

# FUKUSHIMA DESK NEWS

Sendai Diocese Support Center

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## *Music Education “El Sistema” in Soma Children to Regain the Power to Live*

This is the story of the city of Soma, situated on the sea shore in Fukushima Prefecture. It is a historical city populated with 36,000 people. After the Great Earthquake, all the ten elementary schools and two junior high schools in this city adopted the “El Sistema” music program for the brass bands, violin lessons and chorus. All of these formed Soma Children’s Orchestra.



For the El Sistema activities, annual evaluation from the outside has become a regular practice. The result of the evaluation shows a higher rate than the national average, e.g. “More opportunities of communication with friends and parents” ; “Satisfaction with the area of their residence.” This result is considered to be a successful element of the activities in the post atomic accident in Fukushima.

The program named El Sistema started 41 years ago in Venezuela, South America. This system enables all the children to receive free music education collectively, regardless of the economic situation of the families. There they learn cooperation and discipline; and while



developing a positive attitude as the objective, they aim at growing in hope and pride. This also serves as the protection of children from crimes and violence. At present more than sixty countries and/or areas in the world enjoy the practice of this method for adapting to cultural background and needs.



In Japan, El Sistema Japan was established in March, 2012, and started to help the children of the disaster areas. In April of the same year, a specialist in violin was sent to the instrumental music department of the First Nakamura Elementary School, Soma City. The department of instrumental music at the First Nakamura Elementary School has a history of 60 years, with a record of often being No. 1 in string orchestra. The school had been declining with the deteriorating condition of the violins due to the absence of a professional teacher, and the whole situation was exposed

to the fatal damage of the Earthquake disaster. The activity of the El Sistema Japan, which started with helping out club activities, brought back pride to the local people. Thus we have a unique realization in Japan.

What the El Sistema stresses is : “Every child should be able to participate without any charge”, “Playing together makes one aim at higher art”, “Peer learning, i.e. teaching each other and learning from each other, cultivates a sense of unity and team work”, “It creates a comfortable place for each member”, “Building local communities through children and their parents.” In the beginning it was only the First Nakamura Elementary School, but in the following year the regular week end classes of string music were started. In 2015, the First El Sistema Children’s Music Festival was held under the auspices of the El Sistema and the City of Soma in the big hall of Soma City which has been rebuilt.

This style being “Established by a Private Organization and Consolidated by the Government” became a more certain entity in May 2012, when the City of Soma and El Sistema concluded a formal contract of cooperation. The activity is now under the ownership of the local government, therefore a sustainable establishment. It is no more a small private group but is an independent activity well organized by the local residents, therefore easily known to the people of the area. Furthermore, this music class gives hope not only to the members of the music class and their parents, but is now developing into a joyful life giving activity for the residents of Soma and interested visitors.

There was a teacher who had a private violin class for children in Odaka-ku, Minami Soma. (See the photo.) This teacher encountered the El Sistema while staying at Soma to evade the Tsunami danger, and started to help out with the weekend violin classes. “This is my second career, which





keeps me going,” she says. “I can do one more pull, for these little ones. Now I am giving 130% of my energy every day.” An old man who sells musical instruments said, “All my life I have been dealing with musical instruments. At this age, I feel I am coming to the summit of my life as I can help fixing violins for these children.” The citizens of Soma, hearing this orchestra play the Bon Festival Song of Soma, praised North Japan!”“Now we have the next generation to succeed our drums!”

In March, 2016, the dream of the children of Soma to play their music in Europe was materialized. They travelled to Berlin, and manifested the cheerfulness of Fukushima at the Berlin Philharmoniker’s chamber music hall, St. Thomas Church, Japan-Germany Center of Berlin, etc. The children felt they were able to express their gratitude and love as they manifested their sincere attitude in the performance. The encouraging advice and donations are still arriving from time to time, to the joy of the children.

(See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD\\_EGXiRi3Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD_EGXiRi3Q))



To support Soma Children’s Orchestra and Chorus, there are such means as “Wind Instruments Instruction Volunteers” (\*1), Program of Donating Musical Instruments of Children’s Size(\*2), and donations through the Tax Bureau of Soma City. Also, please check the home page of El Sistema Japan or Soma city,



\*1: Those who volunteer to teach wind instruments commute to Soma. The lady who is teaching in the photo to your left commutes from Tokyo.

\*2: They need more children’s size instruments: Violins and violoncellos of 1/16, 1/8, 1/4 and 1/2 are still needed. If any of the readers have un-used instruments of your children at home, they will be happy to receive them. Second hand instruments are very welcome.

The photos used in the present issue were by the courtesy of El Sistema Japan Home Page.