Omnipresent Compositional Creativity

by Albert Oppenheimer, Director of YOURS Project, People's Music School, Chicago

As a composer, I've been curious about the role of musical creativity within El Sistema. Can composition and improvisation support a social mission? El Sistema-inspired programs instill a sense of responsibility and discipline within the structure of an ensemble, giving young musicians the opportunity to learn that steady, repetitive hard work yields big results. The lesson of success through continuous striving towards ever-larger goals is the magic of El Sistema, a magic that is transferrable to every part of a child's life.

The question remains: within this world of achievement through discipline and structure, is there room for personal choice, creativity, and ownership? I had the immense pleasure of visiting Venezuela last spring as one of the Sistema Fellows. In every nucleo we visited, students approached me wanting to share their music with me. Or sometimes a nucleo director excitedly pointed me towards the 7-year-old who had just written a string quartet or the 17-year-old who was puzzling out how to harmonize the melody he had just written for violin.

I realized: composers are everywhere in El Sistema! There just isn’t an official structure within the system to nurture them…yet.

The abundance of budding composers isn’t surprising. Children in El Sistema are immersed in classical compositions for many hours a day, many days a week. The act of composition is role-modeled for them. The potential is exciting.

It’s equally exciting that here in the U.S., we have the chance to incorporate and nurture that potential at the beginning of our young national movement. I know firsthand that this is happening at the YOURS Project in Chicago, which I direct, but in order to get an overall picture of what is happening elsewhere, I surveyed nucleo leaders around the U.S.

The majority of responders said that they incorporate improvisation into the very beginning of their students’ experience, with some programs beginning improvisation games as young as three years old.

Only a small number of programs institutionalize improvisation as an independent musical goal, the rest trusting the individual teaching artists to mix improvisation as they see fit.

Some programs begin with an improvisatory stage of music making, focusing on developing ensemble and aural skills with improv games and structured group improvisations before teaching traditional notation. One program reported that it waits for up to five years to teach notation, where another starts teaching notation in the first week of the program! Every program reported using elements of improvisation as students discover notation.

As in Venezuela, very few programs teach notation with composition in mind, though almost all responded that students in their programs are spontaneously composing, and that group improvisations are commonly featured in concerts.

It appears that most music by living composers played in U.S. nucleos consists of show tunes and Hollywood scores. But a few notable composers, including Phillip Glass, Libby Larsen, and Michael Gandolfi, have been approached for potential commissions.

Can composition and improvisation support the social mission of our programs? The answers I received were enthusiastically affirmative. Responders said that composition and improvisation have the potential to help students express their relationships to their peers and their world, and are great ways to increase creativity and intrinsic motivation. Musical creativity, it was overwhelmingly asserted, furthers not only musical goals, but social goals as well.

Music is not just a language for instrumentalists to read off the page. It is also a language of creation, of personal ownership, expression, and exploration. Every pitch, every rhythm can potentially be re-imagined into a unique composition. If music is taught with the understanding that it is as malleable as language, as fluid as finger paint, perhaps we can nurture a generation of composers: composers of music, and composers of life.
On January 28, 2013, the Paterson Music Project pilot program launched in Paterson, NJ, with 28 second-graders at the Community Charter School of Paterson. The program is a partnership between CCSP and the New Jersey Youth Symphony-Wharton Music Center. Meeting three days a week for two hours after school, the children have already begun learning to play violins, violas and cellos. In addition to ensemble instrumental instruction, students also learn general musicianship concepts, with a special focus on composition. An important feature of the program is a plan to develop mentoring relationships between PMP students and members of the New Jersey Youth Symphony. The first public performance by PMP students will be less than three months after the program’s launch, at a New Jersey Youth Symphony gala on April 20, 2013. Visit the program’s blog at http://patersonmusicproject.blogspot.com; for further information, please contact Liz Moullthrop: emoulthrop@verizon.net.

A one-week Creative Leadership Immersion course (March 16–23) goes beyond the concert hall and into the surrounding Baltimore community to lead, create, perform and engage with music and a wide range of community participants. Creative practitioners from London will join Dan Trahey and Jill Collier in leading this experience-based course. The course culminates in a community project with a new co-created musical composition including Peabody Conservatory students, course leaders from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, The Baltimore Symphony’s OrchKids, and other Baltimore City School students. Academic credit available. Contact Jill Collier with questions, at jkcollier@mac.com.

The Boston area will hold two multi-site projects this month. March 16th brings students from three programs together for a side-by-side rehearsal and concert, and on the 27th the Sistema Fellows host students from seven programs for a three-hour workshop on improvisation, singing, and composition.

“Children feel ownership about their own creative voices when they compose; even if it’s just arranging four notes in a pattern, it’s their pattern.” – Terrence Thornhill, Teaching Artist, Paterson Music Project, Paterson, NJ