The Baltimore Seminario—a First for the U.S. El Sistema Movement

by Tricia Tunstall and Eric Booth

In Venezuela’s El Sistema, a “seminario” is a special intensive learning experience. That’s right — sometimes the typical four hours a day, six days a week of music learning is not intensive enough. Teachers and administrators are often inspired to call for a seminario whenever any kind of unusual opportunity presents itself. For example, a great bassoon teacher will be visiting our nucleo — we must have a four-day seminario of all bassoon students in the region! A group of Abreu Fellows is in town — we must have a weeklong seminario for them to help us prepare to perform Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture on Saturday! Or Jon Deak, a composer from New York who loves to spark students’ composition, has come to Venezuela — we will have a composition seminario, even though we don’t usually study composition! The sheer enthusiasm around the opportunity allows for extraordinarily ambitious learning, accelerated beyond the already-fast pace of El Sistema development.

The El Sistema movement in the U.S. just had its first seminario, on May 7, 2011. Pulling together teachers and students from four nucleos, during the already-hectic month of May, there was a touch of mad ambition about it. Dan Trahey, Director of OrchKids at the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, hosted delegations from Soundscape in Newport News, VA (led by Director Rey Ramirez) and Tune Up Philly from Philadelphia (led by Director Stanford Thomson), with two students and some faculty help from Y.O.U.R.S. in Chicago. All in all, about 157 students participated, and about 25 faculty. Along with the visiting students came many of their parents, even though the bus rides to Baltimore were long (seven hours for the Virginia delegation!). So Lockerman-Bundy Elementary School in West Baltimore, home of OrchKids and host to the seminario, was brimming all day with excited children, intent teachers and proud parents.

One school, one day, two quick meals, and constant rehearsals and sectionals, culminating in a concert and pizza celebration at the end. It felt very Venezuelan — short on time and long on ambition, the leaders multitasking cheerfully, the students focused in rehearsals and blowing off steam boisterously on their breaks. Baltimore Symphony conductor Marin Alsop paid an afternoon visit to work with and inspire the string players. And just as in the Venezuelan model, students of widely varying skill levels worked together in the impromptu three-nucleo orchestra that thrilled the audience at the final concert with the Ode to Joy and the William Tell Overture.

We were guests who wanted to experience this historic day. Tricia Tunstall is the author of the forthcoming book Changing Lives: El Sistema, Gustavo Dudamel and the Transformative Power of Music — the first book on El Sistema (in Venezuela and the U.S.), due out in January 2012. Eric Booth is the Senior Advisor to El Sistema USA, and a cheerleader/consultant to the movement.
Guests don’t tend to sit around and observe at a seminario — they participate with whatever skills they happen to bring. This put Tricia at the piano for the rehearsals and performances of the two (younger and older) choruses, and non-musician Eric...well, he made a lot of sandwiches, moved a lot of chairs, and helped clean up. Other friends of the movement were there too: Mark Churchill worked with the cello section and performed with the orchestra; Jamie Bernstein led a film crew shooting a documentary; Alvaro Rodas of the Corona (NY) Youth Music Project was there, as was the conductor of Harmony Program’s Harlem orchestra Julie Desbordes.

The goosebump factor was high all day. In hindsight, it’s important to go further and to try to document and describe the many kinds of success achieved by the event. The extraordinarily focused musical work was a kind of measure, as was the easy mixing of the young musicians from different cities. The dramatic improvement in the level of musical performance over the course of the day was unmistakable. And the cheering enthusiasm of the packed house was an authentic measure of success. So were the heartfelt testimonials from parents who spoke at the end, culminating in a blood pounding preacheresque “thanks to God for these programs” and “for the gift of watching our children grow up in front of our eyes.”

As we reflected on the day, we found that five specific aspects struck us as learning to take away and share with the field for consideration, in anticipation of the hundreds of seminarios that lie in this movement’s future.

First, it was fascinating to witness the depth of parent involvement in all three of the programs — Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Newport News — whose children were the main participants in the seminario. The visiting parents tolerated long bus rides on both ends of the day, and their presence in the hallways, lunchroom, and rehearsal rooms was consistently enthusiastic and supportive (and frequently reassuring to the smaller and shyer visiting musicians). The parents were clearly impressed by watching children who had never met each other learn so quickly to play and sing together. Moms and dads — and a few grandmas—pitched in to help wherever they could. And their hearty applause, cheers, and moving tributes at the concert gave the children a clear message that their music-making was something special and valuable; that they were a valuable asset to an ambitious endeavor. Eric recalled that the very first words Gustavo Dudamel spoke to him when he asked about the key factors that made El Sistema so powerful in Venezuela were: “We never forget fun. Every child must feel like an asset.” In Baltimore that day, we never forgot fun, and every child felt like an asset.

In conversations with faculty members, we were told that the process of engaging parental involvement had been lengthy and difficult. “In the first weeks, we had very low attendance at parent meetings,” said an OrchKids teacher. “This program was very different from anything they’d ever seen, and they didn’t really understand what it was about. It wasn’t easy to gain their trust.” He and other program staff members said that consistent, ongoing communication with parents
had eventually resulted in higher levels of trust and engagement. At the seminario, we saw that engagement in action. We saw how important it was as a source of support for the children, and we felt how important it was to the growth and sustainability of a nucleo and a movement.

Second, we were impressed by the shared teaching we saw that day — teachers from Baltimore, Philadelphia, Newport News, and Chicago taking turns working with groups that combined children from the different nucleos. The children’s learning was deepened by their exposure to different teaching styles. And teachers were able to support and learn from one another. We had the sense of an expanding shared pedagogy among the nucleos. This peer-to-peer teacher learning was clearly an opportunity to build on in the future.

Third, we were interested in how the seminario addressed the always lively issue of repertoire. The two classical works played by the combined orchestra are among the most universally played pieces in El Sistema Venezuela; it’s likely that on any given day, “William Tell” and “Ode to Joy” are being played in literally hundreds of Venezuelan nucleos. The choruses, on the other hand, sang a variety of non-classical works, including African and Gaelic folk songs, a medley of U.S. folk songs with a “hand-jive” groove, and a 1980s pop song. While it’s not uncommon, even in Venezuela, to choose classical masterworks for orchestra and a more eclectic mix of genres for chorus, the combination is still worth noting. Questions of repertoire and genre are among the exciting challenges El Sistema programs in the U.S. are exploring, and there is much to learn from one another in this area.

A fourth observation is also in the area of choices about music-making. While most of the music played at the seminario was rehearsed and prepared, there was at least one instance of spontaneous composition. The expanded bucket band, including children from two nucleos, performed a work that was announced as being “composed by all of us today.” The idea that a seminario is a setting where children can create together, as well as playing together what they have rehearsed separately, seems a tremendously fertile one to explore. The complementarity of these two kinds of musical courage, brought together in one day, seems an El Sistema-esque way to nurture more holistic and flexible young musicianship.

Finally, we were impressed and inspired by the overall atmosphere of the day, which felt, again, unmistakably Venezuelan. The unspoken but palpable understanding was that all those present — teachers, parents, guests, school administrators — would contribute whatever they could to the success of the day. And every contribution, from folding and stacking a chair to teaching a two-part harmony, was valuable. No musical lesson could be more important for the children of our nucleos than the simple lesson that everyone helps, and everyone's help is needed and valued.
In closing, four snapshots of one student at the seminario — let’s call him Shawn — capture the aspiration and wholeheartedness of El Sistema-inspired work, and the power of music to redirect the trajectory of young lives.

The first time we saw Shawn, he was building a hiding place for himself out of chairs and boxes in the main hallway of the school. Our first thought: difficult student, has been in a bus for a long time, probably is schooled on a special education track; how on earth will he manage a long focused day like today?

An hour later, two percussion teachers asked us to step out into the sunny playground area to hear a rehearsal of a percussion part of the Ode to Joy. On the bass drum was Shawn. He performed beautifully all the way through, following the score without an attention lapse, and he was clearly delighted at the applause from his audience of two.

Released for a break, he went running wildly through the playground. One of his teachers told us that he was a constant behavioral challenge and had been on the verge of being expelled from the nuedo, but the staff had decided to go the extra mile with him because he seemed to respond so fully to the music; it might be just what his life needed. A second teacher set down his papers and went off to play chase with Shawn, saying it’s always good for him to run hard. Ten minutes later, both were back — the teacher gasping for breath, and Shawn bragging that he had not been tagged, not even once.

At the concert, Shawn was performing for the first time in an orchestra of 157 players. He was among the smallest, and hard to spot in the back. But we looked for him. He was focused, successful, a contributing member of the ensemble and its full sound. He beamed at the final note. He raised his drumsticks and danced around, firing off more energy as the audience cheered.