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Young conductor JONATHAN GOVIAS spent two months in Venezuela studying the country's famed music programme. Here he gives a teacher's perspective on its philosophy, and shares his experience of its transformative power

INSIDE EL SISTEMA

In April 2010 an orchestra gathers for the first time to work through Mahler's Symphony no.1, and acquits itself honourably. This by itself might not be noteworthy, but the orchestra in question is comprised of 337 musicians, all of whom are under the age of 16. Is it necessary to say that this is in Venezuela? El Sistema has been alternately described as 'the Venezuelan music miracle' and 'the future of classical music' by various luminaries, its orchestras have performed across the world, and its musicians are joining the ranks of the most storied ensembles in the industry. And yet the questions remain. What exactly is El Sistema? How does it work?

Those are simple questions. But I and the other eight young postgraduate musicians on the Abreu Fellows programme at the New England Conservatory were still wrestling with the answers even after months of study in Boston and two months of field work in Venezuela. We had the privilege of being the first group of individuals welcomed by the national organising body and encouraged to delve deeply into the inner workings of El Sistema. We had visited dozens of sites across the country, interviewed teachers, students and administrators, performed, taught and observed, and still our debate raged.

The discussion wasn't purely philosophical either. For every example of pedagogy or practice cited by one of us, another could give a counter-example to prove the opposite. Small incidents led to grand extrapolations or generalisations, and theories or preconceptions found validation in isolated episodes. El Sistema, as we experienced, cannot be reduced comfortably to bullet points or pedagogical soundbites. Its founder, José Antonio Abreu, once described the organisation's development and growth in terms of chaos theory. From this perspective, El Sistema is much like an orchard of apple trees: each tree is unique, its height, width, leaves and branches,



**EL SISTEMA
BY NUMBERS**

35

years since the founding
of the programme

size and number of apples distinct, and yet every tree grew from an indistinguishable seed, and every tree produces apples.

To understand El Sistema, it is important to accept that the seeds aren't primarily pedagogical but philosophical and social. Each flowering, as Abreu once described it, is distinct, and most suited to the local growing conditions, but is also firmly rooted in or determined by fundamental principles. (For all the possibilities latent within an apple seed, it will never produce peaches.) Ultimately, the most practical way to look at El Sistema is not by itself, given its unique cultural and economic context, but in comparison with underlying philosophies of Western art music pedagogy. It is in the framework under which music is taught – the ideals and objectives – that El Sistema is most divergent from the established practices of classical music, more so than in its methods.

IT WOULD BE EASY TO DISMISS El Sistema as an anomaly: it grew largely within a vacuum, and now receives significant government funding. The fact that it gained international notoriety at roughly the same time as the current regime came



An orchestra rehearsal in Acarigua

184

centres across the country

337under-16s in the National Children's
Orchestra of Venezuela**368,000**Venezuelans currently involved
in the programme

to power has also created a completely inaccurate correlation for some, given that the programme has successfully navigated six changes in government over 35 years. Its survival relates to brilliant leadership under Abreu, but also to the explicit social objectives of the programme. El Sistema does not focus on the production of musical excellence, but the promotion of positive social change through the pursuit of musical excellence.

For students with motivation, untold doors will open

It's such a simple idea, obvious on one hand, but quite radical when considered against the vast industry of conservatoires and schools fine-tuned to produce excellent performers. The social agenda permeates every aspect of El Sistema's operations, is a core element of its advocacy and thus sustainability, and influences at the most fundamental level its practical activities.

El Sistema is first and foremost an ensemble programme, with the symphony orchestra, and increasingly chorus, the focal point of the participant experience. Students are assigned to groups from day one, regardless of their level of ability, and are expected to contribute as best they can. The larger facilities (*núcleos*) generally boast multiple orchestras of varying levels of ability, so the learning curve can be quite gentle, but the practice is maintained consistently even at the smallest *núcleos* with only one orchestra. In these the curve may actually be less steep, since the student can benefit from the ongoing support and guidance of the more experienced players. The results of this can be extraordinary. At the *núcleo* in the small town of Acarigua, a young man named Samuel Vargas joined the only orchestra at age eleven, and rose to the position of concertmaster within three years, without the benefit of a regular private instructor.

The de-emphasising of the individual represents a complete inversion of the established music training paradigm in which private lessons constitute the primary learning experience, with ensembles added much later. Each method has its value, but the Venezuelan model would have little or no effect were it not paired with a level of frequency virtually unheard of >



Simon Rattle conducts the National Children's Orchestra, with Samuel Vargas (left) from Acarigua as leader



Double bassists rehearse in Acarigua

No one is ever turned away because of lack of financial resources or on the grounds of proficiency

outside the country. Children arrive at the núcleos after school and proceed to spend four to six hours a day, five to six days a week in rehearsals, sectionals, and group or private lessons. The immediate advantage of this intensity is the extensive contact with students, but at the cost of time for individual practice. As a result, significant amounts of rehearsal time are used to teach and reinforce notes and reiterate musical concepts.

If this sounds frustrating, it isn't. The benefit of this structure is that instructors can oversee much more effectively their students' activity and progress, which means that lapses one day can be corrected before they become ingrained bad habits in the days after. What then emerges is a rare longitudinal window to cultivate and model both practice techniques and work ethic, two qualities that often emerge through such intensive contact. Private lessons are then introduced much more strategically and resource-efficiently for those most able to benefit.

AS A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE, no one in El Sistema is ever turned away because of lack of financial resources or on the grounds of proficiency. Offering financial aid based on a combination of merit and need, as is often the case in North America or Europe, can create a vicious circle in which a student with all the necessary motivation still cannot afford the instruction required to earn the scholarship. El Sistema is committed to inclusivity and accessibility, and strives to give every child an appropriate opportunity to participate.

The idea of appropriate opportunity is important. For students with motivation, untold doors will open. The director of the núcleo in Acarigua, Roberto Zambrano, regularly coordinates opportunities for high-achieving students

in the nearest city with a more advanced orchestra, just as he already brings into Acarigua deserving string players from even smaller towns. This is 'the system' at work, the system to which the name in common use refers. El Sistema is in fact a contraction of *Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles y Infantiles de Venezuela*, or the State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela, nationally known as

Fesnojiv (pronounced *FES-no-heev*). El Sistema refers only to the national network of ensembles, and not a curriculum or method, much like the way the phrase 'health system' refers to a multitude of service providers and agencies, rather than a specific medical procedure.

The national body's role is not to dictate curricula or standards, but to build connections from the smallest of núcleos all the way to the largest and most sophisticated. These connections create a network of orchestras that forms a continuous 'conveyor belt' of service and opportunity for musicians from the time they first start an instrument all the way up to the national orchestras. The best illustration of this is the person filling the concertmaster's chair of that 337-member leviathan of under-16s: none other than the same Samuel Vargas, now aged 14, of Acarigua.

BY JULY OF THIS YEAR, this extraordinary orchestra was advancing to even greater things under the direction of Simon Rattle. Yet even at its gargantuan size, the elite ensemble represents just a fraction of those musicians within the programme. There are some 368,000 Venezuelans involved throughout 184 different centres across the nation, so simple averages would suggest that the results of the programme are as diverse and as complex as the programme itself. In some respects, Venezuelan youth are no different from their counterparts around the world, so outcomes can be quite similar. Enrolment in Fesnojiv programmes by age peaks at twelve and drops off sharply thereafter, a near-universal phenomenon in the world of classical music instruction. Some students seize the opportunities presented through >



An orchestra rehearsal in Guarenas in 2008

the programme, but others take them for granted or drop out. In keeping with the social mission of El Sistema, the ultimate goal of Fesnojiv is to give every child in Venezuela a choice, the opportunity to participate, and allow them to make of it what they will.

Much of Fesnojiv's past organisational practice can be explained by the emphasis on the social mission, and the subsequent need to make limited resources stretch as far as possible. The idea of peer instruction, commonly cited as a pillar of the programme, rose out of necessity in the early days when there weren't enough properly trained and qualified instructors. Now that Fesnojiv has access to musicians of the Berlin Philharmonic or Baltimore Symphony Orchestra for high-level training, they trust young musicians much more strategically, looking for individuals of particular motivation and commitment, rather than accepting anyone as simply being better than no one. Similarly, there has been some suggestion that a syllabus was established through repertoire. In search of confirmation, I took a circulating list to Roberto Zambrano who examined it for about two seconds before telling me: 'My friend, you must understand, this is all we had.' This wasn't his resignation at an imposed curriculum; this was a reference to the very limited musical library in Venezuela, where ensembles in remote towns still play from 14th-generation photocopies.

Fesnojiv is acutely aware of the difference between compelled practice and inspired pedagogy, and the way the organisation has welcomed musicians trained in Western European methods speaks strongly of their belief in the value and importance of established music education traditions.

Indeed, despite all the attention their creation has received, the administrators of El Sistema are remarkable for their lack of arrogance and for their tireless efforts to improve everything they do. This evolution is unceasing, with El Sistema in a perpetual state of *ser no ser todavía*, or 'being and not yet being', as Abreu put it – a work in progress never to be completed. Because of this attitude, the organisation continues to grow and flourish as more trees spring forth and bear fruit.

DOES EL SISTEMA WORK? The programme's motto is *Tocar y Luchar*, or 'To perform and to struggle'. The word 'struggle' is imbued with multiple meanings here, encapsulating the idea of the programme as social venture, but also asserting the principle that any social benefit derives through both the pursuit of musical excellence and performance. It is the struggle, the attention to notes, intonation and phrasing, the striving towards an unattainable perfection that brings people together and unites them into a community beyond all considerations of age, socio-economic status and ethnicity; and it is the performance that gives meaning, purpose and direction to the struggle, and allows accomplishments to be celebrated communally.

That's the idea, in theory, but it's possible to study apple seeds or trees for years and have it all remain meaningless unless you've actually tasted the fruit. Of my time in Venezuela, the experience that was most powerful was the fortnight I spent in Acarigua, rehearsing the núcleo orchestra to prepare for an outdoor concert. In those two weeks I did more than see El Sistema: I lived it. I experienced at first hand the benefits and challenges of four hours of daily rehearsal, and witnessed the human effect of inclusion and accessibility.

On the night of the concert the temperature was 34°C, and the only relief came from an occasional breeze that, while cooling, also sent music flying. The lack of a sheltered stage made it nearly impossible for the musicians to hear each other, and a large part of the programme was performed to fighting dogs and 'drunkard obbligato'. Despite all these challenges, the evening was very special, something I'll never forget. This was it – this was *Tocar y Luchar*. We had struggled together, we had succeeded together, and thus our achievement was made meaningful and profound, and we were connected forever. El Sistema works. ■

EL SISTEMA: THE ESSENTIALS

- Goal is social change through musical excellence
- **Focus on ensemble playing**
- Intensive and lengthy activities increase its impact
- **Philosophy of continuous and unending development**
- Emphasises inclusivity and accessibility
- **Connections between orchestras are as important as the orchestras themselves**