



On the first day of programming at the Beckmen YOLA Center, students in kindergarten through fifth grade attended classes with teaching artists.

Home, Sweet Home

YOLA's new Inglewood headquarters is designed by starchitect Frank Gehry, but it represents something beyond bricks and mortar: a solid commitment to free music-making for young people in an underserved neighborhood. And the building is the tip of the architectural iceberg, as music education—and permanent homes for youth orchestras and communities—is increasingly important.

By Jim Farber

On October 16, 2021, a small but enthusiastic crowd of student musicians, civic officials, parents, and members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic gathered in front of a former bank building at 101 South La Brea Avenue in the City of Inglewood in Los Angeles County. They were there for the ceremonial ribbon-cutting that would inaugurate the 25,000-square-foot Judith and Thomas L. Beckmen YOLA Center. And while YOLA—the Youth Orchestra Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's free community-based music education program—has been in operation

since 2007 on four other campuses in LA, the newly opened YOLA Center in Inglewood represents the program's first permanent home.

Designed by architect Frank Gehry and acoustician Dr. Yasuhisa Toyota, the center is anchored by 250-seat Edgerton Foundation Performance Hall, designed to be the same dimensions and caliber of the LA Phil's Walt Disney Concert Hall stage. The YOLA hall can be converted into two smaller multi-purpose rehearsal spaces; in performance mode, retractable risers can provide theater-style seating. The building



houses offices, multiple rehearsal spaces, and a small practice studio with recording capabilities that YOLA students can use when they audition for high school and college. Built-in fiber-optic cables support distance learning and video-conferencing programs for remote musical collaboration. The building also has a lounge for parents and family members to hang out in during YOLA hours. Floor-to-ceiling windows in the lobby offer open views of the building's activities to the neighborhood.

As part of the opening festivities—delayed a couple of months due to last summer's COVID surge—YOLA students and their LA Philharmonic mentor/musicians performed Gordon Jacob's *The Canterbury Flourish*, a fanfare, and *Made By* and *For the Future* by Yoni Fogelman, a member of the LA Philharmonic's Composer Fellowship Program, led by Philharmonic Music Director Gustavo Dudamel. A succession of speakers praised the new center, including Dudamel, the man most responsible for YOLA's inception, and CEO Chad Smith, who played a

major role in coordinating the project. But it was, perhaps, architect Frank Gehry, whose firm oversaw the \$23.5 million redesign and repurposing of the building, who put it best: "To the kids of Inglewood, I say, *let it rip!*" This is your building, and I hope you use every inch of it to experiment and further your creative explorations. It was a joy for me to make it, and I hope it is a joy for you to use it!" Following the ribbon-cutting, there were tours of the facility and the YOLA percussion ensemble performed in the center's acoustically bright performance hall.

Also on hand at the center's fall opening was Inglewood Mayor James T. Butts Jr., whose administration has played a principal role in the city's renaissance. The City of Inglewood, in southwestern Los Angeles County, has recently emerged as a sports and entertainment center for Los Angeles County. YOLA musicians performed at this year's Super Bowl, which took place less than two miles from the new Beckmen Center, at the dazzling new SoFi Stadium. A new indoor arena for the LA Clippers is also

under construction in Inglewood. When we spoke this winter, Butts explained that in 2017 Inglewood found itself burdened with an empty 100,000-square-foot former Security Bank building, right in the middle of its downtown business district. At the same time, the Los Angeles Philharmonic was looking for a site that could become the first permanent home for YOLA. It was a perfect match. The Philharmonic purchased the property for \$5.65 million. Then, propelled by a \$14.5 million dollar donation from Judith and Thomas Beckmen, the vision of Frank Gehry and Associates was brought into play, leading to the creation of the center. The Beckmen Center joins four existing YOLA sites—in South LA, the Rampart District, Westlake/MacArthur Park, and East LA—which together serve students from more than 200 schools in LA County.

Located less than four miles northeast of LAX in southwest Los Angeles County, the city of Inglewood is a diverse neighborhood that is developing into one of LA County's hottest neighborhoods, with multiple



Students in class with a teaching artist at the Beckmen YOLA Center in Inglewood, Los Angeles.



Students in the Los Angeles Philharmonic's YOLA (Youth Orchestra Los Angeles) program perform outside the newly opened Beckmen YOLA Center, October 2021.



At the ribbon-cutting on the Beckmen YOLA Center's opening day (left to right): architect Frank Gehry, Los Angeles Philharmonic Music and Artistic Director Gustavo Dudamel, Inglewood Mayor James T. Butts Jr., a YOLA student, and LA Phil CEO Chad Smith.



Architect Frank Gehry speaks with Gustavo Dudamel during opening ceremonies of the new Beckmen YOLA Center in Inglewood, California, October 2021.

sports and entertainment facilities under construction or just completed—and now, the Beckmen Center. The neighborhood until recently had been in financial decline and associated with gang violence and poverty. Inglewood was a place you went to see the Lakers play or attend a rock concert at The Forum, put money down at the Hollywood Park Race Track and Casino. You did not consider staying. The attitude toward Inglewood has changed completely, making it the most happening area in greater Los Angeles, especially with the opening of SoFi Stadium, where the Rams won this year's Super Bowl. Financed by Los Angeles Rams owner Stan Kroenke, the stadium reportedly cost more than \$5 billion to build—a price not without ironies in an area suffering from long neglect. Amid all these giant arenas, YOLA's presence as a nonprofit that is free represents a meaningful commitment to the Inglewood community.

“YOLA connects children from every background with some of the greatest musicians in the world, the members of the LA Phil,” says Mayor Butts. “That’s a game-changer in the level of commitment. Let me explain it in terms of sports. There are a lot of cities and parks that provide tennis instruction. In Inglewood, we subsidize a non-profit program called ‘40 Love’ that employs exclusively Black former Olympic competitors in tennis. Our youth play in tournaments at country clubs. They compete against the best. There are programs, and there are *programs*. YOLA is a *program!*”

To be clear, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Gustavo Dudamel are not the only ones making a commitment to free music education for children who otherwise would not have the opportunity to participate. The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra has its OrchKids program,

founded in 2008 by Music Director Marin Alsop, now offered to students at nine Baltimore City schools. Charles Dickerson founded the Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (ICYOLA) in 2008 and, in an impressive feat of cross-country synergy, he added a second initiative, the South Side Chicago Youth Orchestra, in 2019. (People nationwide got to know the Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles when its young musicians performed during a nationally televised NFL awards ceremony three days before this year's Super Bowl.) In January 2022, the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra announced that it is constructing a new music center set to open in 2023; a major impetus for building the space is to expand music education programs. In February, the Knox-Galesburg Symphony in Illinois announced that it is renovating a former Farm Bureau Building, also with a goal of



The Wisconsin Youth Symphony is building a new music center in Madison, expected to open in 2023, with a design inspired by the curves of a cello.



Courtesy, Cargo Films

Young musicians in the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's OrchKids program are featured in *The Conductor*, a new documentary about conductor Marin Alsop, who founded the program in Baltimore in 2008.



In January 2022, the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra announced that it is constructing a new music center; the space allows the orchestra to expand its music education programs. The Stella Boyle Smith Music Center is set to open in 2023.



Inner City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (ICYOLA) and Charles Dickerson perform at Walt Disney Concert Hall in in 2018. ICYOLA is one of many programs around the country focusing on free music education for children who otherwise would not have access to it. In 2019, Dickerson added a second initiative, the South Side Chicago Youth Orchestra.

expanding music education. Increasingly, music education is a critical part of the work orchestras are doing in their communities—and the mini-burst of new buildings dedicated to these endeavors is an encouraging sign of ongoing investment in that work in many places.

Still, with its multi-year embrace of YOLA and now the Beckmen Center, the Los Angeles Philharmonic has made a statement with this very visible commitment to YOLA and to the Inglewood community. As a conductor already a superstar in his twenties, Dudamel could have chosen any number of paths. But it's music education that has remained a consistent focus for him, and for the LA Phil. It's not quite true, as some have said, that Dudamel's decision to go to Los Angeles from his native Venezuela hinged on a promise to create a Los Angeles incarnation of El Sistema, the free, longstanding music

education system in which he was raised, but it certainly was a factor. Former LA Phil CEO Deborah Borda remembers traveling to Venezuela to recruit Dudamel as music director, and learning more about El Sistema and meeting its founder, José Antonio Abreu. "It was so inspirational to see these young performers and to watch Gustavo working with them," she recalls. "One of the things that Maestro Abreu explained that really turned my head, was that we wouldn't have to make YOLA exactly like El Sistema in Venezuela. For the program to thrive, he told me, it has to be developed and tailor-made for each country, community, or city. There are, however, basic aspects that have to be applied such as: starting children when they're very young, closely involving the families, getting kids to teach other kids, and sometimes putting them into orchestras with players that are much better than they are."



In February, the Knox-Galesburg Symphony in Illinois announced that it is renovating a former Farm Bureau Building, with a goal of expanding music education.



Inglewood, California Mayor **James T. Butts Jr.** (left, with LA Phil Music and Artistic Director Gustavo Dudamel at the new Beckmen YOLA Center) says, "For Inglewood, YOLA is a long-term commitment. It's part of the brand of the city now, and it's brought a whole new energy."



Beckmen YOLA Center director **Camille Delaney-McNeil** says, "We all want YOLA to be a model and a resource center for other organizations. At the same time, we have the potential to grow deep roots right here in the community of Inglewood."



YOLA saxophone teacher **Albert "Poncho" Williams**, a longtime resident of Inglewood, California, says, "We're committed to the well-being of these children and how that will manifest into positive community growth."

Borda (who stepped down from the LA Phil to become president and CEO of the New York Philharmonic in 2017) says that she had to convince the LA Phil board to sign on to creating YOLA in 2007. "When we initially proposed it, they turned it down," she says. "They were more concerned with dollars-and-cents than the unique aspects of the program. To their credit, when we presented a revised proposal a few months later, emphasizing how YOLA could be financially supported and provide a way for the Philharmonic to really integrate itself with the community, they came on board. In the beginning I think everyone, including the orchestra, was nervous. Today they'll tell you YOLA is one of the programs they're most proud of."

On the eve of the center's official opening in October, Dudamel told *Spectrum News 1* in Los Angeles that this moment represented a culmination: "For these young people," he said, "they will go to a new place that is full of beauty and possibilities. I believe that in this place they will build not only their future, but the future of their community through culture. That is something that is very important. It's about identity.... After all these complex times, this tragedy, to get together and bring better possibilities and better spaces for our children is the best way to celebrate them." Just before the official ceremony in October, Chad

Smith told the crowd that on September 30, 130 students attended their first classes at the Beckmen YOLA Center. "I'm proud to say," Smith added with a nod to Inglewood's Mayor, "80 percent of the incoming class are residents of Inglewood."

Increasingly, music education is a critical part of the work orchestras are doing in their communities. A burst of new and renovated buildings to house these programs demonstrates ongoing investment.

School's Open

Camille Delaney-McNeil joined the LA Phil last spring as the first director of the Beckmen YOLA Center. A classically trained singer and flutist who previously administered the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's OrchKids program, she is also a board member of El Sistema USA, which supports a nationwide alliance of El Sistema-inspired organizations. Since assuming her current post, Delaney-McNeil has dealt with meeting and working with faculty and students in a new building—all while confronting the elaborate protocols and health issues raised by the pandemic. "The school could not have picked a more challenging time to open," she says. "We have been making every effort to continue offering

live classes even as the protocols seem to change every week. We currently have a faculty of 15 teaching artists and a student body of 140. Our original goal was to have 160 students, but COVID made us limit that number. Someday, when the pandemic is no longer a problem, we would like the total enrollment for

all five centers to be about 500." She points out with pride that the school was able to present two "Winter Showcase" concerts in mid-December, and at press time intensive rehearsals were underway for a spring showcase.

Delaney-McNeil emphasizes "how important a role the LA Phil and YOLA can play in the field of community involvement. We all want YOLA to be a model that can serve as an example and a resource center for other national and international organizations. If we can bring other organizations on board, YOLA can be the genesis for how we inspire and mobilize the field. We want this to be a hub and a laboratory that sparks new conversations for the music education community at large. We also want it to be the place where people can come and try out new ways of thinking. At the same time, we have the potential to grow deep roots right here in the community of Inglewood."

This winter during the Omicron surge, I spoke by phone with Sophia Grant, an Inglewood resident and fifth-grade student at St. John Chrysostom



The Grant Family

Fifth-grader **Sophia Grant**, a first-year YOLA student and Inglewood resident, says, "I signed up in August, and I've had great experiences. I've made a lot of new friends. My homeroom for my first semester was percussion, and I learned how to play the marimba. But my instrument is the trumpet. I think I would really like to have a career in music."

School who is in her first year as a YOLA student. Her instrument of choice, she says, is the trumpet. "I came to be involved with YOLA through my family and friends," she explains. "I signed up in August, and I've had great experiences. I've made a lot of new friends. My homeroom for my first semester was percussion, and I learned how to play the marimba. But my instrument is the trumpet. I think I would really like to have a career in music."

While steering students toward a career in music is admirable, Delaney-McNeil points out, it is not a primary YOLA objective. "It's great that Sophia would like to become a musician," she explains. "But that's not necessarily our goal. What we expect from our students is a commitment, both from them and their parents. If they are willing to dedicate themselves and put in the necessary time, they're welcome. It's the experience of making music and having the opportunity to work with remarkable teachers that's the real takeaway."

Delaney-McNeil says the response to this year's YOLA program from the Inglewood community has been strong. "When we had our first open enrollment, 396 families showed interest for about 160 slots. If I could use the image of a pillar to describe our structure, our students and their families are the pillar that YOLA is built on. That level of social consciousness also carries over into how we treat our alumni and our graduating

high school students. We help them with building resumes and applying to college. Our goal is to address the whole child."

Civic Pride

YOLA saxophone teacher Albert "Poncho" Williams comes to the organization by way of his 20 years as a resident of Inglewood. Delaney-McNeil credits Williams, one of the Center's original faculty members, with laying the foundation for all the woodwind classes and playing a critical role in establishing the Center's learning infrastructure. As a military veteran (who performed in the Army's music division), and a veteran of the Los Angeles public school system, Williams says, "I'm used to adversity. I taught at a school where we couldn't even afford to buy horns. We had to figure out how to raise the money ourselves to buy instruments. When I was teaching in middle school and high school, you would invariably end up with students in your classes that were there simply because they couldn't get any other elective. The students at YOLA are here because they dig music. We all share a common goal. We're committed to the well-being of these children and how that will manifest into positive community growth."

"When I first began working here," Williams says, "I remember being at a gas station, and I had on a YOLA mask. The local mailman recognized me and said the whole neighborhood had heard about me teaching at YOLA. 'We are so excited,' he told me. 'That Center has brought a whole new energy to Inglewood.'"

Timing also played a critical role in the creation of the Beckmen YOLA Center. Just ask Inglewood's three-term mayor, James T. Butts Jr. At the time he was first elected in 2011, the city was mired in debt. Since then, Inglewood has emerged as a Los Angeles success story, climaxing this past February with the hometown Los Angeles Rams playing the Cincinnati Bengals in Super Bowl LVI beneath the vast, glowing dome of Inglewood's SoFi Stadium. And as a further celebration of the city, the Super Bowl pre-game ceremonies featured the contemporary gospel duo MARY MARY, accompanied by the student musicians of YOLA performing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," conducted by Thomas Wilkins, principal conductor of the Los

Angeles Philharmonic's Hollywood Bowl Orchestra.

Mayor Butts says, "Our goal was not just to create an environment in Inglewood that would attract people from outside the city to places like the renovated Forum and SoFi Stadium. We want to build a city that could be an incubator for employment and for our youth. We wanted to add a cultural component as part of the overall mosaic, and our interests coincided perfectly with the goals of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. For Inglewood, YOLA is a long-term commitment. It's part of the brand of the city now, and it's brought a whole new energy. People used to say, no one's going to come to Inglewood. There's too much crime, it's too dangerous. There are gangs, poverty, yada, yada, yada. No one is saying that now!" **S**

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