

Round Table Discussion: Linking *El Sistema* Programs With Community

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 round table discussion.

Moderator: Robin Higham, Senior Fellow at the University of Ottawa and Board Member of The Leading Note Foundation.

Participants:

- **Jonathan Govias**, conductor, teacher, author and *El Sistema* advocate;
- **Stéphane Lemelin**, music professor, Director of the School of Music at University of Ottawa, concert pianist, and recording artist;
- **Margaret Tobolowska**, co-founder of The Leading Note Foundation and Artistic Director of *OrKidstra*, former NACO cellist; and
- **Richard Hallam MBE**, National Music Education Grant Director, consultant to the UK's Department for Education, member of the steering group for In Harmony Sistema England and director of In Harmony Ltd.

Participants were invited to open with a few points about *El Sistema* and music education programs. What are the links? What should the links be?

Jonathan Govias drew a contrast between music education programs as understood generally in schools and universities, and the *El Sistema* approach: the former being inherently hierarchical and the latter focused on mutual sharing. He pointed out that the conservatory approach attempts to prepare 100% of students for a career in music when only about 5% would be successful. The remaining 95% were not given sufficient tools to pursue non-performance work in the field of music i.e. for a 'life' in music.

Stephane Lemelin commented that university music students have high ideals but it is hard for them to see how they might achieve their goals when they learn in isolation. Participating in a program such as *OrKidstra* gives them the chance to set their goals against reality, to see the impact of their skills and talents on children, while testing out interactions between teacher and student.

Richard Hallam stressed the importance of setting the vision of improved music education in the context of the times. He noted that early reports in the UK demonstrating the importance of music education were shelved due to lack of interest by policy makers at the time. Now the context in the UK has shifted and progress is being made. It is important to think through exactly what one is trying to achieve and not stray from that goal. He also cautioned that in defending and promoting music education it is very easy to fall into the trap of validating the opinion that music is not fundamental to good education. Instead of recognizing such perspectives—if only to negate them—he urged proponents of music education to assume the benefits and challenge naysayers to prove otherwise.

Margaret Tobolowska underscored the value of sharing a passion for music with children through *El Sistema* programs, such as *OrKidstra*. She pointed to the social change that occurs when

professional teachers use their skills with kindness to teach music to children. She noted that such teaching could provide a valuable outlet to the 95% of music graduates who do not find, or do not want, performance roles.

Moderator Robin Higham then asked how the message could be conveyed successfully to the non-converted. How can funding be secured?

Hallam suggested that musicians and 'the converted' have to know how to identify central issues and how to network effectively. Then the message must be delivered consistently. A scatter-gun approach is not effective. Finally, although useful, the turning point is not reports and statistics, but actually seeing the children and how they are positively changed by music programs. An audience member felt it would be useful to add teaching programs to performance programs at music institutions.

Govias agreed, iterating his earlier view that current music education is geared to disappoint 95% of students. He feels strongly that the Western approach to music has become so idealized that music is no longer a social activity for amateurs, but the domain of the 'professional' and of recording artists. It has become largely inaccessible on an individual basis (except as a 'consumer' good) and therefore the general public no longer relates to music or music education as it used to.

Lemelin suggested that music and music education should be seen more as a spectrum: leading to a 'life' of music not simply a 'career' in music.

An audience member wondered whether music education, specifically *El Sistema*, is better placed in schools or outside schools.

Govias felt strongly that music should not be part of the school experience. Schooling is top-down, tends to stifle creativity and would drag down *El Sistema* classes to an unacceptable level. Attaching them to school programs would also limit financial support to education budgets. He noted that in Venezuela *El Sistema* programs were tied to social budgets.

Hallam disagreed, believing the location of *El Sistema* programs could shift as the context evolved. Furthermore, he felt that instead of education influencing music negatively, perhaps music would influence regular education programs *positively*. Perhaps *El Sistema* programs could be the Trojan Horse to make education programs more responsive, creative and exciting for children.

The Moderator commented that schools were failing many children, especially boys who fail to engage with education. He thought that *El-Sistema*-like programs were another way to reach out to such children, involving them positively and making their time at school more meaningful.

A member of the audience, newly arrived from Venezuela and now resident in Montreal, queried the relevance of *El Sistema*-inspired programs given that Canada does not face the severe social challenges endemic in Venezuela. Hallam stressed that although Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Manchester or Liverpool—indeed cities throughout the developed world — may not present such immediately visible evidence as Venezuela's barrios, they do face major social development problems caused by poverty and lack of opportunity. Social change programs, such as *El Sistema*, are needed and effective.

An audience member pointed out that the current education system in Ontario still suffers from the Mike Harris (the former Conservative Premier of Ontario) philosophy "If you can't measure it, it isn't worth doing." For this reason alone it is especially important to stress economic benefits when selling *El Sistema* music programs.

Tobolowska felt strongly that passion and conviction would be fundamental in convincing supporters and securing funding. Another audience member agreed, but suggested that as there are so many social programs vying for scarce dollars, an organization that speaks from the heart *and* the head would have a competitive edge.

Govias pointed out that although many financial decision-makers are quick to cut music and other cultural programs from official budgets, they nevertheless do participate and support the arts on a personal and individual basis—a chink in the wall, perhaps. Members of the roundtable concluded that if we are to make progress on music education programs, we must focus our energies and work within the real world. To make change, we must marry passion to pragmatism.

The Moderator drew the panel to a close encouraging audience members to attend Saturday's *Symposium on Social Harmony Through Music Education*.