

El Sistema: From Venezuela to the USA and Beyond

by

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Introduction

El Sistema was born in Venezuela in 1975, the brainchild of musician and economist, Dr. José Abreu (who earned a PhD in Petroleum Economics at the University of Pennsylvania after musical studies). Within two years of its first session in an abandoned parking garage, Abreu's successful musical initiative was rewarded by the full financial backing of the Venezuelan government. For over three decades, Abreu has deftly led El Sistema through the political minefields of ten different administrations. What began with eleven children now serves between three and four hundred thousand young people in a network of approximately three hundred orchestras and choruses.

The noted conductor, Sir Simon Rattle, has said that El Sistema “is the most important thing happening in classical music.” While this statement may well be true, El Sistema exists less to produce world-class musicians than to produce world-class citizens. Its goal is to rescue and rehabilitate the nation's poorest youth and preclude criminal activity among them. To Abreu, an orchestra is the microcosm of an ideal society. The ingredients that constitute good citizenship—personal discipline and collaboration with others—are practiced by ensemble musicians. (Perhaps we should elect violinists to congress.) Abreu has said, “An orchestra is a community where the essential and exclusive feature is that it is the only community that comes together with the fundamental objective of agreeing with itself. Therefore the person who plays in an orchestra begins to live the experience of agreement.” It is telling to note that governmental supervision was initially provided, not by the Ministry of Culture where it currently resides, but by the ministry concerned with social services.

Gustavo Dudamel is the 30-year-old poster boy for all that is achievable through El Sistema. Dudamel is simultaneously the director of three world-class orchestras on three different continents, not the least of which is the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. Dudamel has said, “I studied music since I was four years old, and from that moment I became part of a family. And that family has taught me things; not only musical things, but things I have to face in life, and that is where the success of the system lies.” Throughout El Sistema's birth country, a uniform methodology is employed to train children, progressing from simple singing and the of playing pretend instruments to electrifying performances of symphonic literature. The considerable success of El Sistema has captured international attention. El Sistema-inspired programs have been established in several countries, most notably Scotland, England, and the United States. Each adopting culture has its own unique challenges, but the results of these nascent programs have been promising.

El Sistema—Venezuela

How did sports-mad Venezuela, a country with only two orchestras, give rise to El Sistema?

The maxim that “necessity is the mother of invention” goes a long way to explain the conception and ontogeny of a program issuing hope to innumerable youth around the globe. Venezuela is notorious for crime and poverty. Caracas, El Sistema's hometown, suffers the highest murder and gun violence rates in any non-war-zone in the world. These dangerous conditions are exacerbated by the disparity between a poor majority and an oil-wealthy minority. It is estimated that 70 to 90% of El Sistema's children live in poverty. Of these, 60% were at risk of dropping out of school, were outside of the educational system, or were victims of family violence or social neglect prior to participating in the System.

While not promising to cure all of his nation's ills, Maestro Abreu believes that music can inhibit many of them. El Sistema's motto is “Tocar y Luchar,” “to play and to fight.” Abreu explains: “‘To play and to fight’ means undertaking music as a collective experience that also involves individual effort; it entails a relentless pursuit of excellence; and, above all, it means persevering until dreams become reality.”

Abreu's organizing genius grew organically from his experiences as a young musician in the 1950s and '60s. That was a lonely time for young Venezuelan classical musicians. Students studied alone, practiced alone, and had no opportunities to perform. Abreu recalls, “I assembled some kids to play together, which is what we all wanted to do. We rehearsed anywhere we could—sometimes in an ice-cream shop when the owner would give us permission, sometimes in someone's house. And we would play anything, whatever music we could get our hands on.” Abreu also fondly remembers music teachers who encouraged his efforts and provided instruction without charge.

In 1975 Abreu attempted to organize a youth orchestra, the seminal act of what was to grow into El Sistema. “I called many young music students to come to a rehearsal in the garage,” Abreu reminisces, “but only eleven showed up. It was a disheartening prospect. And I knew that this was a moment of truth: either something momentous had to happen, or it was over. I said this to the eleven

students. I told them this could be a historic moment. And I asked them to come with me on this journey. Twenty-five young music students came the next day. The day after that, there were forty-six . . . within a month we had seventy-five young musicians.”

Before Abreu's orchestra celebrated its first birthday, Abreu made the audacious decision to take his musicians to the International Festival of Youth Orchestras in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1976. The Venezuelan organization took the festival by storm, stunning and outperforming finely groomed youth from Europe, Asia, and North America. The newly-minted international recognition was the ticket Abreu needed to persuade the Venezuelan government to assume responsibility for his orchestra.

Abreu credits a childhood teacher for two principles that led to early successes and still guide El Sistema today: The first is that students teach and coach each other, and the second is the need for frequent public performances to provide goals, enhance confidence, and motivate ensembles to remain together.

Today El Sistema's annual cost is approximately \$120 million U.S. dollars, primarily supplied by the Chavez government, though there are additional contributors, including China and Japan who have recently given instruments. Is El Sistema worth this hefty price tag? Yes, claims the Inter-American Development Bank. Prior to granting a loan in 2007, the IDB conducted a study of 2 million young people who had been educated in El Sistema. This research verified that El Sistema has improved school attendance and reduced juvenile delinquency. The bank calculated that every dollar invested in El Sistema was earning about \$1.68 in social dividends.

At a more philosophical level, Dr. Abreu observes that, “The huge spiritual world that music produces in itself, ends up overcoming material poverty. From the minute a child’s taught how to play an instrument, he’s no longer poor. He becomes a child in progress, heading for a professional level, who’ll later become a citizen.” It must be noted that El Sistema no longer consists exclusively of children in poverty. The affluent, noting the program's success, now also send their children. El Sistema, however, is vigilant about staying true to its purpose as a lifeline to the disadvantaged.

El Sistema is organized into 180 núcleos where children as young as 4 receive instruction. Students attend the núcleo 2 to 4 hours a day, 6 days a week and more during school vacations. The núcleos feed a network of 300 children's, regional, and national orchestras. (The official Venezuelan website clarifies that choral singing and other ensembles are of equal importance.) As generous as the Venezuelan government has been, Chavez is determined to triple the funding, increase participants to one million, and move the program into the school day.

Methodology

The El Sistema methodology consists of eight distinctive components, following the philosophy, “passion first, refinement second.”:

1st Learning Sequence—Preschool children begin with body movement and rhythm. At age 5, the children join a choir and learn to play the recorder or a percussion instrument. 7-year-old children choose their first wind or string instrument.

2nd Instruction—Recognizing that notational literacy takes many years to achieve, students often focus on playing single notes within group songs. Many great works from the symphonic canon have been arranged for students at every ability level. By the time a student is presented with an authentic work as written by the composer, such as the *1812 Overture*, they already have a deep connection the music.

3rd Learning through Performing—Students play in front of audiences as much as possible. Performing becomes a natural part of their musical life and reduces performance anxiety. Peers often play for peers, inspiring greater achievement in each other.

4th The Environment—El Sistema provides a haven of safety, joy, and fun. Discipline is described as “relaxed but enforced.” Participants are treated in such a way that they know they are valued. As Dudamel expresses it, “every child is made to feel that they are an asset.”

5th Teachers—Most of the teachers are former students of the program. They are thoroughly steeped in the mission and methodology of El Sistema. They also are very proactive in their communication with parents, often making home visits.

6th Curriculum—An established national curriculum is utilized, allowing for some local adaptation. Compositions are introduced according to a specified sequence, including the previously mentioned simplified arrangements of large symphonic works. We have lived our entire lives inside these pieces,” says Dudamel. “When we play Beethoven's Fifth, it is the most important thing happening in the world.”

7th Music—El Sistema introduces its students to classical compositions from Europe and the Americas, as well as Venezuelan folk music. Improvisation in native styles is likewise encouraged.

8th Work with Parents—Teachers visit the parents of children as young as 2 or 3 to explain El Sistema and the considerable commitment expected. Once a child enters a regional or national orchestra, the parents receive a stipend to honor the child's achievement and to prevent them from pulling their child out of El Sistema and sending him or her to work.

In order to supply a considerable number of instruments to the students, Abreu wisely imported European instrument makers to train Venezuelans in the art of building and repairing instruments. This industry now mainly employs people who themselves were educated by El Sistema.

Another laudable aspect of El Sistema is the growing network of teachers and núcleos that not only integrate children with special needs, but help them excel. 80 teachers serve 1,800 special-needs children in 19 núcleos. Under the pioneering work of Jhonny Gómez, El Sistema has developed effective ways to find a meaningful place for children who are blind, autistic, deaf, and mentally handicapped. El Sistema is equipped to transcribe music and books into braille for the visually impaired—the population Mr. Gómez finds the easiest to integrate. The deaf, he believed, would be the most difficult to accommodate, that was until he brilliantly devised the White Hands Chorus. The

White Hands Chorus is a double choir of white-gloved children, half of them deaf, who use hand motions to interpret the music sung by the hearing choristers. Jhonny Gómez says that “if Beethoven were alive today, he would write for the White Hands Chorus.”

El Sistema has spawned many compelling personal stories. I wish to paraphrase one recorded in Tricia Tunstall’s newly published book, “Changing Lives:”

The face of Lennar Acosta bears scars from when he lived on the streets at the age of twelve, engaging in knife fights. Running afoul with the law, he was detained at the Los Chorros facility for juvenile delinquents. Eventually the Los Chorros facility and its residents were turned over to El Sistema to form a núcleo. Given the clientele, teachers were afraid to go there; however, Abreu succeeded in persuading members of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra to teach the delinquents. A clarinet was placed in the hands of the surprised Acosta. Within a year of playing, he auditioned for and won a place in the Simón Bolívar Orchestra. Next, El Sistema offered him a scholarship to learn the craft of organ building in Germany. Following his apprenticeship in Bonn, he returned to help build an organ for a new El Sistema concert hall. Then he received a phone call from Maestro Abreu telling him that he must take over as director of the Los Chorros núcleo from whence he came—the place he had been sent to be punished. Acosta expressed reservations about his ability to assume the post, but Abreu told him, “you can do it. They need you there.” Under Acosta's leadership, Los Chorros has grown from 300 students to 1,100. “Music was my salvation. Completely,” says Acosta.

El Sistema—United States of America

The success of El Sistema has garnered international attention. Music educators in the United States are keenly interested in adopting and adapting El Sistema. El Sistema USA was officially established in 2009 in partnership with the New England Conservatory and with the blessing of El Sistema Venezuela. The National Steering Committee consists of an impressive list of representatives from major orchestras and educational institutions engaged in promoting El Sistema. The movement, nevertheless, is loosely organized. Though the New England Conservatory claims that there are presently 40 nucleos in the United States, it appears to me that some of the programs listed on the official website are only nominally inspired by El Sistema.

Each country has a unique set of challenges when seeking to adopt El Sistema. In the United States I believe that there are principally three layers of obstacles: music's educational value is underappreciated; costly financing is difficult to obtain; and North American children, even the most impoverished, have many distractions competing for their attention.

A 2005 UNESCO-sponsored study revealed that elementary children in the United States receive less education in the arts than children in any other developed country. This, despite a growing body of studies testifying to the beneficial effects of music education on academic and intellectual development. (See appendix for a summary of important studies and articles.)

In regard to funding, where Venezuela has made an annual commitment of \$120 million for El Sistema, the 2010 U. S. federal government budgeted a mere \$40 million for Arts in Education programs. The total arts allocation—including public broadcasting and museums—amounts to only 0.066% of the total federal budget. El Sistema USA was dealt a blow in January of 2011 when the New England Conservatory announced that it is reducing its commitment for financial reasons, therefore placing in jeopardy the training of Abreu Fellows.

The Abreu Fellows Program, endorsed by Abreu himself, equips postgraduate musicians and educators with the skills needed to promote and lead El Sistema USA. The Conservatory will continue to host this program through the 2015 graduation, after which the future is undetermined. On a brighter note, The Longy School of Music and Bard College announced in the fall of 2011, that they will jointly launch a master's degree program focused on training a new generation of teachers in the El Sistema philosophy.

From personal experience I am aware of the obstacles that prevent the meaningful involvement of disadvantaged American children in musical activities. In my position as a church music director, for ten years I've headed a program offering musical opportunities to children in downtown Fort Wayne. Irregular attendance due to a variety of circumstances compromises musical achievement. Children in poverty are often in transition, being shuttled between guardians or moving to a different home. There also exists the misguided idea that musical activities to be withdrawn as a punishment if a child falls behind in school, when in reality their academic performance would likely improve with disciplined musical study.

The most successful nuclei in the U.S. are sponsored by major city orchestras. The flagship nucleo, YOLA, the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles, is the outreach of the Los Angeles Philharmonic—the orchestra not surprisingly directed by Dudamel—and community partners. YOLA serves 500 mostly Hispanic children who come five days a week for group lessons, private lessons, and orchestra rehearsals. An early childhood component has been added, as well as a second program at a community center.

Dan Berkowitz, an Abreu Fellow and YOLA's manager, kindly answered my questions in preparation for this paper. When asked about YOLA's strengths, Mr. Berkowitz supplied a four-fold answer: students, parents, community, and teachers.

- Students—Venues are created for students to be teachers and leaders from their second day – therefore, building ownership of the program from a community level. Also, constant performance opportunities support the YOLA core of our philosophy of “performance as habit.”
- Parents—Parents are engaged in weekly workshops from musicianship to health. Parents perform a piece on recorder alongside their students during our concerts.
- Community—Each year YOLA has nearly 30 performances within the larger community.
- Teachers—A large investment in lead teachers has paid dividends. A solid teaching philosophy was established at the beginning which has led to a cohesive team. The teachers effectively model citizenship and collaboration, which positively affects the quality of experience for the community.

Mr. Berkowitz also points out some of the challenges that are unique to the US: Coordinating with schools is difficult because the school day is longer in the US and there is higher pressure on academic achievement. YOLA now offers academic tutoring in addition to musical training, but Mr. Berkowitz expressed frustration with academic tutors and parents who do not, in his words, “believe in the power of music to help with academics.”

Based upon other programs I contacted, I've observed that most are quite small with less than a dozen children, some do not meet more than once a week, and several are still in the planning stage. There are, however, some shining lights.

- Imagine Syracuse, New York, provides free after-school arts and enrichment to more than 150 children between the ages of 5 and 14 years old in the Near Westside neighborhood-- the 9th poorest census tract in the country.
- OrchKids, sponsored by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, involves 180 students at Lockerman Bundy Elementary School in bleak West Baltimore. The music activities occur not only after school, but remarkably *during* the school day.

- YOSA (Youth Orchestras of San Antonio) serves 1,500 children in partnership with Good Samaritan Community Services. The marriage of the music program to a social services agency uniquely enables them to support the whole child and the needs of their family.

Clearly the jury is still out on El Sistema USA, but the momentum is encouraging. The future depends largely on educating the public about the merits of music education and forging partnerships with organizations, businesses, and schools that believe the same and have resources to contribute.

El Sistema—Beyond

In November 1995, UNESCO appointed maestro José Antonio Abreu as a special delegate for the development of a world system of youth and children's orchestras and choirs, aiming at the promotion of the Venezuelan model across the world. More than 25 countries have music projects emulating El Sistema. In addition to South, Central, and North American countries, projects can be found in Italy, India, Portugal, and South Korea. The United Kingdom has set aside £332 million for a three-year pilot program targeting three impoverished areas.

The enormous success of El Sistema in Venezuela caused some in that country to wonder if similar results could be obtained by programs in other areas, such as sports and theater. Jesus Blanco, a well-respected Venezuelan musician, has conveyed that attempts to launch such projects did not meet with success and have been abandoned.

In 2007 El Sistema was extended to the penal system with the goal of humanizing jails through music. Of the prison population in Coro, Venezuela, the facility's governor has said, "We've seen a huge improvement in the inmates. From being some of the worst behaved inmates, we now have people who are among the best in this community with a clean record of conduct for more than two years." There is also evidence that El Sistema's benefits continue long after release from incarceration.

El Sistema—Conclusion

When I first embarked upon this quest, my cynical side refused to believe that El Sistema was the purported miracle many claimed. But for decades, the eyes of the world have been on El Sistema. Scores of noted educators, writers, and musicians have traveled to Venezuela to investigate this phenomenon. The sole negative criticism I could find exists in the blogosphere. Music critic Greg Sandow leveled a charge that El Sistema promoted only music by dead Europeans, neglecting native, contemporary, and improvisatory expressions. There is nothing factual in this accusation. Followers of Mr. Sandow's blog quickly assailed and refuted his assertions.

The incredibly supportive role of President Hugo Chavez is somewhat enigmatic. This authoritarian socialist—and no friend of the United States—has been uncharacteristically receptive to visits from representatives wishing to implement El Sistema in their own countries. I suspect that an enormous ego may be at the root of his hospitality and patronage. Thanks to El Sistema, Venezuela and Chavez enjoy a much improved international reputation. No doubt Chavez also sees El Sistema as a means to reduce criminal activities and a tool for controlling the people. However noble or tainted his motives, we cannot ignore the significant good wrought by El Sistema. Even in the worst case scenario, we must concede that El Sistema is the proverbial right thing even if for the wrong reason.

El Sistema is a remarkable gift to the world from one of the most unlikely countries, founded by José Antonio Abreu, a man of incomparable vision, tenacity, and eloquence. Countless lives, families, and communities have been saved in Venezuela. The replication of Venezuela's success in other countries is just beginning to be realized. The financial and societal challenges of introducing El Sistema to other cultures are immense, especially in our own country. However, after reciting a litany of reasons why I think El Sistema will struggle in the U.S., Lenelle Morse, Music Specialist at Canterbury School and my muse for this paper, responded, “that doesn't mean we shouldn't try!”

APPENDIX

Sampling of studies and articles testifying music's to the beneficial effects of music education on academic and intellectual development from www.childrensmusicworkshop.com

* A study of 237 second grade children used piano keyboard training and newly designed math software to demonstrate improvement in math skills. The group scored 27% higher on proportional math and fractions tests than children that used only the math software.

Graziano, Amy, Matthew Peterson, and Gordon Shaw, "Enhanced learning of proportional math through music training and spatial-temporal training." Neurological Research 21 (March 1999).

* In an analysis of U.S. Department of Education data on more than 25,000 secondary school students (NELS:88, National Education Longitudinal Survey), researchers found that students who report consistent high levels of involvement in instrumental music over the middle and high school years show "significantly higher levels of mathematics proficiency by grade 12." This observation holds regardless of students' socio-economic status, and differences in those who are involved with instrumental music vs. those who are not is more significant over time.

Catterall, James S., Richard Chapleau, and John Iwanaga. "Involvement in the Arts and Human Development: General Involvement and Intensive Involvement in Music and Theater Arts." Los Angeles, CA: The Imagination Project at UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, 1999.

* Students with coursework/experience in music performance and music appreciation scored higher on the SAT: students in music performance scored 57 points higher on the verbal and 41 points higher on the math, and students in music appreciation scored 63 points higher on verbal and 44 points higher on the math, than did students with no arts participation.

College-Bound Seniors National Report: Profile of SAT Program Test Takers. Princeton, NJ: The College Entrance Examination Board, 2001.

* Data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 showed that music participants received more academic honors and awards than non-music students, and that the percentage of music participants receiving As, As/Bs, and Bs was higher than the percentage of non- participants receiving those grades.

NELS:88 First Follow-up, 1990, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington DC

* Physician and biologist Lewis Thomas studied the undergraduate majors of medical school applicants. He found that 66% of music majors who applied to medical school were admitted, the highest percentage of any group. 44% of biochemistry majors were admitted.

As reported in "The Case for Music in the Schools," Phi Delta Kappan, February 1994

* In a study conducted by Dr. Timo Krings, pianists and non-musicians of the same age and sex were required to perform complex sequences of finger movements. Their brains were scanned using a technique called "functional magnetic resource imaging" (fMRI) which detects the activity levels of brain cells. The non-musicians were able to make the movements as correctly as the pianists, but less activity was detected in the pianists' brains. Thus, compared to non-musicians, the brains of pianists are more efficient at making skilled movements. These findings show that musical training can enhance brain function. Weinberger, Norm. "The Impact of Arts on Learning." *MuSICa Research Notes* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2000). Reporting on Krings, Timo et al. "Cortical Activation Patterns during Complex Motor Tasks in Piano Players and Control Subjects. A Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging Study." *Neuroscience Letters* 278, no. 3 (2000): 189-93.

* A research team exploring the link between music and intelligence reported that music training is far superior to computer instruction in dramatically enhancing children's abstract reasoning skills, the skills necessary for learning math and science. Shaw, Rauscher, Levine, Wright, Dennis and Newcomb, "Music training causes long-term enhancement of preschool children's spatial-temporal reasoning," *Neurological Research*, Vol. 19, February 1997

* A University of California (Irvine) study showed that after eight months of keyboard lessons, preschoolers showed a 46% boost in their spatial reasoning IQ. Rauscher, Shaw, Levine, Ky and Wright, "Music and Spatial Task Performance: A Causal Relationship," *University of California, Irvine, 1994*

* Researchers found that children given piano lessons significantly improved in their spatial-temporal IQ scores (important for some types of mathematical reasoning) compared to children who received computer lessons, casual singing, or no lessons. Rauscher, F.H., Shaw, G.L., Levine, L.J., Wright, E.L., Dennis, W.R., and Newcomb, R. (1997) *Music training causes long-term enhancement of preschool children's spatial temporal reasoning. Neurological Research, 19, 1-8.*

* A McGill University study found that pattern recognition and mental representation scores improved significantly for students given piano instruction over a three-year period. They also found that self-esteem and musical skills measures improved for the students given piano instruction. Costa-Giomi, E. (1998, April). *The McGill Piano Project: Effects of three years of piano instruction on children's cognitive abilities, academic achievement, and self-esteem. Paper presented at the meeting of the Music Educators National Conference, Phoenix, AZ.*

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