

Costa Rica International Teaching Scholars Experience Summary

Lisa Eckstein

On teaching and learning, Leonard Bernstein said, "You'll see that they are interchangeable words. Basically, deep down, they mean the same thing. So when I teach, I learn, and when I learn, I teach." This is why I wanted to be a part of the 2017 Costa Rica International Teaching Scholars Program through George Mason University and the Potomac Arts Academy. I knew that being a part of this program would allow me to teach, learn, and share ideas about the meaning of music with people in Costa Rica. I was not disappointed. My life was enriched through my experiences.

Before traveling, I learned that there is no military in Costa Rica. The country has an agreement that the USA military will come to its aid if needed. This allows for the Costa Rican government to fund other programs like green initiatives. Costa Rica is a small developing country but is a leader in green energy initiatives. Not having to worry about funding an expensive military also allows the country to fund arts education programs. Music education opportunities for elementary through high school aged students exist in government funded afternoon and evening music schools including the national program, Sistema Nacional de Educacion Musical (SINEM). The President of Costa Rica allocates money to the different ministries within the government, and the Ministry of Culture allocates money to fund SINEM schools. These schools were inspired by the El Sistema program in Venezuela. Because SINEM is a national program, it is highly visible. SINEM provides music instruments free of charge to all students! It is the responsibility of each SINEM school director to have their own vision for leadership and direction. Of the four SINEM schools I visited, most had private or small group instrumental lessons and ensemble classes where the International Teaching Scholars were able to jump in and teach private or small group lessons and play in the ensembles. A few schools offer other music classes but I did not see them. Although the SINEM program is generally doing great work, I believe students would benefit even more if the program had a unified curriculum and learning goals for every school.

Conservatorio de Castella is a public school similar in some ways to our arts magnet schools here in the US. The student population is about 1,100 (this number includes elementary through high school ages). Students receive education in the core subjects in the morning. After lunch and until about 4pm, the curriculum is all arts based including dance, music, and art classes. I visited this school two consecutive days. On the first day, I was proud to watch Jenna and Jason Day from Day Violins take over the music instrument storage room called the "Instrument Bodega." They shared their talents by doing a LOT of string instrument cleaning and repairs and even taught some of the music teachers how to do maintenance and repairs. They worked hard all day and I couldn't believe how much they got accomplished! It was amazing to watch. I was able to contribute just a little bit: I cleaned two bassoons and made the joints on one bassoon better. In the Instrument Bodega, I met Rita Agudelo Ortega. Rita is the bassoon instructor at the school and her English is very good so we began talking. Rita asked if I could come back the next day and so I did.

On the second day, Rita and I played bassoon duets and then I played in an ensemble she directed of about twenty beginning woodwind and trumpet students. They were rehearsing selections in a beginning band book and preparing for an upcoming concert. After this class, Rita and I rode a school bus to the neighborhood of Guadalupe and walked to a government funded afternoon and evening municipal school of music where her husband, Manuel (a French hornist in the Costa Rican National Symphony Orchestra) is the founder and director. On the bus ride to Guadalupe, Rita and I

discussed music education in Costa Rica. I told Rita that I believe a unified curriculum for SINEM would be good. She gave me insights into the politics of SINEM, explaining that while there had been some corruption in SINEM in the past, things are now getting better. She described her experiences as a college student at the Universidad de Costa Rica, which is one of two colleges in Costa Rica that have high quality music programs...the other being the Instituto Nacional de la Musica. Rita said that these two schools in Costa Rica are the best schools in Central America for serious musicians to study music. The Universidad was right across the street from our hotel and we were able to hear a graduate trumpet recital there...it was very good and—in my opinion—comparable to a graduate music recital in the US.

The President of Costa Rica also allocates money to the country's municipalities. The municipalities then allocate some money to after school arts education programs and schools. (The group I traveled with didn't know this...probably because these schools are not national programs and are not nearly as visible as SINEM.) The music school Rita took me to is funded by the municipality of Guadalupe, which is in a suburb of San Jose very close to our hotel. In some ways, this school was very similar to SINEM. The hours were similar (from about 2-8pm) and instruments and sheet music were provided to students for free. However, there were some differences, too. The school had a music library of about eight filing cabinets (four drawers each). The SINEM schools I visited lack sheet music. Not only were there private lessons and instrumental ensembles at this municipal school, but they had two choir rehearsals, a written music theory class, a sight-singing class that was using the Berkowitz ear training book (which is the same book college music majors use at George Mason University), and chamber music ensembles including a saxophone quartet. They had six teachers at this school and one full-time administrator and that is just what I happened to observe that one night! It was amazing! They were doing fantastic work at this school. I was able to fix a good bassoon that just had one debilitating problem. On the spot, a bassoon student was able to upgrade to this bassoon, and was thrilled. I then taught that student a bassoon lesson through Google Translate. Music truly is a universal language! It was fantastic to see that this independent municipal school was doing such great work and that the curriculum seemed to be exceptional...all free to the students and funded by the government!

I was able to visit the Instituto Nacional de la Musica. This school is comparable to a music conservatory in the US. It was interesting that the Instituto had a preparatory program for younger students similar to preparatory programs offered by colleges and conservatories in the U.S. At the Instituto, we heard the Costa Rican National Symphony Orchestra (the country's premiere orchestra) rehearse. I was able to meet many students and teachers, observe a flute masterclass, rehearse chamber music with other double reed students and the oboe instructor, and perform in a recital. The Instituto is a fantastic school and I can see why students would come from all over Central America to study. Music making and music education is at a high level.

Through a connection that Professor Mark Camphouse had made with the Band de Conciertos de San Jose, the International Teaching Scholars got to rehearse for a few days with the band under Professor Camphouse's direction. There is a concert band in all seven regions of Costa Rica and this one—being in the capital of the country which is also the only large city—is the premiere band. Rita's stepson plays French horn and I sat in front of him. The bassoonist was very nice and many of the musicians spoke English well enough to have comfortable conversations. The quality of the ensemble was good—comparable to some of the finest college ensembles in the US. During one of the rehearsals, I had the opportunity to conduct and rehearse a piece! I did so speaking Spanish almost the entire time...broken Spanish but it worked ok. The band was great and I had a fantastic connection with them

through the music...they watched me like a hawk! It was so much fun and a great honor to conduct them.

My favorite day in Costa Rica was the one I spent with Rita. My favorite thing about the country in general was how nice the people were...all of the musicians and music teachers I met were extremely warm, friendly, and truly interested in exchanging ideas. Other highlights of my experiences in Costa Rica were playing in the bassoon section and conducting the Banda de Conciertos de San Jose, learning about all of the music education opportunities provided in the country, and seeing how the government is able to fully fund much of the country's music education programs.

Interacting with students and teachers through music in Costa Rica was profoundly enriching. My experiences in Costa Rica will shape my future endeavors in music education in positive and globally conscious ways. This was a life-changing experience that I will remember forever. I am extremely grateful to Libby Curtis and John Kilkenny for all of their time and efforts in organizing the trip, to the Potomac Arts Academy for helping fund my trip and also for donating fifty instruments to SINEM, to the International Teaching Scholars, Day Violins, members of the Potomac Arts Academy, and faculty of George Mason University who I traveled and worked with in Costa Rica for being wonderful people, musicians, and collaborators. Music truly is a universal language. It allows us to form deep bonds and realize the stalwartness of our humanity even when we do not share the same cultures or languages. Thank you for this experience!! I end this summary with another quote by Leonard Bernstein: "Music can name the unnameable, and communicate the unknowable."

Lisa Eckstein
2017 Costa Rica International Teaching Scholar
George Mason University DMA in Conducting Student