Chamber Music Within Orchestra Programs

By Tina Fedesi, Executive & Artistic Director, OrKidstra, Ottawa, Canada

My friend and colleague David Visentin, the director of Sistema Toronto, has said that chamber music is “the most intimate reduction of the social/orchestral model, and places pure responsibility on each individual to demonstrate exemplary self-governance, commitment and professionalism.” We at the OrKidstra program in Ottawa, Canada agree with him.

In fact, many of our students love playing chamber music so much that they inspired us to start a Friday Night Youth Group for our older students (ages 13-18). Every Friday, a variety of chamber groups play for a few hours, and then we have a movie, games or a special event. The Youth Group has strengthened teamwork, friendships, mentorship and leadership across the whole OrKidstra program.

Our chamber ensembles have become our main ambassadors for playing in the community because they are well-rehearsed and play at a high level; their players are more self-motivated to practice independently. In addition, the groups are easier to transport and less expensive to coordinate. And it’s great experience for the students to play at the inauguration of Ottawa’s mayor, in the hospital room of a loved one, or for the celebration of Peace Day.

Nearly all of the programs we contacted for this article said that they too engage in chamber playing and find it particularly rewarding for the older and more advanced students. In general, the feedback we received about roles for chamber music can be clearly divided into four areas: musical development, social development, exploration and development of repertoire, and development of program ambassadors.

Musical Development. Kathleen Krull from Play On, Philly! noted that “playing in a smaller ensemble without a conductor, and being able to listen in that way, helps make students more alert and aware when they play in orchestras. It gives students a deeper understanding of what it takes to make music with others.” Albert Oppenheimer said that “from what I’ve observed and implemented while with the YOURS Project, programs use chamber music as a means of strengthening sections.” Dan Trahey from OrchKids in Baltimore emphasized that chamber music is a great way for kids to learn to rehearse on their own.

Social Development. While the whole is greater than the individual parts, each part is especially essential within the chamber ensemble. Without each part, the music isn’t complete. As we heard from many programs, students learn responsibility to themselves and commitment to the group in a tangible way. This fosters stronger group interaction and builds friendships. Chamber players develop clear leadership qualities and seem to carry themselves with greater confidence.

Exploration and Development of Repertoire and Musical Styles. Along with more accessible chamber music repertoire, we have often used orchestral string music as quartet or quintet music, sometimes also adding winds and transposing/re-arranging parts as necessary. In addition, we play different styles of music, including jazz, world and pop. Lorrie Heagy at JAMM in Juneau, Alaska makes intentional use of a Friday morning rock band as a kind of chamber music – very cool! Here at OrchKidstra, we are big fans of arrangements that allow for flexible instrumentation – for example, “A Charlie Brown Christmas” or “Frozen FlexBand” arrangements can be played by full orchestra, string quintet, winds and brass, or any mixture of the above. Fun and flexible!

Development of Program Ambassadors. Dan Berkowitz at YOLA spoke of putting together chamber groups of more advanced players together when going on tour. “Chamber groups are also great tool for special events for public officials, fundraisers, and board retreats,” he said. “They can achieve a very high level of musicianship and are much cheaper to produce than the orchestra.” David Visentin from Sistema Toronto says, “We have outside opportunities for small groups, and this provides added exposure for a few children who are developing as leaders.” And Dan Trahey’s OrchKids noted that one of the many benefits of chamber music is its portability.

A major challenge posed by including chamber music in our programs is that it needs extra time and human resources. So what’s new? It is clear that chamber music not only soothes the soul but also is a powerful building block for orchestral playing and social and community development.

“Once a child discovers he is important to his family, he begins to seek new ways of improving himself. And hopes better for himself and his community.” – José Antonio Abreu
The Ensemble

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

News Notes

After starting in 2014 as a summer pilot in partnership with an existing academic tutoring program, the East Lake Expression Engine, led by co-founders Michael Kendall, Libby O’Neil, and Evelyn Petcher, now serves 44 elementary school children in the East Lake neighborhood of Chattanooga, TN. Students take choir, bucket band, and orchestra ensemble classes, alongside group instruction on select instruments. General music theory and musicianship skills are incorporated into the ensemble and instrumental classes, along with a creative group composition project once a semester. The桶乐队模型 also lends itself extremely well to the social goals of Sistema-inspired programs. Peer-to-peer teaching and student leadership are learning modes that play a huge role in the bucket bands I lead. In addition, one of the most important and helpful teaching tools in bucket bands is establishing a rest-and-ready position. Without that strict guideline for quieting students and getting them ready to start playing again, a bucket band class can be extremely chaotic. But with a guideline firmly in place, bucket band offers the opportunity to discuss the larger idea of listening to one another and allowing one another’s thoughts to be fully expressed before responding. I spend a lot of time connecting this idea with the importance of having respect for one another and for the teacher. This reinforces the social goal of mutual listening.

Another piece of neuroscientific evidence in the ever-strengthening case for the lasting health benefits of early musical training can be found in this study that shows that nerve function decline associated with aging, in this case around auditory challenges, is much less likely in people who learned to play an instrument when young, even if they played for only a few years.

For starting a bucket band, call and response activities are the usual jumping-off point. Any time you can challenge students to be playing and listening in the same activity, I would say it’s a good idea. When students are asked to take turns making the “call,” a third skill, improvising, becomes involved – an invaluable skill that challenges a very important part of the brain. As students advance, bucket band can become a creative outlet. Creating pieces together gives students a greater stake in the group and motivates them to work hard.

In Praise of Bucket Band

by Pete Tashjian, Bucket Band Director and Teaching Artist, Shift: Englewood, Chicago

From an early age, we are able to internalize and recognize rhythms. Children understand rhythm intuitively long before they can comprehend harmony or melody. Building on that natural ability can be an invaluable tool in working toward the social and musical goals of Sistema-inspired programs. The bucket band model provides a great vehicle for establishing skills that will help young people create positive changes in their lives.

Giving students the ability to sound good is extremely important for beginning students as well as for beginning programs. Bucket band affords a cheap and fairly easy way to give young students the joy of performing and being part of a powerful, appealing sound. Ideally, this early experience carries over to all ensembles, and raises students’ expectations about what they can hope to achieve in making music with others, and also about the satisfactions that music-making can bring.

For those who were unable to attend, this five-minute film captures the feel of the International Sistema Teachers Conference held in Stirling, Scotland on October 27-30, 2014, hosted by Sistema Scotland. Speaking of Sistema Scotland, many respect its history of program research and evaluation. Its latest Evaluation Plan is available here, to read and learn from: http://www.gcph.co.uk/publications/507_evaluating_sistema_scotland_evaluation_plan

The Leading Note Foundation, parent of OrKidstra in Ottawa, Canada, is hosting a two day Symposium on Instrumental Change in Sistema-inspired programs. February 12 & 13, 2015. Early bird discount until January 10, 2015: General $125, Student $30. Keynote speakers include Simon Brault (Director/CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts) and Richard Hallam (Founding member of Sistema England, Chair of Music Education Council, UK). For more information and registration: http://tinyurl.com/knce3z

In 2014, Massachusetts became the first state in the U.S. to set aside funding explicitly for El Sistema programs. While the initial funding from The Massachusetts Cultural Council is modest, a dozen sites are the first grantees, and the funding is expected to grow.

 British Colombia gives a stirring TEDx talk on the development of executive function in children, and makes explicit and favorable reference to Sistema programs. The talk is a strong advocacy tool. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StASHLru28s  

For starting a bucket band, call and response activities are the usual jumping-off point. Any time you can challenge students to be playing and listening in the same activity, I would say it’s a good idea. When students are asked to take turns making the “call,” a third skill, improvising, becomes involved – an invaluable skill that challenges a very important part of the brain. As students advance, bucket band can become a creative outlet. Creating pieces together gives students a greater stake in the group and motivates them to work hard.

In Praise of Bucket Band

by Pete Tashjian, Bucket Band Director and Teaching Artist, Shift: Englewood, Chicago

From an early age, we are able to internalize and recognize rhythms. Children understand rhythm intuitively long before they can comprehend harmony or melody. Building on that natural ability can be an invaluable tool in working toward the social and musical goals of Sistema-inspired programs. The bucket band model provides a great vehicle for establishing skills that will help young people create positive changes in their lives.

Giving students the ability to sound good is extremely important for beginning students as well as for beginning programs. Bucket band affords a cheap and fairly easy way to give young students the joy of performing and being part of a powerful, appealing sound. Ideally, this early experience carries over to all ensembles, and raises students’ expectations about what they can hope to achieve in making music with others, and also about the satisfactions that music-making can bring.

For those who were unable to attend, this five-minute film captures the feel of the International Sistema Teachers Conference held in Stirling, Scotland on October 27-30, 2014, hosted by Sistema Scotland. Speaking of Sistema Scotland, many respect its history of program research and evaluation. Its latest Evaluation Plan is available here, to read and learn from: http://www.gcph.co.uk/publications/507_evaluating_sistema_scotland_evaluation_plan

The Anthony Quinn Foundation scholarship program provides grants for high school students who demonstrate exceptional talent and dedication with a strong commitment to personal artistic growth, and who have financial need. Perhaps this is a fit for one of your most motivated high school musicians? https://anthonyquinnfoundationfluidreview.com/

Another piece of neuroscientific evidence in the ever-strengthening case for the lasting health benefits of early musical training can be found in this study that shows that nerve function decline associated with aging, in this case around auditory challenges, is much less likely in people who learned to play an instrument when young, even if they played for only a few years.

http://tinyurl.com/phy4ohz

Subscription Information
To ADD or DELETE names for The Ensemble: TheEnsembleNL@gmail.com
Back issues always available at: http://www.changingliveselsistema.com/?page_id=7

“In anyone who believes in miracles is not a realist.” – David Ben-Gurion