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Witnessing the Power of El Sistema in Urban Communities: Sister Cities Girlchoir

Erika Kitzmiller

On December 5th 2013, the Sister Cities Girlchoir members gathered for a performance at the Union League, a famed elite social and philanthropic club in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The girls wore their school uniforms to identify their respective schools and sported white carnation boutonnieres to show that they were all members of the same ensemble. Several family members were there to see the performance. For many of the girls, this was the first time that they were performing in such an austere space with choir members from another school. When the girls entered the building, with its crystal chandeliers, hand-carved mahogany staircases, and antique silk curtains, many of them remarked that they had never seen anything so beautiful. Moments later, they settled into the room where they would be performing and enjoyed a snack that the Union League members had prepared for them.

When they finished eating, the girls gathered to warm up their voices as the Union League members quietly filed into the room to mingle with their social peers and observe these young women. At 6:00 p.m., the members of the Sister Cities Girlchoir lined up in their designated places, fixed their boutonnieres, and prepared to begin their program. Under the careful guidance of their conductor, Alysia Lee, the choir sang a medley of several African American spirituals, including “When the Saints Go Marching In” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and then a Christmas classic, “Dona Nobis Pacem,” in the original Latin. Lee’s high standards were evident to everyone who watched these young women perform. The members of the choir had memorized the music. They watched for the conductor’s cues. They remembered the various hand movements that accompanied the songs. When the concert was over, several of the Union League members commended the girls on their performance and applauded their musical talents.

Afterward, the girls posed on the steps of the Union League for a photograph to commemorate this moment. Their families looked on with pride at what their children, nieces, and grandchildren had accomplished that evening. After their performance, the members of the Sister Cities Girlchoir and their families walked to the Kimmel Center to listen to the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra rehearse for their concert under the direction of Gustavo Dudamel, the famed El Sistema prodigy. For many, this was the first time that they had ever been to the Kimmel Center or heard a professional orchestra in person. They were in awe of the beautiful space, but what made even more of an impression on the young women was hearing Dudamel speaking Spanish to his Venezuelan orchestra. Several of the Latina girls turned to me and remarked, “Miss, he is speaking Spanish.” What these young women remembered the most from that evening was that the man who led this famed group spoke in their home language and came from the culture that was most familiar to them.

Before the performance at the Union League, I interviewed several family members to understand why these youth joined the choir, why they continued to participate, and what benefits they received from being in the program. One mother told me that her daughter loved to sing and perform, but that she really enjoyed being in this choir because they “learn about different cultures and sing in different languages” (parent 1, interview, December 5, 2012). Another woman stated that she had been trying to save money to give her granddaughter singing lessons at a local music school. When the grandmother heard about the Sister Cities Girlchoir, she immediately enrolled her in the program; without the choir, her granddaughter might not have had the opportunity to receive training as a singer (grandmother 1, interview, December 5, 2012).

In the past decade, researchers have published several studies that promote the importance of quality after-school programs as a means of improving school attendance, helping children develop social skills, encouraging physical activity, and reducing youth violence (Active Living Research, 2012; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Despite the support and availability of these programs, research also shows that youth of color from low-income homes are still much less likely than white youth from middle- and high-income homes to have access to and participate in after-school programs (Lee, Borden, Serido, & Perkins, 2009; Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman, & Davidson, 2010; Roffman, Pagano, & Hirsch, 2001). In addition, studies point out that female youth are less likely than male youth to participate actively in after-school programs and that middle and high school youth are also less likely than elementary school children to participate in them (Goerge, Cusick, & Guiltinan, 2009; Roth, Malone, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010).

History of El Sistema and the Sister Cities Girlchoir

In 1975 José Antonio Abreu, an economist and musician, gathered 11 young musicians in his garage for the first rehearsal of his renowned El Sistema training program. Many of these original members remained with the organization to manage its growth, provide musical training, and spread its message throughout the world. From the founding of El Sistema, Abreu remained committed to his belief that rigorous musical training and performance had the potential to reduce poverty, stem violence, and promote social justice among Venezuela’s most impoverished youth. According to Abreu, “poverty is not just a lack of a roof or bread. It is also a spiritual lack—a loneliness and lack of recognition. The vicious cycle of poverty can be broken when a child poor in material possessions acquires spiritual wealth through music” (Tunstall, 2012, p. xii).

Venezuelan youth usually start to attend an El Sistema center, known as a nucleo, in their local town when they are small, sometimes as young as two or three years old. Most of the members stay with the program as teenagers and rehearse with their local nucleo six days a week for several hours each day. In addition, they attend retreats and workshops with members of other nucleos. Participation, instruction, and supplies are free. Currently, Venezuela has over 60 children’s orchestras, nearly 200 youth orchestras, and over 30 professional adult orchestras and choirs. Abreu and his El Sistema graduates, including Dudamel, Edicson Ruiz, and the members of the

famed Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra, continue to advocate for the organization's mission and help develop new El Sistema programs. When Dudamel, who was only 28 years old at the time, accepted the position as the musical director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic starting in the 2009–2010 season, he pledged to bring El Sistema to the United States (Lubow, 2007); as of 2013, there are almost 100 El Sistema programs operating there (El Sistema USA; see also Booth, 2009; Majno, 2012; Tunstall, 2012; Wakin, 2011).

One of these US-based organizations is the Sister Cities Girlchoir in Philadelphia, under the direction of Alysia Lee. Lee is a classically trained singer and founder of Opus Nine, a chamber ensemble based in New York City that is actively engaged in musical outreach. Lee and the members of Opus Nine have been searching for ways to make their own musical outreach and educational efforts more meaningful for urban youth. During a brainstorming session, Lee stumbled upon a video of the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra performing Shostakovich's Symphony Number 10¹ and, as she recalled, she was impressed with the "way the music sounded and that all the kids were brown" (A. Lee, interview, December 27, 2012). As a classically trained African American singer, Lee knew that students of color in the United States rarely have exposure to classical music or the training that she had enjoyed in her youth. Even though she knew about Dudamel's work, she had never heard of El Sistema. So she researched it, reading articles about its success and listening to recordings to understand what made it unique. After she learned more about it, she realized that the El Sistema philosophy matched her own desire to provide more meaningful musical education to urban, underserved youth. In September 2011 she became an El Sistema fellow at the New England Conservatory² and spent the year learning more about El Sistema and visiting El Sistema-inspired programs in Juneau, Alaska (Juneau, Alaska Music Matters), Los Angeles, California (Youth Orchestra LA [YOLA]), New York City, New York (Harmony Program), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Play On, Philly! and Tune Up Philly), and Boston, Massachusetts (Boston Conservatory Lab Charter School), as well as several El Sistema programs in Venezuela.

As a fellow, Lee began to reflect more deeply about her own experiences as a young musician and how they had shaped her youth and her future aims. Lee believes that musical organizations, particularly her choir, helped sustain her childhood despite the challenges that she faced. There were times, she argues, that she often felt a sense of obligation to the members of her choir, which in turn helped her make healthier choices for her future. According to Lee, it was the relationships that she made in these organizations, not the music, that mattered. She argues that music on its own does not have any power; rather, the power to enact social change rests with the communities

¹ This performance can be viewed at

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKXQzs6Y5BY&feature=youtube_gdata_player

² For more information about the New England Conservatory's Sistema Fellows Program, see

<http://necmusic.edu/sistema-fellowship>

and relationships that are created through musical training and performance. In addition to believing in the importance of relationships, Lee wanted to start an organization that offered disadvantaged youth the kind of classical training that she had received as a young woman. When she began her vocal studies, Lee, like many adolescents, wanted to focus on Broadway show tunes. But her voice teachers insisted that she study classical music and promised her that with such training she would be able to sing any kind of music she wanted. While she was initially a bit skeptical, she quickly learned to love this approach because she “had this tool that other kids didn’t have” (A. Lee, interview, December 27, 2012). As a classical singer, she soon realized that she had the training and skills to sing a wide variety of genres—jazz, Broadway, and gospel—in addition to classical. She appreciated the versatility that her training afforded her and continued to believe that her studies gave her the ability to pursue her own musical path. Over time, she realized that classical music offered another advantage: it has a rich history. Lee appreciated that there was a timeless quality to classical music; it was full of emotions that individuals felt centuries ago but that were still relevant to contemporary audiences. The more she studied classical music, the more she enjoyed “tapping into this eternal sense of emotion that was running through time” (A. Lee, interview, December 27, 2012).

Music educators Allsup and Shieh urge other educators to reach beyond performance and leverage music education as a way to combat the various injustices that artists observe in the world. Drawing on feminist and critical pedagogy (including Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Greene’s *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*, and Noddings’s *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*), they refer to this orientation as public music pedagogy (Allsup & Shieh, 2012). In their article, they argue that music educators must reach out beyond the traditional audiences for “when the audience becomes a community different from parents and teachers, and the performance is conceived as a response to that community, the work of performing and making music takes on a larger purpose and action” (Allsup & Shieh, p. 50). After reflecting on her own musical training, visiting other El Sistema programs, and thinking about the inequities in her world, Lee did exactly what Allsup and Shieh urge musical educators to do: she deviated from the typical El Sistema format and told her fellowship committee that she wanted to create a choral program rather than an orchestra ensemble. Lee believed that a choir reflected the importance of community over individuals, which for her was an essential component of her experience and the program that she hoped to create. In addition, after reading an influential World Bank report on the economic and social impacts of investing in girls’ education and thinking about injustice in Philadelphia and Camden, Lee told her fellowship committee that she wanted to create an all-female group (Cunningham & Chaaban, 2011). Initially, some of the leaders of the El Sistema program were concerned that a single-sex program excluded male youth, but Lee leveraged research on the benefits of all-female programs and her own understanding of the inequities in the community to convince others to let her proceed (A. Lee, interview, December 27, 2012). In September 2012 Lee founded Sister Cities

Girlchoir to provide a safe space for disadvantaged female youth to build resilience and connections, strengthen academic and social skills, and develop healthy habits as participants in a world-class choral training program (A. Lee, 2012). Currently, the program operates in three low-income middle school charter schools that primarily serve students of color, two in Philadelphia and one in Camden. Lee selected these schools for two reasons: the student demographics reflected program aims and the school administration supported her goals.

As a classically trained musician, I have been interested in El Sistema for several years and asked Lee about observing rehearsals and speaking with the Sister Cities Girlchoir members and their families about their experiences. The qualitative data presented in this article were collected in a nine-month study of the Sister Cities Girlchoir. I gathered these data through observations of seven choir rehearsals and two performances as well as through semistructured interviews, surveys, and small focus groups with 16 choir members, five of their families, and Lee. After observing several rehearsals, I decided to focus my research around three questions: Why did the girls in the choir initially decide to participate? What made them continue? What benefits did they receive as participants in the program? I used traditional ethnographic methods—writing observational fieldnotes and coding the data from these observations as well as from the semistructured interviews, choir surveys, and small focus groups—as well as my own classical music training to collect and analyze the data included in this article.

Sister Cities Girlchoir: An Engine for Social Change in Low-Income Communities

At the beginning of every rehearsal, the members of the Sister Cities Girlchoir gathered in their school cafeteria to enjoy a small snack. Lee—or Ms. Alysia, as the girls know her—calmly reminded them that they had five minutes to finish their drinks and clean their trash. After five minutes, Lee grabbed two six-inch sticks and began to tap a rhythm over the girls' incessant after-school chatter. One by one, the girls quickly cleaned up their spaces and lined up two by two. Lee told them that they were going to the music room to use the piano and that since they are moving, they might as well be singing. As I stood there during one of my visits, watching the girls walk two by two through their school hallways to the music room, they immediately started singing a West African folk song, in its original language, that they had been studying for several weeks. When they were finally in the music room, the young women quietly took their seats in a neatly arranged circle and listened to the agenda for the day's rehearsal. After that, they stretched their bodies and proceeded through several different vocal warm-ups that any classically trained musician would immediately recognize, but with a twist. Lee began with a run up the scale, singing, "warming up our voices," and the girls immediately echoed her, following the exact run and using the same words. She continued with another run, singing, "ready, set, let's go." The choir repeated it, and then she sang, "do-re-mi-fa-so" and said, "let's try that." The girls imitated her sound and continued to warm up, moving up a half step every time they repeated the phrase. After they had

run through these exercises, they practiced watching Lee conduct a short phrase down the scale, singing, “May we follow you?”

When the girls started their vocal training, Lee had them rehearse songs without accompaniment. Because they were singing everything a capella, the girls could not hide their voices behind any instruments, which Lee believed encouraged them to learn how to listen and control their own voices (A. Lee, interview, December 27, 2012). During the rehearsals, Lee directed the first few runs and then, in true El Sistema fashion, asked the girls, “Can I have a volunteer come here and stand in the conductor’s spot?” Four of them eagerly volunteered to replace Lee temporarily as director of the Sister Cities Girlchoir. Each time, Lee reminded these brave volunteers to make eye contact with Mr. Jon, their accompanist, to use strong gestures, to stand up straight like a leader, and to set the musical tempo and vocal dynamic that they wanted. As the girls attempted this, Lee coached the new conductors on how to use proper arm gestures and reminded the choir that they needed to follow their peers in the same way that they followed her. The volunteers beamed as they tried to outsmart their fellow choir members by making various tempo and dynamic changes. Even if they never became famous conductors like Dudamel, this conducting exercise gave these young women the opportunity to try something new, to take a learning risk, and to practice their leadership skills.

When the girls finished their warm-ups, Lee picked up the sticks one more time. The girls lined up and started singing the same West African folksong as before as they moved into the auditorium for the rest of the rehearsal. Lee reminded them about their upcoming performance at the Union League. For the remainder of the rehearsal, they practiced the songs—which they had memorized—that they would be performing at that event. They started with “Dona Nobis Pacem” in the original Latin, and eventually switched to singing several songs—“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “When the Saints Go Marching In,” and “Up Against the Sky”—in rounds. As the girls practiced, Lee gave them a number of reminders about vocal technique and stage presence. Before they sang “Dona Nobis Pacem,” she urged them to get into their “stage-ready bodies”; almost immediately, the girls moved their shoulders and straightened their backs to show their conductor that they understood how to use their posture to improve their singing. When they finished each song, Lee used a mnemonic device to teach them how to bow. As the girls acknowledged the audience and practiced their bows, she had them whisper “Did I shine my shoes? Yes, I shined my shoes” to themselves. They laughed lightly as they practiced this, and eventually they learned how to bow without relying on the phrase. These activities reinforced the tenets of classical vocal training and reminded these young women that as members of the Sister Cities Girlchoir, they were part of something larger than themselves: they were members of a first-rate ensemble that rested on the commitment of individuals to ensure its success.

When I asked the choir members what prompted them to join the Sister Cities Girlchoir, the girls, like many adolescents, immediately boasted about their natural talents or their desire to be a

superstar. As one girl wrote on her survey, “I joined choir because singing is my passion and my life” (student survey, #3). Another echoed these sentiments and said that she joined the choir “because all of my friends said that I had a lovely voice” and because her mother suggested that she join since “I love to sing at home a lot.” This student remarked that she enjoyed the various trips that the choir took and that her participation in the choir will “make me a superstar” (student survey #4). Others noted that they decided to participate in the choir because “it releases my inner talent” (student survey #6) and because “it’s fun to use your voice in different places” (student survey #5). In most cases, the girls joined the choir simply because they thought they had good voices and wanted to find a way to improve their skills and sing with others. But as arts educator Nathan points out, “creative work as an actor, musician, dancer, sculptor, or graffiti artist gives students bragging rights and credibility, both critical to healthy adolescent development” (Nathan, 2013, pp. 47–48). The members of the Sister Cities Girlchoir have developed the “bragging rights and credibility” through their decision to join the choir and the experiences that their membership has afforded them.

When I asked these young women to explain why they continued in the choir, they offered a variety of answers that reflected their own personal connections to the musical selections, the choir staff, and the other members. One of the Latina students remarked that “when you sing you feel that there is a connection, a personal connection between you and the song” (student 4, interview, April 13, 2013). When I asked her to clarify what she meant, she told me that as a member of Sister Cities Girlchoir she got to sing in Spanish, which she never did before. She explained, “when I think about singing in Spanish, I just love it” (student 4, interview, April 13, 2013). The Sister Cities Girlchoir has given this young woman an opportunity to celebrate her linguistic heritage, her cultural background, and her ethnic identity—a rare event in many communities, but particularly in ones, such as hers, where racism and xenophobia affect youth of color from low-income homes (Pascale, 2013). Her membership in the choir reinforced her own personal experiences and identity. Moreover, it offered her a way to perform works that reflected her own passion and interests, which—as Nathan (2013) suggests—may transform schooling into a more meaningful experience.

The girls also stressed that their relationships with their fellow members and with Lee were a critical reason for their decision to continue in the choir. One African American girl suggested that she kept participating because “I love the group that I’m in...and Ms. Alysia” (student survey, #1). Another Latina girl echoed these sentiments and told me, “I still participate in SCGC because I just can’t leave my team hanging” (student survey, #2). Others noted that their choir friends often differed from their peers in school (student survey, #5 and student survey, #6). The time that these young women spent with one another and with Lee offered them a space to develop their artistic talents, make new friends, and share the challenges and joys that they experienced in their lives. In the rehearsals and performances, Lee routinely encouraged them to use their voices and articulate the connections that they had with the music and one another.

Lee wanted to do more than build an ensemble of musicians; she wanted to create a choir for urban youth that provided a different experience than such organizations typically offered. According to her, when musicians consider ways to educate inner-city youth, they generally form choirs like the one in Sister Act 2, where youth sing gospel music or traditional African American spirituals. While there might be advantages to this approach, Lee knew that she could not follow it because it did not reflect her own journey as an artist and her own beliefs about the power that music might have for these young women. Instead, she selected music from a variety of genres that made the youth feel that they could transport themselves to a different time period or world culture but at the same time allowed them to identify with the emotions or feelings there. As Lee remarked, she wanted the youth to realize that there was still someone like them in those other places (A. Lee, interview, December 27, 2012). To reinforce these points, Lee used “circle time,” which resembles a morning meeting format, and rehearsal breaks to discuss the themes, stories, and emotions in the songs that the choir performs. For example, when the girls rehearsed “Dona Nobis Pacem,” Lee paused to ask them what peace meant to them. One girl immediately said that it meant quietness. Another thought it meant stillness. Still another argued that it meant joyousness. Lee told the young women that that they should think about peace means to them when they performed the song, particularly when they were singing it in Latin.

Lee leverages this idea not only in connection to singing, but also in other aspects of the program, such as the dance routines that the girls learn during rehearsals. During one of my observations, she told the girls to line up in their “queen” positions. The girls immediately formed four lines of couples across the stage and prepared to practice their queen walk, an English madrigal line dance that transported these Sister Cities Girlchoir members to the Elizabethan era of monarchs, palaces, and pageantry. During circle time, Lee had a discussion about queens with them and asked them to describe what being a queen and doing the dance meant to them. While they each had their own view of what this routine meant, Lee chose it because she wanted the girls to remember that they were royalty, either to themselves or to someone else, and that they could channel their queen persona at any time to be a strong and powerful leader for social change. But participation in the dance had other benefits because it forced these young women to interact with a partner who might be younger or older or from a different racial group, which was a new experience for these adolescents. Often, as one girl told me during rehearsal, the members of the choir tended to socialize with individuals from their own ethnic group. Puerto Rican students congregated with other Puerto Rican students while African American students gathered with other African American students. Lee deliberately made the girls interact with people who they might not choose to spend time with during regular school hours. This approach helped these youth move beyond their social comfort zones and work together with their peers to achieve a common goal. Under Lee’s direction, the members of Sister Cities Girlchoir are encouraged to question their own choices as well as the racial stereotypes that often fracture their schools and communities (Pascale, 2013).

By working as an ensemble and performing together throughout the Philadelphia metropolitan area, the members of the Sister Cities Girlchoir forge relationships that might not develop otherwise. As one of the members told me, participating in the choir—which enrolls girls in grades 5 through 8—provided an opportunity for these young women to make friendships across grade levels, which she had done (student 1, interview December 15, 2012). Other girls pointed out that their snack period and circle time at the beginning of every rehearsal gave them the chance to get to know their peers differently. This young woman argued, “people are totally different in choir...they open up more because there are not many people around them” (student 3, interview, December 15, 2012). Several other girls agreed with this statement, suggesting that the choir created a space where they could talk to other young women about their school and community and the challenges they faced there (student 2 and student 5, interview, December 15, 2012). Finally, the youth argued that their participation in the Sister Cities Girlchoir allowed them to “cool down” and took away the “stress of doing a lot of work” in school and at home (student survey, #8). In one interview, one of the members said that her involvement in the choir “made a difference in my life when I had really difficult problems...when my grandma died” (student #4, interview, April 13, 2013). The Sister Cities Girlchoir provided this young woman with a way to cope with her grief among a group of individuals who cared about her deeply. Her relationship with Lee and the other members of the choir afforded her an opportunity to escape, at least for a few hours, from her personal loss.

Watching the members of the Sister Cities Girlchoir practice the same vocal techniques that I had practiced as an adolescent reminded me of the power of the arts to enact social change and challenge inequities in low-income communities. By holding these young women to high standards and encouraging them to support one another, Lee has crafted an ensemble that exposes the Sister Cities Girlchoir members to the joys of classical music and allows them to develop talents that many may not even have realized they possessed. However, the arts by themselves cannot end injustice. This became readily apparent to me when I asked the young women to complete a short survey about their experiences in the choir. After I distributed the survey and explained its purpose, the girls spread out in the auditorium to answer the questions. However, as I looked around the room, I noticed that one of the young African American women seemed distracted. She was doodling hearts and the word “love.” I tried to refocus her attention on the questions and encouraged her to think about her answers. However, when I walked away, Lee told me that the girl could not read or write. Despite the benefits that the choir provides, participating in it does not guarantee that these young women can develop the skill set they need to be leaders for social change in their communities. While the Sister Cities Girlchoir provides a space where they can learn to unleash their hidden talents, release their personal stress, and develop new relationships, it does little to alleviate the gross educational inequities that these low-income youth of color have experienced for decades.

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