

LaScena Musicale

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OVER *to* YOU

by JONATHAN GOVIAS

The music business might claim a long history of involvement in peace movements, but its track record is less than stellar when it comes to producing actual results. Woodstock was billed as “three days of peace and music”—a promise only half kept since the event generated more mud and garbage than international accord. Efforts by individual musicians have hardly fared better. John Lennon’s “Bed In” gave legions of fans a misplaced sense of Gandhian righteousness while hitting the snooze button on their alarm clocks, but the only harmony it produced was musical, not geopolitical.

And yet there’s a serious movement underway to nominate a musician for the Nobel Peace Prize. Less than one week after being named recipient of the 2010 Seoul Peace Prize, Maestro José Antonio Abreu, founder of Venezuelan’s *el Sistema*, was mentioned as a worthy candidate for the more famous award bestowed in Oslo—and by no less a luminary than Sir Simon Rattle. In putting forth the name, Sir Simon was somewhat apologetic, even defensive, conceding that the conflict within Maestro Abreu’s sphere wasn’t a war in the conventional sense, even if it did include weapons and bloodshed.

Sir Simon need not have worried. Past winners of the Nobel Peace Prize include a first-year American president, a former vice president with “deadly slideshows” (his words), a Kenyan environmentalist, and a Bangladeshi economist. To say that some of these choices were contentious is something of an understatement. But what all these individuals have in common is that through their efforts they actively changed the nature of their nation’s internal and even external discourse, striking at extremism, natural disaster, intolerance, poverty, hunger, dispossession and disempowerment—the many and varied roots of war, rather than war itself.

The economist, Muhammad Yunus, is best known for his

work in microfinance. The environmentalist, Wangari Muta Maathai, founded an organization that reclaims desert through tree planting. These two in particular exemplify the idea that small gestures and small actions (small loans or small saplings) can profoundly and positively change society. The underlying ideas are neither sophisticated nor complex: rather, it is their simplicity that makes them potent.

In that light, it’s difficult to think of a more deserving candidate than Abreu. His idea was as straightforward and as powerful as those of Yunus and Maathai: bring young people together to share challenging artistic experiences, inspire them to cooperate and collaborate, and they will apply the derivative values to every aspect of their lives. Rather than viewing the orchestra as a bastion of elitism or cultural colonialism, Abreu turned it into a framework in which a broader sense of social responsibility is instilled. He rejected, if not completely inverted, the established music pedagogy paradigm: instead of emphasizing the development of artistic excellence in the individual, he focused on crafting strong, supportive musical communities first and foremost, knowing that they would in turn foster strong citizens.

Even with the public backing of classical music luminaries like Sir Simon, the former government economist is hardly a cause célèbre; of late, selections for the award have been as fashionable as they have been controversial. The public debate around the choices begs a larger question: what is the measure of an idea, if not the signing of a permanent peace treaty? Another Nobel Prize winner—this time for physics—once said: “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts,” but in the case of Abreu, it really is about the numbers. Not the millions of alumni of his program, or the statistics showing the extent of the positive social impact, but the multitude of individuals across the globe inspired to make a difference in their communities by emulating his example and starting similar programs. Maestro Abreu has shown that the power to effect change is not vested in high political authority or financial or ecological institutions, but within the hands of the common man.

LSM

With this final article the 10-part series concludes, but *el Sistema* in Canada is only beginning. Visit www.jonathangovias.com

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PHOTO: JULEN WERNAND

MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL MUSICAL COMPETITION 2011 Piano Edition

1st Prize

Beatrice Rana
(see our profile of Rana on p. 46)

2nd Prize

Lindsay Garritson

3rd Prize

Henry Kramer

LE PRIX D'EUROPE

Winner

Pianist Charles Richard-Hamelin (see our profile of Richard-Hamelin on p. 48)

Le Prix de composition Fernand-Lindsay

Composer Gabriel Dharmoo

Le Prix John Newmark

Violinist Victor Fournelle-Blain

TD Bank Winners

Soprano Andréanne Paquin, pianist Charles Richard-Hamelin, violinist Victor Fournelle-Blain, percussionist Isabelle Tardif

QUEEN ELIZABETH COMPETITION

1st Prize

Haeran Hong, soprano (Korea)

2nd Prize

Thomas Blondelle, tenor (Belgium)

3rd Prize

Elena Galitskaya, soprano (Russia)

Canadians: Soprano Sasha Djihanian, semi-finalist, and competitors soprano Betty Allison, mezzo-soprano Catherine Daniel, mezzo-soprano Irina de Baghy, soprano Leah Gordon, soprano Sarah Marie Kramer, soprano Vanessa Lanch, soprano Meghan Lindsay, soprano Isabelle Nicolas

BBC CARDIFF SINGER OF THE WORLD

Winner as well as winner of the Dame Joan Sutherland Audience Prize

Valentina Naforni (Moldova)

The Song Prize

Andrei Bondarenko (Ukraine)

Canadian

Soprano, Sasha Djihanian, competitor

