

National Research Project for *El Sistema*-inspired Orchestras



March, 2015

Key Topics:

- **Milestones**
- **Right Now**
 - Sharing Pilot Data

Special Features:

- Angelica Cortez: Musician and *El Sistema* Researcher
- Thoughts on *El Sistema* debates

March Greetings

This is the third newsletter from the research team at Longy School of Music of Bard College and WolfBrown. This regular newsletter is designed to keep us all in touch and on track – and to spare all of you a stream of separate emails. In each issue we also include links to amazing events, people, and projects in the world of music – links you can click on at the end of the day and be reminded of the remarkable work you and your musician colleagues do.

Milestones: Recent Accomplishments in the Study

Complementing the original grant from the Buck Family Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is supporting two aspects of our shared work: 1) research on what it takes to train young professionals to have the musical, teaching, and research skills to lead *El Sistema* work; and 2) the effects on symphony orchestras that support *El Sistema*-inspired youth orchestras. Here are some headlines:

- 1) **MAT Students** train as researchers: The Longy Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) students in Los Angeles have gathered pilot data at the two West Coast Core Sites in San Diego and Santa Barbara. Similarly, three graduate students from Longy's Cambridge campus have worked at Conservatory Lab Charter School, collecting data using the music performance measures. For insight into how this experience is informing their development as *El Sistema* professionals, read the interview included in this newsletter.
- 2) **Pilot data**: We are beginning to receive pilot data from sites! Along with that data, we are beginning to schedule debriefing conversations that will allow us to thank you all for your hard work and to revise our measures and methods for the spring data collection.

Right Now

Sharing pilot data: We hope that the first round of piloting is going well for everyone. Just as a reminder, by March 13, we would like the following from each site:

- 1) **A list of students who have consented to be in the study** thus far that includes students' genders and grades in school. Please remember that this list should not include students' names, but rather the identification numbers you assigned to the students.

- 2) **The measure booklets that students filled out.** These would include both the school measure booklets that your comparison-group students completed as well as the school and music booklets that students in your program completed. Again these should not include students' names, but instead should be labeled with students' identification numbers. The easiest way to remove the identification numbers is to black them out with a marker.
- 3) **The student rating sheets for the performance measures** that were completed by the evaluators.
- 4) **One set of annotated instructions for the *each of the measures*:** the school measures booklet, the music measures booklet, and the performance measure proctoring instructions. The annotations should reflect your thoughts, impressions, and suggestions about how the first round of piloting went. We are particularly interested in sections where students struggled with instructions or wording, sections of the measures that took a long time to complete, or aspects of the manuals that the proctors felt were unclear. Please note that your comments on the performance measure instructions should include any comments you have about the rubric.

Detailed instructions for scanning and posting these documents, as well as for removing student names and assigning numbers are found in a document called "Sharing Pilot Data". This document is found in the shared Study DropBox. (All site liaisons should have received the information to access the National *El Sistema* Evaluation Drop Box. This location will hold digital copies of all the materials that sites need for the pilot. This will allow sites 24x7 access to all the documents and make it possible to make additional copies when needed.)

By 9am EST on Monday morning 3/9, each site liaison will also have received an invitation to each site's *individual* DropBox where data may be uploaded securely and with privacy. Only the site liaison and the research team will have access to the individual site DropBoxes.

Please contact us right away if you have any questions regarding these specifics, or difficulty accessing either DropBox.

MAT Interview: Angelica Cortez

Part of the national study involves thinking about what experiences rising young *El Sistema* professionals need in order to contribute to the field. Angelica Cortez is currently enrolled in Longy's MAT program, studying and teaching in the context of the LA Phil's YOLA program. Angelica has been part of a team helping to pilot the music performance measures at two West Coast Core Sites, iCAN (Incredible Children's Art Network) and SDYS (San Diego Youth Symphony) Opus Project. Here Angelica shares some of her early perspectives about being involved in the data gathering as part of her graduate studies:

It has been interesting to travel to the different sites, meet the teaching artists, and discuss what we are all so passionate about – working in *El Sistema*-inspired music programs. It's exciting to have these new colleagues with whom to have the conversation about how we make this work better.

For Angelica, the most surprising aspect of the study has been to recognize that while the

challenges that many programs face seem to be similar (from funding to repertoire choices to retention of students) – the ways in which sites have answered these similar challenges all look very different.

The sites that we have seen all answer to their own needs and their own contexts in very unique ways. It has been fascinating to learn about the unique approaches.

Additionally, the MAT students are working together with the research team to design and pilot an ensemble music measure consisting of observational protocols that will help us understand what students are learning within the context of ensemble rehearsing and performing – musical behaviors that lie at the heart of the *El Sistema* approach. Angelica was surprised at how challenging it has been to create this instrument.

We all had these initial ideas and talking it through, it all made sense. But then we encountered the actual students and environments. Using the instrument to gather data was a whole different experience than what we thought it would be.

Angelica, a brass player, has also leant her skills to adapting some of the assessment repertoire for low brass players. She commented that this taught her the difficulty of truly creating a level playing field and trying to adapt pieces with equal challenge level across all the levels and instruments. She was able to try her arrangements with young musicians in the YOLA program in Los Angeles, as well as ask colleagues and other musicians for feedback.

I realized that as a researcher, you are consulting many sources as you try to put together all the pieces of the puzzle.

Although Angelica is uncertain exactly what her future career path holds, she knows that being part of the *El Sistema* movement and teaching are two parts of it. Participating in this project, she says, plays right into all the skills she knows she will need for her future – thinking critically, adjusting, questioning, collaborating and reflecting. She concludes:

My previous trumpet teacher has always told his students that as classical musicians we can never just perform – we have to be advocates for this music. This study feels like advocating for *El Sistema*-inspired programs in a long-term way. As TA's, we take for granted what we know about music and how it changes lives – we just know. But the rest of the world needs data – and this is what we're trying to do with this evaluation. That is important advocacy.

Debating *El Sistema*: What's in a Name?

In the last several months, Geoffrey Baker published a wide-ranging critique of *El Sistema*. In response, a member of our research team, Steven Holochwost wrote this short response:

Recent criticism of *El Sistema*, the program of orchestral music instruction founded by Jose Abreu in Venezuela, has caused concern within the community of *El Sistema*-inspired programs taking root here in the United States. In his book, *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth*, the English academic Geoffrey Baker argues that *El Sistema* is more appropriately described as “a cult [or] a corporation” (<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/11/geoff-baker-el-sistema-model-of-tyranny>) rather than a model of how music education can better the lives of vulnerable children.

While concerns that this criticism may reflect poorly on programs here is certainly understandable, deeper concerns that we are transplanting a “model of tyranny” from Venezuela to the United States are unfounded. First, the United States is not Venezuela: arts education policy is not unilaterally decided by our head of state, and little funding for arts education comes from the federal government. While the latter point may undermine programs’ ability to work in concert for the collective good (in that it places programs in competition for philanthropic funding), it does afford leaders of programs the freedom to incorporate what they admire about *El Sistema* into programs that are tremendously diverse in size, partners, intensity, and instructional approach. Second, even if there were a single architect planning the content of all *El Sistema*-inspired programs, the burgeoning field of implementation science teaches us that executing that plan with fealty across wide geographies and diverse populations is tremendously challenging.

What *El Sistema*-inspired programs in the United States do share is a commitment to providing music education for children who in many cases attend school districts no longer able to offer even a “wholly inadequate” education, as Philadelphia’s Superintendent of Schools put it (<http://www.educationviews.org/philly-schools-plead-96-million-wholly-inadequate-education/>), districts in which budget constraints and mandated testing regimens have prompted the elimination of anything deemed inessential from the curriculum, including the arts. The fact is that *El Sistema*-inspired programs restore music education to students in these districts. Whether they constitute “the future of music” (<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/jul/29/classicalmusicandopera1>) remains to be seen; more even-handed observers than Baker have noted that there is as of yet little evidence for the efficacy of these programs (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/arts.htm>), and we must be careful not to let our enthusiasm for these programs to overshadow the good work of other organizations that may predate the *El Sistema* movement. Ultimately, what we should be concerned with is whether a given program provides sustained, intensive, high-quality music education. If it does, then we should not worry too much about its name.

Any Questions?

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