

# Children find their voices through music

By Star-Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff

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Members from the Youth and Children Orchestras National System of Venezuela wait to perform in Caracas, Venezuela, in November 2011. The national network of orchestras, known simply as “El Sistema” or “The System,” provides free musical instruments and lessons to the 250,000 children enrolled in its program.

MINNEAPOLIS—Tremell Caldwell tapped his feet on the floor, made funny faces and wiggled the cello between his knees. He was fidgeting like any 7-year-old kept indoors on one of the nicest days of summer.

But when music teacher Patricia Morgan-Brist said “Bows ready!” he laid his bow across the cello strings. He then got his fingers in note-playing position.

“This is my precious instrument,” he said. “I like it because it’s big and has the longest strings.”

Caldwell is one of 18 first- and second-graders enrolled in El Sistema Minnesota. It’s an after-school music program that just finished its second year at Nellie Stone Johnson Community School in Minneapolis. The program uses violin and cello lessons to teach low-income children not only music, but also cooperation and study skills.

After just one year, students in the program tested as more empathetic and creative. They are faster readers, too.

## **Program Travels Far From Venezuela**

El Sistema was launched nearly 40 years ago in Venezuela. The program was as concerned with transforming the lives of some of Venezuela's poorest children and preventing crime, as music.

"Poverty is not necessarily the lack of bread or roof," said its founder, musician Jose Antonio Abreu. It's "the feeling of being nobody."

The program is paid for by the Venezuelan government. Today it teaches more than 300,000 students a year and is involved with about 500 orchestras and other music groups. Some students have gone on to professional music careers. One of its most notable graduates is Gustavo Dudamel, the rock-star music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

The idea has spread around the world. In the United States, more than 50 programs modeled on El Sistema have sprung up in the past several years.

## **Two Friends Saw A Good Idea**

"Adagio means what?" asked music teacher Patricia Morgan-Brist of her students. She was talking about how fast to play the music.

"Slow motion!" they replied in unison, moving on to andante—"Walking speed!"—and allegro, which means quickly in Italian.

"We never allegro in the hallways, right?" said Morgan-Brist. She co-founded the nonprofit program with her good friend, violin teacher Kelly Carter. They called it ACME, which stands for Advocates for Community through Musical Excellence.

"We saw something about El Sistema on 60 Minutes' and thought, we need that here," she said. "60 Minutes" is a news show on the CBS television network.

Carter has played with several community orchestras around Minneapolis.

"Public schools in north Minneapolis don't offer much music education. And for a lot of families here, paying for private lessons isn't an option," she said.

## **It Starts With Just A Few Notes**

So, far, the organization is funded entirely through events and donations.

Students begin in first grade, attending 2 1/2-hour afternoon sessions four days a week. Each one is lent an instrument and given private lessons from teachers and musicians from the Minnesota Orchestra. They also get free transportation and help with homework.

At a recent fundraiser for the program, jazz pianist Nachito Herrera teamed with a group of much more advanced students, members of the Minnesota Youth Symphony. They performed George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." The piece was conducted by Manny Laureano. He plays trumpet with the Minnesota Orchestra and is the co-director of the Youth Symphony.

The concert opened with a brief performance by the El Sistema kids, who enthusiastically played the few notes that they knew. Then they watched the rest of the show from front-row seats.

Beginning violinist Jalia Hall's parents, Eric and Franzetta Hall, were in the audience, cheering their daughter on.

"I was surprised she wanted to play the violin," said Jalia's mom. "But I'm supportive because it really enriches her learning at school. Any kind of music does, but I want her to know that music means more than rap or hip-hop."

## **Music Is A Voice For Many**

Laureano said the El Sistema students reminded him of himself when he was growing up—but with a head start.

"I didn't start playing the trumpet till I was 12," he said. "It gave me a voice at a time when I really needed one and allowed me to feel like I was doing something (important). When you're a kid you can get caught up in so many ... negative things. Music helps you stand out for all the right reasons."

Back in the school music room, Tremell Caldwell stood under a large poster of jazz great John Coltrane. Tremell asked, "Can I go outside now?"

Morgan-Brist said yes, but first asked him to read aloud from a note written by one of the program's supporters.

"I am proud of you," he read slowly. "Your talent amazes me."

He broke into a broad grin, then bolted for the door.

## Quiz

1. According to the article, El Sistema gives lessons for which of the following instruments?
  - (a) cello and violin
  - (b) violin and piano
  - (c) cello and trumpet
  - (d) trumpet and piano
2. According to the article, El Sistema teaches which of the following to its students?
  - (a) singing
  - (b) rock music
  - (c) social skills
  - (d) effective reading skills
3. Select the paragraph from “It Starts With Just A Few Notes” that shows parents’ supportive nature toward music classes.
4. What is the connection between El Sistema and Gustavo Dudamel?
  - (a) Gustavo Dudamel founded El Sistema
  - (b) Gustavo Dudamel was a student at El Sistema.
  - (c) Gustavo Dudamel teaches violin at El Sistema.
  - (d) Gustavo Dudamel teaches rock music at El Sistema.

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