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Music as a force for social change: El Sistema in Venezuela and in the United States

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Preface

This project has been a journey four years in the making. In the fall of 2009, I came to James Madison University with a declared Music Major knowing that I wanted to “be the change” through music. This project attempts to reveal the story of that journey and how I have come to know the profound ways in which music can impact communities and individuals.

In May of 2010, I traveled to Venezuela to study and to experience firsthand the national public music program of El Sistema. Inspired by the teaching philosophies of that program, I decided to create a test model of some of the aspects of El Sistema here in the Shenandoah Valley. For the past year, I have taught beginning string music at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Staunton, Waynesboro, and Augusta County, including certain aspects of the philosophy of El Sistema when applicable. In order to protect the privacy of my students and their families, I have assigned psuedonyms to them. I do not refer to my students or their parents by their real names in my Reflective/Contextual Essay or in my Journal of Progress.
Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support and guidance of several JMU faculty members. Foremost, I would like to thank my project advisor Dr. Pedro Aponte for his sharing his wisdom, expertise, and personal experiences with me over the past four years. I would like to thank my readers Dr. Carl Donakowski and Dr. Andrew Connell for their encouragement and comments, and also Dr. Maynard for consulting with me on various occasions. For helping me to navigate the Honors Program from my freshman through my senior year, I thank Dr. Jonathan Gibson. For the merit scholarship I received from the School of Music upon beginning my undergraduate study of music, I thank Dr. Jeffrey Bush, Dean George Sparks, and Dr. Marilou Johnson.
Abstract

Through my Senior Honors Project, I study the connection between music and social change through the publicly funded and internationally recognized music education program of Venezuela, El Sistema: The National System of Youth and Children’s Orchestras of Venezuela. This program has been immensely successful in Venezuela in terms of improving the future prospects of Venezuela’s children. The program has generated much attention from the international music community in recent years, as stellar performances by some of El Sistema’s ensembles including the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra captivate audiences worldwide.

By teaching at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Waynesboro, Staunton, and Augusta County, I examined the process of implementing a social music education program like El Sistema in the United States in a semi-rural area and tested some of the teaching philosophies of the program. In the United States, El Sistema-like programs have been successful almost exclusively in urban environments. In Venezuela, El Sistema reaches the country’s most remote and rural corners. The following are my original guiding questions: What are the cultural associations that Venezuela has with classical music? How are cultural associations with classical music in Venezuela different from ours in the United States? What is the role of government in El Sistema? How is the program organized at the national level? Where does its funding come from? As soon as the music teaching and learning began, I abandoned some of these ideas in order to focus on the practical components of running the string program. Therefore, I did not focus my efforts on making general conclusions about the role of classical music in American society. Rather, I found that piquing the musical interests of children in Waynesboro in Staunton by offering them free instruments and lessons was invaluable to the children, their parents, and their community.
Beginning in October 2012, I taught three to six weekly group violin or cello lessons at the Boys and Girls Club locations in Staunton and Waynesboro as part of a program sponsored by the Waynesboro Symphony Orchestra and the Virtu Foundation. My Journal of Progress highlights key experiences over the past year, including performances by the students, challenges experienced by the students and myself, and connections between the Boys and Girls Club program and El Sistema.

My main purpose in designing project was to celebrate and highlight the powerful positive effects that music education programs have on society by empowering children with a strong internal locus of control over their own futures. Inspired by my own personal experience studying and participating in El Sistema in Venezuela in May of 2010, I would like to share my experience with the JMU community through the performance and research paper components of my project.
Reflective/Contextual Essay

Led by my professor Dr. Pedro Aponte and his wife Maria Lorcas, I traveled to Venezuela for three weeks in May of 2010 with eleven other music majors. Our purpose was to closely study and participate in El Sistema, Venezuela's national public music program. We began our adventure in the capital city of Caracas, where we spent one week studying the administrative and artistic center of El Sistema. Our first meeting was with the program's international outreach coordinator, where the mission, purpose, and structure of El Sistema were explained. Although many of our initial questions were answered through this discussion, the remarkable and marvelous nature of this program did not unfold until we started teaching. While in Caracas, we toured the administrative facilities and the breathtaking performance halls and rehearsal spaces. We sat in on rehearsals of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra as well as the Caracas Youth Symphony Orchestra at which Dr. José Antonio Abreu, the program’s founder, was present. We visited two nearby nucleos, or local El Sistema Centers. We spent about half of a day at each of those nucleos teaching and assisting in rehearsals.

In Caracas, we learned that the teaching philosophy of El Sistema is to use the music classroom as a model for citizenship. The program is more concerned with enhancing the possibilities for the life trajectories of Venezuela’s children than it is concerned with producing musical prodigies. The latter was an unintended outcome of the program that has helped it gain international recognition and thus helped to secure its future in Venezuela. El Sistema is at its core a social, not a musical, program. In the words of Dan Wakin in an interview by Gabe Johnson of the New York Times, “El Sistema is Venezuela’s version of a massive anti-poverty program. The weapon of choice is classical music and the idea is to get children involved with
studying music as a way to remove them from the difficulties of poverty.”¹ The following quotation from Dr. Abreu explains the powerful metaphor of the philosophy: “The huge spiritual world that music produces in itself, ends up overcoming material poverty. From the minute a child’s taught how to play an instrument, he’s no longer poor. He becomes a child in progress, heading for a professional level, who’ll later become a citizen.”²

With music as a vessel to citizenship, El Sistema uses music to empower its students by having frequent performances, challenging repertoire, and high expectations. The program uses a stimulating musical environment so that when students eventually leave the program, they are equipped to lead productive and meaningful lives. Students can attend their local nucleos as “early as age 2 or 3.”³ The vast majority of these students continue “well into their teens; attending up to six days a week, three to four hours a day, plus retreats and intensive workshops.”⁴ The music education curriculum and philosophy of El Sistema “emphasize intensive ensemble participation from the earliest stages, group learning, peer teaching and a commitment to keeping the joy and fun of musical learning and music making ever-present.”⁵

The soul of the nucleo community and culture is the orchestra, which has also become a symbol for Venezuelan society at large. From the beginning of a child’s music education as part of El Sistema, he or she is working towards becoming a member of an orchestra at the nucleo. The efforts of the music teachers are focused this preparation. As El Sistema is the National System

⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
of Youth Orchestras and Choirs of Venezuela, choral singing is considered “of equal importance.”

As this program is completely free for children, we spent considerable time learning about and discussing how the program is funded and how it has survived many regime changes since its conception in the 1970s. Although El Sistema is recognized and praised around the world as a major artistic and cultural endeavor, the program has a highly organized agenda to keep children occupied while their parents are at work. In other words, it is a way of making sure that some of Venezuela’s most at-risk children stay off of the streets, away from drugs, crime, and gangs. It is fully funded by the federal government and classified as a social, not a music, program. It is completely free for students; students do not pay for instruments, instruction, facilities, or sheet music. Dr. Aponte led discussions, which helped us compare and contrast certain aspects of Venezuelan culture and government with our own. We examined the dominant influence of capitalism in the United States and of socialism in Venezuela. Those forces play a large role in how the governments of each country would support a program like El Sistema as well as how the citizens of each of those countries would feel about governmental support for such an endeavor. We postulated about whether or not a national music program would work in the United States. Some of us thought that perhaps the United States is too geographically vast and diverse for such a program to be feasible. But Dr. Aponte pointed out that Venezuela is in fact quite topographically diverse itself, which we were about to realize by driving through the Andes Mountains. We examined more cultural reasons, like how Friday night football is a major community event for American towns. We cannot ever know for sure until someone tries to launch a national music program, but we do know that local programs have been successful in

6 Ibid.
the United States. In fact, “El Sistema-like initiatives now exist in 25 countries” including the United States.⁷

After our week in Caracas, we drove 12 hours through the Andes Mountains to Mérida, where we spent the remainder of our time. Each day we were in Mérida, we visited a different nucleo. Some of these nucleos were located in very remote towns at very high elevations where the air is thin. We visited nucleos with early childhood music programs and nucleos with programs for children with special needs. El Sistema accepts all children regardless of any conditions they may have, providing a high-quality experience for every child. Each nucleo receives money from the federal government, but provinces and towns can supplement this with their own fundraising efforts. At one of the smallest villages we visited, the program had grown so much that the initial building for the nucleo was insufficient. The nucleo had to spread out around town, so we saw the viola sectional at the bank and the flute sectional at the post office. The transformation of municipal buildings into musical centers demonstrates the community’s commitment to El Sistema. Each nucleo we visited in Mérida was unique and the nucleos had their own way of doing things, but the consistency of the curriculum and philosophy was also evident.

Everywhere we went in Mérida, we were received like superstars, greeted with smiling faces and hugs. The children were overjoyed that we had come to meet them and teach them. They wanted to know everything about us---where we had come from, what instrument(s) we played, why we had come to meet them. This discussion was only somewhat difficult considering the language barrier, but we managed to have lively charade-like conversations. This warm reception helped me to conduct a beginning string orchestra for the very first time. The

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narrow-minded cello performance major in me thought I would just be teaching cello sectionals, but when I stepped in front of that orchestra of at least 50 kids, I felt alive. Those kids could have cared less how much experience I had. To them, I was a professional musician from the United States. After the rehearsal was over, the kids swarmed me with hugs and asked me again and again, “When are you coming back?” One girl, 9-year-old Johanna, followed me around for the rest of the day. She had endless things to tell me about her family, how much she likes playing the cello, how her sister wants to play violin, etc. This is part of the teaching philosophy for El Sistema’s music teachers---no matter what degrees you have or how long you have been studying an instrument, you have something to offer the children.

El Sistema is an earthquake, with the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra as its epicenter that has shaken Venezuela and the music world at large. In fact, “over the past 35 years, the program has provided music training to more than two million children between the ages of two and 19, the vast majority of them living in wrenching poverty.”\(^8\) It has brought global attention to “the existence of the barrios of Caracas, and the fact that many more potential ‘Dudamels’ are living in such appalling conditions.”\(^9\) The effect of the program on Venezuelan society is reflected in the statistics: “students who participate in the music program have higher class attendance, better academic achievement, lower school dropout rates, and fewer behavioral problems than those in a control group, according to a report prepared by the Inter-American Development Bank.”\(^{10}\)

With all of this in mind, I worked with Dr. Aponte to create a situation in which I could be part of one of these El Sistema-like initiatives here in the Shenandoah Valley. By a stroke of

\(^8\) Kim Kowski, “Taking the El Sistema Challenge,” 44.
\(^{10}\) Kim Kowski, “Taking the El Sistema Challenge,” 44.
fate, I was hired by the Waynesboro Symphony Orchestra to teach beginning violin lessons in group settings at the Boys and Girls Clubs in Augusta County at no extra cost to families. The program was conceived of by members of the WSO, its conductor, and its Board of Directors to extend string music to a section of Augusta County’s population that would not otherwise have access to it in and in order to invest in the future of classical music for children in the communities of Staunton and Waynesboro at large. The WSO received a donation of twenty violins from the Virtu Foundation, an organization that provide high-quality instruments to young musicians who cannot afford them, as well as grants from other organizations including Target, Walmart, and private donors. These resources would provide the teacher and materials necessary to begin a program that would offer free lessons and instruments to students. The Boys and Girls Clubs of Augusta County became a natural partner of the WSO, as the two organizations have complimentary missions and purposes. The Boys and Girls Clubs of America seek to “enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens,” as explained by its mission statement. The WSO is a socially conscious non-profit organization that, as its mission statement explains, “provides dedicated instrumentalists with opportunities to collaborate in an intergenerational and educational environment, to share in the joy of music-making and to contribute to the cultural vitality of the region.”

To be hired as the teacher for this new program meant that I would have the opportunity to apply what I learned in Venezuela to the communities of Staunton and

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Waynesboro, to plant the seeds for a music program that will hopefully become a prominent feature of those communities.

The Boys and Girls Clubs of America have over a hundred years of history of serving the youth of this country. Today, there are 4,074 chartered Club facilities in “small towns, large metropolitan areas, public housing communities, and Native American and Native Alaskan lands.” The Clubs themselves are “community-based, building-centered and led by professional staff.” “They offer youth development programs, determined by local need and available resources, to meet the interests and needs of young people ages 6-18.” The Boys and Girls Clubs of America is a nationwide social program that has the same goal as El Sistema: to create citizens with bright futures. In November 2012, “Forbes magazine named BGCA as one of five stand-out ‘Charity All-Stars.’” In its periodic evaluation of the nation’s largest nonprofit organizations, Forbes also ranked the Boys & Girls Club Movement, encompassing Club organizations and BGCA collectively, at No. 13 in total revenue. Of the youth served by the organization, 5 percent are 5 years old and under, 46 percent are 6-10 years old, 20 percent are 11-12 years old, 19 percent are 13-15 years old, and 10 percent are 16 and under. The ethnicities of the youth include 31 percent Caucasian, 29 percent African-American, 23 percent Hispanic/Latino, 5 percent Multi-racial, 3 percent Asian-American, and 3 percent American Indian or Alaska Native.

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
In Augusta County, club membership for a child costs $20 per week. There are seven Boys and Girls Club sites, two in Staunton and five in Waynesboro. The Staunton club has an elementary site at the Booker T. Washington Community Center and a Teen Center at a house that has been converted into a community center a few blocks away from the elementary site. In Waynesboro, the elementary sites are at Wenonah Elementary School, Berkeley Glenn Elementary School, William Perry Elementary School, and Westwood Hills Elementary School. The club has access to certain rooms in the elementary schools when the school day is over. The staff comes in and uses the cafeteria and gym, and sometimes the art room or the music room at each school. The Teen Center is in the Paul Freed Building on Main Street. In both Staunton and Waynesboro, children from 6th grade and up can attend the Teen Centers after school. Most of the kids who attend these programs are in middle school and the older high school students who attend are volunteers or have become staff members.

When the WSO applied for the instruments and grant money to create this program, it intended for four weekly group violin lessons to be taught at the Boys and Girls Club. This language was loose, as the WSO was not fully aware of how the sites are organized into the Augusta Club. The WSO thought that the Teen Center was the Club and that the lessons would all take place at that location. My first task as the new teacher for this program was to figure out how this puzzle was put together; I needed to know how the Club was organized and how the two organizations would work together.

My first meeting was with a man named Don Spaulding, a retired orchestra teacher from New Jersey. Don teaches private cello lessons in the area and conducts the advanced orchestra of the String School, a coalition of private teachers who teach lessons and conduct the only two
youth string orchestras in the county. The String School is a program of the WSO intended to create the future players in the WSO. Some of the more advanced students in the String School currently play alongside their teachers in the WSO. Don became my mentor and greatest support throughout this project. He is a musician of all trades, as he is a self-taught instrument technician, arranger, and composer. Whenever I needed something for this program, Don got it for me immediately. From shoulder rest sponges to extra strings to someone to talk to, Don was there for me and for my students. After my initial meeting with Don, I met with Tyrell McElroy, the Chief Professional Officer of the Augusta Club. Tyrell was incredibly excited to have a string program become part of the Boys and Girls Club. He explained that the Club primarily attracts working class families in the community and that with a unique and stellar music program, the Club might attract more middle class families and become more socioeconomically diverse, thus benefitting the community overall. Tyrell also wanted to challenge the stereotype that classical music and string instruments are for old white men. He really believes that the kids at the Club need to know that if they are passionate and diligent, their futures do not have to be determined by their race or their parents’ income level.

The program has evolved from the WSO’s original conception and will continue to evolve to meet the needs of the club. Originally intended to be a violin program, I envision a Boys and Girls Club String Orchestra in Augusta County that will partner with the String School and eventually feed into the WSO. This vision has guided my efforts over the past year. Starting in October 2012, I taught a weekly lesson at the Staunton elementary site and two weekly lessons at William Perry Elementary School. By the end of the school year, the program had about sixteen students. Today, we have twenty-six students. We have outgrown our original number of twenty Virtu Foundation violins and have been given four more violins and two cellos by
community members. For the past three months, I have taught group lessons at six of the seven Club sites.

As I intended for this project to be an El Sistema-like initiative, I was constantly reflecting on my experience in Venezuela and reading about El Sistema-like programs across the country. I knew that I wanted certain aspects of El Sistema to be present in this program, namely the philosophy that every child deserves the opportunity to succeed through music, the nurturing classroom environment, and the building of community in and outside of the classroom. Some of these ideas were easier to effect than others. With our lessons occurring only once a week and many students being shuffled around between the homes of extended family members or foster families, attendance and accountability became issues early on. These issues were difficult to address, as some of the family situations are sensitive and deeply personal. However, at our key performances throughout the school year, the families did attend. The two highest points of the school year were the concert we presented at the Staunton Mall, which was a joint performance with the String School, and our Spring Concert in May at First Presbyterian Church in Waynesboro. Other performances included a performance in the atrium at Augusta Health and performances for the kids not in the string program at the individual Club sites.

An aspect of El Sistema, which I was not able to coordinate for this program as well as I had hoped is peer-to-peer teaching. Since El Sistema has so many students across so many age groups, the teachers can rely on older students to help younger ones. This empowers the older students as their musical skills are valued and become essential to the success of the orchestras overall. I was fortunate to have the assistance of members of the Mello family, a homeschool family with eight children in Staunton. Four of the kids in the Mello family are string players that make up the Quail Hill Quartet, their family quartet. The violinists of the quartet and the oldest
daughters in the family, Sophie and Loredana, came to the Staunton elementary site each week last year to help out. The Mellos play in the String School and helped to bridge the gap between the String School and the Boys and Girls Club program. Sophie and Loredana helped with tuning, set-up, and individual musical mentoring when necessary. This year, Loredana and Gus, the quartet’s violist, help out in Staunton. Mellissa Mello, the mother, has assured me that her children will continue to be part of the Boys and Girls Club program. Last year at William Perry Elementary School, where the club transported all of the Waynesboro elementary violinists, I was assisted by Janelle Harris, a freshman violinist with the String School. Janelle also helped bridge this gap between the WSO, the String School, and the Boys and Girls Club, though I was not able to have her come this year because I could not provide transportation for her.

The WSO intended for lessons to occur once a week but for the Boys and Girls Club staff to hold daily practice sessions in between class meetings. After my first day at the Staunton Club and my first day at William Perry, I learned that this would be next to impossible. The Boys and Girls Club is already stretched very thinly in terms of staffing and has its own schedule. This year, however, one of my most advanced students from last year offered to lead practice sessions at Berkeley Glenn during the week. The benefits of this became evident after one week. This student was the only one at her site who returned to the program for this year, so she needed an opportunity to teach in order for her to advance musically. The students at Berkeley Glenn are currently the most advanced of the students at all of the sites because they practice at the Club in between class meetings. As the program grows and has more returning members, I believe that this will be less of a novelty and more of a core element to how the string program runs.

During the moments last year when I felt hopeless, when I felt ineffective as a teacher because the students were not retaining information from week to week and some students were
dropping out of the program, I reminded myself that my role in this program was to plant the seeds for the eventual Boys and Girls Club Orchestra. I told myself over and over that Dr. Abreu began El Sistema with seven kids in a garage. Now, with the Mello family’s relationship to the Club, with promising students like Maria at Burkeley Glenn, and with the continued support of Tyrell and the WSO, I believe that this program will continue to grow. I have received emails from community organizations including the Waynesboro Public Library and ProjectGrows requesting that the Boys and Girls Club musicians perform at events. This program has already become a feature of the community and I know that it will continue to grow in this role in the future.
Appendix – Journal of Progress

September 7, 2012

As of today, I am the new strings teacher at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Waynesboro, Staunton, and Augusta County! I am feeling a million things---excitement, anxiety, and a lot of relief because now I a real chance to try out some of this El Sistema philosophy here in the Shenandoah Valley and something tangible for my Honors Project. This program is a grant-funded outreach program of the Waynesboro Symphony. Some people associated with the WSO, including members of the orchestra and the board, the conductor Dr. Peter Wilson, and local string teachers received instruments and money to pay for a teacher. The instruments were donated to the Boys and Girls Club by the Virtu Foundation (http://www.virtufound.org/). This organization provides quality string instruments to students who otherwise would not be able to afford them. I should mention that I was not originally chosen for this job. In July, Sharon Miller of EMU emailed me saying that Dr. Aponte had given her my name. She is part of a committee that is searching for a teacher for a new grant-funded string program at the Boys and Girls Club in Staunton and Waynesboro. This email sounded too good to be true when I received it. I was in the middle of being a camp counselor/cello sectional teacher at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp when this communication came my way. I sent my resume and a summary of my experience in Venezuela with El Sistema to the review committee. They then informed me that they had chosen another candidate. I thought that was a little bit strange---contact me about a potential job offer and then tell me I wasn’t the best candidate? Does this happen frequently in the work world? Oh well. But then, on September 1, Don Spaulding of the String School emailed me saying that new developments had occurred and he wanted to speak with me immediately.
The tone of his email was urgent so I called him that day. As it turns out, the teacher they hired for the Boys and Girls Club program has been in a terrible bike accident and she is unable to play or teach violin for a while. We don’t know for how long. That poor woman! This sort of thing is a musician’s ultimate nightmare. My heart goes out to her. What an odd turn of events.

Mr. Spaulding, who says I can call him “Don” so that’s how I’ll refer to him from now on, and I met on September 3 at the Starbucks on 250 in Staunton. Don is a retired orchestra teacher from New Jersey where he had a teaching career of more than 30 years. He majored in Music Education at NYU and his instrument is guitar. His Jersey accent is noticeable here in Virginia. Don and his wife June have retired to Earlysville to be closer to their children and grandchildren. Since music teachers never really retire, Don has gotten involved with some other string teachers in the area. He teaches at something called The String School, which is another program of the Waynesboro Symphony Orchestra. String players in the Symphony and other string players in the woodwork of the Shenandoah Valley (mostly in Staunton, Waynesboro, and Charlottesville) have organized to teach private lessons and to provide ensemble playing experience for their students since the public schools in the area (except for those in Charlottesville) are missing strings. Some of the students in The String School are homeschooled and some represent the public schools of Augusta County, Staunton City, and Waynesboro City. The questions that I had for Don were mostly answered in this meeting. I wanted to know who is behind the scenes in this program and what kind of funding we have available.

On September 5, I met with Don and Tyrell McElroy, the chief professional officer of the Boys and Girls Club. We met at the Waynesboro Teen Center, which is located on Main Street in Waynesboro. To me, the area seems a little bit depressed. Downtown is clearly experiencing a revitalization of sorts, but the Boys and Girls Club is located near some failing businesses. The
inside of the building is really cool. The staff has put a lot of effort into making it a nice place for kids to come and hang out after school. There are leather couches and colorful walls and computers and pool tables and all kinds of neat stuff. Here’s the outside of the building:

![Boys & Girls Club Building](image)

**Figure 1**

This meeting was a great opportunity for me to talk to Tyrell and to see what kind of support the string program will have from the Boys and Girls Club administration. It’s going to be a lot! Tyrell really believes in this whole idea and is even going to learn violin alongside the kids. He can already play “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” I was impressed. Tyrell is originally from Ohio, where he was a Club member growing up. He said that the Club was one of the main reasons he went to college. He could go there after basketball practice to get help on his homework. Tyrell ended up going to Kent State with a full scholarship for basketball and then on to get two master’s degrees, one from UVA and one from Virginia Tech. He is now working on a PhD in Strategic Leadership, Nonprofit Management, and Community Leadership at JMU. This guy is the man. I worked in my questions about the community that the Club serves into our
conversation. Tyrell explained that most of, but not all, the families whose kids come to the Club are of relatively low socio-economic status. The parents are working multiple minimum wage jobs. One of the reasons Tyrell is excited about having the string program is to attract more middle-class families to the Club. In Venezuela, children across all socio-economic backgrounds participate in El Sistema. Tyrell said, “The Club will officially be the only place for miles where a child can play on a nice violin and get quality instruction---for free.” I needed to know some basic structural things about the Boys and Girls Club, which Tyrell explained. The Teen Center (the building pictured), is where kids in 6th-12th grade can go after school. There are three elementary sites: Westminster Presbyterian Church, Wenonah Elementary School, and William Perry Elementary School. In Staunton, there is one elementary site and one teen center. Don says that this program is going to be targeted at 4th and 5th graders, but we can include middle schoolers if we do not get enough interest from our target age group.

The grant from the WSO covers four weekly group violin lessons for 20 students. Tyrell thinks that we will have one class in Staunton and three in Waynesboro. He says that the Club can pick the kids up from school in Waynesboro and bring them to one site for me. This sounds great! Now, Don and I just have to recruit!

September 10, 2012

Today was the first official recruitment demonstration for the new Boys and Girls Club String Program! Let me be clear about one thing: I am a cellist. This demonstration was done on violin, because that is the only instrument we are offering right now. I need to clarify some things about the vision for this program. I think it would be really cool to have a Boys and Girls Club Orchestra eventually. Who knows if I will be around for that, but I am willing to lay the groundwork on violin if that’s what it takes. My dear friend Robert helped me out a lot with the
bow hold and the posture. I practiced “Call Me, Maybe” (the most popular pop song of the summer), “La Cucaracha,” “Boil ‘Em Cabbage Down,” and the first phrase of the melody of “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik.”

This demonstration took place at Westminster Presbyterian Church, one of the Boys and Girls Club elementary sites. There were 23 kids who sat, listened, and participated. I was joined by Patty Lam, a violin teacher with The String School. Patty has a large private studio and tons of violins. She brought a bunch of violins in different sizes for the kids to try. I presented my prepared tunes, which ended up being just perfect in length. The kids’ attention span and my violin playing stamina are the same at this point. We then let the kids come up and try out some violins. One kid named Daniel was really intrigued by “Boil ‘Em Cabbage Down.” He said that his grandpa plays fiddle and that he only listens to country music at home and that he is “definitely” signing up for violin. Another boy asked me if I know any Michael Jackson. I really should have thought about preparing some Michael Jackson songs!

Overall, I thought this little event went really well. It was kind of low-key, but there was “definitely” interest from some 4th and 5th graders.

**September 17, 2012**

Today Don and I did two more recruitment demos. We went to William Perry Elementary School and then to Wenonah Elementary School. Boy was I glad that Don was there. He is into arranging so we played some of this arrangements. Don played violin and I played cello. In hindsight I think we should have both played violin because we don’t have any cellos to the kids to play, and so many of them were asking about it. We played the theme from “The Pink Panther,” “Eleanor Rigby,” “Saludo,” and “Petit Ballet.” Still no Michael Jackson. I need to work on that.
We are going to follow up these demos with a parent meeting. We passed out these flyers today (Don made them, he didn’t like the ones I made):

**Children who play a musical instrument get higher grades**
- In school and score higher on math and reading tests

We know that music lessons are expensive. It involves renting an instrument and finding a teacher.

The Boys and Girls Club of Waynesboro and Staunton together with the Waynesboro Symphony and the Virtu Foundation

**HAS AN EXCITING ANNOUNCEMENT!**

We are pleased to offer violins and group violin lessons to students at the Boys and Girls Clubs in Staunton and Waynesboro at no cost. We have been talking to the students after school at their clubs to show them the instruments available and let them actually give them a try. We are looking, primarily, for fourth and fifth grade students who have the desire, talent, and commitment to be successful at learning to play the violin or viola (a larger version of the violin). If you are interested, it is necessary for you to attend the following meeting.

**Monday, September 24 at 6:30 pm at William Perry Elementary School**

Please attend this meeting to receive more information regarding this program, its teachers, instrument care, and answers to any questions you may have. Please contact Anna Kobylski at anna.kobylski@gmail.com or Don Spaulding at instrings@comcast.net for more information.

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I stayed at Wenonah for a bit after we were done to hang out with the kids. A 4th grader named Kalea talked to me almost the entire time. She says that she really wants to do violin
because all of the other girls do Step with Ms. Kayla (one of the staff members at Wenonah) and she doesn’t like Step.

These elementary school sites remind me so much of the nucleos we visited in Venezuela, only they are not dedicated to music. They could be in the future, though…

**September 24, 2012**

I just got home from an event that really made me feel like an elementary music teacher. Don and I met with Boys and Girls Club families who are interested in the string program. Tyrell printed and distributed the flyers for us. About ten families in total were present with kids ages five to ten. That little line on the flyer about us being interested in 4th and 5th grade kids was just that---very little! Don and I agree that we just need to see what kind of interest we get and go from there. I need to remember that this year all we are doing is planting seeds and laying the groundwork for a thriving music program.

Our presentation included talking and music. I got a chance to chat a little bit with almost all of the families, to talk to the kids and to see why they might be interested in playing a string instrument. Mostly, the kids just like music and the parents want to take advantage of a free opportunity. I think those are perfectly valid reasons. So Don and I played our little and talked about string instruments and the obvious benefits of learning to play a musical instrument. We had parents sign in so we knew who was in attendance. I got a couple of emails from families who could not attend the meeting but were still interested. We brought along a contract for the families to take home. We are really trusting these kids and their parents are going to take care of these instruments. What if they get lost or stolen? Can we trust these families? I have no idea how this is going to turn out. I guess I’m going to be the one in charge of making sure we get all of the instruments back at the end of the year. Oy vey---that’s kind of a lot of pressure. We still
need to go to the Staunton Elementary Site to have a demonstration and meeting. That will be on Friday.

This is the contract we sent home with the families who came to William Perry:

The String School/Boys and Girls Club
Parent Contract

I, (please print your name) ________________________________,
give permission for my child (print name) ________________________________
to participate in the String School’s new program to take place at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Waynesboro and Staunton. I understand that my child will be playing on a borrowed string instrument that is both valuable and fragile. Therefore, I agree to pay a deposit of $5.00 to cover any damages to the instrument that may occur when it is in my child’s care.

Print Your Name ________________________________
Your Signature ________________________________
The Date ________________________________

The cooperation of three people will insure your child’s musical success:
A knowledgeable and dedicated teacher (that’s me, Anna Kobylski)
A student who is motivated to learn and work hard (that’s your child)
An involved and encouraging support system at home (that’s you)

Please keep in mind that the first sounds you’ll hear at home may not be beautiful but with time, patience, and some hard work we can make this happen. And I can assure you that we’ll all be very pleased with the result

Tyrell McElroy
Anna Kobylski

The String School is sponsored by the Waynesboro Symphony Orchestra and this special program is funded with the generous support of the VIRTU Foundation.

Figure 3

September 28, 2012
So far, I have avoided a discussion of race or ethnic background. I need to talk about this after visiting Staunton today.

Before I started this project, I did not know much about the community that this string program would be serving. I knew that this program would be targeting underprivileged youth, just like El Sistema. I knew that the Boys and Girls Club is a major American organization that has many of the same values and goals as El Sistema. But can we talk about being underprivileged in this country without talking about race? What does that term, "underprivileged," even mean today in the context of our American society?

Today I drove back in time. In my little Toyota Prius, I crossed Augusta Street, the boundary line between the chic revitalized Staunton and the old pre-integration Staunton. Around me were dilapidated houses and busted fences. I saw my surroundings as a black and white photograph, a picture of 1950s Staunton in a Virginia history textbook. I pulled into the parking lot of the Booker T. Washington Community Center, the formerly segregated high school. I grabbed my cello and went inside. I entered through the gym, where a large painting of Booker T. Washington hangs. The ceilings and walls of the building are exposed concrete, so every little sound was bouncing all over the place. I was swarmed by energetic children asking me "Wow! What’s that? Is that a guitar?" (in reference to my cello case).

This Honors Project is larger than life. I’m not just involved with a new string program. I am now part of the living history, society, economy, politics, and culture of Waynesboro and Staunton.

How do I discuss race in a way that avoids the language of “otherness”? How do I talk about black people and white people in a sensitive way?
How do these kids see me? Do they see me as a spoiled upper-middle-class white girl from the NOVA of NOVA? After all, McLean, VA is home to Colin Powell and Dick Cheney. The MARS candy company is headquartered there. Tysons Corner is there. The Kennedys had a large piece of property in the Langley area. Where I come from and where these kids come from couldn’t be more distant. When I think, or when I thought of Staunton, I thought of the Blackfriars Playhouse and restaurants and shops and gorgeous buildings. My understanding of what this community looks like is growing. There is clearly a deep economic divide in Staunton that is linked to the city’s social history.

To me, these kinds reflections are more important than the technical aspects of starting a string program. This is why I’m doing this project—because these kids deserve just as much as the kids I grew up with in uppercrusty McLean to experience the joy of music.

**September 29, 2012**

I had to sleep on all of that before I could write about what happened at the meeting. To this meeting, Don invited some of his students from The String School. Gus, Sophie, and Loredana Mello and their mom Melissa joined us at the Club. There are eight kids in the Mello family, and these four make up their family string quartet. How cool is that? A family with a string quartet! Sophie and Loredana, the oldest girls in the family and the violinists of the quartet, will be helping me out as volunteers at the Club in Staunton. Having students who take private lessons with The String School get involved with the Boys and Girls Club program is going to be very important. The program has to feed itself and have multiple teachers. El Sistema does this so well. Students become empowered through the expectation that they pass on what they have learned to new students. Hopefully we can get more of The String School kids on board with this program.
The Boys and Girls Club kids got to see a string quartet (though Don conducted them, which I thought was weird) and some solos. Sophie played a Vivaldi something or other and I played some Bach and “Julie-O.”

After our presentation, we let some kids try out some violins. There was one girl, Carla, who seemed to hold the instrument quite naturally. I don’t have a ton of experience with beginning string players but this seems like a good sign. A boy named Avery asked me a bunch of specific questions about how the instrument creates vibrations. This kid is actually the son of Ms. Angela, the Unit Director of the Staunton Club. Ms. Angela said that Avery is very excited about playing violin and that she will make sure he practices at home. Ah, parental support---yet another aspect of playing an instrument. The Mellos clearly have that. I have a feeling that Melissa and her husband Dave are really good at encouraging/forcing their kids to practice.

So now we let the presentations settle. I hope the kids went home and told their parents how awesome the music was and how they really really really want to play an instrument.

The next big event for this program will be the first lessons. We think that we will have one class in Staunton and three in Waynesboro, but we don’t have numbers just yet. The Boys and Girls Club will pick up all of the “violin kids” as they are being called from school and bring them to William Perry Elementary School on Wednesday afternoons. On Monday afternoons, I will go to the Booker T. Washington Community Center for the Staunton class. Sophie and Loredana Mello will meet me there. Now to plan the first lesson/meeting!

**October 2, 2012**

Thank goodness for Blue Lake. I have planned some ice-breakers, some fun songs, and “The Ants Song” that I learned in cello pedagogy. I hope we can get to all of this in one day. I want to make sure that the kids stay energized throughout the class and that they are immediately
introduced to posture and making a pretty sound. My campers at Blue Lake were middle school-aged. These kids will be a little bit younger. I feel silly talking through this first lesson out loud, but it needs to be done. Some of my ideas sound great in my head, but when I practice in front of the mirror, I realize that I am talking so much and that I might lose these eight, nine, and ten year old kids. So here’s the plan for the first lesson: the violins will be in their cases on tables in the classroom (which by the way I haven’t even seen yet, so I hope there are tables--- if there are none, we’ll use the floor). I will have the chairs arranged in a U-shape/semi-circle (again, I’m assuming that we will have chairs). I will ask the kids to come in stand in front of a chair. Then, we will do the “Step In, Step Out” song from Blue Lake (“Step in, step out, and turn your self around. Step in, step out, and introduce yourself…). This song will hopefully allow me to get some rhythm going in the classroom while I learn the names of my new students. I would like them to call me “Ms. K.” instead of “Ms. Anna” like the rest of the Boys and Girls Club staff. I have thought about this for a while and it seems to be a nice compromise between the full “Ms. Kobylski,” which I would perhaps go by if I were their school music teacher, and “Ms. Anna,” which I would go by if I were a regular Boys and Girls Club staff member. Ok so back to the plan. After we do this song, I will have them sit down while I explain the next set of instructions. This part is going to be complicated. I don’t know if this is going to work. I want the kids to crowd around me as I unpack my violin and attach the sponge (we are using sponges attached with rubber bands instead of shoulder rests) so they can see what I’m doing. I will emphasize how gentle they need to be. We will then take the violins back to our seats and sit in “rest position” or “position one.” One of the teachers I observed in Venezuela did this awesome classroom management thing which consisted of “position uno,” “position dos,” and “position tres.” If I remember this correctly, “position uno” was rest position, “position dos” was
instruments up, and “position tres” was bow/right hand on the string. I’m going to try this. We will then go through “The Ants Song” (Eeek eek eek, look at all the ants ants ants, digging in the dirt dirt dirt, digging in the ground ground ground for E-A-D-G). That song is genius.

October 4, 2012

The first day of the new Boys and Girls Club string program was totally invigorating! I’m exhausted! These kids have soooooo much energy! So much for wanting them to “stay energetic.” What was I thinking? I needed them to calm down! They ask so many questions. How do I address their questions and make them feel valued while staying in control of the class? “The Ants Song” was a big hit.

Ms. Betty, the Unit Director at William Perry, showed me to the counseling classroom when I arrived. I arranged ten chairs in a semi-circle for the nine kids I was expecting plus myself. I unloaded all of the violins from my car and arranged them on the tables. I had my sign-in sheet. I tuned the violins. Two high school-aged girls, Chloe and Mia, showed up to the classroom. They are members of the Boys and Girls Club staff and they will be helping me with the lessons. Chloe is a senior at Waynesboro High School and Mia is a sophomore. They are sisters. Chloe wants to go to JMU or VCU and major in elementary education. Mia also wants to go to college but doesn’t know what she wants to major in yet.

We went through how to take the violin out of the case, how to tighten and loosen the bow, how to sit in rest position, how to hold the instrument, how to pizz, and how to arco. Phew! Just doing that took up most of the time. The kids interrupted me a lot. I am so concerned with them liking me and thinking of me and the violin as positive influences in their lives that I was so hesitant to discipline them during the first day. Mia and Chloe were very helpful by saying, “Shh! Ms. K is talking!”
I am a little bit concerned that we have two kindergarteners in the class. We were so desperate to get this thing off the ground that we accepted them just so we could have our first class. They are playing on violins on loan to us by Patty Lam. They (the girls and the violins) are so little!

After William Perry, I drove to the Teen Center. There, four girls and two boys were interested in doing a “try-out” lesson. Tyrell encouraged this. He said to the girls “How do you know you don’t like it if you’ve never tried it?” The Ants Song was not as big as a hit with the teens. The Teen Center is for kids in 6th-12th grade, though there are not many high school students. The few high school students I saw were wearing staff t-shirts and had “volunteer” nametags. Tyrell said that Club members are eligible for certain college scholarships, and the older ones get more out of volunteering at the Club (or working, like Mia and Chloe) because they are valued. They can tutor, mentor, and still be an integral part of the Club.

The Teen Center kids kept making song requests, and I was so embarrassed. I wish this was a cello program. I should have brought my cello today. I need to learn some Michael Jackson songs. I can’t tell you the number of requests for Michael Jackson I have received.

At the end of the “try-out,” one girl named Laticia approached me. She said, “Ms. K, my sister is Kalea from Wenonah. She and I both really want to do violin.” Laticia seems incredibly bright. I asked her about what she likes to do and she said she loves to read. A girl after my own heart. It would be great if they could both practice together at home. I gave Laticia a form to take home so her parents can officially “enroll” her in violin.

On Monday, October 15, I will drive to the Booker T. Washington Center for the Staunton Class. School is closed on October 8 so the first Staunton class is getting bumped by one week. The WSO wants me to teach four group lessons per week. I think that now means one
class in Staunton, one class at the Waynesboro Teen Center, and two classes at William Perry. I’m thinking that eventually I will split the William Perry guys up into two groups.

The Club has something called “Power Hour” which is when the kids do their homework. All of the elementary sites do this. They have snack, Power Hour, activities, dinner, then maybe another activity or more homework. The staff is there to help them with their homework and lead the activities which include art projects, read-alouds, health and wellness activities, sports, and now music. Today for the elementary kids, violin was during power hour. We will have to figure out a scheduling situation where they can all get their homework done and have their lesson on Wednesday afternoons.

**October 19, 2012**

Monday was the first day of the Staunton class. I was quite surprised at the lack of self-control that the kids had. It stands out to me a lot and concerns me. There was so much attention-seeking, talking out of turn, yelling at each other, and one girl even hit another girl. We barely got through “The Ants Song.” Very reluctantly, I let the kids take the violins home.

When Dr. Aponte and I talked about testing out El Sistema’s teaching philosophy, we thought starting small, just like how El Sistema itself began, would be a good idea. We thought that working with a small group of kids a few times a week would be ideal and manageable. I think this program is a much larger undertaking than we thought this project would be. I’m driving to two towns, teaching in three different buildings, and carting the instruments around.

On Wednesday, at William Perry, three of the nine kids who were present forgot their violins at home. They were all dropped off at my classroom, so I had to do something with them. I had them do their homework while I worked with the kids who brought their violins. Then, we
swapped and the kids who brought their violins did homework and I had the kids who did not bring their violins use their peers’ violins.

Chloe and Mia were incredibly helpful. They helped the kids with their homework in the hallway, took kids to the bathroom, and made sure everyone had snack.

Here’s the El Sistema part kicking in: I have to be flexible, make things work, work with what we have, and still share the joy of music-making. I think it might just take a while before we establish our class rhythm.

After William Perry I went to the Teen Center. Laticia was waiting for me. She said, “Ms. K, I think I’m the only one that really wants to do violin.” I am perfectly happy with that. She and I had a private lesson. She learns quickly—we were able to learn the D-major scale starting on open D and ending on third finger on the A-string. My lesson with Laticia made me feel so much better about this whole thing—she is such a ray of sunshine. It is so much easier to teach students who are pleasant and who behave, but I think that the ones who have those self-control issues are the ones who need us most.

October 26, 2012

Last week I committed a cardinal sin for classroom teachers—I did not establish class rules and expectations as the very first thing. I thought certain things were obvious, like raising your hand when you have a question or not interrupting the teacher or bringing your violin and book each week (we’re using Essential Elements for Strings, by the way—the WSO purchased 20 books with some of the grant money). I am so naïve.

I’m basically making this curriculum up as I go. I was given a bunch of Essential Elements Books which have the note names printed in the noteheads for the first few pages, but eventually the names are darkened and we’re dealing with straight-up sheet music. I do not have
time to teach these kids to read music. Should they be getting that in general music at school? I learned how to read music in my piano lessons when I was 7 years old so I really don’t know how this is supposed to go. I’m relying on learning by ear and singing lots. We sing everything before we play it.

**November 2, 2012**

Coming from my experience in Venezuela, I had many expectations for what these kids would be like. I thought that they exactly like the ones I met in Venezuela, that they would be so incredibly inspired by music and by me that they would listen to everything I had to say. This is not a fair comparison. The children at the nucleos in Venezuela are part of this seismic wave of energy that the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra and other aspects of El Sistema have created. Plus, when we visited, we were cool because we were American visitors. We were part of a special event for them. But there is something intrinsically inspiring about music that works in Venezuela. The program is successful there because the power of classical music is so great. I really believe that.

Maybe the problem is that I can’t get a grip on the classroom management. And I can’t explain how the note name changes when you put down your left hand fingers, and that the letter names are in alphabetical order. They keep saying, “But I thought that was E!” for third finger G on the D-string.

Ms. Angela says that she will now sit in on our classes in Staunton and help out. I am so thankful. We have a student who has a set of issues which I am trying to understand. Throughout our entire class on Monday, Nabeele was talking back, playing out of turn, and just doing things in general to get me to pay attention to her. Additionally, she has some physical difficulties with holding the violin up and sitting up. I watched her walk back to her locker and she seemed to be
struggling. Ms. Angela says that Nabeele has some bone issues and that she has had multiple surgeries. Ms. Angela also explained that Nabeele lives with her grandfather because her mother is in jail and her father is not in the picture. As soon as I got in my car, I started crying. Playing the violin won’t fix any of these issues, but maybe it can at least be a source of joy in this child’s life.

**November 2, 2012**

Thanks to Halloween, we got to eat some candy and do some singing this week. I taught the round “Ghost of Tom,” only we weren’t really able to do it in a round. Plus, I wasn’t really sure how to teach a round so I was satisfied that we were all singing together on mostly the right pitches. We sang the song while plucking a half note D-string drone. Then, we had some people pluck the A-string. The perfect fifth gave the whole thing a sort of creepy Halloween feel. Then, we walked around the classroom to the beat. I told the kids to pretend like they were in a graveyard and to walk quietly so we wouldn’t wake up the dead people. They loved it!

This is the song: Have you seen the ghost of Tom? / Long white bones with the flesh all gone / Oooooooooh / Wouldn’t it be chilly with no flesh on?

The students added “on the string” at the end because we stop plucking when we sing “no flesh on!” They added, “Wouldn’t it be chilly with no flesh on the string!” I love it. They are quite clever.

**November 9, 2012**

So Don called me yesterday about the first concert we will have----a joint holiday performance with The String School kids at the Staunton Mall. Sounds like fun! The only problem is---what are we going to play? I spend so much time in class getting my kids to be quiet, listen, sit up straight, hold the violin properly, etc. that I’m afraid we won’t know any
Christmas tunes! But that’s not the right attitude. El Sistema emphasizes performance as a way to build self-esteem and to keep up the energy and drive to learn new music. Maybe this will shock them a little bit.

I don’t know how to reach out to these families. Many of them do not have computers or internet access at home. I guess I could call them but this makes me so anxious. I think that practicing at home is incredibly difficult and rather unrealistic for many of my students. Don had hoped that the Boys and Girls Club staff could lead daily practice sessions, but the Club does not have the staff to spare for this kind of daily endeavor. We’ll have to keep working on this one.

The kids with major behavioral and emotional issues are making it very difficult to get through our tunes (“Hot Cross Buns,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” and “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”). We need to move on to at least “Good King Wenceslas” soon.

**November 16, 2012**

I can’t wait until this program has some experienced players who can mentor and teach the new students. These kids need kids in their community to look up to. We have the Mellos, but they are not really part of the Club. We’ll get there. We’re still planting seeds. I only see the kids once a week so progress is slow, but we WILL have a successful winter concert after Thanksgiving!

Laticia is still a ray of sunshine. I really look forward to my lessons with her. She even said to me, “Ms. K, I’m so lucky because the elementary kids have group lessons but I get to have a private lesson!”

**November 23, 2012**

No classes due to Thanksgiving Break.

**November 30, 2012**
The scheduling has been working pretty well at William Perry. We split up into two groups. One has Power Hour first and violin second, and the other does the opposite. The only problem is, there is always at least one kid absent from week to week or one kid who doesn’t have his violin, so I can’t group them in the way that I want to according to ability and level of focus/attention. I have to group them so that everyone has a violin on which to play.

I think I might need to talk to the parents of our two kindergarteners after the Holiday Concert. They just can’t sit through and focus (not that the 10 year olds are much better) and it’s really hard for them to be with kids who are so much older. One girl has a stomach ache every class. Or a boo boo. Or a pain in her toe. Or a pain on her forehead. I just can’t handle it.

The Staunton kids are coming along. They are behind the William Perry kids. I have told them that if they get lost in the concert, just smile and pluck the D-string.

**December 7, 2012**

It never occurred to me to ask Don about the playing expectations were for the first concert. He said just “have the kids play what they can play” so I guess that will be “The Ants Song,” “Twinkle,” “Good King Wenceslas,” and “Jolly Old Saint Nicholas.” The kids will play simplified versions of the tunes and The String School kids will back them up. We will perform in front of Pebbles. We have a dress rehearsal at Waynesboro High School next week so some logistics will get sorted out then. I am nervous and excited!

**December 14, 2012**

Our concert at the Staunton Mall was so much fun! I think I’ll go sleep for 48 hours straight. We demonstrated “The Ants Song” with our bows, then placed our bows down on the floor in front of us. We then played “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” two times through. Some kids played the “cheesy” version (open strings) but most of them attempted the actual tune. Don
invited a man from the Virtu Foundation but he was not there. The parents and family members were beaming. Before we began playing, I heard one of my kids whisper, “This is so exciting!” It really was. The kids behaved better than ever. They had a blast, and they looked good. The Club purchased a bunch of white shirts for them to wear and I made sparkly festive pins. Ms. Lavette brought some Santa hats. We put on a good show! Looking good is half of the performance, especially for beginners. The kids in Venezuela have really cool jackets with the Venezuelan flag. Maybe we can get some T-shirts with the Boys and Girls Club logo and a violin or something.

I have so many ideas and so much to offer this program, but I don’t have the energy or the time to do it. I’m a full-time student, I’m trying to prepare for my senior full recital, and I also teach private cello lessons. This program will need more than one teacher soon.

We will now take three weeks off. I hope that they don’t forget about how successful their performance was!

Here is a copy of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” “Jolly Old St. Nicholas,” and “Good King Wenceslas”:
"Normal" Twinkle, Twinkle

//: D D A A B B A ---
G G F# F# E E D --- ://
A A G G F# F# E ---
A A G G F# F# E ---
D D A A B B A ---
G G F# F# E E D ---

"Cheesy" Twinkle, Twinkle

//: D D D D G G D ---
G G D D G G D --- ://
A A A A A A ---
A A A A A A ---
D D D D G G D ---
G G D D G G D ---

Figure 4
January 11, 2013

We are now about halfway through the first year of this new program. I think we are doing well. It’s time for some serious reflection.
I am pleased with many aspects of how things are progressing. We had a great concert, many family members attended, and the kids were smiling. I think it is wonderful that we have about 15 students. I say “about” because they do not all show up consistently. This is for a variety of factors. One family has just found out that the mother has cancer. Another family just had another baby and needs the older kids to help out at home. Several families have incarcerated parents. Many parents work odd shifts and have to arrange for different people to pick the kids up from the Club, which causes scheduling issues and they can’t always get picked up at the right time. When we only meet once a week, and things like this come up with families, it is incredibly difficult to move at a fast or even steady pace. I also worry about the kids who do show up week to week, with their violins and books. These kids are attentive, they love music, and they have more support at home. I don’t want these kids to lose interest.

I met with my Mama G. this week. That is what I call Gretta Sandberg, my high school orchestra teacher and one of my lifelong mentors and friends. Gretta and her husband retired to Highland County, VA, the lowest populated county in Virginia. There, Gretta started a string program. In the summer of 2010, as soon as I got back from Venezuela, I went and stayed with her for a month. I helped her start this program, which she did by attaching a beginning string class to the already-existing annual Highland Arts Camp. She now has a string orchestra of about 20 kids. She has partnered with a violin teacher and her students in Bath County and they have started something called the Allegheny Mountain String Project. They rehearse at Garth Newel in Bath County twice a month and Mama G. teaches her students privately in between the rehearsals. Mama G. is brilliant, kind, and loving. She creates string players everywhere she goes. Before she retired, she had a 30+ year teaching career in the midwest and in Northern
Virginia. She was at McLean High School for 14 years and she retired in 2009, the year I graduated.

Mama G. wanted to hear everything I had to say about El Sistema in the summer of 2010. She shares many values with El Sistema and has used string music to enhance the lives of the children and families of Highland County. Her program is now a feature of the community, as the orchestra has performed in parades, at farms, and at the annual Maple Festival.

**February 15, 2013**

Curt Peterson, the local representative and one of the founders of the Virtu Foundation, hosted a lovely dinner party at his house last night. The event included a solo performance by violist Jessica Garand. Don insisted that I take 33 to get to Crozet. I have never been more afraid in my life. I did not have cell phone reception whatsoever. I ended up pulling up onto some people’s property. A dad and two kids were playing in their yard. I was terrified that they were going to shoot me. I grew up in Northern Virginia and my parents raised me to be very anti-gun so I have this image of country folk shooting trespassers. The father was very helpful. He directed me to a store where I went in and made a phonecall, got directions, and finally got there. Because I was so late and traumatized, we only had about 15 minutes to talk to Jessica. She completed her master’s in viola performance at Juilliard and she and some friends got together behind this music for social change idea. They started a program called Opportunity Music Project (OMP). Their program targets musically gifted children whose parents will support daily practice. Only families who can convince Jessica and her colleagues that the child will practice and agree to performance requirements will be allowed to take private lessons. Maybe some professional musicians agree that this should be the case. I feel that parents should be involved in children’s music education, as they should be involved in all aspects of a child’s education. But
for some children and families, this is not a reality. Not in this culture. It is definitely not a reality for many of my students in Staunton who are in foster care or who live with extended family members.

March 1, 2013

On Wednesday we had a performance at Augusta Health in Fishersville. We performed in the beautiful atrium. We were joined by a few parents, patients, and staff. We just played three tunes (Twinkle, French Folk, and Boil Em Cabbage Down). We did the whole bit twice. Don was there and helped fill in the sound. The Mellos could not make it. Some of the kids have parents who work at Augusta Health, so that was special for them. Don and I were both under the impression that Patty Lam would be there with some of her students, but she wasn’t. We still have not connected these dots. We need to connect the players of the WSO and The String School with the Boys and Girls Club program. The Staunton Mall Concert was a good start. I don’t really know anyone in the WSO. I’m kind of overwhelmed by the JMU Symphony right now. Maybe next year we can get some sort of weekly thing going---we need ot have players from the Symphony take a more active role in this program.

March 15, 2013

I wanted to do something different last week. I brought crayons and copies of a sheet of paper with a violin in the center. I asked my students, “What does your violin mean to you?” I thought that this would be kind of cool, a chance for them to reflect on their experience as young musicians. I don’t know if they are too young for this kind of thing, but I think critical thinking is important, even for elementary schoolers. Here are some of the interpretations that turned out really well:
Figure 6

My violin... is the best thing that ever happened to me!

My name is Rachel
Age: 9
My violin... is really important to me and it also helps me learn.

Name: Adaria
Age: 9

Figure 7
Figure 8

My violin...  
Thank you for letting us use the violins. 

My name is Shiona, age 10

Figure 9

My violin... is the way I express my feelings.

Mercedes 10
March 22, 2013

In February, a woman from NBC29 News came to William Perry with a camera and a notepad. She interviewed my students, me, and filmed our rehearsal. Today, the clip aired! She says that she will burn a DVD so we can have a copy of this for our records. That was incredibly exciting for the kids.

Today, Daniel informed me that his family is moving to Richmond. This is the kid who wanted to talk about all kinds of fiddle music at the beginning of the school year. He is one of my best and brightest musicians and I will be so sad to lose him. His mother says that she is trying to find a teacher for him in Richmond. I really hope he sticks with violin.

April 5, 2013

When it became clear that several kids were not going to be participating in this program regularly, I asked them to turn in their violins so that other kids could play them. I then “accepted” three new girls into the program. They were recommended by Ms. Lavette and they are wonderful. Don says that next year we need to be more selective in the kids we accept. This is not exactly El Sistema philosophy. The deeper we get into this, the more I realize that I might be the only one who is really on board with the philosophy or who even really understands it. I understand Don’s point---we need to keep the kids who have musical potential interested.

I cried again this week. Laticia and her sister Kalea are no longer in the program. They have babysitting responsibilities at home and they are no longer Club members. I asked their mom if they could just come for the last few weeks and finish up with the Spring Concert but she said no.

We have had some fluctuation this year with kids and families as some parents have to change jobs and move out of town, some kids have a change of heart, or I don’t know what.
May 3, 2013

Our end of the year concert at First Presbyterian Church in Waynesboro is coming up. I am exhausted. I did my full senior recital, I’ve been driving two times a week to the different sites, and finals are coming up. I think I’m insane.

I can’t wait for the school year to be over. Don and Tyrell want me to do a summer camp but I can’t see myself living in Waynesboro or Harrisonburg alone this summer. I need to be with my family and I need a break from everything.

May 20, 2013

What a night! We just had a VERY successful end-of-the-year concert extravaganza for the Boys and Girls Club Fiddlers! Don was INCREDIBLY helpful in putting together our “show.” I would have never have thought to do what he did. He had the Mellos play different variations of the Boil ‘Em Cabbage Down tune with the Boys and Girls Club kids playing the melody in between. The last verse was all of us together. One of my students played a solo (Maria). Curt Peterson attended the concert. He was very pleased and sent us a follow-up email expressing that he and the Virtu Foundation are excited for the future of our program.

At the end, I collected all of the violins and took them to the Teen Center.

July/August 2013

I met with Don at the Teen Center on August 20. We went through and checked all of the violins. Four violins are missing. I brought my list of who had which violin. I know exactly where three of them are, but I don’t know who has #10. Don was visibly upset and I felt really embarrassed—how did this happen? I think that by the end I was shuffling violins around to make everything work for our last concert in May. Additionally, some of the instruments are damaged.
This really upsets me—I know I went over (multiple times throughout the school year) about how fragile the instruments are and how special they are. I do feel that I did my part in teaching and modeling how to handle the instruments. The problem is that these violins from Shar donated by the Virtu Foundation are too expensive for beginners. Now we have to track down #10. Tyrell thinks that it’s in Staunton. I will email Angela and see if someone left it at the Club. This is a mess. This is too much responsibility for me—teachers have too much responsibility. Not only are they charged with the emotional, musical, and educational well-being of their students, but they are in charge of managing thousands of dollars of property.

Don took some violins with him and I stayed to have a private meeting with Tyrell to discuss the new structure of the Club for this year. Staunton is the same with two sites, one for the teens and one for the little guys. Waynesboro has grown. The other afterschool childcare company in town, Latch, has folded. The Boys and Girls Club will now have four elementary sites plus the teen center. The sites are Wenonah Elementary, Berkeley Glenn Elementary, William Perry Elementary, and Westwood Hills Elementary. The kids will simply stay after school instead of being bused around. Tyrell says that it will be much easier on the staff if I can do a class at each site. This sounds great to me but also raises some concerns. Last year, busing all of the violin kids to William Perry caused some social issues. The kids grouped themselves according to their friends from school. I frequently adjusted the groupings to make the lessons flow better, but many of the kids definitely the whole thing as a field trip that they didn’t have to take seriously. Having little lessons at each site will solve many of those problems. However, the grant from the Waynesboro Symphony only covers five lessons per week. I’ll have to talk to Don about this. Plus, that is a heck of a lot of driving for me.
School starts really soon in Augusta County. Don and I will need a couple of weeks to do some more recruitment and planning. I really think that this program is going to need more than one teacher soon. We have planted the seeds and our program is growing. Our budding musicians need instruction more than once a week. And they need to sing. I know that I personally cannot provide all the music instruction that this program needs to grow.

**September 2013**

Well, we haven’t done a single recruitment demo yet and we already have interest from students and parents! I sent the new flyer and form to Lavette who forwarded it to each Unit Director. Thank goodness for Lavette. She is just the most insightful and helpful person on the Boys and Girls Club staff. She knows the community. She tells me when my ideas are not the best. I love her.

Here is the flyer and form we sent out this year:
Augusta Boys and Girls Club String Program

As members of the Boys and Girls Club, 4th-8th graders have the opportunity to participate in a unique life-enhancing music program at no cost. The program involves:

- Weekly violin or cello lessons in a group setting to reinforce life skills such as focus, commitment, and teamwork
- Performance opportunities to share the joy of music-making with the community and to build self-confidence
- A high-quality instrument to play on

Here are a few research-supported reasons to encourage your child to participate in this program:

- Children who study music have larger vocabularies and more advanced reading skills
- Students who participate in music programs score 22% better on English and 20% better on Math standardized exams
- Students who study the arts learn to cooperate with their teachers and peers, have higher self-confidence, and are more equipped to express themselves and their ideas in a creative and positive way

About the teacher:
My name is Anna Kobyliski (“Miss C”), and I am the proud teacher of the Boys and Girls Club String Program. I am a 2003 graduate of James Madison University where I majored in Cello Performance and French. I would love to help your child discover his or her passion and potential through music! Please contact me at 703.585.4095 or at anna.kobyliski@gmail.com with questions, concerns, or for more information about the string program.

Figure 10
Last year, I learned a lot about teaching beginning string players in a group setting. This year, I am not as naïve and I feel much more in control of the class. Plus, working at Wolf Trap over the summer helped. I feel more confident about enforcing the rules. My failure to establish classroom rules and expectations on the first day of classes really affected the rest of the school year. I felt out of control of many situations. That ain’t happenin’ again this year!
Maria has been helping the kids at Berkeley Glenn practice throughout the week. They are moving so much faster because of this. And their interest is greater.

There is still something going on with the Staunton Elementary kids. I think that community is particularly rough---the kids are just more on edge than the Waynesboro kids.

We have a Teen Center Class! With 2 cellos! I’m in Heaven! The teens are the best. They are in 6th-8th grade. There are 5 of them. They are wacky but curious. I love them.

I had a conversation with Prof. Szeps, the department head of French at JMU and she tells me that if I want to go, I can be an exchange student at the University of Versailles St-Quentin-En-Yvelines for the spring semester. This is crazy. Of course, as soon as I got off of the phone with her I cried and called my mom. I love French and I am majoring in it. I am even applying to graduate school for French. This is the big elephant in the room (at least, I think it is): I love this program, my students, and teaching music, but I don’t want to do it forever. I wanted to start this program but I am not Gretta Sandberg. Don and the WSO have to start looking for a new teacher/teachers immediately.

November 30, 2013

So here is what I have been doing this semester:

Monday: 4-4:45 Staunton Elementary Class, 5:15-6:15 Waynesboro Teen Center Class
Tuesday: 4:15-4:45 Wenonah Elementary Class, 5:15-5:45 Berkeley Glenn Class
Thursday: 4:15-4:45 Westwood Hills Elementary Class, 5:15-5:45 William Perry Class, 6:00-6:30 Private lesson with Maria.

The program has 26 students. 24 violinists and 2 cellists. We will perform at the Holiday Open House at the Teen Center on December 7. Then, we will perform at the Staunton Mall again on December 14. My students don’t know yet that I am leaving. Having this whole French
connection hanging over my head has made teaching very difficult. I know that I’m leaving and I want to be making plans and focusing on getting myself to France and to graduate school, only I can’t because I am so entrenched in this program. The program needs two new teachers to split the teaching so that it is not so much time and stress on one person. I really think that a team of teachers will take this program to the next level.

**December 4, 2013**

Next week will be my last week of teaching the students at the Boys and Girls Club. I am so sad to leave my babies but I know that going to France is the opportunity of a lifetime. When I started this project, I wanted to test some teaching philosophies of El Sistema on a small group of students. What I ended up becoming part of was growing a string program that now has 26 students divided up into six group lessons. The program has high quality string instruments and grant funding for the rest of this school year, though it will be up to the WSO to apply for funding for future years. Tyrell says that if the WSO cannot come up with the money, the Boys and Girls Club will pay for a teacher because he believes that the program is now an essential part of the Augusta Club. Part of this project was a personal experiment. I wanted to see if I have what it takes to be a musician and teacher on the front lines of social change, like Jessica Garand of Opportunity Music Project or Dantes Rameau of the Atlanta Music Project. I know that I will be involved in community music in some capacity for the rest of my life. The joy that this program has brought to the students and parents at the Boys and Girls Club is immeasurable and I will always want to be part of that joy. From the initial recruitment demonstrations to the concerts of this weekend and next which I know will be successful, this project has been an incredible journey and I am so thankful that I have had the opportunity to work with these students, to become part of these communities. I can’t wait to come back in ten years and to see
what the program has become. I plan to stay in touch with Tyrell and Lavette and to check in on things over the next few months. Maybe they will find someone to do a strings summer camp. Maybe I can come back and visit this summer. As I leave the Boys and Girls Club String Program and James Madison University, I can confidently say that I have been part of the change.
Bibliography


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