

Collective Action: the Why and the How

by *Sonya Robinson, Director of Artist Corps New Orleans; Director of Educator Engagement for Music Rising at Tulane; governance council of Any Given Child New Orleans*

Collaboration. Coalition. Collective impact. Community building. We read these terms in grant guidelines and hear them thrown around at conferences, but how do we navigate their meanings? Why should we consider building coalitions with other local music learning programs, and how can we focus our collaborative impulses into effective, coordinated action?

First, a primer on the use of these terms in recent years: in 2011, John Kania and Mark Kramer published [an article on Collective Impact](#) in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, challenging organizations to recognize that large-scale social change requires broad, cross-sector coordination. Their [5 Conditions for Collective Success](#) struck a chord, and many entered into collective impact initiatives in their own communities. [Tom Wolff](#) and others asked us to think critically about this framework, suggesting that it oversimplified the complexities of coalition-driven community development and excluded core principles of community engagement, leadership development, and social justice. (Kania and Kramer have since added [Principles of Practice](#) to their FSG Consulting model).

Whether we frame the work as collective or collaborative, the potential to multiply our impact should compel us to reach beyond our own organizations and build local, strategic coalitions. We are competing for scarce resources, and previously-relied-upon funding streams are in jeopardy. Funders are considering targeted investments within local communities; building a healthy ecosystem of music will strengthen each organization's ability to serve its own audience. So why aren't we working together?

Musician to musician, educator to educator, from one social justice-minded organization to another, can we be honest with each other? We know that the larger field of music education needs to engage in some constructive reflection, tackling assumptions about what constitutes sound musical instruction and programming. It's time to ask the hard questions, and admit that much of this framing is rooted in systemic racism. It often prevents us from engaging with organizations that have different approaches and audiences, and blocks opportunities for the kind of mutual discovery that could improve our own practices. This is precisely why we must work to build coalitions, and to include those outside our field who can offer new insights, frame discussions, and challenge assumptions. But first, we need to assess our readiness to engage.

1) Shift to a Community Mindset

Think beyond your organization, and imagine how your community might be transformed if access to music making experiences were available to all young people. What would this look like? School programs as well as community-based work? Immersive musical experiences in addition to direct music instruction? Teaching and learning that reflects multiple musical traditions? Music specialists and teaching artists? Students, parents, and families? What about city and state government or local foundations? How can equity, diversity and inclusion be held as central tenets at each stage of the work? What organizations are demonstrating leadership in these areas? Who ensures representation from the community in organizational leadership? The power of a coalition becomes clear: we need each other to effect systemic change.

2) Check Your Posture and Your Purpose

Consider how you will enter the coalition space. What experiences, expertise, and biases are you carrying with you? Where are your gaps? How will you know when you need to be silent, honoring the experiences and expertise of others? How can you ensure that all voices can be heard? To hold yourself in check, commit to a posture of service, and work with your coalition to establish collective values very early in the process. What might happen if you all committed to values of equity, inclusion, access and inquiry? How would these values shape your collective future?

3) Commit Time and Patience to the Process

Effective coalition-building is grounded in relationship, and trust is developed over time. What could it mean for your collective work if you visited one another's programs before you entered into dialogue about common goals? Remember that planning is not a linear process. In order to be responsive to the community, you will need to engage multiple stakeholders at every stage (including public meetings at key points throughout the process). Determine the time you think you will need to plan, then triple it.

Authentic, collaborative impact is not easy. You will be challenged and changed in the process, so do not enter into it unless you are willing to grow. In addition to the common measurements your coalition identifies and the collective goals you achieve within your community, one of the truest tests of this work will be the change it brings about in your own organization.

FROM THE EDITOR

I was recently at dinner with a group of orchestral emissaries from Europe who are interested in music education for underserved children. "We don't really consider the El Sistema model relevant to us," said the woman sitting next to me, a music education administrator.

I asked her why. "Well, because it's such a strict pedagogical formula," she said. "And because our cultural circumstances are so different from Venezuela. What works there wouldn't work elsewhere."

My first reaction was amazement that this cosmopolitan person had such a misunderstanding of the many ways El Sistema is growing around the world. "Strict pedagogical formula"? Would that include the Chinese folk songs that Roma kids in Transylvania are learning to sing? The Orff ensembles in Medellin, Colombia? Freewheeling group improvisation in Baltimore and "sound painting" in Zurich?

But the unfortunate fact is that in most places around the world, there is a persistent awareness gap about the richness, flexibility and diversity of practices in programs inspired by the Sistema idea.

Having seen such programs in action in more than two dozen countries on many continents, Eric and I know first-hand that one of the most remarkable aspects of the global Sistema movement is its fusion of shared central principles with multiple methodologies. Sistema programs can look and sound remarkably different, even as they hew to the same basic vision of using ensemble music learning toward goals of transformative change.

It's clear that even as we hone our variations on the Sistema theme, we need to be communicating better and more fully about them, not only among ourselves but also with everyone else. This means speaking with other music educators, arts educators, all kinds of educators...inviting wider audiences to performances, and talking to them about the many ways we work with our students...and, as *The Ensemble* has been urging lately, reaching out to thought leaders and elected officials to advocate for the efficacy of El Sistema programs.

I don't say this with any illusions about how hard it is to add these priorities to already heavy workloads. But I do know that each time we educate the public about what we do, we contribute to the evolution of a civic consensus around the vital importance of arts education for underserved children, and for all children.

Tricia Tunstall

"The true joy in life is to be a force of fortune instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself entirely to making you happy." – George Bernard Shaw, playwright

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

News Notes

The Arts & Mind Lab at Boston College is working on a randomized **controlled study looking at the effects of El Sistema-inspired programs on children's executive functioning, self-perception, and relationship to school**. Working with three sites, they are following children from the end of kindergarten, when they begin instruments, to the end of Grade 2, to look for growth in these three areas. The control group will be children who applied to these schools or programs but were not admitted due to space limitations. The research is funded by the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the National Endowment for the Arts Research:ArtWorks program. Contact: jillian.hogan@bc.edu, ellen.winner@bc.edu

Sistema New Brunswick (SNB) and its parent New Brunswick Youth Orchestra (NBYO, which is now nearly half SNB players) celebrate Canada's 150th birthday in a big way. They commissioned a new song from composer Howard Shore, with themes of social engagement, inclusion, and community building, for soloist (and NB native) Measha Brueggergosman, 120-voice choir, and orchestra. The Francisco De Miranda Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela will send 15 members to coach in SNB's 8 centers, and then the full orchestra will join the NBYO in July for a tour that includes the Ottawa's Parliament and National Arts Centre and then goes to Montreal to celebrate Canada 150 and the City of Montreal's 375th anniversary, adding a third orchestra, Orchestre de la Francophonie. They invite Sistema programs around the world to record themselves singing 'Happy Birthday' to Canada – alone or with a group – have fun! Upload video at: nbyocanada150.ca

Resources

The Opportunity Agenda has put together a useful guide that can foster productive conversations about race, racism and racial justice. **Ten Lessons for Talking About Race** (created with input from partners across the U.S.) helps with key points based on research and experience. <http://tinyurl.com/ko9oeum>

Do you partner with a school's Parent Teacher Association? Would you like to? The PTA can apply for The National PTA Mary Lou Anderson Reflections Arts

Enhancement Grant, which provides up to \$1,000 in matching funds to support local PTA arts projects within their school community. Arts projects must actively engage families and community partners. Eligible applicants must be PTAs in good standing. For information, visit <http://www.pta.org/members/content.cfm?ItemNumber=3101>.

The University of Alaska Southeast has increased and expanded its MAT scholarships to include all instrumental music graduates in its year-long intensive on music as the focus of community engagement and social change. In one year, students conduct their teaching internships in elementary and secondary schools within the Juneau School District, including with Juneau Alaska Music Matters (JAMM) schools; perform with the Juneau Symphony; and receive an MAT in Secondary Education with a K-12 Music Certificate. The deadline is April 15th. <http://www.juneaumusicmatters.com/mat-program.html>

While the U.S. State Department's funding is currently being challenged, the **Creative Arts Exchange program** is accepting applications that support international collaborations through artists that build understanding and share positive American values. Can you imagine an international exchange with another Sistema program? Think big, and get applications in before the April 10 deadline. <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?oppld=291678>

The Sparkplug Foundation provides grants to start-up nonprofit organizations, or new projects of established nonprofits, in several areas, including music education, where they **seek projects that deal with "the whole student" and with learning as a community activity**. Online questionnaires must be completed by April 10 and letters of intent are due April 17; the deadline for final applications is May 5, 2017. Guidelines and online application instructions available at: <https://sparkplugfoundation.org>

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PULSE of a National Network

by Krystal Prime Banfield, Dean for Berklee City Music, Berklee College of Music

Berklee City Music, Berklee College of Music's 20-year-old contemporary music education and creative youth development program, increases access and opens career pathways by engaging young people in what is most familiar to them – their music. Our goal is to empower students to become creators and performers of their own artistic works. To that end, we've established a membership network and partnerships with like-minded organizations across North America. This learning community shares a number of educational resources.

A principal online resource, the **PULSE** (pre-university learning system experience) music method, provides interactive tutorials and instructional materials in core music elements, improvisation, songwriting and composing. PULSE includes a set of lessons called *Take Me To The River*, which uses as its source material a film documentary that chronicles a hallmark intergenerational recording project between musicians from the rhythm & blues and hip-hop generations. Film excerpts and downloadable lessons have been highly effective in teaching the social contexts that influence music.

Other often-used online tools include Garageband and Noteflight, both of which allow easy access to musical exploration and creativity. Some programs also use Pro-Tools and Reason software for students to create original songs, raps and instrumental recordings. Students learn in incremental steps that pair mastery of musical elements with learning how to use the software. Each competency learned and evaluated affords students further access to more studio time and coaching. Additional tools we sometimes use are iMovie, for music video production, and Ableton Live and Serato software, for teaching beat-making and how to combine sampling with live performance.

BCM, based on the core goal of youth development through contemporary popular music, is a big idea that continues to grow. The approach welcomes young people regardless of their levels of musical literacy, and gives them valuable tools needed to excel in music and in life.

ACTION FOR THE MONTH: Email Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski, <https://www.murkowski.senate.gov/contact/email>

Given the current news, we repeat the Action of last month, since few took this action. Please email Lisa Murkowski (a Republican) who chairs the Senate Subcommittee that determines the budget for the National Endowment for the Arts. Read the full Action instructions (<http://theensemblenewsletters.com/action-for-the-month>) and then write a short message that describes your program, thanks her for her courageous advocacy for education, and asks for her commitment to support the National Endowment and the ways it sustains us.