



## **Focus on Social Learning**

### **January: Teamwork Month**

Of all the themes chosen to include in our Social Curriculum, Teamwork was the most obvious choice. Ensemble-based learning is an essential element of the El Sistema model, and our students spend nearly all of their time learning collaboratively in groups. Working together in a group means having to navigate the individual personalities and needs of its members, and negotiating how to divide tasks fairly and appropriately. Collaboration is an incredibly important life skill, much valued in the workplace. As [this article](#) points out, successful collaborations rely on effective communication, focus, confidence, resilience, empathy, and conflict resolution skills. Musical ensembles each have their own traditions and structures, from the top-down dictatorial tradition of the orchestra to the egalitarian, collaborative tradition of a string quartet or a garage band.

But not every group is a team. A team is defined by shared goals. Groups can get work done, but teams work efficiently and effectively because they are unified by a common purpose. The most effective teams benefit from the different strengths and skills of all of their members, dividing tasks to make the most of their diversity. Members of a group often compete with one another, hoping to shine individually, but teams compete together, and they succeed or fail as one.

At Sistema Toronto we want all of our students to experience the thrill of effective teamwork. This month we launched a new project that we hope will give them that experience, while also learning about music and having a lot of fun. The *Theory Olympics* includes a set of fun and engaging activities designed to help students improve their comfort with a variety of music theory concepts. The activities are tied together by a simple competitive format, where each class is divided into three teams that compete for points in each event. The first group to complete each activity successfully receives a “gold”, worth three points, second place earns a “silver”, worth two points, and third place a “bronze”, worth one point. Teachers may also assign bonus points and penalties as they see fit. The activities are designed to be amusing, surprising, and entertaining, and they present the students with a wide variety of physical, social, and intellectual challenges so that group members are encouraged to draw on their individual strengths and skills in order to succeed. Ideally, even members who do not have a strong knowledge of music theory will be able to contribute to their group’s success in other ways.

Each strings class received a box including everything necessary to carry out all the activities, so that teachers are able to hit the ground running with no additional prep work before class, and different boxes were developed for each of our ensemble levels.



[Picture Caption: The Contents of a Senior Theory Olympics Violin/Viola Box]

For the juniors, the activities focused on:

- a) Getting familiar with the staff and the clef
- b) Recognizing the notes of the open strings on the staff
- c) Reading and clapping rhythms using quarter and half notes
- d) Learning and understanding some Italian musical terms: Forte, Piano, Allegro, Adagio, Legato, Staccato

For intermediates:

- a) Scale patterns, tones and semitones
- b) Reading and clapping rhythms using half, quarter, and eighth notes
- c) Identifying rising and falling pitches by ear
- d) Identifying and understanding Italian terms and symbols: forte, piano, allegro, adagio, legato, staccato, accel., rit., cres., decres., slur, pizz., arco, Bass Clef, Treble Clef, Alto Clef

For seniors:

- a) Learning and recognizing intervals up to perfect fourth
- b) Reading and clapping rhythms including half, quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, and triplets
- c) Scale patterns on the musical staff, the instrument, and the fingerboard
- d) Identifying, understanding, and using music terms, symbols, and concepts: Crescendo, Decrescendo, Forte, Piano, Accelerando, Ritardando, Arco, Pizzicato, Allegro, Adagio, Legato,

Staccato, Fortissimo, Pianissimo, Tremolo, Fermata, Trill, Glissando, Tempo, Dynamic, Harmony, Melody, Rhythm, Beat

The activities are designed to be level and age appropriate them moving around the classroom, and to introduce some novel and fun ways of engaging with musical material. One of the junior activities, for example, asks the students to draw a staff on the floor using painter's tape, and stand on the open string notes. In order to construct the staff on the floor the students need to construct a mental picture of the staff, remembering how many lines there are and how the spacing looks on the page, use their own spatial awareness to reconstruct it accurately, communicate with one another effectively to work together, remember the meanings of the lines and spaces, find the right places for the open spaces, and negotiate who is going to stand on which open string. It sounds simple to the students, but it ends up being quite challenging to execute it quickly as a group.



[Making the Staff with Masking Tape]

Other activities use interesting or novel materials to teach familiar concepts in new and creative ways. LEGO Rhythm Flash Cards, for example, challenges students to use Lego bricks to represent different rhythms. Each group is given a set of eight identical Lego bricks, representing a whole note, and is challenged to arrange them to represent a different rhythm.

In addition to introducing new concepts and reviewing familiar ones, some of the activities are designed to combine existing skills to challenge students in new ways. Melody Relay, an activity for the Seniors, challenges the group members to learn four one-bar melodic fragments, one after the other, then combine them into a single performance. The melody was designed so that it would make sense in any order.



[Senior Cello Melody Relay Activity]

This activity challenges the group members to activate all of their music theory knowledge and put it into practice learning the notes and rhythms quickly, but also to navigate their group dynamics successfully. Each member must work both independently, learning their own bar or bars, and also together, to put together a final coherent performance of their complete melody.



[Senior Melody Relay Example]

The competitive structure of the Theory Olympics is a pedagogical strategy, designed to motivate the students to learn about theory through the games and activities. Working together as a team to solve theory puzzles, our students will feel more ownership over their learning than they would by passively answering questions or taking tests. This experience of teamwork, working efficiently and effectively

because of a common goal, is one we hope will carry on into the rest of their work in Sistema and in life, learning to cooperate, negotiate, compromise, solve problems creatively, and support one another in their learning, all while hopefully having a great time!

