EVERYTHING TO LEARN

Tricia Tunstall

The confluence of the National Children’s Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela and the Mozart Children’s Orchestra of the Salzburg Mozarteum Foundation is an unprecedented event in the history of the Salzburg Festival. Never before have so many children from such different cultural worlds come together to perform as one group. It is an exciting moment when the Festival celebrates the multicultural future generation of classical music.

Artur Schnabel famously wrote that Mozart’s music is ‘too easy for children and too difficult for adults’. For the children of these two exceptional orchestras, Mozart is therefore the perfect meeting ground. The 40 members of the Mozart Children’s Orchestra, a group formed just a year ago by the Salzburg Mozarteum Foundation, come from the Salzburg region. Ranging from seven to 12 years of age, they are all students at music schools in Austria and Bavaria and were chosen by their schools to be in the Orchestra. For these children, Mozart is a birthright, a musical world in which they are steeped from their earliest years. In the words of their conductor, Christoph Koncz, ‘Mozart is as deep a part of their environment as the cuisine and the architecture’.
The children of the more than 200-member National Children’s Orchestra, who are between seven and 15 years old, hail from right across Venezuela; they have arrived in the Orchestra through a rigorous audition process that selected the most talented, motivated and virtuosic young musicians in the country. In many ways, their homeland and their cultural heritage are far from Central Europe. But because they have grown up in El Sistema, Venezuela’s extraordinary national programme of children’s orchestras, they are as thoroughly steeped in Mozart’s music as the children of Salzburg.

In El Sistema children begin hearing the great symphonic masterworks from their earliest years. Their very first learning groups are likely to be called ‘Baby Mozart’ orchestras. At six or seven, in their first instrumental ensembles, they play Mozart’s Variations on ‘Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman’ – more commonly known as ‘Twinkle, twinkle little star’ – and throughout their training they encounter and re-encounter Mozart’s symphonies and concertos as well as those by Haydn, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and others. Mozart, the composer most cherished by Sistema founder José Antonio Abreu when he himself was a child, has been a constant and beloved musical presence for the children of El Sistema ever since the programme’s first orchestra began in 1975.

Here at the Festival, these two groups of children meet to share their passion for Mozart and for music. They sit intermingled onstage; each Salzburg child shares a music stand with a Venezuelan player. The Venezuelans, who are more seasoned performers, are natural mentors and guides for the youngsters of Salzburg – even in playing the music of Mozart. From the Venezuelan youths, the Salzburg children can absorb the brio that El Sistema musicians bring to Mozart, to all music. In turn the Venezuelans have an opportunity to experience and be touched by the grace and dedication of the youngest musicians of Salzburg.

It is fitting that this performance includes one piece written by a very young Mozart. His Symphony No. 4 in D major is only the second authenticated symphony in the composer’s catalogue; it was written when he was nine years old, during a tour of Europe with his family. Scored for strings, two oboes and two horns, it shows the stylistic influence of Johann Christian Bach, J.S. Bach’s youngest son, whom Mozart met during that tour and quickly came to revere.
It is followed by the first movement of Piano Concerto No. 12 in A major, written in 1782, when Mozart was 26. The opening Allegro is an elegant, light-hearted conversation between soloist and orchestra. As the composer himself wrote, it is ‘very brilliant, pleasing to the ear, and natural, without being insipid’.

For the final piece the combined children’s orchestra turns from Europe to Latin America. Manuel Artes’ Chamambo is a lively piece filled with jazz-inflected rhythms and riffs. A favourite in the repertoire of El Sistema-inspired programmes in the USA, it provides the children a chance to swing together, Latin-style.

It is also fitting that the combined orchestra will be led by two very young conductors, 26-year-old Austrian Christoph Koncz and 18-year-old Jesús Parra from Venezuela. Koncz, born in Konstanz to an Austrian-Hungarian family of musicians, has been the principal second violinst of the Vienna Philharmonic since 2008, as well as being concertmaster of the Verbier Festival Orchestra.

Christoph Koncz knows the Mozart Children’s Orchestra well, having conducted them in during the Mozart Week in Salzburg in February 2013. ‘Working with them is really rewarding’, he says, ‘because they are so attentive and enthusiastic’. He adds that although many of them have had little or no experience playing in ensembles, ‘it’s never too early to put children together in an orchestra. It’s a great social experience as well as musical, because they learn to take care of each other and support each other.’

Jesús Parra, like the Venezuelan children he conducts, grew up within El Sistema. Born and raised in the province of Aragua, he was playing violin at the age of nine and began conducting when he was 12. He studied at the Simón Bolívar Conservatory in Caracas and has conducted the top tier Youth Orchestra of Caracas as well as the National Children’s Orchestra, serving as guest conductor for ensembles in Turkey, Britain and at Carnegie Hall.

He speaks with awe of the young virtuosos of the National Children’s Orchestra. ‘I grew up in El Sistema, and I’m used to hearing kids play
incredibly well’, he says. ‘But even for me, this orchestra is hard to believe. I am speechless when I hear them and work with them!’

Both conductors relish the chance for the two children’s orchestras to play together, seeing it as a learning experience for all. Christoph Koncz says that ‘in the musical life of El Sistema children, there is no fear. They are not inhibited about making mistakes; they practice and practice and practice, and in performance they just go for it.’ He hopes the children of his Orchestra find that spirit contagious. In turn, Jesús Parra is certain that the young Venezuelans ‘have everything to learn’ in Salzburg. ‘They will feel the music of Mozart in a new way’, he says.

By performing in open rehearsals, the children and conductors of Salzburg and Venezuela invite the audience to share their learning experience. Their delight in playing this music together is powerful proof that the spirit of Mozart is alive and well, thriving alongside Chamambo. And the eloquence and ease of their musical communication is testimony to the truth of music as a universal language. That, says Christoph Koncz, is the most joyful part of all. ‘Playing together, communicating with one another through music – this will be an experience they will never forget.’

Jesús Parra speaks of the children’s remarkable capacity to bridge cultures. ‘This new generation of young musicians, they will open new ways for music to bring people together’, he says. ‘In the same way that Mozart changed everything about the musical world, these children will change things. They will make it more and more possible that people can be united through music.’

Tricia Tunstall is a writer and music educator. She is author of Changing Lives: Gustavo Dudamel, El Sistema, and the Transformative Power of Music, published by W.W. Norton, and Note by Note: A Celebration of the Piano Lesson. She has written for The New York Times, Classical Music and many other publications. She maintains a private piano studio in Maplewood, New Jersey.

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