Toward a New Model Of Urban Music Education:
An Adaptation of el Sistema for a fourth Grade Keyboard Class, With Curricular Perspectives.
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Author Note
This paper was prepared for CPED Foundations of Curriculum Theories, Dr. Colin Green, and was informed by my teaching Music at Brightwood Educational Campus, DCPS.
TOWARD A NEW MODEL OF URBAN MUSIC EDUCATION

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The broad issue is Arts in the Curriculum, the specific proposition; an el Sistema type program in which every fourth grader learns keyboard and plays in a keyboard orchestra. This is similar to the electronic orchestra referenced in Jacobs (2010, p. 57) and is the format of the ensemble I currently run at Brightwood, E.C. in the District of Columbia Public Schools.

In the U.S. today, we are turning into a bifurcated society in terms of educational opportunity. In the wealthy counties around Washington, D.C. children typically receive piano or other instrumental lessons if they are interested, many as early as first grade. David Brooks (2012) recognizes this as an attribute of the “[Elite, who] work much longer hours than people down the income scale, driving their kids to piano lessons and then taking part in conference calls from the waiting room...” The suburban school systems these children attend offer beginning band and string class starting in the fourth grade, beginning band and orchestras in middle school and more advanced such groups in high school. The overwhelming majority of public schools in Washington, D.C. however, offer no such opportunities. My keyboard program addresses part of the inequity noted by Brooks and as such reflects Social Meliorist values.

The el Sistema approach has been adapted in various ways in the U.S, as an after-school program and as the afternoon half of the school day as in the original Venezuelan model. In my current program in DCPS the children receive two, 45-minute group lessons/classes a week and

1 see (http://elsistemausa.org) for more information on the program in the U.S.

2 see (http://jameslevymusic.com/wordpress/?page_id=12) for videos of my program.
there are various other informal opportunities for musical interaction, before school, during recess, and one-on-one “pull outs,” ten minute lessons. While the focus is on playing keyboards, there is a strong vocal/solfege\(^3\) component to the program.

My ideal proposition is yet another variation on el Sistema, 1) all keyboards and, 2) one hour of group meeting every afternoon\(^4\), 3) the standard 1.5 hours a week of private instruction, which could be adaptable to the point of getting, after an initial period of assessment, approximately 4 students in at a time. Students would be responsible for 30 - 60 minutes of practicing on their own every night. It should go without saying that any student who had a violent antipathy toward playing keyboard would be exempt, but all students would be urged to give it a try.

Support for this program may be found within a wide variety of theories of curriculum. Today’s point in history is unique: previously the cost of a piano was prohibitive for so many, but in my program the children play on (and about 20% receive as their own) keyboards which cost a mere $100 each. As for justifying this particular version of a music class, its inclusion in the curriculum is most eloquently stated by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), for keyboard playing is truly the “heart of the discipline” of music. Keyboard has been the main instrument of the vast majority of composers for at least the last 300 years.\(^5\) When my fourth graders play Theme From Beethoven’s 9th Symphony, they are making a connection with one of the most influential minds of the 19th century. Donald Jay Grout (2001, p. 581) makes this point nicely by including Joseph

\(^3\) Solfege means singing with the Do, Re, Mi syllables. The syllables do not represent absolute pitches, it is a movable system with “Do” being whatever key you’re in. One of my classroom mantras is “When does the magic happen? When you sing AND play.”

\(^4\) This allows some time in the afternoon schedule for another class or subject.

\(^5\) Since Educators love lists, here’s one for every finger; Handel (more accessible than Bach), Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Ellington, Monk, Leonard Bernstein, Stevie Wonder, Elton John and Sarah McLachlan.
Dannhauser’s painting of Liszt and his friends with the bust of Beethoven set as if it were a shrine.

Humanists, such as Charles Eliot, would support the inclusion of my modified el Sistema, because by learning a bit of Classical piano my students make contact with a crucial part of the Canon of Western Culture, Classical Music. The classists are also pleased because they recall the value that Plato set on musical training in *The Republic* and the large amount of time he allocated to music in his curriculum.

There are aspects of the program that resonate with core Social efficiency values; the sorting of students and vocational direction. By the end of the year the students may be sorted according to musical talent by some very measurable indicators;

1) how much repertoire has the student learned (may be recorded on video files)

2) does the students show any aptitude for improvisation

3) how well has the student learned to sight-read

4) how well does the student play in an ensemble.

At that point, referencing recent research popularized by Daniel Levitan (2007),

The emerging picture… is that 10,000 hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert — in anything. In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again. (p. 197)

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6 See the page following the Reference page for a jpg of this painting

7 It is a poignant connection for American students to make. Having “Unity” as a prime consideration, namely the idea to organize curricula around a unifying theme, be it culture epochs or Robinson Crusoe or Ethiopia, all of which have been a part of American curricula at various times, may be persuasively traced back to the Herbartians, from there to German Culture in general and thence to Beethoven.
the musically talented fifth grader may be counseled to put in three hours a day, seven days a week. This will total 10,000 hours in ten years or, by the end of sophomore year of college: by then the student can reasonably hope to be a master pianist. By the time vocational considerations enter the picture, the end of high school (keep in mind we’re looking at a program for high needs/low income schools) the seeds planted in fourth grade could blossom into actual employment. For fitting into society as an economic unit, keyboard is the best instrument, whether as a cocktail pianist, piano bar warrior, dance class accompanist, piano teacher, accompanist for voice, violin or other instrument classes, in-studio producer, video game music composer -- all keyboard gigs.

In schools run by child-oriented Developmentalists such as Dewey or Montessori the students would have had extensive musical experiences prior to fourth grade. Shiraishi (1995) describes the music program at the Dewey school: songs and solfege, at age eight, contact with a piano. Today’s students in a privileged school of this type would already have received considerable music instruction, for them my program offers just a potentially new type of ensemble. Looking at my public school keyboard program, Developmentalists would appreciate the improvisational component and the opportunity the students have to explore the keyboard on their own at home.

Tyler (1949) would support this keyboard program, for learning to play the keyboard is very definitely a behavior, and one that can be tracked. It is one that gives satisfaction to (most) students and it is defined by practicing. Since Tyler also valued generalization, he would be intrigued by the possibility that “The Mozart Effect” actually exists when you play Mozart (as
opposed to having it on as background music). He would be impressed by Skoe and Kraus’ (2012) finding that musical lessons during childhood, even if not continued, have been shown to have a positive effect on the adult brain.

Both Tyler and the authors of Understanding by Design value educational experiences that cross over into other subjects and allow the creation of “Broad Subjects.” Playing the piano fits neatly into the broad subject of “Performing Arts.” Furthermore, piano is often used to accompany theater, video and dance production. Even exhibitions of the Fine Arts are often presented with musical accompaniment.

There is also real power in using songs as a vehicle for memorization. In the U.S., practically every child has learned our alphabet by singing it to an old French Folk tune (erroneously and sometimes strategically attributed to Mozart, who did use the melody for a set of variations). While most contemporary writers on education are scornful of ‘rote memorization,’ there is certain information, certain facts that should reside in our students’ brains. Informational songs, especially ones written or adapted by the students themselves, are an effective means of stocking our students’ brains with important facts.

My actual program has an unfortunate element of competition due to limited resources. In its ideal form, the year would begin with a keyboard being delivered to each child’s home. In reality the first part of the year is a race to see who will be the first ten students to learn five songs. These students receive keyboards to take home as their own and they begin to rehearse

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8 There is only limited resentment among students who don’t earn their own keyboard.
before school once a week to become a showcase group. They also act to help disseminate new information to the their peers. Various students will spontaneously walk up to me on the playground and play melodies on their hand or a wall\(^9\). Students come by Wednesday before school for my two keyboard, all are welcome, jam sessions.\(^{10}\)

In conclusion, my proposed keyboard program has elements that would satisfy a wide range of curricular theorists: humanist, including classicists, social meliorists, social efficiency proponents, and educators with more eclectic viewpoints like Wiggins and McTighe. All would find some of their values reflected in different aspects within the overall program. There is also widespread support among the students: polled at the end of last year, six students didn’t like playing keyboard, seven liked it and 34 really liked it. With strong student support, a wide ranging theoretical framework and two years of success\(^{11}\) in a downsized form, all it would take is an inspired School Chancellor to make my modified el Sistema program happen here in Washington, D.C.

\(^9\) Here’s [video](#) showing student access and interaction on a Wednesday before school. It represents about 30 minutes edited down to 17:15. It is an example of creating a musical environment in the school.

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\(^{11}\) I count success by various measures. There is the musical success of the performing group. I also consider the increased confidence that students have from being able to perform a success. There is also the intriguing datum that one of my students from last year’s fourth grade program, one who earned his own keyboard, now, as a 5th grader, has the highest rated lexile reading level in the school, which goes up to the 8th grade. Cause and effect? The second highest reader is also a 5th grader who went through the program, but did not earn a keyboard.
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References


Franz Liszt Fantasizing at the Piano (German: *Franz Liszt, am Flügel phantasierend*, sometimes as *Eine Matinée bei Liszt*), a painting (119 x 167 cm) of Franz Liszt playing in a Parisian salon a grand piano by Conrad Graf, who commissioned the painting; on the piano is a bust of Ludwig van Beethoven by Anton Dietrich; the imagined gathering shows seated Alexandre Dumas (père), George Sand, Franz Liszt, Marie d'Agoult; standing Hector Berlioz or Victor Hugo, Niccolò Paganini, Gioachino Rossini; a portrait of Byron on the wall and a statue of Joan of Arc on the far left.

Current location: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Alte Nationalgalerie F.V. 42

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