

New School Year



by D.T. Baker

As much as anything can be up and running in these uncertain and fluctuating times, the two Sistema-based programs of the Youth Orchestra of Northern Alberta launched its eighth year in September. Both schools of YONA-Sistema, as well as Kipohtakâw YONA at Alexander First Nation have taken their first steps of the 20/21 school year.

But almost as soon as they began, each program needed to undergo a series of adjustments and new strategies in an attempt to maintain flexibility and responsiveness to an ever-changing pandemic landscape.

“The start of the year has felt very different this year with regards to structure, procedures, and the types of problems we need to resolve,” said YONA Site Manager at St. Alphonsus School, Jacquie McNulty at the start of the year. “During the first two weeks of September, we essentially created a new program - one that seeks to strike a balance between offering the same high quality music education and community feel while balancing the need to respect boundaries imposed by COVID-19. Our staff orientation was largely spent discussing different ways to make it all work.”

“Kipohtakâw YONA has always had two cohorts, previously of mixed levels. This year, the two cohorts are based around the students’ grades to avoid groups mixing as much,” assesses Kipohtakâw YONA Site Coordinator Lauren Dykstra. “There are also some students who are learning exclusively online. I’ll also be the only Teaching Artist going to teach in person to avoid Teaching Artists being at too many sites.”

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Clearly, it’s an ongoing adjustment for everyone, but perhaps for no one more than Tisa Haesch, the new Principal at YONA-Sistema’s other school, St. Teresa of Calcutta. This has been her first experience with the program. “I’m excited to learn more about it,” she admits. “We have two classrooms this year that are being provided by the school for the children to come.”

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Both Ms. Jacquie and Ms. Lauren say the students they work with are as excited as St. Teresa's new Principal. "The students are incredibly excited to be starting up again, and are already asking when they'll get to perform again," Ms. Lauren says of the Kipohtakâw Education Centre at the Alexander First Nation. "The school is being as flexible and adaptive as possible, and is especially supportive of helping the students with technology challenges."

The first few weeks have already seen a number of circumstances in which the parameters have changed drastically, including a complete lockdown of Alexander First Nation (see the Kipohtakâw article in this issue). With pandemic guidelines undergoing many updates and modifications as circumstances dictate, it's no surprise that "flexible and adaptive," and adjectives thereof, are common words lately. "We have to be extremely flexible," Ms. Jacquie echoes. "Luckily, YONA has always been so. We seek to provide the best care and support for every child - which often means understanding the unique needs of that student."

"We finished YONA in the spring online anticipating that we would need to utilize our online format in some capacity this fall, and we are," adds Kristin Swirles, YONA Site Manager at St. Teresa. "What's different is that lots of parents and kids are now very

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familiar with Zoom and other online platforms. I feel good about the online/in-person schedule we've built and are trialing because it will, hopefully, allow us to switch back and forth as needed. If a school shuts down because of COVID the hope is that our students can smoothly transition to their YONA classes online."

The fundamental nature of the Sistema-based programs has much to do with the benefits of ensemble (which the pandemic has largely ruled out for the time being), so life has thrown everyone a pretty wicked curveball, and YONA's staff are game to tough it out.

"I feel very happy to be back in action," Ms. Kristin says. "It's so nice seeing the students, and it's been great to see the smiles of family members at the end of the day picking their children up from YONA."



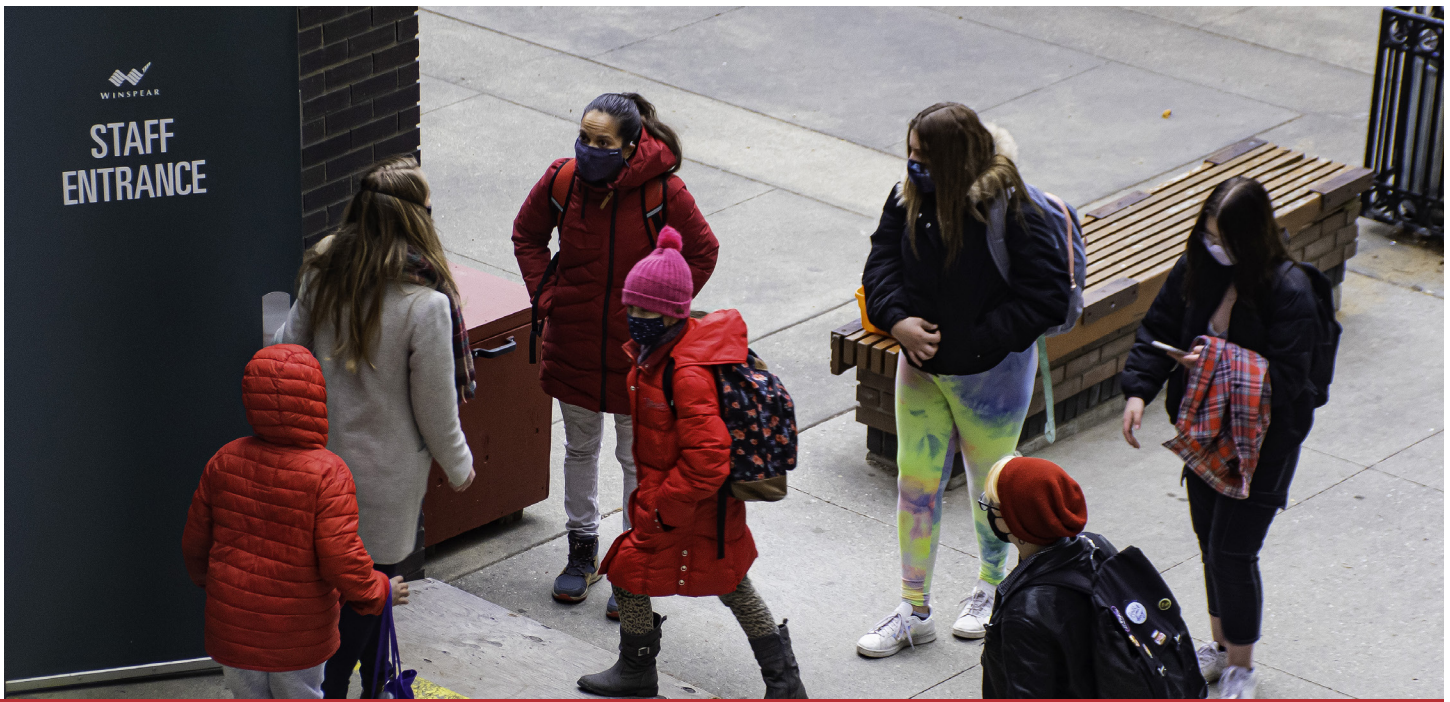
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“It’s so nice seeing the students, and it’s been great to see the smiles of family members at the end of the day picking their children up from YONA.”

Being back at the school (which began the year only part time with one cohort) feels like a little piece of normalcy. It’s great.”

“I’m looking forward to this year being a year of experimentation,” Ms. Jacquie adds. “What opportunities does our new reality offer us?”

“Music fills the soul, especially during the pandemic right now, making students feel needed and that they belong – there’s hope,” says YONA rookie Tisa Haesch. “What a great opportunity for the children.”





The Winspear Cohort

by D.T. Baker

The “Winspear Cohort” of the YONA-Sistema program is a creation born of necessity, as a way of keeping certain students involved in the program who would otherwise fall through the COVID cracks.

When schools have been able to run any programming beyond regular classroom time, they have been (rightfully) maintaining some pretty strict guidelines due to the current health crisis, and one of those is a restriction that closes off schools from allowing students from other schools to enter. As a consequence, YONA-Sistema’s two main sites – St. Teresa of Calcutta and St. Alphonsus – were made off limits to students from schools such as Vic and Spruce Avenue, so at the start of the current school year, some necessary adjustments were made.

Some YONA musicians are participating online. But for others, the Winspear Cohort was born. “The Winspear Cohort is made up of students that don’t attend either of the two main sites,” explains strings Teaching Artist Lauren Dykstra. “The reason they’re coming here is that the schools don’t want students that aren’t actually attending those schools to be coming into those buildings, just to minimize cohorting and all of that. The other challenge then was that because there’s such a shortage of bus drivers in the city, the school boards aren’t able to offer us busing. So it’s up to our students and their

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families, if they want in-person programming, they have to get themselves to the Winspear.” And eight of them were doing just that, and they represent a diverse mix. Ms. Lauren and ESO Assistant Conductor Cosette Justo Valdés looked after them. “Our youngest student is in grade five, and our oldest is grade 10 – different instruments, different lengths of time playing, so a huge range,” Ms. Lauren says. “So we’re starting the day off with 20 to 30 minutes of smaller group time. The older, more advanced students come with me – they’re string players anyway, so that works out well. And then the winds and brass and percussion work with Cosette.”

It’s hardly an ideal situation, of course, especially for a program that was established in large part to provide the students the benefit of ensemble instruction. “It would be better for me if there was like two horns,” is Gabe’s honest assessment. A student at Delton last year, Gabe is now in grade seven at Spruce Avenue School, and his second year



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with YONA. “It would be better if there was another horn here that would start playing the exact same time as me, because I don’t know when to start and when to stop.”

The hope for this unusual year, that has required a massive re-think to the normal way of doing things, has been that across the range of YONA-Sistema instructional platforms – online, the site schools, the Winspear Cohort, and Kipohtakâw-YONA – all the young musicians will be working on the same piece, a Bartók orchestral suite. Eventually, all the separated groups will come together to play, in person or otherwise.

“Everybody’s learning (the Bartók suite) with the exception of the St. Teresa juniors, because this is only their second year, says Ms. Lauren. “But the other group of students at St. T’s that normally would be going to St. Al’s is going to be working on the Bartók suite, the St. Al’s cohort will be learning the Bartók suite – even the violin students at Kipohtakâw will be learning the violin parts. We’re looking at ways of doing it, maybe as some giant YONA-wide Zoom call where we can play for each other.”

The Winspear Cohort – two violins, two cellos, two flutes, and one each of percussion and horn – certainly get a different experience than they would under normal circumstances. “Kind of like guided practice,” adds Ms. Lauren. “So that’s helping with the variety of skill levels.”

“Back at St. Al’s, there’s a lot of other kids there, so I get a lot of social time during break,” Gabe says about what the biggest differences are. “Then when I come back inside, I get back with my own little group.” But there are some pluses as well, he adds. “I get a bit of one on one teaching with Ms. Cosette. And it’s more exciting, because we’re here in the Winspear, so why wouldn’t it be exciting?” 🎵





Andreas' Roots of Music

by D.T. Baker

Say the word “music” to a dozen different people, and there’s a good chance you’ll get about a dozen different ideas of what exactly that means. That applies to the young musicians of YONA-Sistema, too.

Sure, they’re learning the basics of the western art music tradition, and are budding violinists, flutists, percussionists et al. But they’re also young people with Spotify iPhones, and more than one of them likely knows the words to every Post Malone song.

The music education the students receive through YONA-Sistema may spend a good part of its time in the world of Mozart and Bartók, but that’s not where all the music is. So a few years ago, Teaching Artist Andreas Wegner morphed his option class into something that encourages exploration and creativity in all kinds of music.

“We used to offer options in YONA which happened once a week for the elementary aged students,” he relates. “They would pick between three or four different classes, and one of the options was one that I taught called Composition, where we’d learn about how to write your own rhythm, how to write your own melody, et cetera. And that class became more fully fledged two years ago, where it would be once a week for every student, and it became Roots

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of Music. The class would have elements of teaching history, and also elements of composition as I had done in the class before. And a big component of this class was learning through improvisation and spontaneous creativity with the students and their peers – so not reading music like they’re used to in every other day in YONA where they have to learn how to translate exactly what’s on the page to their instrument – but more on how to create.”

Units in the Roots of Music class would delve into various kinds of music, Mr. Andreas says. Like Motown, for example. “We’d talk about Motown for a month, we’d talk about the word ‘groove,’ and how it relates to Motown. And we’d do some listening to Motown, and then the activity for the day would be to focus on the groove and think about how a rhythm you created interlocks with your smaller group.”

Mr. Andreas:

“I’ve been trying to incorporate elements of improvisation in all the activities that we do.”

I know what you’re thinking: I’d take that class, too. The division of the YONA musicians into separate “cohorts” has definitely had an impact on how Mr. Andreas can teach his class in the COVID reality. Based at St. Alphonsus School, the students that attend that school continue as before. The others he sees online, but that comes with challenges, of course.

“It’s near impossible to get students to improvise and create music with each other online, so that’s been tough,” he concedes. “There are some great, free drum machines online where they can create their own grooves, then play along to it and improvise. We’ve been doing a lot of that. And I’ve been trying to incorporate elements of improvisation in all the activities that we do, so if we’re working on our scales, we won’t just play them up and down – I won’t dictate exactly how they should play it. We’ll maybe do a review of it then I’ll say, ‘OK, everybody mute, and I want you to play

the notes of the scale, but change it up, improvise it, play it with different dynamics – get loud, then soft – try different rhythms.’ Then I’ll ask one or two of them to share with the class how their improvised scale went.”

A well-rounded musician is usually a better musician. If nothing else, they’re more likely to be open-minded, and just as willing to appreciate a Schubert song as one by Ariana Grande. Mr. Andreas’ Roots of Music class encourages that. “Every week, we have something called Song of the Week, which is a song that the students pick. They send me the name of a song that they like, and then I’d play it for the class and we’ll discuss it – what instruments we hear, what we like about it, that sort of thing.”

Nothing wrong with a little groove in your Bartók. 🎵





Kipohtakâw Update

by D.T. Baker

The circumstances around the circumstances of the Kipohtakâw YONA program at Alexander First Nation have shifted moreso than has been the case for the Edmonton-based program, but that's simply indicative of the kind of on-the-fly responses everyone is having to make. The current situation at Alexander First Nation as of this writing is a lockdown, brought on by some confirmed cases of COVID-19 there.

As per the provincial government's guidelines on school closures, "the lockdown is scheduled to go until mid-January," says Lauren Dykstra, Kipohtakâw-YONA Site Coordinator. After finishing the last school year with the Kipohtakâw Education Centre (KEC) closed, Ms. Lauren says that she and the rest of the YONA team knew that the start of the present school year was pretty uncertain.

Ms. Lauren:

"Students are saying that the YONA classes are one of their favourite parts of their school day, and that they really look forward to it."

Even still, the hope was that, while it was known that some students had opted for home schooling for the entire year, that the rest of the KEC students participating in Kipohtakâw-YONA would be able to access the school long enough to bring their instruments home.

"We knew that there was a chance we'd have to pivot, and move online pretty quickly, so we all have plans in our back pockets for instances when that's the case," Ms. Lauren says. "So with Kipohtakâw,



we're just waiting on support from the community to be able to get instruments home to the students for when they decide that it's safe to do so. We're trying to just be responsive to what the community is saying they feel safe with, and what they need and want right now, and trying to do as much as we can within that."

Before the latest lockdown, Ms. Lauren says that they had managed to squeeze in six to eight visits out to Alexander First Nation, and that the students were happy to have YONA back in their lives. "There are three students that had elected online learning all year," she explains, "so they're getting an hour of online instruction twice a week on one of our usual days, Tuesday, but it's after school, so it doesn't interfere with their online school. So they come from three until four, online for those three students." The other regular YONA day, Friday, is one for which KEC is encouraging their students to get away from video screens, and spend time outdoors with family.

All the Kipohtakâw -YONA musicians have also been invited to participate in the online YONA choir that the YONA-Sistema students in Edmonton can join as well. "We've had one student who joined (from Kipohtakâw). I don't know if more will come this week – hopefully – but it's an option that's available to them all online," Ms. Lauren says. "We're encouraging them to come if they want to."

None of this can supplant the in-person sense of connection and community the students feel from the in-person Kipohtakâw-YONA experience, Lauren admits, but even what they've managed to do so far feels like it's helping. "A lot of the students are saying that the YONA classes are one of their favourite parts of their school and their day, and that they really look forward to it. And especially I think for some of the online students, they're really finding it a way to stay connected with their friends and to play together." 🎵

YONA's Tips for Staying Healthy

“Exercise.”

- Bitania

“Eat warm water.”

- Pranjali

“Drink warm water 2 times a day.”

- Elly

“Eat your veggies and fruits.”

- Elly

“Put things on your face (like cream and lotion) that make your face smooth. And wear scarves to avoid frostbite.”

- Johnny

“Try your best to not get a fever.”

- Nico

“Don't eat too much sugar.”

- Bitania

“One tip or trick for staying healthy is to eat two apples a day or 3, or 30, like me. 2 apples a day is fine.”

- Mary (Grade 4)

“Always put your jacket on. Because my Mom says so.”

- Isaiah (Grade 4)

“Trailing running in the River Valley will keep you healthy. Running is good for the mind, if your legs can take it.”

- Mr. Nathaniel

“Stay at home unless you want Corona! It's a Corona survival tip.”

- Carlos (Grade 4)

“Eat Veggies.”

- Felicia (Grade 3)

**“Stay hydrated. Drink water.
Hydrate with cream on your
hands and skin.”**

- Ms. Nava

**“Energize yourself, eat food,
brush your teeth, get fresh air.”**

- Elizabeth (Grade 4)

**“You have to run and do more
power and exercises!”**

- Shiva (Grade 3)

**“While on a walk: try to open
your heart and chest to the sky
and take deep breaths while
bending backwards slightly.
Try to notice your surroundings
and think about the energy
nature gives us.”**

- Ms. Kristin



Save the Date!

You are invited to join us for

YONA-Sistema's Winter Celebration!

Friday, January 29, 2021 • 5:30 PM

Live on YouTube

(link to follow via email)

Support our students and celebrate their learning as our program continues to make music and build community together. Enjoy student presentations from each of our cohorts and an authentic glimpse of the YONA program so far this year. We can't wait to show you what we have been up to!



Join us from your living room!

Donate to YONA

You can support the future of YONA by donating money, time, or instruments. When you give, you put a musical instrument in the hands of a child. This can become so much more than a simple vessel for sound – it can become an instrument for growth, development, and change. Every gift, great or small, makes a difference in the life of a child and contributes to social change in our community.

Visit online to donate:

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Thank you to our supporters

The support of our incredible donors allows YONA to grow and thrive, and means more now than ever. Thank you!

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