

**CULTURAL COUNTERPOINTS:
Examining the Musical Interactions between the U.S. and Latin America**



Pedroza, Ludim R. (University of the Incarnate Word; Texas State University):

“Save the Children or Save the Music: Venezuela’s *El Sistema* as Syncretic Aesthetic and Pedagogical Export”

Abstract:

El Sistema defines itself as a “Venezuelan government social institution for the systematization of instruction and collective practice of orchestral and choral music as instruments of social organization and community development.” The program trains mostly poor children throughout their elementary and secondary education. Some will ultimately join the famous Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, and a handful, such as conductor Gustavo Dudamel, might become world-renown musicians. Founder José Antonio Abreu emphasizes the social objectives of the program and exhibits a keen consciousness of the versatile nature of Latin America’s modernity and the program’s adaptability and mutability. On the other hand, Abreu’s belief in the “unique” power of music to “transform” echoes Romantic ideologies specifically exemplified in Lisztian philosophy. In short, the program’s history, documentaries, and performances, reflect an aesthetic negotiation between European musical mythology and Venezuelan socio-artistic identity; the resulting entity both nurtures the “classical” canon and challenges it through the inclusion of Latin-American composers and adapted popular dances. Foreign musicians and media, nevertheless, appear to understate the social and musical syncretic potential of the *El Sistema* phenomenon, emphasizing instead the program as “the future of classical music.” Upon this dualistic foundation, Mark Churchill (of the New England Conservatory) now attempts to build *El Sistema USA*. This paper will scrutinize the complex aesthetics of *El Sistema* and its transplantation as a pedagogical model to the U.S. Such scrutiny affords us an opportunity to explore current mythologies of “classical music” and *El Sistema*’s potential to preserve them or mutate them.

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CULTURAL COUNTERPOINTS:

Examining the Musical Interactions between the U.S. and Latin America

of its abstract, which was peer-reviewed. This paper is presented as submitted by the author, who has authorized its dissemination through *IUScholarWorks*.

Save the Children or Save the Music: Venezuela's *El Sistema* as Syncretic Aesthetic and Pedagogical Export

By Ludim R. Pedroza, Texas State University

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El Sistema is an abbreviated term that stands for the far more ambitious title “State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children’s Orchestras of Venezuela.”¹ Today it is more often marketed to the public as the Simon Bolivar Musical Foundation (*La Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar*), but its stated mission continues to emphasize the terms “social work,” “systematization,” and “collective practice,” as opposed to “art” or “classical music.” In this paper, I will explore how *El Sistema*’s international profile has been construed, in great part, through a number of documentaries and journalistic pieces, and how in these, the notion of classical music has been understated or overstated depending on the particular agenda of the producer. This exploration affords us an opportunity to scrutinize current conceptions of the notion of classical music, along with *El Sistema*’s potential role in the mutation of such conceptions.

Venezuelan filmmaker Alberto Arvelo’s 2006 documentary *Tocar y Luchar* (*To Play and to Fight*) casts *El Sistema* as a socio-musical entity whose particular brand of energy and vitality is rooted on its member’s self-recognition as “Venezuelans” and on their desire to transcend the limits imposed by disadvantageous economic conditions.² Arvelo reinforces this perspective through images of children playing Baroque music under the iconic Venezuelan “bohío,” a type of hut common in the coastal region of the country. To the average foreign viewer, this is a powerful visual and aural incongruity, along with the footage of the youth orchestra performing Beethoven symphonies, Venezuelan folk-

¹ In Spanish the title *Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela*, is sometimes expressed by the acronym FESNOJIV.

² *Tocar y Luchar*, DVD, directed by Alberto Arvelo (Explorart Films, 2006). Watch especially at approximately 21:25, where Eduardo Marturet talks about the “Venezuelan” identity that endows the sound of the orchestra with a particular “fingerprint,” and from 51:31 to 54:00, where the founding members of *El Sistema* discuss the “need for expression” that drives the players to produce their particular “rumbling sound,” among other things.

infused music, and cross over works such as Bernstein's *Mambo*. Arvelo successfully defamiliarizes the viewer with the stereotypes of orchestral repertoire, the venues and the manner in which it is conventionally played, forcing us to see and hear orchestral music through the ambitious energy and unique performative style of the young players.

While *Tocar y Luchar* builds on an ambiguous notion of music never quite identified as "classical" by the Venezuelan protagonists, *The Promise of Music* (2008) directly capitalizes on the idea of conquering the classical music international scene specifically through preparation for the *Beethovenfest* in Bonn, 2007.³ Once more, the young players seem to triumph in great part thanks to the energetic drive they exude. In the same year, the Boston Globe pronounced Gustavo Dudamel—*El Sistema*'s most famous graduate—and the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra "the most exciting thing in Classical Music."⁴

But the journalistic piece that most likely brought *El Sistema* into broad U.S. consciousness and anointed the notion of classical music as a protagonist of special importance in the phenomenon, was 60-Minutes' *El Sistema: Changing Lives Through Music*. The piece initially juxtaposes images of the slums of Caracas and its destitute residents with those of young people playing orchestral instruments; it continues by showing 2-year-old children learning to play violins and oboes, and interviewing kids whose lives have been presumably changed thanks to their involvement in the program. At one point, Raphael Elster, one of *El Sistema*'s instructors, emphatically reiterates that popular music would not work: "Their father, who drinks every day, he get [*sic*] drunk with that music," - "So you have to give them something different. When they sit in one of these chairs in the orchestra, they think they're in another country, in another planet.

³ *The Promise of Music*, DVD, directed by Enrique Sánchez Lansch (Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon, 2008).

⁴ David Weininger. "Gustavo Dudamel is Maestro of All He Surveys," *The Boston Globe*, November 4, 2007.

http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2007/11/04/gustavo_dudamel_is_maestro_of_all_he_surveys/ (accessed October 11, 2011).

And they start changing."⁵ Elster, thus, romanticizes classical music as the “transcending” catalyst in the transformative equation.

The producer’s decision to feature Raphael Elster is significant; none of the previously released documentaries feature Venezuelan representatives of *El Sistema* making explicit points about classical music. Such commentary is more commonly implied in statements coming from U.S. enthusiasts, especially members of the relatively new Abreu Fellowship program at the New England Conservatory, and *El Sistema USA*.⁶ For instance, Mark Churchill, Dean Emeritus of the New England Conservatory’s Department of Preparatory and Continuing Education, has found in *El Sistema* the answer to the nagging problem of “elitism in classical music:”

It seemed like an activity for the privileged few. Of course it was the 1960s and we were all wanting to save the world. So we wondered why we were pursuing a field like classical music, and a lot of people stopped pursuing it. I didn’t. I held out a hope that something like *El Sistema* could exist.⁷

A more startling statement of value—and an inaccurate description of *El Sistema*’s methodology—is made by another member of the fellowship, Daniel Trahey, while sharing a panel at Yale University on June 11, 2009. Referring to the repertoire covered by one of the *nucleos*⁸ of *El Sistema* in Venezuela, he says: “There’s no fluff down there. . . they do Beethoven; they don’t do transcriptions, they don’t do works by the people that are specifically writing for third or fifth or eighth grade; they are doing the real stuff. . .”⁹ Initially, however, the pronouncement that became an international marketing

⁵ CBS News—60-Minutes, *El Sistema: Changing Lives Through Music*, originally aired on April 13, 2008. Updated on July 16, 2008.

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/04/11/60minutes/main4009335.shtml> (accessed October 11, 2011).

⁶ See <http://necmusic.edu/abreu-fellowship> and <http://elsistemausa.org>.

⁷ Jeremy Eichler, “You Are Part of Something Bigger,” *The Boston Globe*, July 18, 2010. http://www.boston.com/ae/music/articles/2010/07/18/inspired_by_a_venezuelan_music_program_two_prepare_to_bring_its_benefits_to_boston_kids/?page=full (accessed September 23, 2011).

⁸ These are neighborhood units where the children receive orchestral training.

⁹ The panel can be found at <http://music.yale.edu/community/media.html> and also at <http://vimeo.com/5375789> (both accessed September 23, 2011). *Nucleos* do have a certain amount

slogan for *El Sistema* in Europe and the U.S. was offered by conductor Sir Simon Rattle in a 2005 press conference in Caracas: “If anybody asked me, where is there something really important going on for the future of classical music, I would simply have to say, here in Venezuela.”¹⁰

Interestingly, although the musicians and media in the U.S. and Europe seem unable to separate the notions of *classical music* and *real repertoire* from the phenomenon of *El Sistema*, I have been unsuccessful in finding an instance when the words *classical music* escaped the mouth of the highly articulate and publically conspicuous founder and philosophical patriarch of *El Sistema*, José Antonio Abreu. On this point, I believe special significance should be attributed to the instance in which Abreu publically translated Rattle’s famous statement about *classical music* and left the word *classical* altogether out; Abreu’s quote of Rattle, thus, came across like this: “If anybody asked me, where is there something really important going on *for the future of music*, I would simply have to say, here in Venezuela.”¹¹ A closer look at Abreu’s public statements would indeed suggest an aesthetic vision rooted on cultural motivations that differ in important ways with those that have historically and socially informed the notion of classical music in Europe and the U.S.

Abreu’s aesthetics are yet to be collected and analyzed in extended fashion, but his numerous public statements advocate a multitude of tenets and beliefs, many colored by strong Romantic¹² and religious overtones. At the opening of *Tocar y Luchar*, he declares: “It turns out that whoever generates beauty, musical harmony, begins to know

of latitude as to methodology and repertoire choices, and Trahey may be referring to his experience with one particular *nucleo*, at one particular time. However, from the inception of *El Sistema*, orchestras ranging from the “pre-childhood” level to the prestigious Youth Orchestra have always played both standard repertoire and works specifically composed for these groups by Venezuelan artists, in addition to transcriptions and adaptations of works ranging from those of Haydn and Schubert to Pérez Prado. See Ana Mercedes Asuaje de Rugeles, Maria Guinand, and Bolivia Bottome. *Historia del Movimiento Coral y de las Orquestas Juveniles en Venezuela* (Caracas: Cuadernos Lagoven, 1986), 85-86.

¹⁰ *Tocar y Luchar* (2006), at approximately 24:00.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, at approximately 24:40.

¹² Rooted in early 19th-century aesthetics, especially those of the German idealists.

inside what essential harmony is, human harmony.”¹³ Nevertheless, this belief does not drive Abreu to idealize the musical work or the composer; instead, two of the central tenets of *El Sistema* are particularly pragmatic:

1. The orchestra and choir are ideal representations of collective life. Abreu consistently and unapologetically appoints the symphonic orchestra and the choir as means for achieving social development; in writing, he elaborates on the presumably unique social potential of these mediums:

For children and young people, to make music together implies to coexist profoundly in the spirit of perfection and the quest for excellence, in the rigorous discipline of concertizing, in the synchronicity and harmonic interdependence between sections, voices, and instruments.¹⁴

Abreu believes that the members of the orchestra “transform” themselves before they have the potential to transform the public,¹⁵ and the public and collective nature of the orchestral medium relates directly to what I consider his main second tenet:

2. Artistic education must be widely accessible and socially inclusive. Abreu believes one of the most notable accomplishments of *El Sistema* is its success in bringing “artistic education” out of the “monopoly of the elites” and into the realm of the “social rights of our people.”¹⁶ In an interview for the Venezuelan online magazine *Analítica.com*, he reveals his understanding of musical “art” as the collective practice of ensemble music

¹³ Ibid., at approximately 4:25.

¹⁴ José Antonio Abreu, “Orquestas Juveniles y Presente Latinoamericano,” in *¿Cabemos Todos? Los Desafíos de la Inclusión*, ed. María Ramírez Ribes (Caracas: Club de Roma, 2004), 405-6. “Para jóvenes y niños, hacer música juntos implica convivir entrañablemente, en animo de perfección y afán de excelencia, rigurosa disciplina de concertación, sincronía y armónica interdependencia entre secciones, voces e instrumentos.”

¹⁵ *Tocar y Luchar* (2006), at approximately 41:00.

¹⁶ Abreu, “Orquestas Juveniles y Presente Latinoamericano,” 405. “Fundamental acontecimiento, poderosa realidad emergente que apunta al Nuevo siglo Americano, lo constituye sin duda, el que la educación artística haya dejado de ser irreversiblemente monopolio de las elites para consolidarse firmemente como derecho social de nuestros pueblos. . .”

associated with Bach and Mozart in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In his view, during this time, highly sophisticated education was a privilege of a few trained musicians who, in turn, served the minority of the aristocracy.¹⁷ In appearance, such view is biased against those musics cultivated outside of the notated tradition, whether in Europe or the Americas. However, Abreu's belief in cultivated music as *art* does not seem to presuppose a preference for particular repertoire; that is, Abreu is not coveting the music of Bach and Mozart, but the type of education and training that would make it possible to produce a rich musical culture. In other words, Abreu's notion of art seems to be defined by the privilege of deep, collective, and inclusive cultivation rather than by any intrinsic property of musical works (as exemplified in the neo-romanticism of Lawrence Kramer, for example).¹⁸ To better justify Abreu's understanding of art, one must deeply examine the particulars of the syncretic musical development in colonial and post-colonial Venezuela, a task that cannot be undertaken in this paper.

Nevertheless, I must at least allude to the partiality that Venezuelan—and Latin American—musicologists show for examining the concept of *música culta* or *académica*,¹⁹ rather than that of *música clásica*. In his "*Historia de la música en Venezuela*, for example, Alberto Calzavara offers speculative but compelling arguments regarding the *cultivated* musical training imposed on or offered to slaves and mestizos, and the possible technical and stylistic fusions that these individuals may have pursued when constructing their musical personae.¹⁹ Mario Milanca Guzmán further alludes to the topic of the cultivation of music by professional musicians of mestizo background, tracing such

¹⁷ Maria Elena Ramos, "Entrevista a José Antonio Abreu 'Con La Música'," *Analítica.Com*, May 30, 2008. <http://www.analitica.com/va/arte/documentos/8492466.asp> (accessed July 15, 2011).

¹⁸ See Lawrence Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Kramer defines *classical music* as a "specific body of nontheatrical music produced since the eighteenth century with one aim in view: to be listened to." (P. 11). For Kramer, "other music also has things to say to us; there is no doubt about that. But no other music tells us the things that this music does." (P. 33). Kramer develops his argument by exploring how melody, harmony, and form, are at the center of this alleged power.

¹⁹ Alberto Calzavara, *Historia de la Música en Venezuela: Periodo Hispánico con Referencias al Teatro y la Danza* (Caracas?: Fundación Pampero, 1987). See especially his chapter 7 on the harp and harp players.

music to the notated tradition of the church, and calling it *música académica*.²⁰ Given the social context surrounding these arguments, the significance of education as a *privilege* in a socially and racially contested space cannot be underestimated. In broad terms, I am attempting to scrutinize the historical impetus that kindles Abreu's aesthetics of inclusion, an impetus that elevates the privilege of education over the privilege of consuming "musical works."

Abreu's keen awareness of the complex nature of Latin America's past and present undoubtedly informs his understanding of *art* as a compendium of cultivated skills, rooted in European forms and techniques, but capable of expansion and necessarily compelled to act as a vessel for the expression of vernacular musical culture. The early 20th-century nationalistic movement in Venezuela and the expansion of repertoire and non-contemplative performative practice by *El Sistema* groups continue to reflect this post-colonial cultural phenomenon. Such syncretic character is plainly evident in the musical footage of the CBS documentary, and truly problematizes its journalistic premise. To explain this point, we must revisit that moment when Elster has just stated that "popular music would not work," that the "kid's drunk father listens to it," and that when the children "sit in one of these chairs in the orchestra, they think they're in another country, in another planet." To this, the CBS anchor replies, "and we are listening to it right now," as the footage immediately travels to an orchestral rehearsal. In this rehearsal, the conductor is shouting "gózalo!"²¹ the 10-year-old-or-so violin players are dancing, and the rhythms heard are those of the Cuban clave. The work the viewer is experiencing is Arturo Márquez' *Danzón No. 2*, the *danzón* being a not-so-distant relative of salsa music, one of the most popular of genres in Venezuela, and thus, one of those popular musics to which the hypothetical drunk father mentioned by Elster could very well be listening to.

In my view, this aural and visual contradiction is brought about by producers eager to construct an "underdog-helps-underdog" dynamic; in other words, the piece strives to

²⁰ Mario Milanca Guzmán. *La Música Venezolana: De La Colonia a la Republica*. Caracas: Monte Avila Latinoamericana, 1994, 51-88.

²¹ Gózalo, an expression commonly used in Salsa music and other transnational and Caribbean genres, can be translated as "Enjoy it!"

show how classical music, a style sometimes considered “destitute” in terms of audience-support in the U.S., is revitalized in the hands of—also destitute—children, in a country not normally associated with classical music. In an effort to emphasize the “energy” and “life” that the kids bring to the presumably stale classical repertoire, the producers insert clips of the youth orchestra playing non-standard repertoire, such as Márquez’ *Danzón*. In doing so, the piece begs the questions: how are traditional definitions of *classical music* disrupted by the repertoire choices and performative style of these performers? Who is “changing” in this equation, the youth? The music? Our concept of classical music? The CBS piece, incidentally proposes a disruption of the notion of classical music, something made possible in great part due to the service role to which orchestral practice is subordinated within Abreu’s philosophy. On the other hand, to the U.S. and European musician, it is the *idea of classical music* that “serves” and “enriches” children’s lives, producing a symbiotic circle in which the children’s energy, in turn, regenerates the *idea of classical music*. From this perspective, it appears that “saving the music” and “saving the children” function as mutually reinforcing objectives, even though on closer inspection, the conventional notion of *classical music* does not survive this negotiation.

At great risk to their professional persona, there are those who have voiced deep apprehension in regards to this colluding scenario. In 2010, Venezuelan musicologist Emilio Mendoza dared to criticize *El Sistema*’s early adherence to what he called “frozen repertoire.”²² Mendoza recognized the incorporation of works by Latin American composers and the adaptations of popular music, but he regarded such efforts as mere marketing ploys. For him, *El Sistema* and what he sees as the cult-image surrounding Dudamel, are ultimately detrimental to the production of new music and the expansion of musical vocabulary and techniques.

Mendoza’s fears are not entirely misplaced; elsewhere I have explored an analogous scenario, one in which contrasting motivations of social and artistic nature end up

²² Emilio Mendoza, “La Composición in Venezuela: ¿Profesión en Peligro de Extinción? Un Análisis de Contradicciones,” 12.
http://prof.usb.ve/emendoza/emilioweb/escritos_tema/escritos_frame.html (accessed July 5, 2011).

colluding to support the emergence of the concept of the *musical work*.²³ Nineteenth-century pianist, composer, and writer Franz Liszt proposed and supported the creation of cultural and educational institutions aimed to protect the practice of music making and to provide widespread musical education.²⁴ His motivations were deeply rooted in the Romantic belief on the power of music to “elevate,” “comfort,” and “civilize,”²⁵ all notions that resonate with Abreu’s statements about music. Although Liszt was an exuberant performer who embraced music and musical works as vehicles toward emotional cleansing, today he is often historicized as the creator of the recital and a contributor to the canonization of repertoire. He would indeed be surprised to learn how his belief in the emotional power of music played a role in the idealization of classical music repertoire at the turn of the twentieth century. For his part, Mendoza seems to fear a similar outcome in relation to the national and international enthusiasm surrounding *El Sistema*. But what Mendoza as well as U.S. musicians may be missing is the way in which *El Sistema* is already transforming traditional musical archetypes, by bringing the fusion of folk, popular and academic elements into global consciousness, and by challenging the contemplative approach to traditional classical performance. Whether *El Sistema*’s social identity will expand in ways that incorporate more creations from living composers is yet to be seen.

Concluding Remarks

El Sistema U.S.A. continues to grow, despite its original benefactor—the New England Conservatory—announcing it will not be able to foot the bill in the future.²⁶ Moreover, the Los Angeles Philharmonic has now created its own *nucleo* (YOLA),

²³ Ludim R. Pedroza, “Music as *Communitas*: Franz Liszt, Clara Schumann, and the Musical Work” *Journal of Musicological Research*, 29: 4 (2010), 295-321.

²⁴ Ralph P. Locke, trans. and ed., “Liszt on the Artist in Society,” in *Franz Liszt and His World*, ed. Christopher H. Gibbs and Dana Gooley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Franz Liszt, *An Artist’s Journey, Lettres d’un bachelier ès musique 1835–1841*, trans. Charles Suttoni (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 20–21.

²⁶ Geoff Edgers, “Sour Note for Music Program,” *The Boston Globe*, January 3, 2011. http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2011/01/03/el_sistema_usa_may_have_to_leave_nec_boston/ (accessed July 15, 2011).

armed with the feisty support of Gustavo Dudamel. *El Sistema Venezuela*, on the other hand, continues to expand in both the social and artistic aspects; some increased repertoire variety is evident from year to year and the creation of several new ensembles is most notable.²⁷ It will indeed be interesting to see how *El Sistema USA* continues to “translate” *El Sistema Venezuela*, and more importantly, to suit which goals.

Finally, I do too fall into the temptation of seeing *El Sistema* through the lens of my own interests; although I do not share Abreu’s neo-romantic aesthetics, I do think his concept of art education is capable of contributing significantly in the 21st-century shaping of music in academia, perhaps away from repertoire idealization and toward inclusive, fluid, and rich education in strong musical skills and vernacular musical expression.

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²⁷ See <http://www.fesnojiv.gob.ve/es/agrupaciones.html> and <http://www.fesnojiv.gob.ve/es/conciertos/1105-orquesta-afro-venezolana-simon-bolivar-en-la-asociacion-cultural-humboldt.html>. The latest list of ensembles includes the Orquesta Afro-Venezolana Simón Bolívar, the Orquesta Latino-Caribeña Simón Bolívar, the Orquesta de la Música Popular del Estado Guárico, and the Orquestas Sinfónicas Penitenciarias.

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<http://necmusic.edu/el-sistema-usa-transition-plan> (NEC and the transition plan)

<http://music.yale.edu/community/media.html> and <http://vimeo.com/5375789> (Yale University panel discussion on El Sistema)

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