

Benefits of Mentoring with *OrKidstra*: Observations of U of O Students

As part of a three-day event built around the residency of the Simón Bolívar String Quartet co-hosted by The Leading Note Foundation and the Ottawa Chamber Music Society, a half-day session was held at the School of Music, University of Ottawa. The morning was built around three sessions: (i) a master class for University chamber ensembles guided by the Simón Bolívar String Quartet; (ii) student commentary on how mentoring with *OrKidstra* – the *El Sistema*-inspired program active in Ottawa – complements music programs offered by the University; and (iii) a roundtable discussion on the question of how best to link *El Sistema* programs with the university and the community at large. This section describes the feedback provided by the U of O mentors.

Margaret Tobolowska, cellist, music educator, co-founder of The Leading Note Foundation and Artistic Director of its *OrKidstra* program, introduced three music students – Kim Shields, Meagan McPherson and Yolande Laroche – who had worked with *OrKidstra* under the U of O Community Service Learning (CSL) program, asking them to comment on how their participation in *OrKidstra* as mentors and teachers had enhanced their formal music education.

The students made the following observations:

- Participating in a live classroom setting provides immediate feedback on teaching methods; the tips and tactics remain fresh in the mind and increase my understanding of what it is to be a teacher. It also improves my own performance skills;
- In connecting with *OrKidstra*'s kids, we both teach and learn;
- Connecting with the teachers in a teaching environment provides practical insights that we couldn't otherwise get;
- Many, if not most, music students will fail to find a position in an orchestra. Teaching is a way to use our skills and knowledge. Those who do find permanent orchestral positions may want to share their skills in proactive ways. Working with *OrKidstra* prepares you for the real world;
- The *El Sistema* approach has opened me to a new understanding of the role of music as a social program encouraging interdependence and growth at an early age. I now understand Maestro Abreu's statement that "spiritual abundance overcomes material scarcity."
- Working with *OrKidstra* has provided practical experience working with real kids in the real world. It has given life to the theories I learn in my university classes;
- Receiving credit for this practicum justified our adding it to our class and practice schedules and workload.