

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

Illuminating True Progress for A//Students

By Reynaldo Ramirez, Program Director, *Soundscapes*, Newport News, VA

As a Sistema movement, the two main goals we aspire to are musical growth and social growth. We often use some iteration of the motto “social change through music.” However, it is often hard to show data that supports this. El Sistema-inspired programs tend to more easily keep track of information pertaining to musical growth. They accomplish this through playing tests, juries, and concerts.

In 2014, Soundscapes worked with Dr. David Dirlam to create an evaluation tool that would highlight progress (or lack of) in all the areas where Soundscapes aspires to have an effect. The result is a developmental rubric that identifies the following nine dimensions of importance in Soundscapes’ overall curriculum. I tend to think of these dimensions as a “35,000-foot-up view” of areas where we believe students participating in Soundscapes will improve.

- ✓ Behavior (Social)
- ✓ Instrument Care (Social/Musical)
- ✓ Aural Skills (Musical)
- ✓ Music Reading (Musical)
- ✓ Physical Technique (Musical)
- ✓ Sound Production (Musical)
- ✓ Practice Habits (Social)
- ✓ Ensemble (Social)
- ✓ Relation to Audience (Social)

There are four social and four musical dimensions, as well as one dimension (instrument care) that is categorized as both social and musical. Each dimension is then broken down into five ability markers: beginner, fundamental, intermediate, advanced, and inspiring/professional. Soundscapes staff (administration, musical, and behavioral) fleshed out definitions for each marker. The finished rubric has 45 different levels in which a student can achieve!

As our teachers began to evaluate the students, they often ignored the marker definitions and ranked students on their ability compared to others in the class. The idea of grading “on a curve” was so ingrained that it was a hard habit to break, despite repeated urgings to rate based on the definitions. After years of grading on a curve, the results looked stagnant. No matter how long a student stayed in the program, the best students were rated a 3 (intermediate) or above, the average student was rated a 2 (fundamental), and the lowest performing

students were rated a 1 (beginner). On paper, there was very little growth.

The problem was the teachers’ longstanding habit of grading on a curve. Our big clue to understanding this was noticing that even in the early stages, some students were being given ratings of intermediate to professional levels. Such a scenario, of course, was highly unlikely. We knew our students were getting better...but where was the proof?

In the fall of 2018, I began a deliberate process to train all the teachers on how to properly rate the students. We began training sessions by considering students we all knew and rating them individually. We then discussed our results with each other and had to justify why we rated each student the way we did. At first, teachers found themselves defaulting to “rating on a curve” rather than putting the attention on the individual student.

After several training sessions like this, the staff began to reach a consensus as to what each definition meant and how to identify it. They began to focus on each individual student’s progress not in relation to others, but only in relation to the definitions in the rubric. The results were amazing! Using true developmental ratings, we looked at how each student has grown over the life-cycle of the program.

On the occasion of their first rating, 50% of students are deemed beginners in relation to both social and musical skills. By the 11th rating, no students receive that designation.

The other 50% of students are rated “fundamental” in social and musical skill levels, on their first rating. By the 11th rating, very few students receive that rating.

By the 11th rating, 92% of the students receive a rating of “intermediate” in social and musical skills. NO students receive that rating in the beginning.

Particularly exciting is the close relationship between musical and social progress, across this time period. Our most exciting discovery is that we can actually show that social change can happen through music. Students progress through social and musical dimensions at the same rate, pointing to the fact that social growth is tied to musical growth. YES! We are meeting our mission!

For a link to the full report, click [here](#).

FROM THE EDITOR

When a famous conductor finishes an artist residency at a storied Ivy League university, he should be given a proper sendoff, right?

The members of the El Sistema [New Jersey Alliance](#), which includes all the Sistema-inspired programs in the state, thought so. So they brought in a 250-piece orchestra to do the job.

Early on April 29th, the very last day of Gustavo Dudamel’s season-long residency at Princeton, Sistema students from six cities across New Jersey (along with a few comrades from New York and Philadelphia) climbed out of buses and converged upon the university’s student center, replacing the hush of a Sunday morning college campus with the purposeful clamor of 250 Sistema kids on a mission to serenade the maestro.

They rehearsed all morning in tuttis and sectionals. Then they sat, palpably nervous, waiting for the great man – and then he came, and the kids got their first lesson in musical super-stardom, El Sistema style. He made his way to the front of the immense rehearsal hall by ignoring the aisle cleared for him and instead threading his way between the cellos and basses, the bassoons and trombones and percussionists, shaking hands with every single kid he passed. It took him a good five minutes.

Before the students played, they were given time to ask him some prepared questions. Dudamel’s responses, like his entrance, were a study in anti-celebrity. “How does it feel to be a leader of El Sistema?” asked one child.

“You are leaders of El Sistema, too,” he said. “Look at you here at Princeton, doing something new!”

Another student asked if he was happy to have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. “That star,” he responded instantly, “it’s yours too. That’s an El Sistema star; it belongs to all of us.”

With every question, Dudamel found a way to avoid what would have been the stock replies of most famous musicians, even the most gracious. He bypassed “I” completely and went straight to “we” with a consistency that perhaps only a long-time disciple of José Antonio Abreu can muster. When the kids played for him, he simply clapped and smiled. Their learning that day was more than musical; it was the clear message that at the heart of El Sistema is the indelible power of “we.”

Tricia Tunstall

“The rich have a duty to the poor which they will never pay financially. But they can pay it socially: to deprive the poor of the beauty of the highest art is a terrible form of oppression.” – José Antonio Abreu

News Notes

In May, [Accent Pontiac](#) students let everybody know their financial literacy message through a powerful student-composed piece of music. Partnering with Funding the Future's Nashville rock band GOODING and hip hop duo The Reminders, and with guest collective composition artists Dan Trahey, Pete Tashjian, and Emily Smith, Accent Pontiac hosted a financial literacy-themed composition workshop week that culminated in two performances at the Flagstar Strand Theatre in downtown Pontiac, Michigan. In the afternoon, they performed for 400 3rd to 5th grade students; in the evening, the theatre was open to the broader Pontiac community for our Rock 'n' Art\$ show as part of the Pontiac Arts Crawl. See some of it on video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aEgIDtlmVc&feature=youtu.be>

Both the Atlanta Music Project (AMP) and Conservatory Lab Charter School (CLCS) opened or broke ground on new facilities recently. AMP: <https://www.atlantamusicproject.org/amp-opens-new-center-for-performance-education/> and CLCS: <https://tinyurl.com/y283q8us>

For their tenth anniversary concert, the [Miami Music Project](#) sold out the New World Center, and in the same week had an ensemble of students play the national anthem before a Miami Heat basketball game on national television.

Resources

[Artists and Other Cultural Workers](#) is a new report from the National Endowment for the Arts that analyzes six federal data sets to capture a statistical profile of 11 artist occupations and several types of cultural workers who are non-artists. https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Artists_and_Other_Cultural_Workers.pdf

Sistema programs are often part of informal creative placemaking projects that don't use that title. A new white paper summarizes years of experience at The Kresge Foundation, which has invested in many projects that transform communities with arts engagement at the center. Can your program tap into this major national arts funding trend? Read [Creative Placemaking: Rethinking Neighborhood](#)

Change and Tracking Progress." Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/ybpqf3po>

Karma for Cara Foundation's Microgrant Program supports youth volunteerism and community service efforts throughout the United States. Young people 18 years of age or younger may apply for grants ranging from \$250 to \$1,000 to complete service projects in their communities. Funded projects include turning a vacant lot into a community garden, rebuilding a school playground, and helping senior citizens get their homes ready for winter. The Foundation wants the grants to fund the nuts and bolts of projects; therefore, stipends, facility rentals, and transportation costs are not funded. Application deadlines are quarterly throughout the year, and the remaining deadlines for 2019 are July 1 and October 1. <http://karmaforcara.org/apply-for-a-microgrant>

The learning gap between students from low income communities and students from communities with greater income leads to many opportunity inequities. This short article from EdSurge focuses on the extracurricular gap, reporting that by the end of a school year, low income students were three times less likely to participate in after-school programs, and spent at least 4,000 fewer hours in such programs than did their wealthier peers. <https://tinyurl.com/y2x2663u>

Students in Sistema-inspired programs often carry stress from their life situations into their learning opportunities. Some need counseling help, but most resilient young musicians do well with the support of sensitive and savvy teachers and kind friends. This article by Christine Ravesi-Weinstein (<https://tinyurl.com/y6r2ncob>) in *eschool News* details five things teachers can say and do to help students who seem anxious – and a link to note some things that are not helpful to do. Of course, teachers and staff members are not psychologists, but they are there with young lives many hours a week, and they care; often, they can be truly helpful.

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Ten Years of Learning

by Paloma Ramos, Chief Program Officer, [Harmony Project](#), Los Angeles, CA

After 10 years of programming at Harmony Project's [YOLA EXPO](#) site, what have we learned?

We have learned that 7 years old is generally too young to start the French horn; it's better to wait until at least 10 years of age. We learned that it's best to start classes a few weeks after school starts, and end them a few weeks before the school year ends.

We learned that private lessons are the only way to prepare students for any sort of audition or pre-professional study.

We learned that it is hard to find great teaching artists, and even harder to find great administrators, for this type of work. We learned that partnership is difficult! It's hard to make sure credit is received where credit is due. Oh, by the way: YOLA at EXPO Center is a partnership between the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association, Harmony Project, and the EXPO Center, a City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks facility.

We have known from the beginning that the most important ingredient in a successful program is excellent music education. The most important thing we have learned along the way is that this ingredient alone is not enough. In order to serve the students and families that need us most, we must be prepared to assist with anything else that might be standing in the way of their success. Harmony Project offers a broad range of services for areas where we have seen students struggle, including a fulltime Director of Community & Relational Engagement, a team of Social Service providers, a College Access & Alumni Manager, and a Manager of Teaching & Learning.

At times, we have tried to outsource these departments to other service providers in the area. Most of the time, it didn't work. The trust we've built over the years with our students and families is the access point for having an impact on areas besides music. The investment has been well worth the effort. Ten years in (18 years for Harmony Project on its own!), we continue to help our students and families change their lives for the better.

ACTION FOR THE MONTH: Support an Increase in Federal Arts in Education Funding

Write your Congressional representatives to urge their support for the proposed restoration of \$40 million for arts education funding at the U.S. Department of Education in the 2020 budget. Arts education funding can seem like a secondary priority, so it is important for your Senators and Congressperson to know that this particular funding is especially important to you. More info [here](#):