

Preview

Cleveland Orchestra “Make Music!” Week: a conversation with El Sistema @ Rainey director Isabel Trautwein

by Mike Telin



Cleveland Orchestra violinist Isabel Trautwein had a vision which took her to Venezuela to study the famous youth orchestra program called El Sistema. The local result is El Sistema @ Rainey, located at the Rainey Institute on E. 55th Street. In its second full year, the after school program now amounts to fifty students meeting five days a week from 4:30 to 6:00 pm under the guidance of five teachers. “The model is for it to become a daily orchestra community,” Trautwein told us in a telephone conversation. “For a lot of kids, this is after school care. We provide snacks and

homework time, and the orchestra every day. Eighty percent of the magic of El Sistema is the daily work habits.”

The young musicians of El Sistema @ Rainey will perform during The Cleveland Orchestra's “Make Music” Week Showcase Concert on Thursday, March 7 at 7:00 pm in Severance Hall. We spoke with Isabel Trautwein about her experiences in creating El Sistema @ Rainey.

Mike Telin: What caused you to make such a huge commitment to the program?

Isabel Trautwein: When I was eight years old I went to music camp and I think I just got the bug then. Being part of a community. As Robert Shaw called it, “a community of expression”. It was just so much fun and I want other kids to have that too.

Mike Telin: El Sistema talks about the four levels of learning – leading the individual to become part of a model society. What does this mean to you?

IT: I do want the kids to become really good players. But if they learn things like awareness — if you're having a bad day, can you keep that inside so that it doesn't affect others, because we all have bad days. If they can learn habits like that and take them to their outer lives, that will make for a better world. You have to be aware of yourself and of oth-

ers to be a good member of an orchestra. [It's] a community of caring. Caring about sound, caring about your own contribution to the whole that is meaningful.

MT: It seems these are traits that, regardless if the child becomes a professional musician, can make them a better person in society.

IT: Absolutely! It's interesting that you say that because I have been reading this biography of Robert Shaw, and he really felt that the amateur musical community, and especially in his case the choral, embodied the perfect spirit of the model society.

MT: That's interesting.

IT: Because the amateur is someone who cares so deeply about what they do, they are willing to sacrifice many hours of free time devoted to the perfection of a craft. So to me, the idea of a kid's becoming a professional is more than secondary, it's completely non-relevant. But becoming a good member of a community is deeply important. They are vitally important members of the community and they are very proud of it.

MT: I think because the kids now understand what it is that you and your Cleveland Orchestra colleagues do, and what makes it good, they are better listeners.

IT: I have definitely felt that. When we bring in guest artists, their ability to listen is noticed by all. The children have very sophisticated observations now and are able to listen for long periods of time. I would say that they are skilled listeners, which is not natural. We are not born with the skill to listen to long musical pieces.

MT: No we're not. During the concert last spring, the imitation piece was impressive; you played a short melody and they had to imitate it exactly.

IT: That's true and they'd better! [laughing] There's a high price if not. Just kidding. But this year we also have a new private lesson program so I am teaching seven of the violinists. I have really noticed that they are becoming very aware of the difference between their sound and my sound, because they are exposed to it so much. An hour and a half every day is almost unheard of in traditional music training. So they are hearing professional sounds a lot.

MT: That brings something to mind. You are re-creating something that was, as you know, developed over many years for a very specific society and culture; so, how has it been to adapt the things that made the Venezuelan El Sistema so great, here in the United States?

IT: I think that's an on-going question, and we are looking at a lot of sides to that. For one thing, there shouldn't be a lot of adapting, because every five, six and seven year old in any country is basically the same. So in terms of the children being inspired by a charismatic teacher and a high energy class, that is going to be the same everywhere.

Now, there are quite a few differences here, and one of the biggest is the availability of time. The Venezuelans go to El Sistema around three in the afternoon and don't leave until seven. So it's a very different span of time that they spend and progress is faster for that reason. We have an hour and a half, and we need to keep it highly structured because

it is at the end of a very late school day. So it is harder for us to create that Latin style where you can take your violin outside and play some tunes. It's very different in Cleveland in February. [laughing]

MT: Right.

So the whole feel is one key difference. Another thing that is different here is that we do live in a racially segregated society, and classical music is seen by many as the music of the white Europeans. I am thinking a lot about that, and one way that I am addressing it is for instance, this Sunday, we are going to play at a church. Although many of the children are not church goers, I do think that in the African-American community the church, as a community gathering place, is very alive. So we're going to play two selections that we will be playing at Severance Hall this week, and Pat Harris, who performs a lot of gospel, and is also classically trained, is going to sing *God Bless America* with our kids. She has worked with them and is teaching them about the voice.

I do want the kids to feel that it is about art, but we have to address [these difficult] questions because unfortunately they are part of our life. I want the children to feel that this is about expression, and however expression comes to you, that's what we want. If you end up wanting Beethoven that's great, and if you end up wanting to sing or play your violin at a place where your family is, and if that place is church on Sunday, that's also what we want.

I'm just at the beginning of thinking about what the twenty-first century integrated Youth Orchestra will look like. What kind of music will they play? Just like in Venezuela where folk music is very much a part of El Sistema during the early years, the young children play mostly folk music and then gradually switch to classical. We may adapt that in all kinds of ways. We may have the children performing folk music and also hip-hop, and writing clean language rap songs to perform with a string quartet. I'm all for exploring ways that this can feel like a music program without cultural boundaries.

MT: It seems to me that the time is right for people to be open to that kind of concept.

IT: I think so too, but why do you?

MT: Because the young musicians of today grew up listening to everything, like rap, electronic pop, folk, rock — you name it, they are more comfortable thinking of it all as music than perhaps in the past. And also things like last week's Akron Symphony Gospel Meets Symphony concert really was a gospel concert with orchestra, and it was great! But that has evolved over twenty years.

IT: Cool! I'm thinking of the symphony as becoming a community gathering place for music making for the larger community. People want to have experiences when they come to the concert hall. And, those experiences should include their being involved, be it through singing along or seeing your child up on stage. I'd like to see a lot more youth orchestras and amateur orchestras playing side by side with really great conductors. Or, have the kids write a poem that matches *Ode to Joy*, and we'll get the kids to play it. I don't think it's complicated to create those bridges.

MT: But building the bridges is hard work and things don't happen over night.

IT: I think the most dangerous thing about El Sistema work is where it could be parallel to missionary work. That religious impulse that if all children play Beethoven they'll all become great citizens. I mean when you look closely at that kind of language it becomes a little frightening. So I think that deep listening, especially to the parents will really help create a musical community that is fitting and wanted by the community. I believe whole heartedly in this wonderful idea of giving access to excellent music making to every child. But we have to be sensitive to the communities that we enter and that is a long process and it doesn't happen over night.

MT: I do think it is happening but you're right, rebuilding the musical front-porch of our society takes time.

IT: Yes, a lot of parents are now coming and asking if the kids can play at church and I tell them, call the kids and see if they are free and who ever wants to play I'll help prepare them. So the families are starting to take ownership of the group and are telling me where they want kids to play. Maybe it's Severance Hall but maybe it's the Galleria for graduation. I'm open, open to the kids and their families shaping this experience.

MT: Did you meet with any skepticism at first? Maybe skepticism isn't the right word, but more like I'm not sure what this is but it sounds like a good thing for my kids. And if the kids were there, the families obviously were supportive of the program in some way.

IT: Absolutely they were. But I think [being seen as] a do-gooder can be a problem you will encounter whenever you enter a community solely for the purpose of improving the lives of the children. Of course parents love to hear the statistics that [programs like this] can improve graduation rates. But I have to say that the parents I have met are very interested in getting the best for their child. That's why they are willing to have them go to a music program five days a week. Yes, there were some humps, but once it was clear that we are committed to each other — their child is coming every day and they know I am out here working with and rooting for their children — then trust comes. But trust is not an immediate thing either. So I'm not sure I would call it skepticism I would say that we were just strangers to each other.

MT: It's a wonderful program and I think it's a great example that art and the making of art is also a social science and sometimes we forget that.

IT: I like that, I think I'll use it, but we should talk more.

MT: Any time, I'd enjoy that.

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