

# Starting with Strings

by Georgina Barnes



*There is a big and beautiful sound in Otara, Auckland, and it's being made by an orchestra of children. The orchestra is called Sistema Aotearoa.*

## Joining the Orchestra

To join Sistema Aotearoa, you have to be a student at a primary school in Otara. Tutors from the orchestra go to the schools and work with the six-year-old students. Then, if a student wants to join Sistema Aotearoa, they and their family must agree that they will go to orchestra practice three times a week. The practices are held at OMAC (Otara Music Arts Centre).

The orchestra always practises as a group. The students are told "You have two ears – one to hear yourself and one to listen to the person next to you." The students play their instruments by themselves only when they are practising at home.

## Which Instrument?

When a student joins Sistema Aotearoa, they get the chance to play a stringed instrument. The tutors watch and listen carefully to decide which instrument suits each student best. The tutors might notice that one student holds the cello well or that another student makes a good sound with the violin.

The first instrument a student gets is one they make themselves out of cardboard or light wood. They play it with a pretend bow, which is also made from wood. This is known as a whisper instrument because it "whispers" as it's played. It's not as easy to break as a real instrument, so students can practise holding it and looking after it. They can also take the instrument home to show their family, and everyone can have a turn at playing it. Once they have proven that they can use the whisper instrument and look after it, students move on to a real instrument.





Each student must pass the “instrument test” before they can take a real stringed instrument home. They must be able to:

- take the instrument out of its case carefully
- loosen and tighten the bow (which is made of horse hair)
- rub the bow with a special wax called rosin
- show their tutors that they know how to practise their tunes by themselves.

The students also need to think about when and where they will practise their instrument and where they can safely keep it at home.

When Sistema Aotearoa started in 2011, the students played only violins and cellos. Now some of them are big enough to play woodwind and brass instruments. Some of the students play percussion instruments too. Everybody learns how to read music so they know the right notes to play.

## *Instruments of the Orchestra*

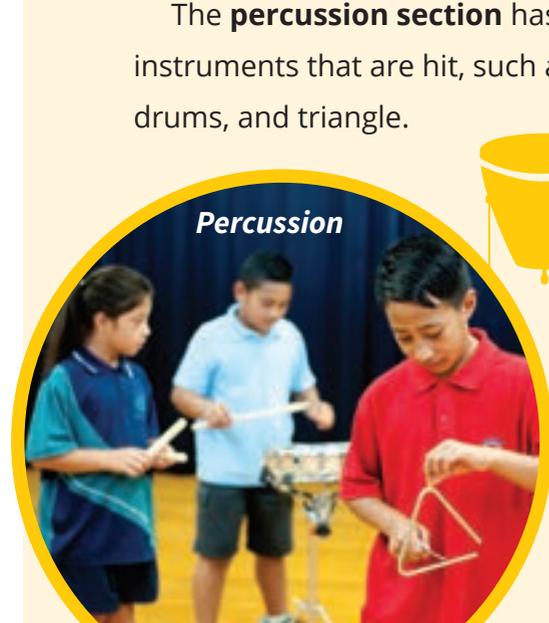
Orchestras are made up of four groups of instruments. These groups are called sections.

The **string section** has the instruments with strings, such as the violin, viola, cello, double bass, and harp.

The **brass section** has the instruments made of brass, such as the trumpet, trombone, French horn, cornet, and tuba.

The **woodwind section** has the instruments that were once made from wood, including the flute, clarinet, oboe, bassoon, and saxophone. (These days, some parts of these instruments are made from other materials, such as plastic or metal.)

The **percussion section** has the instruments that are hit, such as the claves, drums, and triangle.



## Tutti Means Together

When you are part of an orchestra, you can't just play music whenever you want to. You have to watch the conductor. The conductor tells the orchestra who will play, when they will play, and how they will play. The conductor of the Sistema Orchestra often uses body language to show the students what she wants them to do.



*“When the conductor looks around at all the sections of the orchestra and spreads her arms wide, it means ‘tutti’, so everyone has to play. When we do, the sound is really exciting. It feels amazing to be part of it.”*



*“If the conductor looks at my section and her fingers dance and point in time to the music, she wants all the cellos to join in.”*

*“Sometimes the conductor makes really big movements. This means ‘forte’ or loud. We all have to play really loudly with a big tone.”*



## Bringing the Community Together

Sistema students love to share music with their community, and the orchestra often plays in the Otara town square. The musicians also have to be ready to travel. They've played all around Auckland, including in the Town Hall and at Government House. The orchestra has even played in Hamilton. All the students get the chance to play in a concert.

## More Than Music

Sistema students aren't only learning how to play their instruments and make beautiful music. They're also becoming more confident, learning how to work well with others, and gaining new skills that will help throughout their lives. And they're having fun at the same time!



*"I was nervous about passing the instrument test to be allowed to take my violin home. Now I know how to look after my violin and how to play it."*



*"My son is way more confident than I was at his age. It amazes me to see him play in front of so many people."*



*"I love Sistema because I have fun with my friends."*



*"One day, I want to play the cello in another country."*



*"I have to listen to the other people round me. We have to work together."*



*"I'm the first person in my family to play the violin."*



*"My children are learning more than just music – they're learning to be responsible and to be part of a team."*

## Still Growing

The idea for Sistema Aotearoa came from an orchestra called El Sistema, which began in 1975 in Venezuela, South America. The man who started El Sistema was called José Abreu. He believed that everyone should be able to enjoy music and art. Now Sistema Aotearoa is showing people around New Zealand how to start orchestras in their own communities.

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photographs by Adrian Heke

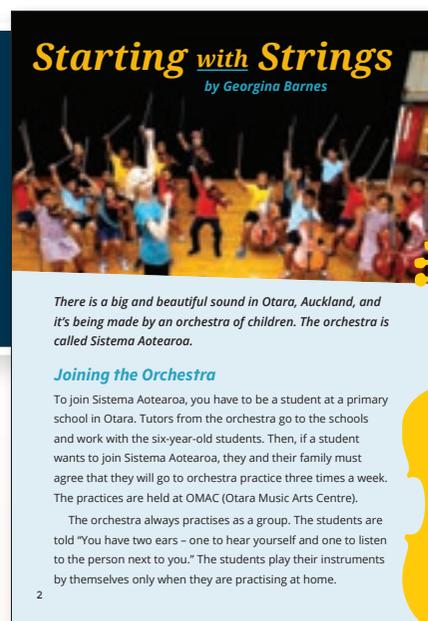
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PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.  
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ISBN 978 0 478 16324 7 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū  
Editor: David Chadwick  
Designer: Liz Tui Morris  
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop  
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione



## SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 2, AUGUST 2015

<b>Curriculum learning area</b>	English The Arts: Music – Sound Arts
<b>Reading year level</b>	Year 4
<b>Keywords</b>	instruments, music, orchestra, Sistema