

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

## Elevating the Holiday/Winter Concert

By Nick Malinowski, Executive Director, *Kidznotes*, Durham, NC

Every year, one of the highlights of the winter concert at Sistema Ravinia in Chicago is the moment when the young musicians whack their guests on the head. Let me be more specific: the real highlight is when one young musician almost whacks a guest on the head with a boomwhacker the size of a pool noodle.

In "A Boomwhacker Christmas," the orchestra accompanies a small group of students who play Christmas melodies using boomwhackers. Sistema Ravinia elevates the moment by bringing 8 guests from the audience up to the stage, giving them hardhats, and whacking out the tunes on top of their helmeted heads. Near the grand finale, one young musician (usually the smallest in the ensemble) pulls out the biggest boomwhacker she can handle and starts to bring it down full force on an unsuspecting guest – only to be stopped at the last second by the conductor. It's a moment that no one in attendance forgets.

Sometimes it seems like we spend so much time thinking about repertoire (Should we do holiday music? Which holidays? Christmas? Hanukkah? All secular stuff? Do we have to do "Jingle Bells" AGAIN?) that we don't stop to think about the power of the unique moment this concert presents to our students – especially our youngest students – and their families. For these students, the winter concert represents not just the culmination of weeks of dedicated hard work, but also a first opportunity to perform in public for their family and friends. We're remiss if we focus on the music more than the moment.

In their book *The Power of Moments: Why Certain Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact*, authors Chip and Dan Heath lay out the qualities that define the truly memorable moments of our lives. Their roadmap to creating meaningful, life-defining moments centers on three types of occasions: transitions, milestones, and pits. While our winter concerts should never constitute pits (though they're preceded by weeks of struggling out of many pits), they are important transitions and milestones and should be recognized, programmed, and designed as such.

According to the Heath brothers, transitions and milestones can be magnified by focusing on the following elements: elevation, insight, pride, and connection. Elevation can be manufactured by

boosting sensory appeal, raising the stakes, and breaking the script. Whacking a concert-goer on the head with a huge musical instrument does all three. It is a perfect example of using elevation to build a peak moment during a concert that should be a milestone.

Connection and pride are the forces that collide to mark a moment in [BRAVO Youth Orchestras'](#) winter concert each year in Portland. This concert is the first opportunity for their youngest musicians to perform publicly for their families. It's likely the first time that a child's family will publicly see her as a musician.

Months before this moment, every new musician starts her journey with BRAVO by constructing her papier-mâché learning violin. Members of each child's family are invited to join her in decorating the tool by which she'll prove her responsibility and maturity over the following months.

By the time the winter concert rolls around, children who have stuck with their commitment have earned their real violin. Recognizing this moment as a transition and a milestone, BRAVO builds on the family connection. At the start of the concert, all the new musicians line up single file in front of the stage, papier-mâché violin in hand. Standing across from each child is a family member who helped build and design the instrument the child holds. Students present the papier-mâché violins as a gift to their family, and family members place around their children's neck a medallion, bedecked in school colors, recognizing publicly the achievement earned through hard work. The pride in the room is palpable.

At [Play On, Philly!](#), insight is the key to marking the importance of the winter concert. Student and parent speakers are invited to share with the audience an anecdote from the year so far. Giving voice to their perspective in such a public venue, at such an important moment, allows parents and students to feel that their insights are genuinely valued by the entire team and family at POP.

At Kidznotes, as we start planning our winter concert, we are thinking about elevation, insight, pride and connection, as well as "Jingle Bells." We are inspired by the many ways our Sistema colleagues find to mark and elevate concert moments, and hope to continue exchanging ideas. And we are committed to focusing on the moment as much as the music.



Medallion ceremony at the BRAVO Portland Winter Concert, as older students sing "Family." Photo: Rich Kolbell

## FROM THE EDITOR

When does the percussion player in a symphony orchestra ever stand right by the principal clarinetist's shoulder?

The answer: when the [Sistema Europe Youth Orchestra](#) (SEYO) is rehearsing *Danzon Number 2* by Arturo Marquez – which begins in a sensuous hush, with a solo clarinet melody over woodblock beats. "It's just a few of you starting this beautiful piece," said Maestro Sascha Goetzel, who was leading the rehearsal. "So let's put you physically together, so that you can play fully together."

In a nutshell, that's the purpose of the entire SEYO Festival: bringing young musicians from Sistema programs all across Europe for ten days, to play fully together.

I was lucky enough to be at SEYO 2018, which was held this summer at the Birmingham Conservatoire in England (the venue changes each year) and involved 191 students from 17 countries, along with dozens of teachers and conductors (many from Latin America). The languages and cultures represented were not only those of each country's majority, but also those of many immigrant communities who came from countries outside of Europe. Even by the high standards of Sistema, it was an extraordinary celebration of social integration. "You," conductor Samuel Matus told them, "are the future of Europe."

The Festival was also a powerful celebration of youth voice. A cadre of Young Leaders chosen by the students themselves provided many kinds of leadership. Youth voice also emerged in the numerous Creative Composition workshops that happened every day between rehearsals.

We spoke with Simi Ambass, a Young Leader from London; he told us that he and his fellow Leaders began to encourage attendees to connect on social media even before the festival began. "And starting a week before, we did a countdown," he said. "Five days to SEYO! Four days to SEYO! That's why the energy you feel here is so high. Everybody was already really engaged when they got here. So when we feel tired or the music feels too hard – we still feel: I'm going into this rehearsal with my buddies."

At the final concerts, audiences were thrilled by the brilliance of their playing and the intensity of their listening. In fact, they had been playing and listening brilliantly all week long – and in the process, coming more and more fully together.

*Tricia Tunstall*

"Love is the quality of attention we pay to things." – J.D. McClatchy, poet

## News Notes

To honor Draylen Mason and keep his positive energy flowing, The Hispanic Alliance, parent organization of Austin Soundwaves, has launched the [Draylen Mason Fellows Program](#) for Austin area high school musicians. Fellows receive musical coaching, financial support and an opportunity to create their own performances in the community. For more: <https://thehispanicalliance.org/draylen>

The [Price Hill Creative Community Festival](#) (August 3, 4) has continued to grow. This year, over 1,750 people attended 60 performances in four venues. There were five Artists-in-Residence, each of whom co-created a brand new piece of collaborative performance with MYCincinnati students. This year, three students from Austin Soundwaves participated for the full two-week summer program and the culminating festival. <http://creativecommunityfestival.org/about/>

On August 15, in a public event with architect Frank Gehry and Maestro Gustavo Dudamel in attendance, the Los Angeles Philharmonic unveiled the [plans for its new YOLA center](#) in Inglewood (an ethnically-diverse community). This first purpose-built center for an El Sistema program in the U.S. (named for donors Judith and Thomas L. Beckmen) will be shared with the community, who can use it whenever YOLA is not working there. Take a look at the design of the extraordinary spaces and how they will be used: <https://tinyurl.com/y8xbo8uq>

## Resources

The [Fund for a Just Society](#), a program of the Unitarian Universalist Association, provides grants to nonprofit organizations in the U.S. and Canada that address issues of social and economic justice and have a plan for systemic social change. Special consideration is given to projects that are less likely to receive conventional funding because of the innovative or challenging nature of the work. Most grants range between \$6,000 and \$8,000. Requests are reviewed twice a year; the next application deadline is September 15, 2018. Guidelines: [https://](#)

[www.uufunding.org/fund-for-a-just-society.html](http://www.uufunding.org/fund-for-a-just-society.html)

Do you have a particularly promising young musician in your program? [YoungArts](#) is an application-based award for emerging artists ages 15–18 or in grades 10–12 from across the U.S.. Selected through an independent, “blind” adjudication process, YoungArts winners receive support, including financial awards of up to \$10,000, professional development and educational experiences working with renowned mentors, and performance and exhibition opportunities at some of the nation’s leading cultural institutions. Application deadline is October 12th. <http://www.youngarts.org/competition>.

All Sistema programs work on issues of student health, but only some recognize and prioritize [learning about stress, loneliness, making healthy life choices, building social bonds](#), etc., as health issues. An NEA report on Community Engaged Research on Arts and Health may encourage you to step up to actual research – not only to learn more, but also because formalizing a research project with a partner improves outcomes for students. It’s worth reading the report to consider what your program might do. <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Guide-to-Community-Engaged-Research-in-the-Arts-and-Health-March2017.pdf>

The [Fourth International Teaching Artist Conference](#) (ITAC4) of artists with a social impact mission will bring together over 200 delegate-artists Sept. 13-15 in New York City – the first time ITAC in the U.S. The conference is sold out, but many of the sessions and keynotes will be streamed live, available free and archived. These artists (of all disciplines) are building international connections and networks; join them. <http://www.itac-conference.com/conference/itac4/digital->

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## Working with Urban Youth

*by Adam Eccleston, Program Director, BRAVO Youth Orchestras in Portland, OR*

As a teacher, musician and administrator in an El Sistema-inspired program, I ask myself four principal questions every September. First, *Who are our students?* In my community, they are generally black and Hispanic, from low-income and/or single-parent households or dual language households. In choosing how to shape ensembles and repertoire, I rely heavily on my students’ backgrounds; I often make choices that help them learn from one another about their different languages, holidays, and cultures.

Second, *What do our students want?* Certainly, every student wants to feel successful. I believe that students also want to relate to what they’re playing. When I teach my ensembles Handel’s “Water Music,” I talk about London’s River Thames, which is like their city’s wonderful river. I tell them how the royal family has always been white – until now! My students create their own version of the royal court, making their own crowns and tiaras, scepters and capes – and taking turns walking and playing the piece!

Third, *What do our students need?* Our students benefit from regimens, such as class agreements and warm-up routines. Further, they need validation and positive reinforcement. For example, when Eric volunteered to help Felipe, who was struggling with a tough passage, I sent Eric a thank you card. Validation can also be in the form of inviting guest artists of various genres and cultural backgrounds. Every week for 30 minutes, our program brings in guest artists who introduce novel techniques such as sound bathing or looping; this encourages our students to explore the many forms music can take.

Lastly, *How can we, the teachers, fulfill their needs and ours?* Students need leaders and champions, especially ones that look like them and represent their future. If that is not you, that’s okay, as long as equity, diversity and variety are priorities in your ensemble. Most essential: talk! Talk to parents and caretakers, and to the classroom teachers who are with your students six hours a day. Maybe even invite them to concerts. They’ll be surprised what students can do through the power of music.

### **ACTION FOR THE MONTH:** Write Your Opposition to Gov’t Funding Cutbacks for Sistema Toronto

*In the June 2018 issue of The Ensemble, we announced a \$500,000 government grant to Sistema Toronto. In August this grant was rescinded in a budget cutback. Please write the Hon. Sylvia Jones, Minister of Tourism, Culture and Sport, who made this decision, to express your disagreement with budget balancing of this kind. Contact information and a sample letter are [here](#). Please support our friends at Sistema Toronto, even if you are in the U.S., just as you would want colleagues to support you if you needed it.*