

## Spotlight on Social Learning

March 2021: Leadership Month

March is Leadership month at Sistema Toronto. Leadership can be a slippery concept to define. Many of our inherited ideas about leadership are tied up with oppressive and outdated social structures, limited by the ways people viewed leadership in the past. To some degree, leadership is about power. One way to define leadership is in terms of power. Leaders are those who have and use power to influence the actions of others. Another way to define leadership is in terms of direction. Leaders are those who show or decide the way forward, and others follow. If we want our students to be the leaders of tomorrow, we need to help them understand leadership and the power structures that shape it, provide them with role models that enable them to see themselves as leaders, and teach them the skills and habits they need to become leaders in their own right.

This challenge is especially important for racialized and economically challenged students. A recent study by the Ted Rogers School of Management’s Diversity Institute found, for example, that while 51.4% of Toronto’s population identify as racialized, only 15.5% of positions on public, private, and corporate boards of directors identify as racialized<sup>1</sup>. In some sectors the challenge is even more dramatic. 7.5% of Toronto’s population identify as Black, for example, but Black people account for only 0.3% of corporate boards<sup>2</sup>. Companies, charitable organizations, and other public and private institutions are working to create new opportunities for current and future leaders in the BIPOC community, and to change the dynamics that created these inequities. According to data from the Students Commission of Canada, over 90% of Sistema Toronto students identify as Black, Indigenous or people of colour. Our students step into a world that already puts many of them at a disadvantage because of factors beyond their control, and we need to make sure they are well equipped to meet these challenges.

Understanding power and influence is an important part of this work. There are as many different kinds of leadership as there are leaders, each suited for a different set of circumstances and each requiring a different set of skills and attributes. One of our new Social Curriculum activities for the month, *Taking the Lead*, invites our students to contemplate how different kinds of leaders gain power, and how they influence the people around them.



### Political Leaders

School trustees, city counselors, mayors, provincial legislators, premieres, members of parliament, prime ministers, queens, and presidents. Politicians lead our communities, political parties, and governments. They help us make decisions and work together.

- What makes a good political leader?
- Who are the political leaders in your community?
- What kind of power do they have?
- Where does their power come from?



**What about YOU?**

*How will you write your own story?*

What kind of leader will you be?  
 Will you lead by example?  
 By having the best ideas?  
 Or do you need to be the boss?  
 Do you know someone who leads the way you want to?  
 How will your leadership change the world?

Sistema Toronto, “Taking the Lead” slides 4 and 8, 2021

<sup>1</sup> Cukier, Wendy. “Diverse Representation on Boards.” *Diversity Institute, Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario*, p. 12, [https://www.ryerson.ca/diversity/Presentations/DL2020\\_Slides.pdf](https://www.ryerson.ca/diversity/Presentations/DL2020_Slides.pdf), accessed March 23, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

Political leaders, cultural leaders, intellectual leaders, and workplace leaders all leverage existing power structures to achieve their goals. Some have the power to give orders, set the agenda, or write the rules, others give advice, set an example, or right wrongs. By helping our students understand these dynamics, we can help them learn different ways to be a leader, and different ways they can become one.

For every leadership role our students imagine themselves taking on, they look for exemplary figures they can model themselves after. Organized, disciplined, hardworking, and creative, musicians can be wonderful role models. Erratic, obsessive, demanding, and egotistical, musicians can be terrible role models. Traditional ideas about leadership in music are deeply tied up with outdated patriarchal structures, and disentangling these threads can be a challenge. Depending on which program notes you are reading, you might see Beethoven celebrated as a caring uncle and an innovative entrepreneur, who persevered in spite of his hearing loss, or as a moody, misogynistic sociopath, who swore at his servants when they messed up his coffee order. And if you were to sit in on one of the rehearsals, you might wonder why in 2021 it is still considered unremarkable for orchestral musicians to refer to their conductors as maestro, which translates directly to “master”? If we want our students to inherit a richer, more open and equitable tradition than the one we grew into, we need to change the way we talk about musical leadership and the role models who embody it.

As important as it is for us to present our students with positive role models that we believe can inspire them, it is also important for us to help them learn to articulate and advocate for their own interests and values. *Musical Role Models* invites our students to tell us about the people *they* admire, and explain what makes them a good role model.



Who is YOUR Musical Role Model?

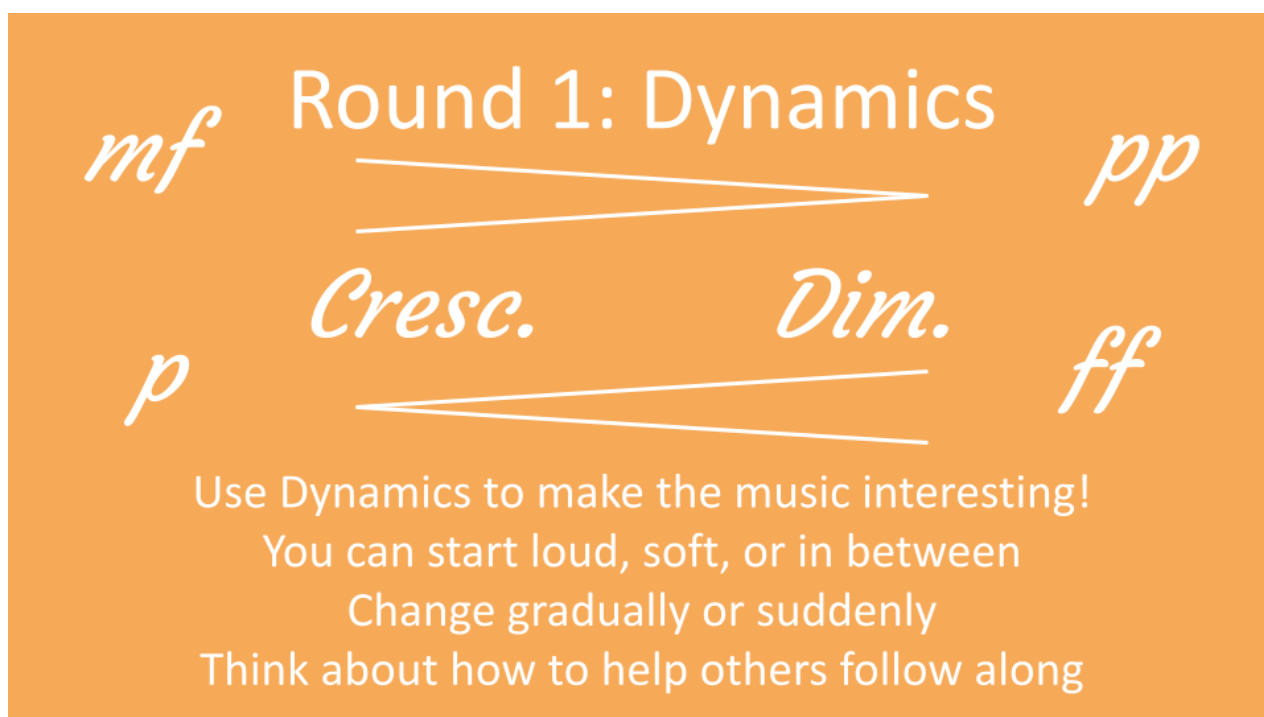
- 🎵 Is it someone who writes beautiful music?
- ⚖️ Someone who fights for justice?
- 🔍 Someone who represents their community?
- 😞 Someone who overcame obstacles?
- 🌱 Someone who helps young people?
- 💬 Tell us who your musical role model is, and one of their songs that shows why

Sistema Toronto, “Musical Role Models” slide 3, 2021

Centering students’ ideas and beliefs is an effective way to engage students’ interest, but it also provides a chance to encourage them to think critically about choices they might not otherwise consciously examine. For teachers, these

discussions provide a valuable way to better understand our students, and for our students a way to better understand themselves.

If we want our students to become leaders, we need to give them practical experience as well as theoretical knowledge. Musical leaders have to make interpretive decisions, explain them to others, and guide the performance, among many other possible leadership roles. *My Way or the Highway* invites the students to take on these musical responsibilities in their zoom classes.



*mf* Round 1: Dynamics *pp*

*p* *Cresc.* *Dim.* *ff*

Use Dynamics to make the music interesting!  
You can start loud, soft, or in between  
Change gradually or suddenly  
Think about how to help others follow along

Sistema Toronto, "My Way or the Highway" slide 2, 2021

Each slide invites the students to explore different elements of musical expression, develop a musical concept, explain it to the class, and then lead their peers in playing the piece their way. Each of these steps involves different leadership skills: creativity and decision making in developing an idea, verbal communication skills in explaining it, and non-verbal musical communication skills in leading the performance. Successfully executing an activity like this gives students hands-on experience with these and other leadership skills and helps them build confidence in their own abilities.

Every student needs to develop their own understanding of leadership, their own ideas about what kind of leader they want to be, and their own set of leadership skills that will allow them to put those into action throughout their life. Whether they want to be the boss or lead by example, by influencing others or convincing them, we want our students to become confident, compassionate, and reflective adults, who are ready to become the leaders of tomorrow.