

## Introduction

Todos lo comentan, nadie lo delata.  
(Everyone talks, no one tells.)  
—Héctor Lavoe, “*Juanito Alimaña*”

In August 2007 an audience of thousands crammed into London’s Royal Albert Hall for the electrifying Proms debut by Gustavo Dudamel and the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela (SBYO). “Was this the greatest Prom of all time?” asked the *Daily Telegraph’s* arts editor (Gent 2007). A turning point in the orchestra’s rise to global prominence, this concert’s impact stretched back to Venezuela, where President Hugo Chávez read out the rapturous U.K. press reports on his television show *Aló Presidente* and announced an expansion of the music education program known as El Sistema, of which the SBYO forms the summit. As I left the Albert Hall, exhilarated, I decided to study this phenomenon.

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Three years later, I was sitting in a car outside Montalbán, El Sistema’s model music school in Caracas. With its high walls topped with barbed wire and gates manned by security, it had the air of a correctional facility. The director came out to the car to greet me and show me in. As I walked through the main entrance, I saw a large poster—of me. They had downloaded my photo and biography from the Internet and created a poster to announce my visit.

I barely had time to register this before a brass fanfare sounded off to my left. An ensemble of a dozen French horns launched into “Hymn to Joy,” announcing my entrance with perfect precision. I listened, entranced. No sooner had the piece finished than I was ushered off into a nearby classroom, where a choir of sixty children awaited me and burst into song as soon as I walked in. And so the visit proceeded, as I was led to hear the beginners’ orchestra and the next-level “Mozart”

orchestra. The climax was the 120-strong Montalbán Children's Orchestra, awaiting me in the main hall, which performed Bizet's "March of the Toreadors" and Bernstein's "Mambo." As we left the room, a fifty-strong wind ensemble that had miraculously formed outside in the hallway struck up the "William Tell" Overture. Along the way, the staff bombarded me with friendliness, attention, and positivity. I left overwhelmed by the musical skill of the students, the enthusiasm and attentiveness of the staff, and the organizational capacity of the school, which had orchestrated this musical spectacle for my visit with military precision. Montalbán is El Sistema's "shop window," and it knows how to put on a show.

What is El Sistema? The Venezuelan State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras (Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela, FESNOJIV) describes itself as "a social program of the Venezuelan state devoted to the pedagogical, occupational, and ethical salvation of children and young people, via the instruction and collective practice of music, [and] dedicated to the training, protection, and inclusion of the most vulnerable groups in the coun-

**CENTRO ACADÉMICO INFANTIL DE MONTALBÁN**  
**CRONOGRAMA PARA LA DEMOSTRACIÓN**  
**VIERNES 12 DE NOVIEMBRE DE 2010**  
**HORA: 04:00 PM**  
**DEMOSTRACIÓN PARA EL DOCTOR GEOFFREY BAKER PROFESOR DE LA**  
**UNIVERSIDAD DE LONDRES ROYAL HOLLOWAY**

ORQUESTAS Y AGRUPACIONES	CANTIDAD DE ALUMNOS	LUGAR	PROGRAMA	DIRECTOR	ESPACIOS ESTUCHES
ENSAMBLE DE CORNOS	12	LOBBY	- HIMNO DE LA ALEGRIA - CORNOCOPIA	LUIS VALLADARES	C6
NIÑOS CANTORES DE MONTALBÁN	60	A2	- CAMPANAS SOBRE CAMPANAS. - ADORACIÓN	RAQUEL CAMPOMAS Y PAOLA OTERO	
INICIACIÓN ORQUESTAL	60	A4	- MI PRIMERA CANCIÓN - HOLA AMIGUITO	EDWIN MIJARES	A3
ORQUETA INFANTIL "MOZART"	140	C1	- OVERTURA 1812 ARREGLO	ANABELL ASTUDILLO	C5
ORQUESTA INFANTIL MONTALBÁN	120	SE	- TOREADORES - MAMBO	MANUEL CAMPOS	B9
BANDA DE VIENTOS VENEZUELA	50	SALITA	- GUILLERMO TELL - CARTOON SYMPHONY - DANZON JUAREZ	LUIS MELO	B2

The printed schedule for my tour of Montalbán núcleo.

try.”<sup>1</sup> The program began in 1975; according to official figures, by 2012 it comprised approximately 200 music centers (called *núcleos*), nearly 400 orchestras, and some 350,000 participants, around two-thirds from the country’s two poorest social strata.<sup>2</sup> Two distinctive elements are its emphasis on collective learning through orchestral practice and its intensive schedule. Many students may spend around four hours a day in the *núcleo*, five or six days a week. Tuition is offered at low cost or for free, and instruments are loaned to students according to availability.<sup>3</sup>

According to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), its major nonstate funder, “the primary individual benefits attributed to the System include improvements in academic achievement and in the psychological development of children and young people. Its social benefits include reducing the school dropout rate and the rate of youth violence. . . . [I]t has transcended the artistic world to become a social development project that aspires to imbue citizens from a very early age with civic values and teamwork” (“Program to Support” 2007, 1 and 8). The idea that this nationwide network of youth orchestras is in essence a social project aimed at the poor, designed not so much to train musicians as to forge citizens, has put El Sistema firmly on the global map. The centering of music education on classical music has been increasingly questioned since the 1970s, yet El Sistema has sent the pendulum swinging back the other way, representing symphonic music as a route to socioeconomic and moral salvation.

*Gramophone* magazine declared El Sistema the second most important development in classical music of the new millennium (after the invention of the iPod). Sir Simon Rattle went one better, describing it as “the most important thing happening in music anywhere in the world,” and proclaiming: “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. . . . I say I have seen the future of music in Venezuela and that is a resurrection.”<sup>4</sup> Other major figures (Claudio Abbado, Plácido Domingo) and prestigious institutions (UNESCO, the Organization of American States) have enthusiastically endorsed The System and its founding director, José Antonio Abreu. The SBYO has captured the world’s imagination: its concert at the 2011 Proms was the first to sell out, in just three hours.<sup>5</sup>

Combining children, a repertoire of classical favorites, and a heartwarming backstory, El Sistema has an extraordinary capacity to appeal to the emotions, and I am just one of many who has shed a tear during a documentary or felt my hair stand on end in a concert. Rattle fought a losing battle to contain his emotions during a visit to Montalbán in 2004 (Borzacchini 2010, 32). Yet judging from my own visit, this emotional effect is carefully calculated. With the tour designed for maximum impact, El Sistema aims at the heart, not the head. Bolivia Bottome, head of Institutional Development and International Relations at FESNOJIV, stated: “In Venezuela, we don’t show numbers—we do a lot of large showcase demonstrations to fundraise. We sit people down and make them listen to a huge orchestra of children playing Mahler 2 and

then they fund us.”<sup>6</sup> A senior IDB figure admitted privately that its loans to El Sistema—some \$160 million over seventeen years—had been made primarily on the basis of hearing the children in action, rather than robust evidence of the program’s social effectiveness. José Antonio Abreu is famous for utilizing the impact of a huge youth orchestra to persuade politicians and funding bodies: one of his favored techniques in the early days was to ambush politicians with surprise concerts in unlikely places, and he has led lavish performances to celebrate the inauguration of new presidents throughout El Sistema’s history. Abreu understands the power of music—and the music of power.

Emotion also dominates virtually all attempts to analyze El Sistema. Chefi Borzacchini (2010, 7) admits that her book, the most substantial on the program, is not objective but rather “permeated, from start to finish, with emotions and sentiments.” Chapter 1 opens: “We may close our eyes and let our ears and hearts guide us.” Jonathan Govias, a leading commentator on El Sistema, wrote on his blog on April 6, 2012, that for those who have studied the program and experienced it in action, “it’s extremely difficult not to believe completely and utterly in the power of the idea on primarily an emotional rather than rational level.” He noted a tendency toward “intellectual intoxication” in discussions of El Sistema overseas—“to lose sight of all perspective, to buy into propaganda, to be unreasonably passionate.”

El Sistema seems to repel rational analysis—Rattle stated, “if people cry two minutes into the concert, there’s nothing more to say” (Aloy 2013)—yet this is my aim. I arrived in Venezuela with my heart full of the program’s amazing sights and sounds; but during a year of research, I tried to use my head. It became clear that El Sistema had rarely been analyzed properly. There was a lot of relevant material circulating—documentaries, TV programs, books, a PhD, master’s and undergraduate theses, blogs, and a vast number of newspaper and magazine articles—but none combined an independent, objective approach with in-depth research on the everyday realities of El Sistema beyond the guided tours and showcase núcleos. Almost all started from the premise that El Sistema was a great success, a miracle even, and then tried to explain its secret. They began, overawed, with the conclusion—and worked backward from there.

Cook (2003, 254) identifies this procedure as commonplace: “writing about music is generally designed to look as if it is working from causes to effects, but is better understood as working backward from a valued belief to reasons for believing it.” This is particularly true in the Venezuelan case: most foreigners arrive (like me) inspired by a rousing concert, a hagiographical documentary, or a delirious article, and thus with our valued belief firmly in place. But a research project ought properly to start from a blank slate and ask: Is El Sistema successful? At what? What are its strengths and weaknesses? What do Venezuelan musicians think about it?

Such basic questions had rarely been asked outside Venezuela, yet any large organization, and especially a publicly funded one with lofty, expansive aims,

deserves rigorous analysis and public debate. El Sistema is a huge, powerful institution that has hundreds of thousands of students and employees, moves hundreds of millions of dollars, and lobbies intensively at national and international levels, and it is no more deserving of automatic adulation than any other such organization. Plenty of corporations, such as pharmaceutical, oil, or technology companies, claim to be making the world a better place. Their claims are considered fair game for scrutiny, since institutional discourses are constructed instrumentally and often conceal as much as they reveal, but El Sistema has been a conspicuous exception. Its powerful public narrative seems to have overawed observers.

El Sistema plans to expand its capacity to one million children in Venezuela before the end of the decade, and it is becoming a global franchise for music education—one of the fastest-expanding and most-discussed initiatives in the world, now operating in more than sixty countries. In April 2013 the Brazilian government committed to creating three hundred orchestral núcleos and serving half a million children under the guidance of El Sistema (“Brasilia” 2013). Shortly afterward, at the Salzburg Festival, Abreu declared that El Sistema would eventually have a presence in every country in the world. As the idea of the orchestra as a powerful tool for social inclusion takes root internationally and Abreu accumulates international prizes, there is a growing sense that El Sistema provides a model for the world to follow. However, this model lacks support from rigorous, objective research, and its extraordinary boom makes in-depth, critical scrutiny more important than ever. Issues like inclusion and social justice are complex and need to be considered carefully. It is not enough simply for an organization to state them as priorities; researchers must examine what actually takes place and whether it promotes or undermines those goals. What lies behind the impressive surface? Does the program deliver on its promises? Is an orchestra really a model for a better society? As Kartomi (2012, 864) asks of youth orchestras in general: “Is the ‘evidence’ of educational outcomes anecdotal and a perception generated by mission statements, websites, and other publicity material?”

Given El Sistema’s rapid international expansion, the aims of this book go beyond an examination of the Venezuelan program to encompass a broader critical analysis of the youth symphony orchestra as a vehicle for a rounded, inclusive education in music and citizenship. Ethnographic observations will be placed in comparative and theoretical context, exploring how local findings are bolstered by scholarly literature on music, education, and their institutions, and may thus be considered both representative and of wider significance. In ordinary núcleos, the detail of El Sistema’s day-to-day practices was largely unremarkable in relation to the conventional practices of European music education; the most notable feature was quantity—of musicians, hours, and sound. My focus is therefore less on extensive ethnographic detail than on analysis of the program’s broader implications.