

Education

Instruments of change

While many schools are cutting fine arts programs, Fort Worth is adding music back into the lives of elementary school kids.



Kahya Hemphill attends B Sharp Summer Music Camp, in rehearsal at Bass Hall earlier this month.

Star-Telegram/Joyce Marshall

By **Yamil Berard**
yberard@star-telegram.com

FORT WORTH — The idea must have sounded radical in Venezuela in 1975: Put musical instruments into the hands of small children whose families have nothing, and form an or-

chestra as a means to effect social change.

“Music has to be recognized as an ... agent of social development in the highest sense, because it transmits the highest values — solidarity, harmony, mutual compassion.

And it has the ability to unite an entire community and to express sublime feelings,” *El Sistema* (The System) founder Jose Antonio Abreu has said.

El Sistema, created to teach classical music to kids who might not ever have held a vio-

lin otherwise, has evolved into more than 100 youth orchestras that are the pride of Venezuela. The idea touches the Fort Worth school district in the form of the B Sharp Music Program.

More on MUSIC, 7A

Star-Telegram.com See a video from the B Sharp program

Music

Continued from 1A

Jurnee Wilson, a fifth-grader at Como Elementary School, stepped off the stage at Bass Hall for a break during a B Sharp rehearsal recently.

"I'm the loudest person in the orchestra," the 10-year-old trumpet player said. "My instrument can really show you what the brass can do."

Several years ago, when some Texas urban school districts took the knife to fine arts programs to cope with constrained budgets, the Fort Worth school district did the opposite: It equipped each elementary school with certified music and art teachers. Music curriculum became a part of the school day, and middle schools and high schools developed orchestra, choir and instrumental music programs.

"This was a bold posi-

Video link

See and hear results of El Sistema in this 10-minute documentary video, *How Music Saved Venezuela's Children*, made in 2008: youtu.be/J-5JPR6C900.

tion," said Michael Sorum, deputy superintendent of curriculum for Fort Worth. "Our board never cut our fine arts programs."

For its efforts over the last decade, the district this year was named one of the nation's Best Communities for Music Education by the National Association for Music Merchants Foundation, joining 376 public schools.

"It gives people from the outside something they can see and say, 'Wow, this district has a strong music program, I'd like my kids to be a part of that,'" said Christina Walk, executive director of visual and performing arts for the district. "It speaks volumes."

Samantha Jones, music specialist at Maudrie M. Walton Elementary

School, said she is fortunate to work in a district that supports her passion for teaching music.

"It's such an integral part" of students' education, Jones said. "It's very important for me to expose my students to music outside of their own culture. It opens up their eyes to the way other people live, to the way other people grow up. It's the reason why we have so many different opinions in our world."

The support of local organizations, including the Cliburn Foundation, Performing Arts Fort Worth and the Goff Family Foundation, is a big strength of the district's music program, Sorum said, adding that this year, Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation also helped buy instruments.

Dozens of youngsters



Bianca Furch plays the tympani in rehearsal at Bass Hall as part of the Fort Worth school district's B Sharp Summer Music Camp.

Star-Telegram/Joyce Marshall

m 1A

take part in the B Sharp program, which was started at Como Elementary School in 2007 by the Goff Family Foundation and expanded in February to one of the district's middle schools.

Jurnee Wilson was among the 30 first-graders in the initial camp.

"When I went for the first time, I felt really good about it," Wilson said. "I had fun, and I learned a lot about instruments."

Since 2010, the Goff Family Foundation has poured more than \$1 million into the program.

The Goff family chris-

tened the program B Sharp after a rarely used name for a note because "it was a rare program," Jill Goff said. (B sharp is the same note as C natural.)

At Como Elementary, where most students are economically disadvantaged, the program provides 10 weekly hours of after-school music instruction. B Sharp Music Program instructors, on contract with the Goff Family Foundation, are professional musicians.

"We wanted to create a program around the culture of the community where it started," said Goff,

who runs the program for the philanthropic organization begun by her brother, John Goff, several years ago.

The program's motto: Love the child first; music second, she said.

In the early stages, the foundation provided many of the instruments for the B Sharp music students, but now the district pays for up to 98 percent, she said.

"We couldn't do it without them," Goff said.

Yamil Berard,
817-390-7705

Twitter: @yberard