

ARTICLE



Seattle Music Project MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS, NOT GUNS by Stewart Hendrickson

“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.” - Maestro [José Antonio Abreu](#), founder of the *El Sistema* youth music program in Venezuela.

The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting on Dec. 14, 2012, shocked the nation into thinking again about gun violence. These mass shootings, however, account for only a small number of gun-related deaths; gun violence claims over 30,000 lives annually, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Gun deaths and injuries in the U.S. usually occur quietly, without national press coverage, every day.

Listening to NPR Weekend Edition a week later, I was intrigued by an [interview with Marin Alsop](#), music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and principal conductor of the Sao Paulo Symphony Orchestra in Brazil. She said, "Brazil's inherent societal belief that music improves quality of life, contributes to improved social behavior, and is an important vehicle to establish a peaceful society filled with tolerance and respect is a philosophy I once thought existed only in my utopian dreams." She mentioned [Dr. Jose Abreu](#), "the man responsible for establishing the *El Sistema* movement of music education in Venezuela almost 40 years ago. That program, which launched the career of superstar conductor [Gustavo Dudamel](#), has reached more than 2 million Venezuelan children, transforming lives and creating a safe haven for many of these youngsters from lives of crime and poverty."

Here in the U.S. in our drive for economic austerity, some of the first programs to be cut in public schools are in the arts and music; yet in Venezuela, Brazil and other Latin American countries youth music programs are being used to combat poverty, violence and other social problems. I think we have our priorities all wrong; cutting arts and music in our public schools doesn't make any sense.

In view of the tragic killings in Newtown Connecticut we need to seriously rethink our approach to gun violence. Many approaches are necessary and music could be one of them. In Baltimore, Marin Alsop has founded a youth music program, [ORCHKids](#): "We started with 30 kids four years ago, and today nearly 600 kids from four schools are participating. My dream is to reach every child. They are amazing children — tomorrow's leaders — and they, along with my amazing new life in Brazil, give me hope that my

utopian dream of a passionate and positive society may one day come true."

[*El Sistema*](#) USA is a support and advocacy network for people and organizations in this country inspired by Venezuela's youth music education program. They feature a [network of *El Sistema*-inspired programs](#) in the U.S. One such local group is [*Seattle Music Partners*](#). They recruit, train, screen and match high school, college and community musicians to work one-to-one with students at four partner elementary schools in central Seattle: Lowell, Leschi, Thurgood Marshall, and Bailey Gatzert. These musicians volunteer every week as music tutors as well as role models. The program was recently expanded to include a second, teacher-led session for students each week, which focuses on music theory and ensemble work. About 90 students and an equal number of musician volunteers are now involved in this program.

[*Seattle Music Partners*](#) needs not only musician volunteers, but also instruments to loan out to students ("We currently are accepting - in good working condition, please - flutes, clarinets, oboes, bassoons, alto saxophones, trumpets, trombones, French horns, violins, violas, cellos, double basses, acoustic guitars and percussion instruments") and donations to keep the program going. I just donated an extra student-grade violin. I hadn't played it in over a year, and instruments need to be played and enjoyed.

I feel good about supporting this program. It is a program that begins at the grass-roots level with volunteers and donations. As similar programs expand throughout the U.S. we can hopefully make a difference in the development of our youth, in creating a more compassionate society and decreasing crime and violence.

[Stewart Hendrickson](#)