass, zydeco, and Appalachian folk, the Great American Songbook of classic musical theater and jazz standards—these are all background, at best, in the audio universe of our students, replaced by a ubiquitous soundtrack of hip hop, top forties pop, and Disney songs. This is not to say that this music is without musical merit; but it does mean that with the important exception of gospel-oriented church music, there are few ways for children to make personal connections to the music of their ethnic heritages.

I think that whenever possible, it's important for Sistema programs to bridge this gap, and include in their repertoires music from one or more of their students' ethnic heritages. Just as classical music enriches children's expressive and emotional experience, so can the classic music of other traditions enrich a child's palette of sounds and feelings. And if, in the process, her sense of the value in her own musical lineage is strengthened, that's a benefit that goes to the heart of the Sistema project.

*Tricia Tunstall*

**"Wherever there is an impact evaluation study, the results are unanimous. Involvement becomes a weapon against poverty and inequality, violence and drug abuse." – José Antonio Abreu**

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## News Notes

**Music Mission San Francisco** (MMSF) began this past October at the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts. After only three months, the program expanded to an additional site, bringing the number of children served to 40. MMSF meets only four hours per week, but presented a first concert in December. It partners with the Marin Symphony and with the Open String Foundation, which will provide instruments for

three years. Christopher O'Riley, of National Public Radio's "From The Top," serves as Artistic Advisor. The founder and artistic director is Margaret Gonzalez,

a former student in Venezuela's El Sistema, where she performed with the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra under Gustavo Dudamel. Margaret has been a faculty member in several El Sistema-inspired programs on the West Coast. To learn more, visit: <http://www.musicmissionsf.org>

The just-released new book **El Sistema: Music for Social Change** contains essays from a variety of perspectives and is edited by Sistema Fellow (and founding Director of YOLA at HOLA for five years) Christine Witkowski. Book sections include a broad setting of context for the movement, program portraits from around the world, teaching and learning practices, and solutions to a range of challenges. Hardcover copies available at [http://www.musicroom.com/se/id\\_no/01123363/details.html](http://www.musicroom.com/se/id_no/01123363/details.html), and Kindle and e-reader versions available at [Amazon](http://www.amazon.com). Paperback to be released later this year.

The music industry's biggest acts appear in the **Super Bowl halftime show**. Don't head to the kitchen on Feb. 7 during this year's halftime because the headliners are **Beyoncé, Coldplay and ... YOLA (Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles)**, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel. Expected audience is over 118 million.

## Resources

We often hear from subscribers to *The Ensemble* that they value the **research links** we include. Sistema Fellow Lorrie Heagy, director of JAMM (Juneau Alaska Music Matters), is helping us all by creating a **user-friendly archive of the studies** she finds most useful for advocacy purposes. Thank you, Lorrie. <http://www.juneaumusicmatters.com/advocacy.html>

The quarterly magazine of Chorus America, called *The Voice*, has a **cover story featuring the four El Sistema-inspired chorus-only programs in the U.S.** The article is available online at: <https://www.chorusamerica.org/education-training/el-sistema-choruses>

New research reported in *Evolution and Human Behavior* affirms that **choral singing increases the sense of connectedness** with others, reduces feelings of isolation, and increases pro-social behavior – possibly because of its evolutionary advantage in social bonding. <http://tinyurl.com/zsfh8gv>

A new study from Canada reports that 3rd and 4th grade children who take music lessons (even if mandatory) developed more **pro-social behaviors and empathy** than children who didn't have music lessons. However, the positive effect was significant only for students who started with poor pro-social skills before their music study began. <http://tinyurl.com/jjdllcs>

Celebrating its 50th anniversary, the **National Endowment for the Arts is launching Creativity Connects**, with pilot grant opportunities that support connections between arts organizations and organizations in non-arts fields, and that show how the arts power a wider range of benefits. Find out more at: <http://tinyurl.com/h69ahy9>. There was an explanatory webcast on January 27 that will be available as an archive on January 29, and applications are due March 3.

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## Where's the Rigor?

*By Norma Nuñez Loaiza, Program Director, El Sistema Lehigh Valley, Allentown (PA) Symphony Association*

It has been four months since I moved to the United States, and I am very excited about working with an El Sistema-inspired program here. The Allentown Symphony Association has supported **El Sistema Lehigh Valley** for the past five years, and although I am its most recent member, it feels like home already. Among our children, parents, staff and partners, there is clearly an understanding of the program's importance to this diverse and growing community. There is an great willingness to support it, and a lot of passion.

I am concerned, however, about the lack of discipline and intensity regarding children's involvement – not only here, but also in programs I've observed elsewhere in the U.S. This is very different from the Venezuelan approach with which I am so familiar. In Venezuela, students are ingrained with a strong appreciation for El Sistema and what it represents. We feel compelled to go to school in the morning and practice with El Sistema in the afternoon, understanding these activities as important responsibilities that will profoundly impact our development into successful young adults.

Therefore it was a shock to discover that in many U.S. programs, even though students have a commitment of five days a week for two hours each day, that commitment is expected to be flexible, in view of the fact that El Sistema may not be their priority. We compete with multiple other programs that are not necessarily as rigorous as our own. Consequently, students, parents and even teaching artists practice a level of flexibility that may not be conducive to the kids' educational and social needs.

It is important to understand that demanding rigor does not equal saying that students shouldn't have fun. Rather, it means that they should learn to associate achievement with fun. It is immensely rewarding to master an instrument, participate in a successful concert, and know that you have met not only your own expectations, but also those of your peers and teachers. In order to reach this point, it's necessary to make sacrifices of time and comfort. This is the message we need to grasp throughout all of El Sistema's initiatives. The rewards of accomplishing something great aren't just fun – they last for the rest of your life.



*MMSF students proudly hold their violins on the day they received them.*

Photo: Adrian Arias/MCCLA Multimedia

**"We lose hope because we lose perspective – we lose sight of the accretion of incremental, imperceptible changes which constitute progress." – Rebecca Solnit, author, historian, activist**