

# **Adopt or Adapt? *El Sistema* as an Inspiration for Music Education in Canada**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The success of Venezuela's *el Sistema* has drawn the attention of the world. The ensemble-based youth music education system has produced top classical musicians and been hailed by Sir Simon Rattle as "the most important thing happening in Classical music" (Booth, 2008, p. 1), but its primary purpose is social development. *El Sistema* presently provides opportunities for inclusion and growth through music participation to more than 300,000 young people, many of them otherwise disadvantaged, at over 204 centers or *núcleos* throughout Venezuela. The program is now being used as an inspiration and/or model for music education initiatives in more than 25 countries worldwide, including Canada. At least eight *Sistema*-inspired programs currently exist in Canadian cities across the country.

Increasing interest in the potential of music education to foster social transformation and build 'social capital' (Wright) through youth engagement has spurred Canadian music educators and others to examine how the *Sistema* model can be applied in our society – do we adopt or adapt? Firstly, this report briefly describes Canada's *Sistema*-inspired programs to provide a context for discussion. Secondly, it outlines the proceedings of the first four national symposia on the subject of *el Sistema* and its relevance as a model for Canadian initiatives. Common threads from these meetings, including issues surrounding how to adapt the *Sistema* model to local needs, the role(s) of music education in society, funding, research, and the possible formation of a national organization to link Canadian *Sistema*-inspired programs are described.

**Keywords:** *El Sistema*, music education, community music, Canada, social change, social capital, model, Venezuela, symposium

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Venezuelan *el Sistema* phenomenon has caught the attention of educators, musicians, community organizations, and governments worldwide, particularly in the last decade as musicians brought up through “the system” have risen to international prominence. Notably, musical achievement is not the primary purpose of this network of extra-curricular youth ensembles; rather, *el Sistema* strives to foster positive social transformation through participation in communal endeavour: *tocar y luchar*, meaning, ‘to perform and to struggle’.

The success of this approach in Venezuela (on both social and musical fronts) has inspired similar efforts around the globe. In Canada, at least eight *Sistema*-inspired programs have been founded since 2007; each will be briefly described in this report. The Canadian initiatives are essentially independent, geographically far-removed, and serve differing urban populations; they have yet to be coordinated into a larger network of musical opportunities, which has been identified as a pillar behind the success of the Venezuelan system.

How well can the Venezuelan model serve contemporary Canadian society? Should we adopt or adapt? Since May 2011, educators, academics, and community leaders have convened four national meetings to address these and other questions surrounding *el Sistema*’s adaptability, potential, and means to promote social change through music education in Canada. This report outlines the proceedings of all four: 1) the ***Sistema Canada Summit: Sharing best practices*** in New Brunswick; 2) ***Symposium I: Understanding Sistema*** at the University of Western Ontario; 3) ***Symposium II: Demystifying the Sistema ethos*** at McGill University; and 4) ***Symposium III: Adaptability to the Canadian society and relevance to its music education system*** at the University of Ottawa. These conferences were well attended by representatives from across Canada, and from the United States and Venezuela, who shared their experiences and expertise. To date, Canada’s *Sistema*-inspired initiatives report having positive effects in the lives of young Canadians, and several new programs are on the horizon. Canadians seem motivated to bring *Sistema*’s philosophy of social transformation through communal musical opportunity to more children across our country.

## 2. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF *SISTEMA*-INSPIRED PROGRAMS IN CANADA

In order to understand the context of the national meetings on *el Sistema* and the programs it has inspired in Canada, brief information on each Canadian initiative is provided below.

### 2.1. Program Histories

The first two *Sistema*-inspired music education programs in Canada began in 2007; these are the Saint James Music Academy in Vancouver, British Columbia (<http://www.sjma.ca>) and The Leading Note Foundation’s OrKidstra in Ottawa, Ontario (<http://www.leadingnotefoundation.org/en/>). Since then, at least six other *Sistema*-inspired programs have been founded, establishing *nucléos* in a total of six provinces.

The Saint James Music Academy (SJMA) was founded by a mother of five upon determining that music lessons for her children were expensive and inaccessible to many in her troubled Downtown Eastside neighbourhood (Werb). In line with the Venezuelan *Sistema* philosophy,

the SJMA website explains: “We believe in social transformation through the power and love of music. Through the inspiration and joy of collaborative music making within the framework of our orchestra and choir, we give young people in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and beyond, the opportunity to explore their creative potential, gain self-confidence, get an academic head-start and become role models within their community” ([http://www.sjma.ca/index2.php#/rtext\\_2/](http://www.sjma.ca/index2.php#/rtext_2/)). The Leading Note Foundation’s OrKidstra program, created by professional and freelance musicians, provides children in under-served Ottawa communities with free group and individual music lessons alongside the opportunity to perform in an OrKidstra ensemble and/or a KidSingers choir (<http://www.leadingnotefoundation.org/en/mandate/>). The program has grown rapidly to address need in particular areas of the city.

The Calgary Multicultural Orchestra (CMO), a *Sistema*-based initiative of the International Avenue Arts and Culture Centre in Calgary, Alberta, started activities in March 2009 (<http://iaacc.ca/orchestra.html>). *Sistema* New Brunswick, a program of the New Brunswick Youth Orchestra, began by opening a “prototype centre” in 2009 in Moncton, New Brunswick. This followed a “learning tour” to Caracas by its board, which established a partnership with the State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela (FESNOJIV), the organization that directs *el Sistema*. In 2010, *Sistema* New Brunswick was awarded a \$1.4 million grant from the (New Brunswick) Provincial Ministry of Regional Development to support a four-year plan to expand throughout the province (<http://www.nbyo-ojnb.ca/sistemanb/en/home.html>); this is the first known instance of a *Sistema*-inspired program in North America securing long-term governmental support (<http://jonathangovias.com/el-sistema/canada/>).

Four new programs began working with students in 2011. *Sistema*-Toronto, located in Toronto, Ontario’s Parkdale area, opened in September and bases its program on three pillars: instrumental training to develop skills for ensemble/orchestral involvement, vocal training through choral singing, and rhythm training through participation in percussion ensembles (<http://sistema-toronto.ca/News.php>). In May 2012, the program received a significant boost: upon being awarded the Glenn Gould Prize for lifetime achievement, legendary Canadian musician Leonard Cohen chose *Sistema*-Toronto as recipient of the City of Toronto’s \$15,000 Protégé Prize (<http://www.sistema-toronto.ca/News.php>). *El Sistema*’s founder Jose Antonio Abreu was previously awarded the Gould prize in 2009 – his moving presentation, along with an impressive performance by the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, inspired the creation of *Sistema*-Toronto. *Sistema* Winnipeg, a partnership between the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra and the Seven Oaks School Division in Winnipeg, Manitoba, opened its doors in the city’s North End in October 2011 (<http://www.sistemawinnipeg.ca>). This partnership with the School Division mandates that the program’s principal teacher is not only a capable musician, but also a certified classroom music educator – this is believed to be the only program with such a staffing requirement in Canada. Symphony musicians provide additional teaching and will help increasingly as various instruments are added. *Sistema* Winnipeg welcomed students five days per week and planned to expand significantly for the 2012-2013 school year. Brio Music (started in 2011) in London, Ontario offers after-school music lessons three days per week, and *El Sistema* Aeolian (ESA), also located in a disadvantaged area of London, launched its orchestra-based program in November 2011 (<http://www.aeolianhall.ca/el-sistema-aeolian>). In July 2011, *El Sistema* Aeolian was honoured with the two-year, \$85,000 Ontario Trillium Foundation grant that will enable ESA to expand its program to two orchestral ensembles and hire additional teachers among other

developments.

Other genres of music are also taught in accessible extracurricular music education initiatives in Canada. For example, the Sarah McLachlan Music Outreach – An Arts Umbrella Project, a free after-school music program offering professional instruction in piano, guitar, percussion, choir, voice, songwriting, student bands and sound lab, launched in Vancouver in 2002; the Sarah McLachlan School of Music, which offers free contemporary and classical music instruction to at-risk youth, opened its doors in September 2011 (<http://www.sarahschoolofmusic.com>). *Le Garage à musique*, a project of the *Fondation du Dr Julien* in Montréal, Québec, whose mission is centered on social pediatrics, provides children and youth with academic tutoring as well as opportunities to learn popular music genres in a group setting; the program was inspired by *el Sistema* and another program called Music Garage (<http://www.fondationdrjulien.org/la-pédiatrie-sociale-en-communauté/alliance-droit-santé/le-garage-à-musique/origines.aspx>).

A number of future *Sistema*-inspired offerings are currently in the planning or fundraising stages; there seems to be a great deal of interest in creating music education opportunities with a social mission to benefit young people across the country.

## **2.2 Social Mission: Effecting Positive Change through Music Education**

As with the original *Sistema*, the objectives of Canada's *Sistema*-inspired programs are primarily social. And as in Venezuela, the Canadian programs principally target underserved groups. They are located in urban areas, often in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of low-income families, including First Nations, multicultural, or recent immigrant populations. The programs are generally free-of-charge and provide all instruments (which are rarely allowed to be taken home) and necessary equipment; some offer after-school snacks and play time so as not to simply extend participants' school day.

Among other things, *Sistema*-inspired programs can provide a safe, supportive, and motivating environment for youth during after-school hours when they might otherwise be at risk. Further, the Canadian initiatives seem to be filling a void in terms of offering free or low-cost extra-curricular activities and/or childcare for low-income families—programs report very positive responses, as well as filling all available spots and receiving substantially more applications than they can accommodate at present.

### **2.2.1 Building Social Capital**

“What we saw in Venezuela compelled us to act,” said Ken MacLeod, President of the New Brunswick Youth Orchestra and *Sistema* New Brunswick. “Through music, the children transported us and themselves into a new dimension – where the *barrio* released its hold, where anything is possible, where the power of their own accomplishments was tangible. Just by learning to play music together. Who wouldn't want that for all our children?” (Ken MacLeod, from the documentary *Sistema Revolution*, Hemmings House Productions). Canadian conductor Dr. Jonathan Govias, a member of the inaugural class of Abreu Fellows who spent time learning and working with *Sistema núcleos* in Venezuela, emphasizes the “explicit social objectives of the programme. *El Sistema* does not focus on the production of musical excellence, but the promotion of positive social change through the pursuit of musical excellence.” (2010, p. 51). The world-class musical prowess displayed by

Venezuela's top *Sistema* ensembles seems to be a by-product of the large scale and motivating aspects of the system.

Music education professor Dr. Ruth Wright has written that "Music might be one of the answers to building social capital; a way of reaching outside individual identities and co-constructing new shared ones: a new sensation of 'we'." (p. 12) 'Social capital', a term coined by political scientist David Putnam, refers to "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (2001, p. 19)." (Wright, p. 12). Increasing social capital may lead to positive outcomes such as better health, higher education levels, increased economic activity, and lower crime rates. Wright argues that the principles of inclusion, enhancement, and participation are crucial to the development of social capital; perhaps they are also central to the success of *el Sistema* and the social change accomplished through ensemble music education in Venezuela.

### 2.3 Adopt or Adapt?

But how applicable is the Venezuelan model to contemporary Canadian society? Canada does not have poverty and *barrios* (i.e. slums) to the same extent as Venezuela, but we do have poor, marginalized, and disadvantaged communities: in 2007, 9.5% of all children (under 18 years of age) in Canada, or approximately 637,000 children, were members of low-income households (<http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/LOP/ResearchPublications/prb0917-e.htm>). These young people in particular could benefit from opportunities for inclusion and participation in positive music-learning communities.

Can we apply the same methods in Canada as in Venezuela and expect similar results? According to *Sistema* New Brunswick's 'Plan', "Although we live in a country very different from Venezuela, the circumstances which can lead to social exclusion for children are largely the same; as are the benefits from playing in an orchestra, which can counter them." (<http://www.nbyo-ojnb.ca/sistemanb/en/nb-plan.html>). However, it seems clear that we must adapt Canadian offerings to local and regional needs and according to the resources available. Existing programs in Canada seem to have done just that. Further, unlike in Venezuela, there is presently no national network of *Sistema nucléos* in Canada to extend and coordinate opportunities for participants, or widespread government funding.

Whether and how to adopt or adapt the *el Sistema* model for Canadian communities was the subject of many presentations and discussions at the four national meetings; aspects of this topic will thus be presented throughout this report.

### 2.4 Future...

Many of the Canadian *Sistema*-inspired programs are still in their first years and consider themselves to be in the "pilot" phase – it is not yet clear whether or how they will be funded in the future to continue their work and expand to serve more students and/or establish more *nucléos*.

There may be a role for a national organization in the future, perhaps with a mandate similar to that of *El Sistema* USA, which is "a support and advocacy network for people and organizations inspired by Venezuela's monumental music education program"

(<http://elsistemausa.ning.com/>). This topic, and the challenges surrounding it, was addressed by several speakers and delegates at the national meetings.

### **3. FOUR MEETINGS ON *EL SISTEMA* IN CANADA: 2011-2012**

Looking toward the future, and seeking to learn from and share with each other, Canadian advocates of *el Sistema* convened four large-scale meetings in 2011 and 2012. Each was independently organized, but drew key participants from across Canada, as well as from the United States and Venezuela.

#### **3.1 *Sistema* Canada Summit: Sharing best practices**

The first-ever national meeting, the *Sistema* Canada Summit, was held in Moncton, New Brunswick (NB) on May 14-15, 2011, and hosted by *Sistema* NB. At that time, the *Sistema* NB program was completing its second year and had secured provincial government funding to operate and expand through to 2014.

The Summit was convened by Ken MacLeod, President of the NB Youth Orchestra and *Sistema* NB, and the additional organizing committee members were: Tina Fedeski and Margaret Tobolowska of The Leading Note Foundation, Brian Levine of The Glenn Gould Foundation, and Dantes Rameau of the Atlanta Music Project. Shortly before the event, Mr. MacLeod stated in an email to delegates that one of the Summit's original purposes was to discuss the formation of a national *Sistema* organization in Canada, but that the committee had determined "such a discussion was premature and that we would benefit most from networking, collaboration and sharing of information about *Sistema* inspired programs. ... In the end, our goal is to be inspired, to learn, to connect and to be better equipped to help orchestrate change for children and families in our communities." (Ken MacLeod to Summit participants, May 10, 2011). He also provided participants with two articles on *el Sistema* in Venezuela to read prior to the event: *Thoughts on Seeing El Sistema* from May 26, 2008, and *El Sistema's Open Secrets* from April 2010, both by Eric Booth, a freelance arts consultant and Senior Advisor to *El Sistema* USA.

More than 60 people attended the Summit, from across Canada (including Nunavut) as well as from the United States and Venezuela. The much-anticipated Special Guest was to be Maestro José Antonio Abreu. However, due to health issues, he was not able to participate. David Ascanio, a founding member of *el Sistema*, and Karina Ochoa attended in his stead, with Mr. Ascanio delivering the keynote address. Other presenters included: *El Sistema* USA advisor Eric Booth; Robert Eisenberg, Toronto business leader and founder of *Sistema*-Toronto; Tina Fedeski, musician, businessperson and founder of Ottawa's OrKidstra; Stephen Huddart, President/CEO of the Summit's sponsor, the McConnell Foundation; Ken MacLeod, business leader and founder of *Sistema* New Brunswick; Dantes Rameau, musician, Abreu Fellow and co-founder of the Atlanta Music Project; Stanford Thompson, musician, Abreu Fellow and founder of Play-On, Philly; and Dan Trahey, musician, educator and innovator and Artistic Director of Baltimore's ORCHkids program.

A high point of the Summit was an uplifting performance by the *Sistema* New Brunswick Moncton Children's Orchestra and Choir featuring over 150 children. The concert was

attended by 800 family members, community members, and government officials (Summit report). The purpose of the ***Sistema Canada Summit: Sharing best practices*** was to “share information, collaboration and discussion of best practices in El-Sistema-inspired programs” (Summit report, p. 1): this was certainly accomplished.

### **3.2 Canadian Symposium I – Understanding *Sistema*: Music Education and Social Change**

The second Canadian meeting on *el Sistema* and programs modeled after it was held at the University of Western Ontario (UWO) in London, Ontario on May 29, 2011 as part of the Leading Music Education International Conference. The one-day symposium was convened by Theodora Stathopoulos (Teacher, Immediate Past-President of the Quebec Music Educators’ Association (QMEA), and member of the board of directors of the International Society for Music Education (ISME)) by invitation of Dr. Ruth Wright, UWO’s Music Education Area Chair. Former Abreu Fellow Dr. Jonathan Govias was the keynote speaker, presenting *El Sistema* = ‘The system’, which he described as an “Extraordinarily broad discussion of the wide-reaching program in Venezuela”. Other speakers were: Clark Brian (Aeolian Hall, London, ON), Richard Hallam, MBE (National Music Education Grant Director, England), Brian Levine (Executive Director, Glenn Gould Foundation), Ken MacLeod (President, NB Youth Orchestra and *Sistema* NB), David Visentin (Executive and Artistic Director, *Sistema*-Toronto), Wayne Toews (Saskatchewan Orchestral Association/Musicfest Canada/CMC Prairie Region), Tina Fedeski (Executive Director, The Leading Note Foundation), Katherine Carlton (Executive Director, Orchestras Canada) and Filmblanc producer Noemi Weis who produced the film *Teaching the Life of Music* which was premiered at the symposium.

Govias spoke on what he has identified as the ‘Five Fundamentals of *El Sistema*’ and the underlying pedagogical philosophy. These fundamental principles, provided below, were culled from the experiences of Govias and his colleagues who visited diverse *Sistema* *nucléos* in Venezuela as members of the inaugural class of Abreu Fellows. The principles were reviewed and approved by Maestro Abreu and FESNOJIV; a detailed discussion of each can be found in Govias’ 2011 article in *Canadian Music Educator* and on his blog: <http://jonathangovias.com/el-sistema/>.

#### ***“The Five Fundamental Principles of el Sistema***

1. ***Social Change***: the primary objective is social transformation *through* the pursuit of musical excellence. One happens through the other, and neither is prioritized at the expense of the other.
2. ***Ensembles***: the focus of *el Sistema* is the orchestra or choral experience.
3. ***Frequency***: *el Sistema* ensembles meet multiple times every week over extended periods.
4. ***Accessibility***: *el Sistema* programs are free, and are not selective in admission.
5. ***Connectivity***: every *nucléo* is linked at the urban, regional and national levels, forming a cohesive network of services and opportunities for students across the country.”  
(p. 21)

In his presentation, Govias also highlighted that “It is in the framework under which music is taught – the ideals and objectives – that El Sistema is most divergent from the established practices of classical music, more so than in its methods” (2010, p. 50). These ideals are somewhat different from those of established systems of music education in Canada.

At this symposium, Mr. Visentin spoke on plans for *Sistema*-Toronto (opening Sept. 2011). It is interesting to note that *Sistema*-Toronto has additionally adopted four guiding principles for its program: inclusion (and non-discrimination), teamwork (through group lessons and orchestra), leadership development (through mentorship), and social change (through developing better citizens and communities) (<http://sistema-toronto.ca/Mission-Vision.html>). Mr. Brian had purchased Aeolian Hall in East London, Ontario, a lower socio-economic area of the city, and discussed his wish to establish a community music school there. Richard Hallam presented on his work with two programs in England providing music making opportunities in schools and communities under the government-funded project *Music Manifesto: Sing Up* (singing) and *Wider Opportunity* (instrumental learning). He also discussed the UK’s newest music education program, In Harmony, which was inspired by *el Sistema* to start projects in London, Liverpool, and Norwich, as well as progress on England’s ‘National Plan for Music Education’. He indicated that the goal of these programs is to provide positive music education experiences for all, regardless of talent or financial privilege.

An exciting and productive aspect of this symposium was the Round Table Discussion. Four of the central questions pondered and debated were:

- Do *Sistema* programs enable social change? What sort of social change? And for whom?
- What needs to be in place for an *el Sistema* model to succeed?
- Could the model work with other musical styles/genres/ensembles, apart from Western art music and orchestras?
- What needs to be adapted from the Venezuelan model for it work in other countries?

Participants shared ideas and information, and began to formulate answers to these challenging questions. Saskatchewan music educator Wayne Toews wrote an excellent report on this symposium, including links to many *Sistema*-related resources. The report is available to download at: <http://conductorschool.com/SistemaReport.html> (accessed June 1, 2012).

### 3.3 Symposium II: Demystifying the *Sistema* Ethos

The third Canadian meeting on *el Sistema* was held at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, on November 17, 2011. It was convened and chaired by Theodora Stathopoulos by invitation of McGill University’s Music Education Area Chair, Dr. Lisa Lorenzino. The very well attended symposium was sponsored by the Quebec Music Educators’ Association (QMEA) in partnership with the *Fédération des associations des musiciens éducateurs du Québec* (FAMEQ) and provided simultaneous translation in French and Spanish. Further information on the symposium is available at: <http://www.qmea-aemq.org/2011-symposium/>.

Several people delivered opening remarks. Ms. Stathopoulos and Dr. Lorenzino were followed by Dr. Sean Ferguson, Dean of McGill University’s Schulich School of Music, who suggested Canada might learn from Venezuela, Brazil, and other countries who prioritize music education despite widespread social and economic challenges. Valerie Descombes,



President of the Quebec Music Educators' Association stated that a Canadian *el Sistema* program should not replace school music education, but rather supplement it with after-school programs that bring schools and local communities together

The Guest of Honour, Mme. Francia Coromoto Malvar, Consulate General of Venezuela, delivered greetings and discussed the history and social impact of *el Sistema* in her country. She indicated that the Venezuelan government values *el Sistema* for much more than its musical achievements – “the system” instills the values of liberty, democracy, solidarity, responsibility, equality, justice, and opportunity, equipping children to become agents of positive social change. José Antonio Abreu created *el Sistema* in 1979; by 2008, the program had expanded to 204 centers serving 300,000 participants. According to Mme. Malvar, the Venezuelan government's goal is to serve 500,000 children through *Sistema* within the next six years, and one million within the next ten years. She noted that *el Sistema* is free for all participants and includes children of all ages and backgrounds, including children with disabilities, those from low-income families, children in prison, and young adults. Mme. Malvar concluded by describing *el Sistema* as a “silent social revolution”. She emphasized that it helps children develop a sense of individual responsibility and an awareness of the impact of their actions upon others, so as to become proud, creative, and modern citizens (Risk & Khoury, pp. 1-2).

Plenary presenters spoke on essential aspects of *el Sistema*, attempting to “demystify” its functioning and reasons for musical and social success in Venezuela. Dr. Ruth Wright (Chair of Music Education, University of Western Ontario) delivered a talk entitled “Music for Social Change: *El Sistema* – a researcher's perspective”. She spoke on *why* the system has worked in Venezuela. Her messages included the potential of music education to transform society by enabling participants to acquire “social capital”, the need for *Sistema*-inspired programs outside of Venezuela to adapt to local needs and capacities, and the current social context for such programs in Canada, particularly our increasing economic inequity. She supported her points by citing the work of ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, and political scientists, as well as government statistics.

Dr. Jonathan Govias spoke on *how Sistema* works in a talk entitled “The *El Sistema* Environmental Ethos”. Based on his experience as an Abreu Fellow, Govias described this ethos as the combination of a particular structural framework and the people involved in it. He emphasized that *el Sistema* is not a music education program but a social program that strives for social transformation *through* musical excellence. He highlighted the five fundamental principles he distilled from his experiences of *Sistema* (see section 3.2; Govias, 2011) and linked these to educational theories (e.g. Vygotsky, Bandura). Govias closed by outlining differences between North American and Venezuelan systems of music education – he characterized the typical North American music education experience as “practical/theoretical,” encompassing both instrumental instruction and music theoretical knowledge, and that of students in Venezuela as “practical intensive,” with a strong focus on instrumental skill but little concentration on theoretical knowledge. Govias suggested that there are ways in which these two approaches might learn from each other.

The third plenary presenter, Leith Hamilton, Project Manager of the African Canadian Development and Prevention Network (ACDPN), Community Health and Social Service Network in Montreal's West Island, spoke on “Addressing the Needs of Underserved Communities” and considered *who* could be served by *Sistema*-inspired programs in Canada.

He described underserved communities as being fragmented and isolated, with children of these families often living in poverty and therefore statistically more prone to unemployment, violence, depression, and mental health issues. He argued that one key to overcoming such difficulties is personal “resiliency”, the inner resources that a person brings to a challenging or disappointing situation in order to surmount it. According to Mr. Hamilton, children develop resiliency through “protective factors” such as a caring person, family support, an adaptive racial identity, or music. He indicated that, rather than focusing solely on reducing risk factors, the Community Health and Social Service Network works to strengthen protective factors for disadvantaged children. He also pointed out that there are certain barriers to accessing prevention services for disadvantaged populations, including mistrust of government intention and language. He argues that public systems must develop culturally sensitive strategies and match their offerings to the needs of local communities if they are to successfully engage with those they seek to serve. He emphasized the importance of building networks and suggested that arts-based programs, such as those inspired by *el Sistema*, team up with community groups (such as his ACDPN) to achieve the best results.

Last, Tim Brodhead, past President of the McConnell Foundation, dealt with the topic of *who* can make *Sistema*-inspired programs possible in Canada. In his talk, “Project-Based Funding – Success Stories for Support of Education Through the Arts”, he spoke about the mission of the McConnell Foundation, which seeks to support the arts by ensuring future audiences and building community, as well as increasing the capacity for resilience to change in Canadian society to create a society that is more inclusive, sustainable, and creative. Mr. Brodhead described the Foundation’s creation of the ArtSmarts program in 1998 to bring together artists, art organizations, and school boards to allow children to create art. It began with eight pilot projects and is now in every province except British Columbia; in 2010 the program reached 23,000 students. ArtSmarts’ outcomes include: increased retention of students, increased self-esteem, and therefore increased participation among previously disengaged children. Notably, the program has had particular success among Aboriginal communities, particularly when the incoming artists were Aboriginal and the classroom teacher participated in the activity. Mr. Brodhead went on to describe the difficulty of creating a centralized, national body to coordinate multiple local programs. He emphasized that when developing a new program such as *el Sistema*, the primary obstacle would be garnering the necessary political willpower.

A panel moderated by Richard Hallam discussed the topic “Music in the School Curriculum and Music in Community”, in great depth. Panel members were primarily educators and researchers; they were: Dr. Catherine Le Maistre (Chair, Advisory Board on English Education, *Commission de l’éducation en langue anglaise* (MELS)), Dr. Scott Shuler (President, National Association for Music Education (NAfME)), Dr. Ed Wasiak (Immediate Past President, Canadian Music Educators Association (CMEA)), Sylvie Boisvert (Accredited Music Therapist, McKay Readaptation Centre (EMSB)), Claire Rousseau (*Fédération des associations des musiciens éducateurs du Québec* (FAMEQ)), Author, and Orff teacher), Dr. Erik Holmgren (Director, Abreu Fellows Program, New England Conservatory of Music), Liana Goldsmith (President, Quebec Suzuki Method Association), Dr. Michael Marcuzzi (Professor, Department of Music, York University), Tina Fedeski (Executive Director, The Leading Note Foundation), Tim Brady (President, Canadian New Music Network (CNMN)), Dr. Lorna Wanzel (President, Canadian Federation of Music Teachers’ Associations (CFMTA)), Larry O’Farrell (Professor and holder of the UNESCO

Chair in Arts and Learning, Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Canadian Network of Arts and Learning (CNAL), Holly Nimmons (Executive Director, Coalition for Music Education in Canada (CMEC), Dr. Guylaine Vaillancourt (Assistant Professor in Music Therapy, Concordia University, and Canadian Association for Music Therapy (CAMT)) (please see: <http://www.qmea-aemq.org/panelists/>). A special Guest Presentation was given by Richard Hallam (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, UK) on "Effective Partnerships – Working in Music Education: Principles and Practice". The symposium led to many productive discussions and connections between teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders.

### 3.4 Symposium III: Social Harmony Through Music Education

The fourth and most recent meeting on *el Sistema* and music education in Canada was organized by The Leading Note Foundation and held on March 31, 2012, in Ottawa, Ontario. The symposium was entitled **Social Harmony Through Music Education** and it followed another daylong event on March 30<sup>th</sup> at the University of Ottawa: **Linking *El Sistema* Programs with the University and the Community at Large**. The goal of the March 31<sup>st</sup> symposium was to reflect on *el Sistema*'s adaptability to Canadian society and its relevance to Canada's existing public-school music education systems.

Dr. Jonathan Govias presented on "Understanding *El Sistema*". He provided an overview of *Sistema*'s principles and practices and contrasted these with the publicly funded music education programs taught in North American schools. Govias emphasized the compromises that current Canadian music education systems make in terms of time spent in music classes, class size, student engagement and contributions, and social opportunity. Lessons or classes typically last an hour or less, once or up to a few times per week, and include only same-age peers. In contrast, in Venezuela, the contact with music education is on a near daily basis, often for hours at a time, and older or more advanced musicians help to propel the younger or less able students forward, as well as challenging themselves by taking on chamber ensemble, conducting, or organizational responsibilities. Presenter and participants then engaged in a question period. In response to queries, Dr. Govias responded that smaller ensembles are less effective as a social development tool, that cost is a major barrier to increased contact time in North America, and that *el Sistema* does not rely exclusively on finding teachers who can work "magic", but rather it allows the musicians to contribute more themselves and thus develops its future teachers.

Next, Noemi Weis (filmmaker, member of UNESCO Team Canada, President-Executive Producer of filmblanc) presented her film *Teaching the Life of Music*. The documentary, made in 2009, focuses on Ottawa's The Leading Note Foundation, its path to success, and its endorsement by *el Sistema* founder José Antonio Abreu. The film examines how students of the foundation's OrKidstra program were inspired by a 2009 performance by Venezuela's *Orquesta Sinfónica Simón Bolívar* in Toronto and motivated to become leaders in their ensembles.

Tina Fedeski and Margaret Tobolowska, founders of The Leading Note Foundation, explained its organization and programs, and the factors behind its success. Established in 2007, the foundation now serves 200 children, including many recent immigrants who speak 35 different languages. It serves as a feeder to the local youth orchestra, which is separate

from the Foundation. Like *Sistema*, more advanced students become teachers and move up to play in advanced groups. The founders emphasized that they have followed a controlled growth formula to assist with developing community and a supportive culture around their programs. They have also worked to inspire local educators to aspire to bridge existing curricular programs with *Sistema*-inspired extra-curricular programs. They walked through aspects of their program using Govias' five fundamental principles of *el Sistema*. The primary differences are: Leading Note emphasizes playing for peace as opposed to "fighting" or "struggling" towards a goal (i.e. in reference to *Sistema*'s motto, *tochar y luchar*); and program sessions are less frequent and lengthy than may be the case in Venezuela. Fedeski and Tobolowska highlighted that it is a community program (as opposed to a "poor kids" program) that works to develop friendships, partnerships and social cohesion between socio-economic groups by including participants from refugee and disadvantaged children and those from more established or affluent families. Though there is no larger *Sistema* network in Canada, the foundation does link their ensembles to other local youth orchestras and ensembles to provide additional opportunities, and it draws on members of the wider community, such as university students, for assistance.

A video was shown of *Sistema* founder Maestro Abreu receiving the honorary doctorate from Carlton University in Ottawa. Subsequently, Richard Hallam spoke on In Harmony – *Sistema* England. He provided program statistics and emphasized the general approach of the program, and the process required to convince all stakeholders and to implement it. In addressing Canadian *Sistema* advocates, Hallam asked the questions: What will you adopt? What will you adapt? Do we dare to aim high enough?

Mr. Hallam also moderated a panel discussion featuring local Ottawa-area education decision-makers Yasir Naqvi (Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP)), Jennifer McKenzie (Chair of the Board of Trustees, Ottawa-Carlton District School Board (OCDSB)), Dr. Peter Gamwell (Superintendent of Instruction, OCDSB), and Jennifer Martinez (Ottawa Catholic School Board, wind coach with The Leading Note Foundation). Panelists noted school boards' narrow definitions of "student success" and "literacy" may be counterproductive, particularly in relation to providing quality music and arts education. For example, contrary to the expectations of some, in one Ontario school decreasing academic contact hours to increase the time spent on music had resulted in better academic performance. The panel discussed models that are working well, such as OrKidstra and *Sistema* New Brunswick, by thinking globally and acting locally.

The panel also discussed next steps in furthering social change through music education, particularly within the province of Ontario. The Ontario Teacher's College now includes discussion of social development and cross-curricular teaching in teachers' preparation, but further training initiatives are likely necessary in order to achieve positive social change by way of music education, in addition to modification of teaching schedules. Notably, panel members generated key points and tools to use in approaching government and other organizations for support, such as emphasizing that the highest rate of crime occurs between 3 and 6 pm, highlighting results of neuroscience research showing the influence of active participation in music on the brain and its development, and showing films, statistics, and results from relevant music education initiatives. They noted upcoming reforms to education in Ontario, and concluded that it is necessary to spread the word and get the music message to the government/ministry of education in order to influence curriculum planning from the top down. (Symposium – March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012 – Ottawa – Summary: 1-7).

## 4. DISCUSSION

The four national meetings on aspects of *el Sistema*, Canadian systems of music education, and *Sistema*-inspired programs, and the possibilities to help children and society through inclusion and participation in accessible music ensembles were extremely productive. Important connections were established between delegates and programs, and a number of key issues emerged. These will be recapitulated below.

### 4.1 Funding and Research

One of the major challenges to the continuation and development of *Sistema*-inspired initiatives using music education to promote social change in Canada is the lack of certainty surrounding future sources of funding. At present, each program is funded independently, often by partnerships from a variety of sources; the length and level of funding for each program is different.

As noted by the panel at **Symposium III: Social Harmony Through Music Education** (see section 3.4), high quality research may help to garner support and funding to continue and expand *Sistema*-inspired programs. Research may also highlight areas for change or improvement in each context. Some of Canada's existing *Sistema*-inspired programs have already begun to conduct research to determine the effects of their programs, however results are not yet available, and the research methods are not coordinated between programs. It is hoped that all new and existing programs will begin or continue to conduct empirical research generating both quantitative and qualitative data in order to establish and compare the effects of participation on students, their families, and their communities; this could be done in collaboration with universities and foundations or other granting agencies. The results of research could be used to develop and improve program offerings, and potentially as an effective tool for advocacy in the future.

### 4.2 Adopting and Adapting: The Roles of Music Education in Society

As highlighted by Dr. Jonathan Govias (see section 3.2), the ideals and objectives of *el Sistema* are somewhat at odds with those of established systems of music education in Canada, both in public schools and typical private music tuition: *el Sistema*'s emphasis is on developing human potential at least as much as musical/instrumental ability. Can established Canadian systems of music education cope with the introduction of a *Sistema*-inspired approach? As iterated by Valerie Descombes, President of the Quebec Music Educators' Association (QMEA), many Canadian music educators believe that *Sistema*-inspired programs should supplement, *not* replace, music classes in the public schools (see section 3.3). Though there is potentially some friction between the two, programs such as The Leading Note Foundation's OrKidstra have been able to navigate this by identifying the complementary aspects of each offering and working to build partnerships (see section 3.4). Programs that adopt a focus on inclusion, enhancement, and participation may be able to achieve different outcomes than existing curricular models.

Dr. Ruth Wright has argued that music education with a focus on social change can be a successful approach to the development of 'social capital', including better health and

wellbeing, and community development and cohesion (see section 2.2.1). In an increasingly urban and digital world, families and communities are perhaps more fragmented than ever before. Adopting *Sistema*'s emphasis on *tochar et luchar*, struggling and performing, "together" as an ensemble may help young people connect to each other and their communities to build skills, confidence, motivation, and social capital. Perhaps, through *Sistema* and programs with a similar focus, music educators and the public are beginning to see a transformation in the perceived role(s) of music and arts education in society.

However, a number of Canadian *Sistema* advocates have highlighted the need to adapt what we know of *el Sistema* to suit the Canadian context and serve local communities. This is essentially the way it works in Venezuela, according to Abreu Fellow alumnus Dr. Jonathan Govias – in as much as there is a "model", each *núcleo* adapts to meet the needs of its participants with the particular resources available. Further, as acknowledged by Ken MacLeod, the circumstances resulting in social exclusion for children, particularly poverty, and the protective benefits of active participation in a community-centered orchestra are largely the same no matter the country or region (<http://www.nbyo-ojnb.ca/sistemanb/en/nb-plan.html>; see also Leith Hamilton's presentation in section 3.3). Canadian *Sistema*-inspired programs have already created their own *Sistema*-like approaches to serve their particular communities.

#### 4.3 Formation of a National Organization

As increasing public profile and interest in the *Sistema* phenomenon lead to the creation and expansion of *Sistema*-inspired programs in Canada, it may be relevant to re-explore the formation of national umbrella organization in the near future, as initially discussed by the organizing committee of the ***Sistema* Canada Summit** in 2011. Since that first national meeting in New Brunswick in May 2011, three large-scale symposia took place, and a handful of new *Sistema*-inspired programs have opened their doors (i.e. Toronto, Winnipeg, and two in London, Ontario), with more in the works. A national organization could serve to link these diverse programs across the country, creating the network considered by Govias to be one of the fundamentals of the Venezuelan system (see section 3.2 and Govias, 2011), potentially uniting and guiding certain aspects of their functioning while allowing each program and site (*núcleo*) to remain essentially autonomous, as in Venezuela. For example, the *Sistema*-Toronto website states:

"As a counter-agent to tackling illiteracy and social alienation for children and youth, Sistema-Toronto also dreams of a future "El Sistema Canada", in centres throughout the country; all unique and independant, yet linked in their commitment to achieving human potential through physical/mental/artistic engagement, discipline and teamwork through the study and performance of music." (<http://sistema-toronto.ca/>).

A national organization could also facilitate the implementation of a coordinated research agenda and serve to increase the fundraising capacity of individual *Sistema*-inspired programs. *El Sistema* USA could serve as a useful model for a similar Canadian association. Perhaps the formation of such a group in Canada can be revisited by the leaders of current *Sistema*-inspired initiatives and supporting organizations after considering information from other countries presented at the upcoming inaugural meeting of the Special Interest Group on *el Sistema* at the International Society for Music Education's 30<sup>th</sup> World Conference held in

Thessaloniki, Greece in July, 2012.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

There has been a flurry of *Sistema*-related activity in Canada in 2011 and 2012: four new *Sistema*-inspired programs have opened, more are being planned, and the first four national symposia on *el Sistema* took place, allowing Canadians and others to share experiences, make connections, and better understand *Sistema* and the complexities of its introduction to Canadian society.

According to Dr. Jonathan Govias, "Canada is a world-leader in *Sistema*-inspired activity. Canadian núcleos are some of the oldest in North America; Canadian universities have hosted the first academic conferences related to *el Sistema*; a national foundation presented the *Simón Bolívar* Orchestra in its largest venue to date and formally honoured Maestro Abreu's achievements in 2008; and a Canadian youth orchestra has set the current gold standard internationally in advocating for and securing major government funding." (<http://jonathangovias.com/el-sistema/canada/>)

Canada is now home to at least eight *Sistema*-inspired initiatives in six different provinces serving hundreds of children, and the numbers are likely to grow rapidly. Existing programs in Canada are modeled on *el Sistema* but adapted to the needs and resources of the local community; organizers have been very resourceful in obtaining funding and developing successful partnerships. There is interest in conducting research to document and assess the influence of such programs on the lives of participating children and their communities; it is hoped that such work will help to support future development of initiatives using music education to effect positive social change. Canadian *Sistema* leaders and advocates are considering the advantages of creating a national organization to facilitate collaboration and support each other in the future. Last, a Canadian music educator, Theodora Stathopoulos, has initiated the formation of a new Special Interest Group on *el Sistema* to share experience and understanding and explore possibilities with members of the international community at the 30<sup>th</sup> International Society for Music Education (ISME) World Conference in Thessaloniki, Greece, in July 2012.

*El Sistema* has shown the world that, by prioritizing human development and social transformation over music performance outcomes, music education can be a powerful tool for positive social change. Yet the Venezuelan system has managed to do very well on both social and musical fronts – enabling youth to make a contribution and work together toward musical goals in a supportive, challenging environment clearly has the potential to promote agency among young people and to foster their social and musical development. *Sistema*'s philosophy seems to be that 'the whole is stronger than the sum of its parts', but also that each individual can be strengthened and supported through participation in a communal endeavour: learning and making music!

*El Sistema*'s success has spurred support and initiatives worldwide. Canadian programs modeled on or inspired by its approach are addressing needs within their communities and reporting positive outcomes. *Sistema*'s founder José Antonio Abreu has said: "Teach children the beauty of music and music will teach them the beauty of life." A number of Canadians are now hard at work, making this happen.

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