

From Music is Joy: An Abreu Fellow's Blog - by Jose Luis Hernandez-Estrada
El Sistema as a tool for re-imagining education ecosystems and mission in American orchestras



Dudamel and the SBYOV in Mexico, 2007

In the fall of 2007, the Simon Bolivar Youth of Orchestra of Venezuela embarked on their first major North American performance tour. They played sold-out concerts under conductors Gustavo Dudamel and Sir Simon Rattle before enthusiastic audiences in New York, Los Angeles, and Mexico City. As we experienced the orchestra's astonishing commitment to the dazzling rhythmic syncopations in *Revueltas'* *Sensemaya* and to the strength of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, we were also invited to ponder

new realms of possibility. The orchestra's display of collective virtuosity reminded us that working together in the pursuit of common goals is a beautiful idea. *Tocar y Luchar* is a familiar motto among El Sistema musicians—"in aspiring for excellence together, everything is possible," they say. These concerts were a beautiful celebration of music and community. Their music-making brought forward new perspectives to the value of aesthetic excellence, artistic relevance; and living proof to the idea that classical music could serve as a catalyst for meaningful social transformations for a wide-range of beneficiaries.

Since its inception, El Sistema in Venezuela has been an interdependent initiative inspired by the need to articulate new and innovative ways to produce structural change in communities, particularly those under the poverty line. To this end, democratic access to collective music-making is used as an intervention tool (in areas as diverse as health, crime prevention, and social development), reframing music and the arts as a medium to increase social capital and mobility—to produce joy and well-being, human connections, and cultural enrichment.

In practicing El Sistema, one is particularly invested in creating a space of connection and collaboration. Teaching young people how to teach others in pursuit of commons goals; showing communities how to lead in the composition of the arts; and inspiring others to aspire to the highest levels of artistic excellence; are all common through-lines and unique perspectives of the Venezuelan model.

El Sistema's founder, Jose Antonio Abreu believes that the arts should no longer be a contemplative object, but rather stand as a call for social action in service to humanity. This inclusive idea has taken relevance in the United States, especially today, as artistic organizations seek to find a new

El Sistema as a tool for re-imagining education ecosystems and mission in American orchestras

voice in advocating for the value of the arts experience. As nationally recognized teaching artist and arts educator Eric Booth explains, in the United States, “the era of art of art’s sake is also now officially closed.” In putting art at the service of society, a flexible space of exchange and re-imagination of purpose can be expressed—one where community plays an integral part of being in communion with art. As I’ve learned, in El Sistema, the rendition of art for many sakes lives in balance and in consonance with the highest of artistic possibilities. This new thread of thinking is particularly in tune with existing educational agendas in the United States, where the notion of artistic achievement, community development, and social change become one organic whole in pursuit of common goals.

American orchestras are listening to the pulse of community more intently, embracing it as a point of inspiration in their efforts to focus and realign their organization’s vision for the future. As we speak, orchestras are invested in a process of deep analysis and introspective thinking about how to succeed in ever changing economic landscapes. Many of them are in a state of identity anxiety, seeking to find new ways to increase relevance in the communities where they reside. In consequence, conversations about re-imagining frameworks for artistic advocacy and community engagement are taking place across the board—from small community orchestras to those in major cities. As a field, we are now beginning to articulate artistic excellence and social participation as part of one indissoluble dimension.

The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra is constantly thinking about ways in which the organization can best reflect the community they serve. “To be relevant, means that we must demonstrate public value,” explained Paul Meecham, during the Abreu Fellows’ recent visit to the Meyerhoff Symphony Hall. One of the many answers to this ongoing challenge, is their flagship education and community engagement initiative, ORCHKids, an El Sistema-inspired program, serving 500 school-age children in four public schools throughout East and West Baltimore. The BSO refers to it as “a fundamental social program critical to the health of the city.” And rightly so, it is positively and dramatically impacting children and families in beautiful ways. Many BSO musicians are collaborating with the initiative--a champion for the cause is percussionist Brian Prechtel, who regularly works with the children and engages them with professional zeal and rigor.

This year, close to a hundred ORCHKids young musicians participated in a side-by-side concert with the Baltimore Symphony under the direction of the orchestra’s music director Marin Alsop. The Meyerhoff Symphony Hall became alive with a new vibrant and energetic audience, gleaming with joy, and hope. The inherent symbolism of this event is a testament of a valiant effort to bring equity in the concert hall and as an case in point of removing barriers of artistic inclusion. In Baltimore, Dan Trahey, the program’s artistic director said, “we must get to all of the music directors in American orchestras, to

El Sistema as a tool for re-imagining education ecosystems and mission in American orchestras



Marin Alsop works with the BSO and ORCHKids, 2011

help them understand the value of this transcendental work.”

The outcomes realized and envisioned reflect a changing trend in the orchestra’s desire to connect with a wider diversity of audiences. Alsop, profoundly believes in “music as a vehicle to change lives,” and most importantly, that her orchestra should lead the movement to reach as many

children as possible throughout the city of Baltimore. It also signals a clear change of direction as to how artistic organizations will think and operate in the future. As Meecham asserted, “we are in the middle of a revolution, every aspect of our thinking will be educational.”

In effect, every orchestra wants to grow their audiences; to bring meaning to their artistic endeavors; and strength to their financial investments. By genuinely articulating public value, artistic organizations are also best positioned to compete for dwindling public resources and private donations. The League of American Orchestra’s president, Jesse Rosen agrees, “sustaining and growing community work has never been more important, as funders and governments make tough choices about how to allocate scarce resources, and challenge the public value that orchestras create” (Symphony, 2011).

In realizing public value, organizations are finding more creative means to provide their communities opportunities to take ownership of the arts process-- to share the experience of being active participants of beauty; of the profound joy that one derives from playing a part in something larger than oneself. Only when we empower others to play a role in the composition of the arts, our concert halls truly become alive. Rodrigo Guerrero, an El Sistema social strategist contends, “one needs to let the community actively participate in the arts, so that they acknowledge their value. Then, the community cannot disconnect itself from its need for the arts, because such need is not merely an aesthetic need, it is a social need” (Mora-Brito, 36).

As we speak, other prominent El Sistema-inspired programs connected to orchestra leaders and musicians at Allentown, San Diego, Cleveland, Hartford (CityMusic) and Los Angeles (YOLA at HOLA) are articulating new and innovative ways to extend reach in educational programming. The

El Sistema as a tool for re-imagining education ecosystems and mission in American orchestras

beauty of it all is that while these programs share a common inspiration, their approaches are quite unique. They frequently service a wide diversity of populations in schools, community centers, churches, libraries, and other public spaces. They are invested in bringing music to the heart of community.

In El Sistema, one is predominantly invested in looking at meeting particular needs for particular communities. This is done through a flexible ecosystem of teaching and learning and in articulating sound theories of change through advocacy and policy interventions. In the United States, we are just beginning to learn how to translate the values of El Sistema into our own frameworks of cultural thinking and action. There is a thriving movement in favor of music for social justice: a growing network of individual and institutions are currently having major conversation to find ways in which we can connect resources, ideas, and best practices. For many orchestras, thinking in these terms is a major paradigm



shift. As Rosen, explains, figuring out how to bridge excellence and community service is complicated and time consuming work.” In meeting this challenge, we must ask ourselves, how can orchestral organizations be ready to serve a dual role of providing both artistic excellence and public value through relevant social action programming? Can we borrow from El Sistema to help us guide our path to success? How is this best accomplished? It is all about listening, intently, and with a purpose.

In seeking to articulate an American translation of the El Sistema phenomenon, establishing it as a space of possibility, rather than a specific stand-alone theory or pedagogical approach will potentially serve a greater cause and purpose. At the nexus of its philosophy (free-access to collective arts participation), practice (flexible ecosystem of teaching and learning), and advocacy (policy and

intervention), lie meaningful entry points to decipher new renditions of the model and find new pathways to achieve meaningful connections between the concert stage and the community at-large.

In theory, El Sistema is first and foremost a social program; a space of empowerment through music. In practice, a beautiful free-standing and evolving mechanism that serves the community through democratic access, engagement, and advocacy. Through this flexible framework, American orchestras can advocate to create new educational ecosystems of overlapping and interdependent tools that co-exist to serve greater relevance and purpose through social action programming. In this model, the notion of

El Sistema as a tool for re-imagining education ecosystems and mission in American orchestras

aspiring for musical excellence is in harmony with allowing for the active participation of new and diverse voices to create even more vibrant artistic landscapes. In re-imagining mission and balancing the role of orchestras in changing landscapes, Deborah Borda, the president of the Los Angeles Philharmonic recently conveyed to the Associated Press, that indeed, through the creation of social action programming, her orchestra has found artistic imperatives to be in harmony with social imperatives as well (2011).

These spaces of harmony and inclusion can be created through a myriad of programmatic tools: including the creation of orchestral youth development programs (nucleos) for at-risk-children, involving the participation of amateur musicians in educational agendas, empowering school teachers to develop arts minded educational curriculums, developing young talented composers, or by embracing the healing powers of music in healthcare settings. The key is how to best utilize available tools and to understand their collective impact. More often than not, it is the mapping and alignment of existing resources that matters most in crafting more effective social action programming.

Abreu dwells on this notion of collective impact. As resources in Venezuela are scarce, leaders are always in need to find creative ways to balance the challenges of bringing artistic excellence to as many young people as possible. This can be done through careful alignment of resources and mapping of community assets.

In exploring an El Sistema as a framework of action, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra realized that through the sharing of resources and best practices, the organization could encourage meaningful conversations among existing youth in music programs in the city to create a greater collective musical impact. As a result, a Young Musicians Initiative was born. Its mission: “to extend and deepen the engagement of youth in music in Chicago and to foster critical mass and visibility among Chicago’s youth music providers.” The CSO’s first bi-annual Youth in Music Festival was a major success, bringing together over 15 partner organizations to engage in collaboration and discuss the future of music education and the potential of El Sistema thriving at the grassroots level.

In keeping the score, further initiatives such as the CSO’s concept of *Citizen Musician* empower local musicians, teachers, and cultural leaders to work together in pursuit of common goals. The movement, inspired by the “efforts of past and present musicians” to connect artistic endeavors to social engagement is a way to “acknowledge and celebrate acts of citizen musicianship and increase awareness of the existence, quality and value of this work.” In re-imagining the role of musicians, new pathways for community engagement will open up in Chicago. In an interview for the Chicago Tribune, Yo-Yo Ma, the movement’s founder, said about Citizen Musician: “This is about recognizing and pointing a spotlight

El Sistema as a tool for re-imagining education ecosystems and mission in American orchestras

on people who are doing things and trying things, and celebrating it and encouraging it." In providing opportunities for the community to articulate the value and future of the arts, the entire city benefits.

In Chula Vista, the San Diego Youth Symphony's Community Opus Project is creating positive impact in the lives of young people through El Sistema inspired programming. The project serves a few hundred children in six elementary schools that benefit from resources and teachers from the SDYS. In an interview for the San Diego Tribune, Kevin Chaisson, trustee and vice chair of strategic planning for the organization said that the project does not supplant school run music programs, but rather helps "fill in the gaps left by a cash-strapped education system."

In bringing much needed support to educators and students alike, the youth symphony is an active advocate for public value--bringing musical access and quality to underserved schools. In re-imagining mission for the organization, leaders realized that there was a bigger purpose for what the institution could do, and needed to do, for the community. Ultimately, the orchestra feels that this work is "helping build better citizens."

These artistic minded initiatives are transcendental mechanisms that bring schools and artistic organizations together to advocate for public debate and arts education reform. During the Abreu Fellows' visit at the National Association for Music Education in Arlington, the organization's Deputy Executive Director, Michael Blakeslee, explained that artistic organizations, could be more effective as educational institutions, if their relationships with local schools and music teachers are in tune with their specific needs.

The Boston Symphony Orchestra has effectively rendered the value of arts and education partnerships. Currently, they are deeply invested in reenergizing a movement towards music education in the city. Their flagship educational initiative, The Academy, founded just a year ago, supports the expansion of music education in the city's schools, with a pilot program at the Thomas A. Edison School in Brighton, a newly merged public schools that serves children from elementary through middle school. The project serves the entire student body of 775 students, bringing BSO musicians as teachers and advocates of the initiative.

Guided by a philosophy of a community of practice, rigorous and dynamic music curriculum, and instrumental instruction, the program also extends the reach of the BSO's extensive education programming. The former Education Director of the BSO (now the Executive Director for Arts at the Boston Public Schools), said in an interview, that the process leading to the development of The Academy grew out of three-year reflection and strategic planning process: "The Education Department at the BSO started a strategic planning process, and one of the goals of that process was to take our knowledge of all the things we had been doing in the schools, professional development, curriculum

El Sistema as a tool for re-imagining education ecosystems and mission in American orchestras

development, and partnering; and how we could begin to do that in a deeper process.” “The notion of bringing three schools together and trying to create a community of teachers and students, was an ideal opportunity for us.” In mapping resources and engaging in deeper partnerships with public schools, orchestra leaders at the BSO have realized that the essence of their artistic responsibility lies in enhancing the social and educational development of community. In this regard, Abreu explains that the democratization of education and the arts, “cannot be conceived but as priority cause, unavoidable, and



Teacher and student, lead and learn together, Baltimore, 2011

emerging towards a profound and valid transformation of civil society.” For these orchestras, arriving to the stage where purpose is clearly articulated has everything to do with engaging in the process of listening to the needs of a community; it is about realigning objectives and mission through careful strategic planning. As Booth further explained during his address at the National Guild for

Community Arts convening in Boston,

“artistic organization must borrow the strongest ideas to grow and to illuminate the power of the arts for many sakes.”

To empower young people and communities is a beautiful idea. The success and relevance of the arts depend on articulating this 21st century need. In empowering young people as ambassadors for the arts, we are building up a new generation of possibility. As advocates of public value, orchestras are uniquely positioned to extract the best tools from existing quality programming to create new frameworks for success. As leaders in the arts, we know that sustaining our art form will entail creativity and innovation; connections and collaboration. How effectively we communicate and enact our mission will help us tap into more powerful and extraordinary ways to succeed in making a difference in the lives of others through music.

As a musician, I am hopeful about the years ahead, and about the role orchestral organizations will play in the creation of new models of artistic equity and community engagement. In the midst of uncertainty, we have in front of us an opportunity to bring new relevance and focus. But most importantly, as Leonard Bernstein, once said, “an opportunity to help bring music at the top of the spiritual must list.”