

# El Sistema: a model of tyranny?

Far from the shining example of how classical music can change vulnerable young lives many claim it to be, Venezuela's El Sistema fails the country's most deprived children, says **Geoff Baker**

**News:** Venezuela's El Sistema music scheme is 'model of tyranny', UK academic says



Gustavo Dudamel, El Sistema's most famous success story, conducting Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall, London. Photograph: Fotini Christofilopoulou/PR

**Geoff Baker**

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El Sistema started out in 1975 as a youth orchestra for mainly middle-class music students. Today, it's aiming at one million participants in Venezuela alone and has become the most famous music program in the world, copied in dozens of countries.

Its success derives from its claim to be a social rather than a musical program, offering Venezuela's most vulnerable children a way out of their impoverished lives and - for the most talented - into the world's great concert halls. Its top ensembles, such as the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra (nowadays they've replaced the "youth" with "symphony"), are also famed for their visual spectacle - vast numbers, synchronised movements and distinctive colourful jackets. Stories of salvation and breathtaking musical performances have seized the popular imagination and elevated El Sistema into a global phenomenon.

Inspired by these rosy images, I went to Venezuela in search of the program's secret. But to my surprise, Venezuelan musicians and cultural observers told me privately about a different Sistema, one that bore little resemblance to the heart-warming story told by the institution itself and the international media.

Likened overseas to Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa, founder José Antonio Abreu was compared in the Venezuelan press to Machiavelli, and had picked up the moniker "the Philanthropic Ogre". A former politician, he clearly had ambitions beyond the musical realm.

As a conductor, Abreu epitomised the autocratic maestro. He placed discipline above all else, and behind the vibrant show, El Sistema's leading ensemble became known privately as the Venezuelan Slave Orchestra. Yet with its top performers paid handsomely, the Sistema slogan "tocar y luchar (to play and to struggle)" became "to play and get paid".

Seen overseas as a beacon of social justice, at home the program was characterised variously as a cult and a corporation. There were numerous allegations of irregularities around its financial affairs, and I also heard claims of sexual abuse and relationships between teachers and students, presaging stories that subsequently emerged from specialist music schools in the UK.

I found many Sistema musicians unconvinced by claims that the project was aimed at Venezuela's most vulnerable children. Pointing to a lack of mechanisms for consistently targeting this demographic, they suggested that most musicians came from the middle levels of society. They doubted that many children from truly deprived families would remain long in such a demanding program.

Gustavo Dudamel, El Sistema's superstar conductor, describes the orchestra as "a beautiful model for a society". Ordinary musicians were more sceptical, however, seeing it instead as the world in miniature, with its problems intact or even intensified. "Yes, it's a model", said one, "of absolute tyranny: a society where someone will always be telling you what to do.... It'll be organised, of course, because you have someone with lots of power who tells you exactly what to do, and you keep your mouth shut, end of story."

Contrary to popular belief, El Sistema did not begin life as a social program, and the social benefits subsequently attributed to it, such as inclusion and teamwork, while music to the ears of funders, are harder to detect than authoritarianism and competition. Indeed, claims of miraculous social transformation have yet to be verified by any rigorous evaluation, despite 40 years of state funding and more than \$500m in development bank loans. Declarations of its success are founded instead on centuries-old beliefs about the uplifting power of high art and a rather more modern PR operation.

Widely portrayed as a revolutionary social project, El Sistema in fact echoes well-worn and in some cases distinctly tarnished thinking about music education and social development. It's a traditional "drills and skills" program: hierarchical, teacher-centred, focused on repetitive learning and performance. It has clear antecedents in 19th-century Europe, where music education was promoted among the masses as part of a drive for moral improvement and higher profits; it was seen as a way of keeping the workers out of taverns, increasing their productivity and decreasing their revolutionary potential. Its roots go back further still to the Spanish conquest of the Americas, when missionaries used education in European music as a means of converting and 'civilising' the indigenous population. These precursors were programs of social control, not emancipation.

Far from a revolutionary, Abreu is a man of conservative political and religious convictions. The "boot-camp" values that his project champions - discipline, obedience, order - are viewed askance by many progressive educationalists today, who prefer creativity and critical thinking. It's ironic, then, that El Sistema has been championed internationally by the liberal cultural establishment.

El Sistema, rather than being “the future of music”, as Simon Rattle believes, is a throwback to the past, raising serious questions about much-heralded efforts to transplant it to the UK. As one Venezuelan musician told me, “if they want to copy El Sistema in Scotland, they need to shout at the kids and tell them they’re useless”.

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