A n unprecedented collaboration unfolded this summer at the performing arts mecca in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps. In addition to its usual roster of world-famous musicians, directors, and iconic orchestras, the Salzburg Festival hosted no fewer than seven massive ensembles from El Sistema, the extraordinary programme in Venezuela that engages hundreds of thousands of children and young people in musical ensembles on a daily basis, with the twin goals of musical achievement and social development. El Sistema’s visionary leader José Antonio Abreu, who founded the program 38 years ago, is convinced that ‘the vicious cycle of poverty can be broken when a child poor in material possessions acquires spiritual wealth through music.’

All 1,300 of the visiting El Sistema musicians were young. Many were children. And more than a hundred were disabled. It is a bold initiative. Here in this jewel-like city of castles and cathedrals, where Mozart’s likeness is everywhere and his spirit is very much alive, the venerable traditions of the Festival run deep. The crowds thronging the cobbled streets are well-heeled and elegantly attired; mostly German-speaking or Japanese, they come expecting to hear European masterworks delivered by legendary artists. They may know of Gustavo Dudamel, the Sistema-trained wunderkind who became conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic four years ago at the age of 28; but they typically know very little about El Sistema itself. Subscription ticket-buyers coming to hear Mahler or Tchaikovsky have been more than once been confounded to find hundreds of Latin American teenagers onstage.

In the opening concert of El Sistema’s residency, the forces arrayed for Mahler’s eighth symphony included not only eight world-class soloists, the Wiener Singverein chorus, and the Salzburg Festival Children’s Chorus, but also the 200 members (mostly 20-somethings) of the Sistema’s flagship Simón Bolívar Orchestra of Venezuela, the 150 even younger members of the Venezuelan National Choir, and children from a new Sistema-inspired initiative in Europe. The Mahler Eight that emerged from this unorthodox group effort was both polished and riveting. Under Dudamel’s transparently expressive direction, orchestra members swayed together as though blown by gusts of music; the singers were borne aloft toward the symphony’s final epiphany. At the end, the audience was silent. Applause began sporadically but built slowly and surely into a standing ovation. Dudamel took bow after bow from deep within the orchestra, as is his custom; orchestra members exchanged grins and applauded heartily for one another; house lights went up, musicians left the stage, and on went the applause. After the performance I talked with a gentleman who hailed from Maiernigg (‘right where Mahler composed!’) who told me, ‘I have been coming to this festival since I was a child, and I’ve never seen audiences react with such excitement’.

What stirs excitement is the players’ consistent combination of technical brilliance and passion – a combination that stems from the distinctive nature of El Sistema training, which emphasises rigorous high standards in a warm, communicative ensemble learning environment. Each orchestra’s members grow up together; nearly half the members of the Simón Bolívar Orchestra have been playing together since they first went abroad to play at the Kennedy Center in the 1990s, when most were around ten. The ensembles grow ever more virtuosic, but they never lose the joy, passion and mutual trust that has characterised their formative years.

A concert by the Teresa Carreño National Orchestra, whose members’ average age is 19, featured no fewer than thirteen hundred Venezuelans, almost all of them under 30: that is not what comes to mind when one thinks of the Salzburg Festival, but Tricia Tunstall finds this year’s event abuzz with youthful energy and Latin American pizzazz.
three rhapsodic *Romeo and Juliet* (Tchaikovsky, Berlioz, and Prokofiev); a frisky, incisive Bartók *Concerto for Orchestra*; and a Tchaikovsky *Fourth* of uncommon urgency. In the course of this ‘marathon concert,’ as it was billed, there was not only a switch from one 29-year-old star conductor from the Sistema, Christian Vásquez, to another, Diego Matheuz, but also three successive concertmasters (two of whom were female).

The even younger Youth Orchestra of Caracas (average age 18) delivered glistening versions of Shostakovich’s Ninth and Tchaikovsky’s Fifth under the baton of yet another gifted young Venezuelan, Dietrich Paredes, then launched into a series of encores: Saint-Saëns’ *Bacchanale*, the Brazilian *choro* piece *Tico-Tico*, a dance from Ginastera’s *Estancia*. At which point the lights went out, and came back up on the players wearing brilliant Venezuelan jackets; when they sprang out of their chairs and danced their way through Bernstein’s *Mambo*; and when they met the ensuing wild applause by flinging their jackets into the crowd – even those of us who had known what to expect were on our feet, cheering. Afterwards, I managed to snap a photo of a beaming fellow in full lederhosen and a Venezuelan jacket.

The residency had more in store: A chamber version of the Simón Bolívar Orchestra and National Choir took on the annual ritual of performing Mozart’s *Mass in C* in St Peter’s Abbey. The brand-new 280-member National Children’s Orchestra, whose members aged seven to 14 had never left Venezuela before, joined forces with children from an emerging Sistema Europe orchestra – and then performed Mahler’s first symphony under the baton of Sir Simon Rattle, a long-time Sistema advocate. Perhaps most affecting of all was the White Hands Choir, whose 110 members were also on their first trip away from their homeland. Half of the choir members suffer from disabilities such as blindness and autism; while they sing, the other half, who are hearing-disabled, perform expressive choreography with their gloved hands.

El Sistema is not entirely new to international audiences. The main orchestra has toured the world several times since a 2007 appearance at the London Proms, captured in a viral YouTube clip, catapulted it into global awareness; other national ensembles have toured Europe and Asia in the last few years. What’s new in Salzburg is that the festival is not just sponsoring one or another Sistema group; it is bringing a multiplicity of ensembles in order to showcase the almost unimaginable range of this great national experiment. In a letter to patrons, the festival’s president Helga Rabl-Stadler and artistic director Alexander Pereira, write that a recent trip to Venezuela was ‘an overwhelming experience for us, in musical and human terms’. They continue: ‘Therefore it was our heartfelt wish to bring El Sistema to Salzburg, giving you the opportunity to witness the entire breadth of this fascinating orchestral and choral education programme. El Sistema demonstrates the extent to which music can change society in a way that is unique throughout the world.’

How do 1,300 young Venezuelans feel about playing the Salzburg Festival? ‘We know what an incredible privilege it is,’ several told me. ‘And we feel honored. To be here where Mozart was born – it’s huge!’ They also feel pride as representatives of their country’s musical culture and achievements. ‘These concerts are momentous,’ said a violist, ‘but we always ask, what’s next? At the same time we’re celebrating this achievement, we’re looking ahead to the next challenge.’

Gustavo Dudamel, encountered during a stroll through Salzburg’s historical district a few hours before opening night, used the same word. ‘Are we challenged?’ he said. ‘Well, yes. Are we having fun? Absolutely, yes!’

Given this season’s vast six-week schedule of world-class artists performing opera, theatre and concert music, it’s safe to say that the Salzburg Festival has never sounded better. It’s also safe to say that, El Sistema in town, it’s never been quite this much fun.