

# School Band and Orchestra Magazine

## El Sistema in the United States—January 23, 2012

Music education programs modeled after El Sistema, the Venezuelan movement of social empowerment through classical music, continue to multiply and flourish in the United States. Affiliated with major orchestras, universities, schools, and arts and cultural centers from Florida to Maine and Southern California to Alaska, there are now more than 50 individual programs that share a mission of improving communities through the rigorous teaching of children and young people to play orchestral music. While most reports on this exciting and widely heralded movement in the United States indicate a rapid-fire expansion, the future of an umbrella organization or national governing body for El Sistema-inspired programs in this country is still unclear.

In an interview with *SBO* in January 2011, Mark Churchill, dean emeritus of the New England Conservatory (NEC) and founder of an organization called El Sistema USA, was pushing for that group to become the primary resource to help support and encourage the individual programs, often called “Nucleos,” in communities across the country. However, Churchill’s hopes took a blow earlier this year, when the NEC opted to disassociate itself from El Sistema USA. Although still under consideration, a nationally unified association or organization has yet to take shape as of December 2011.

What, then, is the future of this movement in the United States? “It continues to grow,” says Mark Churchill in a recent interview. However, “the situation is that there’s no set definition of what it means to be an El Sistema-inspired program,” as of yet. “This is a moment where the movement itself has chosen not to define itself too much, in order to allow for inclusiveness, which will hopefully lead to greater intensity and more and more programs.”

Mark indicates that even though no single institution has so far indicated a willingness to take on the burden of organizing and maintaining a central national office, there is still hope for an umbrella organization to materialize. “There is an evolution that has been taking place, and some false starts and turns in the road in terms of building a central support organization for the individual programs. Rather than incorporate independently and build a self-standing organization that would provide networking, services, and a voice for the movement, which El Sistema USA has been doing, we entered into a different conversation. We are moving towards creating a 501c(6) rather than 501c(3), which is an association of organizations, rather than a freestanding organization that operates independently.

“We’ve had discussions where leaders and personnel from all of the different El Sistema-inspired programs come together to learn about the advantages and the processes of building an association. We’ve just started that process, and I’m very excited about it because I think this will be the next stage of El Sistema USA. A board will be elected from the people who are running the centers themselves, and by-laws will be drawn up.

That would provide the authentic voice of this movement, as it develops and matures. The first priorities will be set by the group itself, rather than some external influence. For me, the first priority would be to set the criteria for what it means to be an El Sistema-inspired program, which would lead to the potential for funding from public and private foundations, national corporations, and so on.”

This concept is still in the very early stages, with the next steps to be taken at a symposium hosted by the Los Angeles Philharmonic scheduled for the end of January. “There’s a lot of young leadership emerging,” continues Churchill. At the symposium in Los Angeles, “we might be able to establish by-laws and all of that, so I would hope for an incorporation in the Spring of 2012.”

One of the most exciting El Sistema-related developments in this country is a recent partnership of Longy School of Music, Bard College, and the L.A. Phil, which will lead to the creation of a Master’s of Arts in Teaching degree program based on the tenets of El Sistema.

The Los Angeles Philharmonic, which is led by internationally acclaimed fiery young musical director Gustavo Dudamel, himself perhaps the most notable success story of El Sistema, started its El Sistema-based program, YOLA (Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles) in 2007, in anticipation of Dudamel’s arrival. Since then, they’ve expanded to two sites and now reach about 600 students in the L.A. area, teaching after school music every day, up to about 17 hours per week.

In January of 2011, Karen Zorn, the relatively new president of Longy School of Music, met with representatives from the L.A. Phil, where she expressed an interest in revising the thinking about the way in which musicians are trained at the conservatory level, understanding that the landscape for professionally trained musicians has evolved dramatically in the past 20 years. “Longy has always had somewhat of a philosophy of giving back to the community, but there is very much a formal track for thinking about teaching and learning, and innovative ways of bringing that back to the community as part of the curriculum,” explains Gretchen Nielsen, the director of educational initiatives for the L.A. Philharmonic. “Longy had just merged with Bard College, which itself has a deep interest in changing public education. Bard College has been establishing charter schools and regular public schools around the country and doing interesting things around higher education and getting students on the pre-college track. One of those schools was started in the Central Valley of California, and fresh off the Bard-Longy merger, Longy was interested in starting a Nucleo as a part of that school. So Longy approached the LA Phil to discuss setting up the program in Central Valley, about the best practices from YOLA, and that conversation eventually turned to ‘helping the field at large.’ We’re all very interested in learning from each other. Although there is all kinds of wonderful music education happening all over the U.S., this kind of intensive music education with the social imperative at its core is somewhat new.”

Nielsen sees the annual El Sistema symposiums, which began in 2010, as a way to bring educators together to learn from each other and share best practices. There are also

discussions of setting up smaller regional conferences, which would take place in addition to the annual national gathering. As for knowledge sharing, the L.A. Phil is leading the push on that front, as well, publishing videos and documents cataloguing helpful tips, best practices, and other relevant information for – and from – educators, directors, and parents on the YOLA resource center, [www.laphil.com/yola/yola-resource.cfm](http://www.laphil.com/yola/yola-resource.cfm). “We’re finding that people involved in these program are really generous,” notes Nielsen, in terms of sharing information and experiences.

As El Sistema-based programs continue to multiply and gather strength, Nielson suggests that they don’t necessarily represent a radical change in music education, especially as compared to many of the flourishing school music programs across the country. “Growing up in rural Pennsylvania, my music education looked a lot like what we’re doing in our El Sistema programs. Music education used to be accessible to all, in all schools, and available every day. In many cases that has been threatened by budget cuts, standardized testing, and scheduling challenges, but also because, in some cases, of a lack of understanding about what it means to be competent in music or the arts at the administrative level. We can use El Sistema-style programs as a demonstration to communities and school administrators to help them find time – whether in the school day or in the after school setting – and understand the value for intensive music education.”

Proponents of El Sistema-inspired programs insist that the more these programs continue to grow, the more the benefits reaped by both the individual students and secondary impact on their communities at large will become plainly evident. For now, though, the second act of this movement has yet to be written.

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