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## **El Sistema and the transformational power of music**

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In a stuffy Ottawa classroom, long after school has let out, an unlikely chamber ensemble struggles with the second movement of a string quartet by Mozart. The cellist, 13-year-old Gareth Luke, keeps missing his entry. If his fellow musicians are frustrated, they don't show it. They start over, again and again. Finally, he nails it – with a grin so wide it seems to stretch his skinny face.

Gareth is taking part in an ambitious program modelled on El Sistema, the wildly successful Venezuelan initiative that offers instruments and lessons to thousands of children, most from impoverished families. He was born in a refugee camp in Thailand and practises every week with two teenage violinists who are also from immigrant families: Daniela De Armas Kakorina's father is from Cuba, her mother from Russia. Ngoc Kim La's family is from Vietnam. On the viola is 17-year-old Rebecca Gray, an accomplished string musician who is a mentor to the other three, spending hours every month teaching less-privileged children.

El Sistema offshoots are sprouting up all over the world, including Canada. There is one in New Brunswick, another in the works in Winnipeg and one scheduled to start in Toronto in September. Advocates see El Sistema as a way to counter many of the negative forces in the lives of youngsters who grow up in poverty. The idea is that intense musical training improves a child's self-confidence, concentration and motivation and that this can translate into greater academic achievement and, ultimately, a healthier, happier life.

But it is important to move beyond the anecdotal evidence about the transformative power of El Sistema, says David Alter, an epidemiologist at the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences in Toronto. He and other researchers, who all happen to have musical backgrounds, have applied for funding to track the 55 children expected to start the Toronto program in the fall. They want to evaluate its benefits and learn if El Sistema helps some children more than others.

There is growing evidence that learning to play a musical instrument may help children do better at school, that it can improve memory and the ability to focus and may even modestly boost scores on intelligence tests. But researchers are also starting to look beyond IQ.

“People focus so much on cognitive benefits. I think there are some, but I don't think they are as large as people would like them to be,” says Laurel Trainor, a scientist at McMaster University in Hamilton who studies music and the developing brain. “I think the social and emotional benefits are just enormous and we are just starting to comprehend that.”

Documenting those benefits will be essential for getting government funding to expand El Sistema programs, says David Visentin, a string musician and former associate dean at the Royal Conservatory of Music. He and Robert Eisenberg, a businessman, are working closely with the Toronto District School Board on a pilot project that will offer 10 hours of music a week after school to students from Parkdale Jr. and Sr. Public School.

“The two predominant cultural groups are Hungarian Roma and Tibetan. Isn't that Canada?” Mr.

Visentin says.

Ottawa's OrKidstra program started in 2007 with music lessons for 30 students. It now involves 150, and among them they speak 24 languages. It has a full orchestra, quartets, a choir and a music and movement program for young children.

"Sometimes I wonder what the heck I'm doing," says executive-director Tina Fedeski. "But then I see the kids, and the joy, the friendship, the discipline, the commitment. It is all these things we aspire to achieve."

Ms. Fedeski and her husband, Gary McMillen, own a music store in Ottawa and founded OrKidstra with Margaret Tobolowska, a cellist with the National Arts Centre Orchestra. The program is supported with fundraising concerts, grants and donations – including 95 per cent of the instruments.

Gareth chose the cello because he loved the way it sounds. He plays with both the orchestra and the string quartet. This spring, he and the two violinists pleaded with Rebecca for extra practice, so she had them over to her house twice to rehearse chamber music.

"They have gotten a lot better at listening to each other," she says.

Ms Tobolowska, who is artistic director, drops by to help Gareth with some tricky fingering. She tells him the cellist has to shine. He says he'll practise.

Ms. Fedeski comes in near the end of the session, two visitors in tow, and asks the teenagers to play the first movement of the string quartet, which they performed earlier in the week at Ottawa City Hall. It sounds beautiful.

Music is somehow more moving when it is played by OrKidstra musicians, Ms. Fedeski finds, perhaps because she knows how hard they have worked and how far they have come.

"It is such a physical response," she says. "I can feel the blood rushing through my heart."

### **El Sistema coming to Manitoba**

"Teach the children the beauty of music and the music will teach them the beauty of life."

That quote, from El Sistema founder José Antonio Abreu, explains the philosophy of a program that began in 1975 in Venezuela. Children willing to practise for four hours, six days a week, would get an instrument and free lessons. Today, it involves more than 250,000 young people.

At heart, it is a social-development program that has been a positive force in the lives of thousands of children. Many have become teachers and mentors to young musicians. Others have become professional musicians, including Gustavo Dudamel, conductor of the [Los Angeles](#) Philharmonic.

Alexander Mickelthwate, music director of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, was the associate conductor in L.A. before moving to Manitoba. Now, he and executive director Trudy Schroeder are joining forces with the Seven Oaks School Division on an El Sistema program they hope will start in September. As in Venezuela, the students will need to commit to coming after school every day for three to four hours. It will start with between 30 and 50 children. Donated instruments would be most welcome, Ms. Schroeder says.