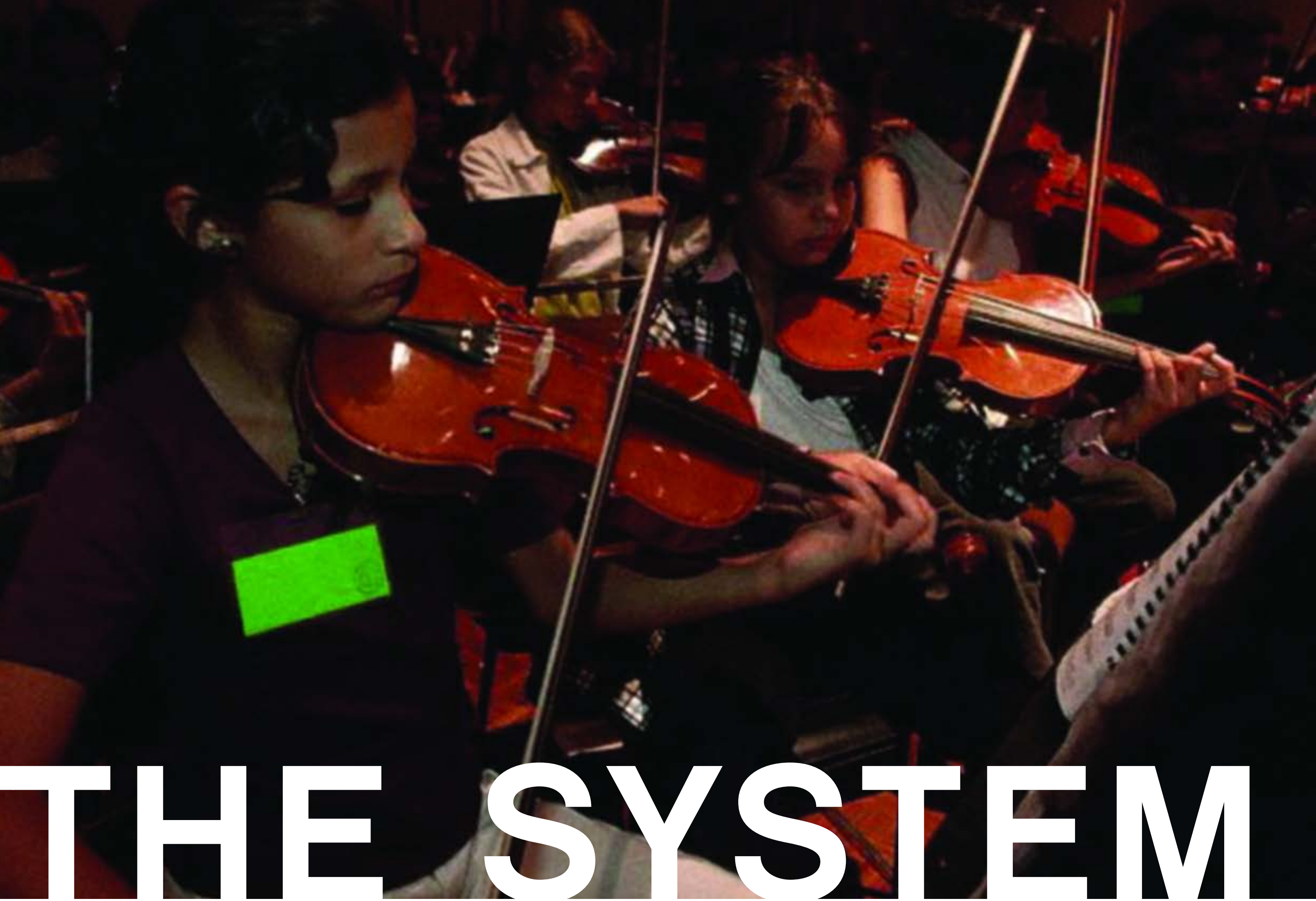


THE SYSTEM

IN VENEZUELA, A QUARTER-MILLION CHILDREN ARE PLAYING CLASSICAL MUSIC IN ENSEMBLES AND ORCHESTRAS.

by John Timpane

It started in Caracas in 1975. Eleven children gathered with some volunteer teachers in an underground parking lot and began to play music. At the next rehearsal (so goes the tale), 25 children showed up. At the next, 46. At the next, 75.

The program was the brainchild of José Antonio Abreu, politician, engineer, and organist. He was interested in helping the poor children of Venezuela—then and now, an oil-rich country wracked with crushing poverty and crime. Music, Abreu hoped, could engage the kids' stranded intellects, create awareness of others, instill discipline and good work habits, as well as teach them how to play together. He also was hoping to create a classical musical culture in a country that essentially had none.

By 2007, Abreu's program had long since come out of the underground and into the light. It has an institutional name: La Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles (State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras), or FESNOJIV. But on the street, it's known simply as *la orquesta* or, more commonly, *El Sistema*.

Somewhere around 250,000 children from all over the country, 90 percent of them from impoverished backgrounds, now participate in to El Sistema. Considering the country's total population of 27 million, it means that one in every 100 citizens plays in an orchestra. Venezuela now has nearly 60 children's orchestras (for children between 2 and 12), more than 150 youth orchestras (for players between 12 years old and young adulthood), 30 adult professional orchestras, more than 120 local *núcleos* (training centers) and countless chamber ensembles. Abreu says his goal over the next decade is to expand El Sistema's reach to embrace a million children.

El Sistema even has an all-star team of sorts. The Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, takes the best and brightest abroad to great applause, and has nurtured a superstar conductor: Gustavo Dudamel, slated in 2009 to become music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. (See "Favorite Son," page 35.) "I learned through El Sistema," says Dudamel, "and so do 250,000 children every day."

Venezuela's Ministry of Health and Social Development now funds the program at $29 million a year: a fortune in a country where average yearly income is about $3,500. Crucial support also comes from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Abreu and company are seeking greater private-sector involvement—a large task in a country with little tradition of philanthropy.

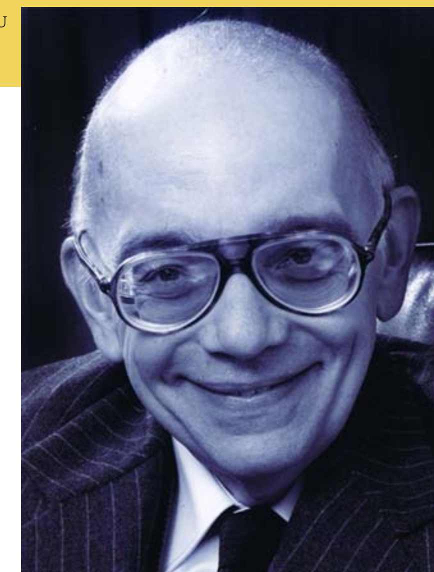
Perhaps the greatest miracle among many is that, through at least five changes in government, through coups and countercoups, nationwide strikes and economic crashes, El Sistema has survived. No matter who has been at the helm, it has been important to keep El Sistema going.

Venezuela has anemic social services and its murder rate of 10,000 a year—or 37 per 100,000 people. According to CIA statistics, Caracas is the scene of more gun-related violence than anywhere else on earth, except for places that are actually at war. The country has one of the worst police systems in the hemisphere (a hair-raising sentence in a State Department brief reports that "almost no murders are solved"). In the midst of this, the PR benefits of FESNOJIV are incalculable—perhaps never more so than under the otherwise controversial regime of Hugo Chávez. Prominent musicians from all over the world have come to hear the children play. Placido Domingo is said to have wept when he heard the Simón Bolívar Orchestra. Simon Rattle, at home in a world given to verbal excess, told London's *Financial Times* that FESNOJIV was "the most important thing happening in classical music."

El Sistema has engendered inspirational stories, like that of Lennar Acosta, a Caraqueño scarred from knife fights, who ditched his childhood gang, learned the clarinet, and now serves as a mentor to young clarinetists. Or that of Wilfrido Galarraga, born into poverty in the barrio of La Vega and now a classical trumpet performer and teacher. "It's amazing what [El Sistema's musicians] get out of their instruments—the enthusiasm, the warmth, the dynamics—which are sometimes no more than a shoebox," says Michael Haefliger, general director of the Lucerne Festival, where the Simón Bolívar Orchestra played this past March.

Dependable studies are absent, but it is widely accepted that crime has been reduced in towns and neighborhoods that

FOUNDING FATHER: JOSÉ ANTONIO ABREU



> "I'm no prodigy. I am the fruit of a great deal of discipline. I learned through El Sistema, and so do 250,000 children every day."
>
> — *Gustavo Dudamel*

have an orchestra or *núcleo*. The United Nations Development Program in 1998 awarded El Sistema a commendation for its exemplary poverty-fighting program.

When Abreu came up with his idea, Venezuela had only two orchestras, and a classical music audience of about 1,000 people—a doughty band who went to all the concerts and bought all the tickets. Music had no source of nourishment, no way to be disseminated. El Sistema has changed all that, putting classical musical culture within reach of practically everyone in the country. Tickets are cheap, and free performances are presented regularly. In 2006, the Municipal Symphony of Caracas sold out its 3,500-seat hall for its entire 20-concert series. At the very least, most Venezuelans know a child in the program: If each of 250,000 children gets four other people interested, that's a million people. "FESNOJIV has conquered a new public who are directly or indirectly connected to the members," says Eduardo Marturet, the music director of the Miami Symphony Orchestra and, for half the year, conductor of the Bolívar Orchestra. "It is a remarkably well-educated audience who enjoys and appreciates not only orchestral music but also chamber music."

This system breaks down barriers of tradition, genre (Gustavo Dudamel is fond of salsa, as well as symphonic music), and class. As Carlos Sedán, director of the music school in the Caracas barrio of Sarría, told the BBC, "We broke the myth that you have to be from the upper class to play violin."

As for the musicians themselves, Marturet estimates that 80 percent continue to play after leaving El Sistema, and 10 percent become professional musicians of one sort or other. Venezuela isn't known—yet—for exporting large numbers of players into the world music scene, but nonetheless it has produced some spectacular successes, like Edicson Ruiz, who won a seat as double bassist in the Berlin Philharmonic at the tender age of 17.

Tocar y Luchar, Alberto Arvelo's 2006 documentary film on El Sistema, was released here as "To Play and to Fight." But the English title misses the political and moral overtones in *luchar*: It's closer to "struggle"—the struggle for a better country, better conditions, a better life. Orchestras bring together people of different temperaments, backgrounds, and experience. To create an integrated, expressive group sound—the kind El Sistema is becoming known for—players must strive for a unity that serves both music and audience. This quest has distinct political and philosophical overtones in a country of so many disunities. It could be said that learning to play together, these young people are struggling to create a better Venezuela.

"Practice sessions often take place during the perilous hours between the end of the school day and dinnertime."

HOW IT WORKS

Considering the breadth of the program, it's not surprising that El Sistema incorporates a range of techniques cross-system and cross-country. Certain hallmarks, though, stay in place across the board.

Get them young. The system takes all comers, some as young as two years old. At the *núcleos*, most of which are allied with orchestras, the very young are trained to clap and sing in small groups, graduating to larger groups while they master instruments well enough to play in group settings. The system buys the children's instruments, although these often are not the best and often must be locked away after practice. (A musical instrument, no matter how cheap, is vulnerable to theft in an environment where families have little money and few possessions.) Some núcleos issue uniforms to encourage group identification. Teachers in El Sistema say what one hears from many other places: young kids learn fast, and often have enough mastery to begin playing simple pieces in a few weeks.

Make it every day without fail. Many *núcleos* hold practice 6–7 days a week, often during the perilous hours between end of school and family dinner. Such regularity calls on the children involved to be punctual, show commitment and form regular work habits.

Get them in front of audiences. As soon as students can sing or clap in time, El Sistema has them perform. This early experience tends not only to prevent the emergence of stage fright, but to break down the notions that classical music concertizing is something reserved for the social and musical elite: Performance loses its aura of awe.

Stress small ensemble playing. According to Abreu, chamber work fosters "social awareness." Michael Haefliger observes: "At the core of everything is that these kids are being trained to learn how to play in [a small] ensemble. Even the lesser talents learn how to play in teams, and that's what you learn most from a very early age: the real key to making music is to play together in ensembles and learn to listen to others." Every young player joins a small ensemble. In many cases, these ensembles stay together, as groups-within-the-group. Many orchestras give these ensembles a chance to step forward and perform during concerts—and of course, they can and do often perform on their own. Small-ensemble work is not seen as an end in itself, but as a means—an honored, crucial, indispensable means—toward giving players experience so they can perform well in the orchestras. Dudamel says the aim is to teach students awareness, teamwork and discipline, all of which characterize the performances of El Sistema groups.

Teach them good music. The country's orchestras are now renowned for their work with Beethoven and Mahler. But audiences will also hear Ginastera, Penderecki, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Bernstein, or pieces written by group members (composition is taught and encouraged) or other Venezuelans; and many playbills include works that embrace dance, indigenous, and popular music.

Create an alternative family. Many children reportedly come to practice sessions sad, abused and hungry; as in the United States, poverty often causes broken families. In response, El Sistema creates a mentoring relationship between older, more experienced players and younger entrants. This practice folds the kids into a system of trustworthy relationships—for some, the only one they've ever known—providing both musical and social benefits.

Stress playing, *not profession.* The kids don't learn about fame or fortune, but about playing music. Xavier Moreno, secretary of FESNOJIV, told the BBC that "our first goal is not to create professional musicians; our goal is to rescue the children."

Encourage the talented to become teachers. El Sistema relies heavily on excellent teaching. A generation of fine music teachers—Susan Siman, Pablo Castellanos, Emil Friedman and Eliecer Sánchez, among others—has left its mark on the system. (Siman was one of Abreu's collaborators in launching El Sistema.) But as the system expands, it faces a teacher crunch, so FESNOJIV recruits among students who have distinguished themselves: The most talented are funneled into a semiformal teacher training track.

The very best get paid to play. If you make it up the ladder to the Simón Bolívar Orchestra, you can be paid $600 a month, which is almost double what most Venezuelans make. It's not a star system so much as an honored ensemble. Nor is it a

FAVORITE SON

Gustavo Dudamel

"I'm no prodigy," says Gustavo Dudamel. "I'm the fruit of a great deal of discipline, a representative of my generation, my country, my continent." In many ways, the conductor's story is the story of El Sistema. As a boy, his first ambition was to play the trombone–the instrument his father played–but his arms were too short. So he was assigned to the violin at 10. He learned fast, and he very much took to El Sistema. He was not only a good instrumentalist but also a natural-born leader in the group situations–the kind of charismatic leader who creates group direction and cohesion. He started conducting at 12. Abreu became a kind of second father to him and eventually asked the youth to conduct the youth orchestra on a trip to Italy.

Dudamel has had an international reputation since he was 18, when conducted in London, Israel, and the United States. His contagious enthusiasm, perhaps inherited from El Sistema, continues to energize colleagues." Deborah Borda, president of the L.A. Philharmonic, told the *Los Angeles Times:* "When Gustavo Dudamel took the podium...we had combustion."

Like Abreu, and like the children who play in the orchestras and chamber groups, Dudamel sees himself as part of a social revolution through music. In Dudamel's formulation, hard work, sacrifice and systematic application that characterize El Sistema's participants could do more than help children: Such pursuit of unity could rescue Venezuela from itself. "What is a symphony orchestra but a union of instruments of different colors?" he asks. "And all the instruments unite to obtain a sound that is pleasing, calm, beautiful...Venezuela could be a great orchestra."

“More than twenty countries—most in South America—are adopting versions of *El Sistema*. Russia and Botswana are said to be interested. One nation that’s unlikely to follow suit is the United States.”

lifetime sinecure—you’re in the orchestra only for a few years, the age range being from about 12 to 26. But it is a great honor and encouragement.

Internationalize. El Sistema has given birth to a range of international exchanges, such as Abreu’s Inter-American Center for Social Action Through Music, which sets up exchanges between Venezuelan and U.S. musicians for workshops and concerts. Abreu has also been instrumental in bringing great musicians into the country as guest conductors, including Claudio Abbado, Simon Rattle, and Krzysztof Penderecki. Last fall in Vienna, John Adams led two Venezuelan ensembles, the Bolívar orchestra and the Schola Cantorum choir, in the premiere of his opera *The Flowering Tree*. In the words of Eduardo Marturet, when it comes to music, “somos del primero mundo” (we are of the First World).

EXPORTING EL SISTEMA

More than twenty other countries, most of them in South America (including Brazil and Argentina), are adopting versions of El Sistema. Farther-flung nations such as Russia and Botswana are said to be interested. Still, the lessons it teaches may not be universally applicable. “Venezuela is a special case,” says Michael Haefliger. “It was fortunate that have an advocate like Abreu to persuade the government to fund, and keep funding, such a quixotic endeavor—and also fortunate that the oil kept flowing and flowing. “In more developed countries,” Haefliger says, “you probably won’t get this combination of factors—but in countries with big social problems involving poverty and youth, something like this still would be worth trying.”

One nation that is unlikely to institute a version of El Sistema is the U.S. The enterprise is a product of Venezuela’s fitful socialism; here, it would be close to impossible to marshal the political will needed for what would be, even at bare bones, a very expensive program. America’s cities, however, are a different matter. Wouldn’t places like Detroit and Philadelphia—cities with rich musical heritages, but beset by violence and poverty—be fertile ground for something like El Sistema?

Out of an impoverished third-world country, an approach has emerged that, even if it can’t cure crime and poverty, can introduce multitudes of young people, along with their families and friends, to music. With little idea of first-world traditions, the young musicians produce an emotional, vigorous version of classical music—one that does not wear tuxedos, one unfazed when a performer bounces around in the seat as he (or she) plays. To do the same in the United States, many things would have to be altered, but that freshness, that pulse of belief, is an outcome devoutly to be wished.

John Timpane is a flutist, a bassist, a publishing poet, and the associate editor of the Editorial Board of the Philadelphia Inquirer.