

# On the Road to El Sistema

Behind the scenes of New England Conservatory's new Abreu Fellows program.

by Kathryn Wyatt

Last May, New England Conservatory in Boston announced the launch of its Abreu Fellows Program, the first initiative of El Sistema USA. The one-year, tuition-free postgraduate certificate program is being offered for young musicians interested in becoming ambassadors of El Sistema, the Venezuelan music-education program founded in 1976 by José Antonio Abreu. An initial \$100,000 grant in 2009 from TEDPrize, which gives recipients funds to support their “One Wish to Change the World,” allowed Abreu to start the program. Musicians in the program, whose first Fellows began their course of study this fall, are housed at New England Conservatory and spend a year studying in Boston and Caracas; in their second semester they will receive guided internships with public programs that serve youth at risk, followed by a required subsequent year working to advance or found an El Sistema program outside Venezuela.

Among the first ten Abreu Fellows is Kathryn Wyatt, who with her colleagues reports from the trenches of El Sistema in the U.S. in her first installment for *Symphony*.

—Jennifer Melick



The Abreu Fellows in front of the Beethoven statue in New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall, fall 2009

For this group of ten musicians, it's not enough to just play music. It is my pleasure to introduce the Abreu Fellows. Ensnared since the fall in the great halls of New England Conservatory in Boston, I have joined nine colleagues—all of us classically trained musicians—in the field of music education and orchestras to discover, challenge, analyze, and champion the birth and growth of El Sistema in the United States.

The original El Sistema is the Venezuelan musical movement in social change that is sweeping Latin and South America, and has the music world on the edge of its seat trying to keep up! For a brief run-down, *60 Minutes* did an excellent segment on the program and its superstar champion, Gustavo Dudamel, an El Sistema alum and newly appointed music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. If that doesn't get you hooked, check out this "youth" (I would use "heroes") orchestra at the BBC Proms in 2007.

The Abreu Fellowship is named for the father of El Sistema, José Antonio Abreu. Maestro Abreu has received many honors for the mission and success of El Sistema, including the TED Prize, which in 2009 granted his wish to create a fellowship program for young musicians outside Venezuela to study El Sistema and bring the ideals back to their home cities.

So here we are, and loving every minute of it. We are being steeped in passion, activism, social justice, kids, and music, music, music. The ten of us range in age from Stanford Thompson, age 23, to Lorrie Heagy and David Malek, whom we fondly have dubbed the mama and papa bear of our clan, in their early for-

ties. I am mourning my thirtieth birthday this year, trying to believe my friends and family, who say that your thirties are the best...

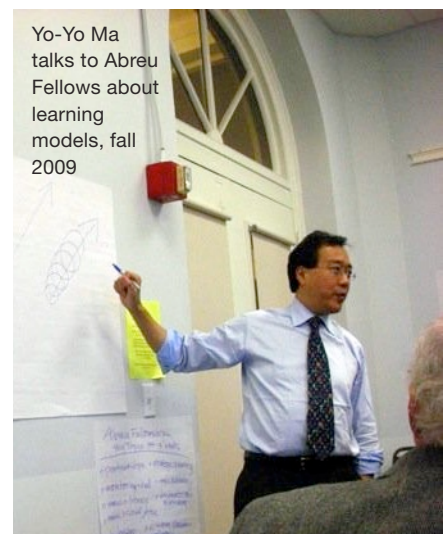
The fellowship is creating fast friends and bringing together a network of people. We are fortunate to spend our weeks with the best minds in the field, who share our enthusiasm for the potential of El Sistema and social change through music. A typical day is Spanish class at 8:15 at the Conservatory, and then a seminar from a guest expert leading a discussion on pedagogy, curriculum models, board structure and governance, strategic planning, poverty, social activism, learning capabilities, and of course music. We'll have an hour break for lunch, where we run across the street to either the sushi place or the coffee shop and continue the debate that inevitably started that morning. At 1 o'clock we'll call a truce, and jump into a crash course on various instruments—the ones we don't already play—learning just the basic wind, brass, and string techniques in order to make informed decisions about purchasing instruments, maintenance, and rudimentary skills. Until we've raised enough money in our *núcleos*—music centers—to hire staff, at least we can change strings when they break. Starting at 2 p.m. we will either continue the conversation from the morning session or jump into a practicum of our "champion" topics. As a group of ten minds, we have parsed the study of El Sistema into topics that we are individually passionate about and will "champion" as we complete the year. We will compile a collection of writings on these topics, which include:

- El Sistema curriculum: exactly what makes a program "El Sistema"?
- The "movement" of El Sistema: how El Sistema ideals and models are being adopted in the U.S., and how this phenomenon is spreading here—this is my own area of focus
- Engagement: what real social change has resulted from El Sistema, and how do we track it?

Ending our coursework at 5 p.m. every day, we will often then spend the evening over dinner or drinks with our guest presenter, sopping up every bit of news and information about El Sistema in their lives and in their work. As a result, we go home with big questions.

A recent highlight was a visit by Yo-Yo Ma. A Boston resident, Yo-Yo dropped by to share with the group his thoughts on learning and the strength of possibility for El Sistema *núcleos* in this country.

You can see from the white-sheet in the photo below his explanation of learning models—the down arrow is much of what we've been experiencing these last few



Yo-Yo Ma talks to Abreu Fellows about learning models, fall 2009

weeks—that lots and lots of information is being poured into us! The up arrow is the learning I expect we will revel in next week, figuring things out for ourselves as we build our experiences from the ground up. The circle represents the connection between the two (learning by taking information in, and by figuring things out on your own), in constant motion. The



El Sistema founder José Antonio Abreu spoke in NEC's Williams Hall during the public symposium on the "Venezuelan Music Education Miracle," November 2007.



Eric Booth, senior advisor to the Abreu Fellows Program (left), and Abreu Fellow Dan Berkowitz

forward shooting arrow is of course the trajectory of our goals, both for this year and for life. (I really like the idea of soaring through life as a shooting arrow!) The spiral surrounding the arrow is the perfect circle of learning, in constant rotation as we achieve our goals.

Abreu Fellow and French horn player Christine Witkowski was also inspired by Yo-Yo Ma's statement that "There is nothing more important than meaning. It is not just about delivering a performance, but delivering yourself. That is being an artist."

Christine wrote in her blog:

The first week of November I had the privilege of hearing from Community MusicWorks, a Providence, Rhode Island string quartet project that began as a "store-front" residency in the middle of downtown Providence, and a description of the Silk Road Project by Yo-Yo Ma. The experiences made me realize we are at the start of a cultural shift in the classical music world; the role of the artist is changing.

The traditional role of the artist is to perform the highest quality music possible for the community—symphony orchestras, opera companies, professional chamber music groups, etc. This role is incredibly valuable and the main function of many celebrated cultural institutions. However, when I asked myself the question, 'How can I best serve my community as an artist?' I found the answer in equal parts high-level performance and public service/education. Where, then, do musicians who wish to have their careers in performance and public service fit? How do we as musicians both work in our communities through education and outreach and yet also feel artistically challenged and fed? And, how do we dispel the mindset that a 'serious artist' does not teach or perform outreach? Community MusicWorks and the work of Yo-Yo Ma are examples of the new type of artists bridging this gap.

Abreu Fellow and clarinetist David

Malek sent around an evocative email on curriculum and musical literacy, after a week of being sick in bed:

What is musical literacy and why is there such a disconnect in our current music curricula in public school and universities and the outcomes?... Is it the curriculum or the implementation? Each state curriculum and even the national standards seem more than adequate in setting benchmarks, yet we fail to produce the outcomes... This [inquiry] is all stemming from the realization of my own functional illiteracy as a classically trained musician and has nothing to do exclusively with style (classical vs. jazz...see Rob Kapilow and Robert Levin). Why is it that we as musicians are coming out of twelve years of primary and secondary schooling with another four years of undergraduate work and possibly another four years of masters and doctoral studies, but are failing to achieve true musical literacy on a level that is beyond question and debate? After all of that education, shouldn't we be able to sit down with a symphonic or chamber music score and make sense of it, to be able to sit in and have musical conversations with our friends or compose a cohesive musical offering to be shared with others? Is this not what is expected in our native language?

Abreu Fellow Lorrie Heagy, in her blog, sees another theme running through our discussions:



Simon Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela members and NEC students and staff mingled at a post-concert party marking the conclusion of the SBYOV's 2007 residency at NEC.

Miro Vintoniv

How does one synthesize a week filled with such diverse topics as leadership, community partnerships, and the inner workings of a successful El Sistema initiative in Baltimore? Two Words: Core Values...As I looked over the key elements of the El Sistema program and reflected on the values of my own community of Juneau, I began developing a list of core values or Key of C's:

- **Child First, Music Second:** every child is an asset and deserves access to the lifelong social, emotional, and academic benefits that



Conductor Ben Zander, a professor at New England Conservatory and director of NEC's Youth Philharmonic Orchestra, delivered a surprise serenade to Abreu Fellow David Malek on his birthday.

music provides, regardless of their financial means.

- **Community Building** through ensemble, peer mentoring, and community partnerships to help students reach their potential and become contributing members of society.
- **Consistency of Program:** start early and every day so that students have a daily haven of safety, joy, and sense of value.
- **Challenge:** through discipline and teamwork, students strive together to master difficult works.
- **Classical and Culturally Relevant Repertoire** is emphasized to respect the contributions of a richly diverse community.
- **Child-Centered:** instruction engages the whole child through movement and joyful music-making.

In addition, we explored implications of the Orff, Kodály, Suzuki, and Dalcroze methods in El Sistema. In her blog, Abreu Fellow Rebecca Levi shared her thoughts on Suzuki and El Sistema:

Delving deeper into the world of Suzuki, I saw its emphasis on parent participation as problematic. What about the children who come from violent home environments? What about parents whose substance abuse precludes them taking an active role in their child's musical learning? We posited: **The núcleo becomes the family.** After all, our Venezuelan friends have been describ-



Abreu Fellow Lorrie Heagy with children from the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's OrchKids program

ing their fellow El Sistema grads as brothers and sisters.

In a session with Venezuelan student graduates of El Sistema now at Boston Conservatory and NEC, we discovered that the real secret to the familial connection of El Sistema musicians is ROAD TRIPS. After many, many questions from the Abreu Fellows to the panel of young "El Sistema" Venezuelans about "what really makes El Sistema so special, and how were your lives changed as child-



Abreu Fellow and flutist Rebecca Levi (left) learning Suzuki violin with Fellow Kathryn Wyatt, a violist, during an instrument-instruction crash course at New England Conservatory

musicians in Venezuela,” we discovered that the feeling of community, family, and loyalty to “the system” is tightly integrated in the *núcleos*. Four times a year, *núcleos* in two or more cities will combine for *seminarios*, and the students will combine into the mega-ensembles El Sistema is famous for. The students said that when you are surrounded by hundreds of your friends, who are all as passionate

about music as you are, what could possibly be more fun?

In November, we took our own road trip to Baltimore to visit OrchKids, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra’s ambitious, homegrown version of El Sistema. Abreu Fellow Stanford Thompson has been fired up about El Sistema since Day One; his video—a mix of footage of children participating in the BSO’s OrchKids program



Abreu Fellows with children from Baltimore Symphony Orchestra’s OrchKids program

and video footage underscored by music from *Rocky*’s “Eye of the Tiger”—can be viewed here.

Abreu Fellow Jonathan Govias’s video of the incredible Samba production the OrchKids put on had more than 300 hits in its online debut.

The Abreu Fellows have a diverse mix of experience, talent, background, and cultures, but El Sistema has united us. We are reinvigorated in our passion for how music has changed our lives, and our conviction that music can have that same power through social change. We are eager to start a conversation in the field about the potential for El Sistema models in this country, and how we can support current work in music education and our colleagues’ aspirations for the future. [S](#)

Watch the March-April issue of *Symphony* for the next installment from Abreu Fellow Kathryn Wyatt.

## You can read the Abreu Fellows’ individual blogs here:

**Daniel Berkowitz:**  
[abreudb.wordpress.com](http://abreudb.wordpress.com)

**Jonathan Andrew Govias:**  
[abreufellow.wordpress.com](http://abreufellow.wordpress.com)

**Lorrie Heagy:**  
[juneaumusicmatters.blogspot.com](http://juneaumusicmatters.blogspot.com)

**Rebecca Levi:**  
[rebeccalevi.blogspot.com](http://rebeccalevi.blogspot.com)

**Dantes Rameau:**  
[dantesrameau.blogspot.com](http://dantesrameau.blogspot.com)

**Alvaro Rodas:**  
[alvarofrodas.blogspot.com](http://alvarofrodas.blogspot.com)

**Stanford Thompson:**  
[firedupwithmusic.blogspot.com](http://firedupwithmusic.blogspot.com)

**Christine Witkowski:**  
[cwabreufellows.wordpress.com](http://cwabreufellows.wordpress.com)

**Kathryn Wyatt:**  
[durhamelsistema.wordpress.com](http://durhamelsistema.wordpress.com)

# Stat of the Arts

Number of results from a Google search for classical music	<b>26,400,000</b>
First American orchestra with a Twitter account First tweet: "Preparing for our All-American Celebration concert on July 4th at Verizon Wireless Amphitheatre," July 2, 2008	<b>Atlanta Symphony Orchestra</b>
Number of followers of the League of American Orchestras on Twitter (Follow us on Twitter.)	<b>147</b>
Number of Facebook fans of the League of American Orchestras (Increase this number by becoming a fan here.)	<b>1,321</b>
Number of Facebook fans of Billy Joel	<b>77,434</b>
Number of Facebook fans of Ludwig van Beethoven	<b>91,383</b>
Number of Facebook fans of Lady Gaga	<b>4,449,281</b>
Number of countries represented by visitors to the League of American Orchestras website ( <i>americanorchestras.org</i> ) in October 2009	<b>109</b>
Number of visitors to the League site from the U.S. in October 2009	<b>20,650</b>
Number of visitors to the League from Luxembourg in October 2009	<b>6</b>
Number of visitors to the League site from Malaysia in October 2009	<b>22</b>
Cost to purchase 30 seconds of a live orchestral concert (League of American Orchestras' reported average ticket price for Group 1 orchestras, divided by a 120-minute concert)	<b>19 cents</b>
Cost to purchase a 30-second ad during the 2009 Super Bowl	<b>\$3 million</b>

(Statistics as of December 8, 2009)

**That's what friends are for...**

