

Revitalizing Communities Through Music:
The Impact and Influence of El Sistema Programs

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Introduction

Amidst significant economic and social hardships, Venezuela gave rise to a revolutionary educational and social program known as El Sistema, or “The System.” This initiative provides intensive and enjoyable music education to children in marginalized communities. Over nearly fifty years, El Sistema has expanded within Venezuela and internationally, significantly amplifying its impact. It offers free education and services that engage children and communities in active and constructive activities, counteracting the draw toward gangs and violence. This paper will examine the emergence and success of Venezuela's El Sistema, highlighting the intrinsic role of music in its outcomes, while also exploring how smaller Sistema-inspired initiatives can adapt and learn from Venezuela's Sistema with attention to the specific case of Elsipogtog First Nations in New Brunswick.

As articulated by Maestro José Antonio Abreu, Sistema's original visionary founder, "The orchestra and choir are much more than artistic studies... They are examples and schools of social life. From the minute a child is taught how to play an instrument, he is no longer poor. He becomes a child in progress, who will become a citizen" (Tunstall 2012, XII). This sentiment underscores El Sistema's core mission — fostering a sense of community through music to address the underlying societal voids. For many youths, El Sistema serves as a stabilizing influence amidst adversity, providing a consistent and positive presence through difficult home lives. Additionally, beyond shaping students' personal development, El Sistema paves the way for future endeavours, equipping them with a diverse set of skills in music-related areas like performance, teaching, leading programs, making and repairing instruments, as well as administrative tasks. With the principle of “whatever you know, teach it” (Tunstall 2012, 163),

skills are eagerly shared among peers and between teachers and students, blurring the distinction between them as all become both teachers and students in their own right.

History

From humble beginnings, El Sistema emerged from Maestro Abreu's desire in 1975 for orchestral music to be available for Venezuelans. While Venezuela had a large classical music scene, its players were almost entirely from North America and Europe; there were very few opportunities for youth to learn and play instruments (Tunstall 2012, 55-56). Because music education is not part of a typical Venezuelan public school education, musically curious and inclined children, like Maestro Abreu, had to turn to other avenues to pursue a music education. Studying music with nuns was not uncommon, and was how Maestro Abreu learned to play piano and developed his vision for a wider-spread, accessible, performance-based music education for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds and areas (Tunstall 2012, 54).

Starting small, Abreu organized a community orchestra that anybody could join, with the core idea, even in those early days, of teaching what you know and supporting one another. Attendance grew exponentially, with members travelling from across the country to be part of this group. Using his government connections and political background, Abreu maximized every opportunity for performance with his orchestra in public venues and members of the government, significantly boosting their visibility and growth. With their rapid success and growth, as well as their performances, more performing opportunities presented themselves, including opportunities abroad. Bringing more and more eyes to their success, Abreu leveraged the position he was in and started to disperse his orchestra members to start their own programs with the same guiding principle of accessibility being of key importance.

Maestro Abreu's persuasiveness and people's level of trust and faith in him appear to have contributed significantly to his success. Abreu would approach the people around him, and it was remarkable how often people agreed to help or join his initiative (Tunstall 2012). With strong founding principles, convincing people to take risks to support him and what would turn into El Sistema, took very little convincing. The motivation of its supporters and contributors was vast, all in selfless acts to support youth facing poverty and exclusion across Venezuela. Using music as the original hook and motivator, Abreu gradually shifted the focus more toward the social benefits, providing a service to help young people.

Structure and Implementation

While "El Sistema" literally means "the system," the idea of the Sistema as a system is not accurate. There are many similarities and continuities binding programs throughout Venezuela, but each núcleo – "the Sistema's word for its learning centers" (Tunstall 2012, 27) – maintains flexibility and adaptability to its approach, ensemble type, and pedagogy (ultimately still with the centrality of performance). Early childhood music education in Sistema programs across the country varies widely between programs and years, with some adopting a paper-mache instrument replica approach, and many cycling through pedagogies like Kodály and Suzuki (Tunstall 2012, 78-79) each adapting and responding to the needs of their learners and their communities. Adapting the general middle-high school-age content to include younger children and getting them into the Sistema earlier facilitates the continual expansion and growth of Sistema to reach even more children before they have the opportunity to fall into unproductive environments like gangs. Tunstall (2012) notes that the "Venezuelan high school dropout rate for teenagers is over 26 percent, but for participants in El Sistema, the rate drops to 6.9 percent" (Tunstall 2012, 37) and "the number of Sistema children who live in poverty is variously

estimated as between 70 and 90 percent” (Tunstall 2012, 36). These statistics are remarkable considering that achievement and socioeconomic status are often correlated, yet Sistema students are able to overcome these barriers and succeed academically. This highlights the surface-level impact of El Sistema, and some of its effectiveness at addressing the root problems of issues such as youth gang involvement, getting kids off the streets, in school, and into El Sistema.

Inclusivity and Career Development

The núcleo located in Barquisimeto exemplifies El Sistema’s flexibility in its slow and careful development of inclusive practices toward youth with all exceptionalities, particularly deafness, blindness, and autism (Tunstall 2012, 187). Recognizing disability as a social construct, this núcleo works to dismantle the social barriers to inclusion that those who live with different abilities than the majority (Bell 2017). Music serves as a unique tool to break down these barriers while providing alternatives to unproductive activities like drugs and violence (Tunstall 2012, 152). Jhonny Gómez, a Sistema leader and alumnus of the Sistema, has been one of the leading innovators developing the Barquisimeto núcleo into the inclusive program it is today.

This phenomenon of alumni staying to lead, or coming back to support the Sistema, is not uncommon. El Sistema is built by and supported by former members of the original orchestra organized by Abreu or former students who return to teach, giving back to their home communities (Tunstall 2012). Within the structure and education of youth in El Sistema are several direct and indirect career paths. Direct career paths involve teaching music, becoming a teacher’s aide, and following the training opportunities funded by El Sistema to learn about the luthier trade of making and repairing instruments (Tunstall 2012). The luthier path is one developed out of necessity, as the growing entity that is El Sistema needs an increasing amount

of high-quality instruments, and by incorporating the training and service into their organization, alumni have a career and the Sistema has instruments (Tunstall 2012, 39-40). Indirectly, El Sistema develops the skills of its members, from time management and dedication to collaborative skills and leadership.

With its musical, academic, and social successes, El Sistema is able to secure ongoing government funding, allowing it to compensate its employees, retain experienced staff, and grow into areas of need, making working with the Sistema a viable career path. Although not all staff who work for the Sistema come from a music background, Maestro Abreu was able to see the strengths and skills people in his life had and translate them to contribute to the aspects of El Sistema he did not have the skills or knowledge for, like administrative duties (Tunstall 2012, 79-83). Abreu created a strong, supportive, and fulfilling environment by gathering a strong support team and offering them steady work, even if it came at a pay cut for some leaving their old jobs. As Abreu shaped the culture of El Sistema, he alone could not do all the work. His structures and guiding principles enabled the program to expand globally while maintaining the core values of community engagement, musical excellence, and social inclusion.

Values

El Sistema's core values can be boiled down to accessibility and community. Community building occurs on many different layers: within the classroom amongst peers and between teachers and students, and beyond to families and the larger community. Students gain social skills and friends; students develop relationships with their teachers; teachers develop relationships with parents; parents develop relationships with other parents; and the whole community develops a relationship with the program itself. In this way, El Sistema programs are

building many different communities under the umbrella of an El Sistema community that includes all of them.

Bartleet (2023) describes community as a “group of people who share a connection that binds them together” (Bartleet 2023, 36). Such communities can be both an active choice or involuntary, whether that be geographic location, shared values, or a collective purpose. Sistema’s engagement with community reflects this understanding, building many communities amongst and between stakeholders that serve the interests of Sistema by leveraging the various strengths of those community members. The relationships within the Sistema are largely actively chosen by its participants, teachers, and families, with the involuntary community of everyone around being its supporters. With the many opportunities of sharing with families and the community afforded by Sistema programs, the environment is created for communities to develop and grow.

The increased engagement of families and students becomes a positive feedback loop initiated by performance events that facilitate community-building and friendship-making. By engaging the community and families more, participating in and hosting more events and concerts, communities support the programs more, parents get more involved in their child’s education, and students make friends and improve academically (Ehrlin and Gustavsson 2018). Not only does the Sistema improve the lives of the children attending it, but it also improves the community through its positive and cohesive presence, as well as its development of a culture of hard-working, dedicated, engaged, and collaborative next-generation workers and citizens (Tunstall 2012, 204-205). Building a supportive community of and around El Sistema gives El Sistema a prominent presence in larger communities, with programs building pride in their community (Tunstall 2012, 205).

As student engagement is essential to El Sistema's success, it is not merely about participation; it thrives on intensity and dedication, pushing students to strive for excellence in their musical pursuits. However, in the middle of this dedication is an element of joy and fun, bringing playfulness and excitement to every rehearsal and performance. While meeting the needs of a community is important to the Sistema as a whole, núcleos across Venezuela have a coherence to their curricula, repertoire, structure, and values. This ensures that a student moving to, or visiting, a new núcleo can seamlessly integrate into their new learning environment and have a positive, fun experience (Tunstall 2012, 86-87). While the teaching styles may differ, the core values, general repertoire, and curriculum remain consistent. The unification of teaching for certain instruments also helps create a sense of group identity, further contributing to the strength of El Sistema's sense of community (Tunstall 2012, 87).

Expansion

Just as Maestro Abreu and the rest of El Sistema's directors have observed, El Sistema has, by all accounts, been a success story. Building on their strengths and expanding their reach to bring music and music education to more children has gone beyond the nation's borders to neighbouring countries, and even further across the world to many other countries across different continents. Evaluating the impact of El Sistema has received some attention in the academic literature and community music education. Following Maestro Abreu's request for American Sistema programs, a fellowship began to fund the exposure, observation, and participation of music educators from the United States to visit many different núcleos across Venezuela, learning and growing, benefiting their practice and endeavours in starting or supporting community music initiatives in America (Tunstall 2012, 143–150).

The Abreu Fellows – a group of American music educators funded by the New England Conservatory to bring El Sistema and its principles to America at the request of Maestro Abreu through his TED Prize wish – followed by Tunstall (2012) went on to build and nurture many programs that are still in operation and successful. The model and principles of Abreu and El Sistema have been adopted and adapted by many others, including across Canada and America. Unlike Venezuela, most programs seek operational funding from private donors and through partnerships with orchestras, with government funding playing a smaller role. As Sistema and Sistema-inspired programs extend to the rest of the Americas and across the world, the adaptability of the program is very evident, accommodating differences in funding, local cultures, and inclusion. A prime example of this is the program emerging in Elsipogtog First Nation in New Brunswick.

Case Study

Sprouting from the neighbouring El Sistema program in Moncton, the Elsipogtog El Sistema program began with kids from Elsipogtog who had been taking the long journey to Moncton to attend. Given the perceived popularity and importance of the program, the community decided they wanted a program of their own (Sistema NB n.d.). Early in El Sistema's history, central organization managers like Maestro Abreu determined where to establish new programs, with expansions typically driven by individuals within the organization. However, there has been a significant shift, with communities now actively requesting Sistema programs. Community-initiated development like Elsipogtog is becoming more common, reflecting El Sistema's growing recognition and support both within Venezuela and internationally, and a recognition that local communities should play a more prominent role in program implementation and support.

The Elsipogtog Sistema is also unique in that it is entirely based on a First Nations reserve and therefore, exclusively serves Indigenous children. Serving traditionally white classical music to an Indigenous community is a contentious topic. Colonial music being taught to Indigenous children for something along the lines of helping them improve their lives and communities is a historically loaded notion that has the potential for further imperial and colonial effects (Bartleet 2023). While some may argue that “it is likely that for the Sistema, the choice of seventeenth-century European... works represents a conscious statement that the highest of... art forms belongs equally to poor Venezuelan children as to Latin American elites and a privileged European tradition” (Tunstall 2012, 182), intention might not always matter when managing consequences.

In light of this tension, Elsipogtog’s program works closely together with the community to incorporate Mi’kmaq culture, instruments, and songs into their teaching to not only give the students a formal music education but also help them continue their culture (Sistema NB n.d.). Working with community elders, the teachers of the Elsipogtog Sistema use the Mi’kmaq language for counting, simplified traditional songs to learn on their violins, and traditional drums to learn rhythms when appropriate (Sistema NB, n.d.). The flexibility allowed by the Sistema’s accommodating and adaptable structure has allowed Elsipogtog’s program to adapt to the community’s unique circumstances. This topic of serving Western classical music education to non-Western demographics, however, is not limited to First Nations populations, as it is a debated topic across the world. Berman et al. (2016) touch on this, suggesting variations to the classic musical literature as a benefit to student growth and identity development.

As a young initiative, only a couple of years into operation, Elsipogtog still has a limited program. Working out of the Elsipogtog Elementary School and having two staff members, the

program only has the capacity to support 28 students up to grade 8 (Sistema NB n.d.). After graduating from the program, students have the opportunity to get involved in more community-based and regional ensembles. As is typical of Sistema-related initiatives, there are hopes to expand the Elsipogtog program to be able to serve a larger number of students with more staff (Lapointe 2024). It is too soon to see any statistical differences in student behaviour and success, but Elsipogtog and other similar programs, as they become established, will merit closer study to identify those elements of the program that most influence academic achievement and social engagement.

On a smaller scale, Elsipogtog appears to share many similarities to Venezuela's Sistema with its intensive and fun ethic, its preparation of students for music beyond the Sistema, and its provision of healthy nutrition and social services for all students, free of charge. Similarities beyond the curriculum are evident globally, though a significant portion of academic literature focuses on Swedish Sistema programs, so research opportunities exist to develop a more global understanding. Moreover, El Sistema's influences extend to public school music education, providing models and principles that can be integrated into traditional educational frameworks. In places where public music education in schools is lacking, El Sistema can fill the gaps (Tunstall 2012, 204), and in places where public music education in schools is developing, they can take influence and inspiration from the Sistema structure (Ehrlin and Gustavsson 2018; Sæther 2018).

Ensuring that all children, regardless of their background, have access to high-quality music education requires youth to engage in "conflict-filled negotiations as well as empowering the self by practicing multiple identities" (Bergman et al. 2016, 372) to promote democratic ideals important to development in democratic societies (Apple 2004). In countries like Sweden,

Sistema programs provide a basis for school music education to revitalize their programs, creating the blueprints for community and family engagement (Ehrlin and Gustavsson 2018), and further adaptation of the music programming to include regional traditional music (Sæther 2018).

Conclusion

Even though community music scholars like Yerichuk and Krar (2019) suggest that removing financial barriers is relatively surface-level and neglects to address the deeper causes of those issues, El Sistema's guiding principles work together to address the roots of social issues through its accessibility and community development. El Sistema provides opportunities for economically disadvantaged children to become culturally rich with the understanding that so long as someone, regardless of economic class, has a strong culture of productivity, they will never be truly poor (Tunstall 2012). By providing intensive music education to youth, the culture developed as a result will help them and their families in life, with the hopes of making them productive members of society and their community.

Much of the literature on El Sistema suggests that there are inclusive environments, but lack detailed analysis and evaluation of specific inclusive practices, particularly concerning gender identity and disability inclusion. While initial observations suggest that disability inclusion is well-developed, it requires more concrete measurement. Further research and study are essential to evaluate El Sistema's approaches to gender identity and disability inclusion accurately.

In summary, El Sistema stands as a powerful example of how music education can promote community development and social inclusion. It demonstrates the potential of music to address social changes, foster a culture of productivity, and create culturally rich environments for economically disadvantaged youth by honing the assets and knowledge of young musicians

(Bartleet 2023, 44). The program's global influence inspires numerous music education initiatives to adopt similar models and principles. By complementing traditional public music education, El Sistema has profoundly impacted the lives of millions of disadvantaged youth and strengthened the social condition of communities worldwide.

The power of El Sistema lies in its ability to harness the transformative potential of music as a tool for social change and community building. It shows that providing children with opportunities to learn, grow, and create through music enables them to overcome significant social and economic barriers, contributing to a more inclusive and productive society. This model for addressing social challenges offers valuable lessons and inspiration for music educators and community leaders worldwide.

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