Another Perspective: El Sistema—A Perspective for North American Music Educators

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What is This?
The Venezuelan youth orchestra program known as “El Sistema” is on the minds and in the conversations of many music teachers in North America. The program, which began in Caracas thirty-eight years ago, is dedicated to changing the lives of Venezuelan children through intensive immersion in collaborative, ambitious, and exuberant ensemble playing and singing. Virtually unknown outside of Venezuela until the past decade, El Sistema has come to international attention through the world tours of its premiere youth symphony, the Simon Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela, led by its charismatic young conductor Gustavo Dudamel, who is also the conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

In the last three years, El Sistema has become a truly international movement, with Sistema-inspired programs forming across the United States and Canada, throughout Europe, and in many Asian countries. It is important for U.S. music teachers to understand the vision, principles, and practices of El Sistema so that all parts of the music education ecosystem in the United States can benefit from each other’s strengths.

The article by Melissa Lesniak published in the December 2012 Music Educators Journal is a welcome first step in this process. Unfortunately, her article misses a number of central points about El Sistema, and her discussion of its relevance to the United States is compromised by automatic assumptions about the United States’ learning culture and its capacity for change.

Lesniak’s central misunderstanding about El Sistema appears in the very first sentence of the article abstract, where she characterizes it as “a music education program for aspiring musicians . . . of limited means” (p. 63). This is precisely what El Sistema is not. The goal of El Sistema is not to foster the development of professional musicians, but to foster the growth of children toward being cooperative, productive, and joyful members of a community and a society. Music is the means through which this goal is accomplished, but it is not the ultimate end.

Of course, many children with strong musical affinities and talents do in fact become professional musicians through El Sistema’s rigorous training, with conductor Gustavo Dudamel being the most famous example. But this is not the raison d’être for El Sistema. Directors of Venezuelan Sistema centers, called núcleos, consistently and clearly describe their work this way: “We are
not trying to create musicians. We are trying to create citizens."

Lesniak identifies three primary characteristics of El Sistema: a considerable time investment, monetary incentives, and group instruction on a limited core of orchestral masterworks. These are certainly Sistema characteristics, but by isolating them without a general discussion of the fundamental principles from which these and many other characteristics flow, she has obscured and sometimes distorted their meaning and significance. It is the basic principles underlying El Sistema practices that make those practices distinctive and worthy of attention; therefore, I will focus on some of these principles.

"In their very essence, the orchestra and the chorus are much more than artistic structures: They are examples and schools of civic life," says José Antonio Abreu, founder and director of El Sistema, "because to play and sing together means to intimately coexist together toward perfection and excellence."

This eloquent expression of El Sistema's central vision clarifies the meaning of musical endeavor within Sistema practice: It is centered in the process of playing, singing, and working together, aiming at the highest standards in creating a work of beauty. It is this process itself that is the goal because of the psychic, emotional, and social resources children are able to develop within that process.

This central vision is the underlying reason for most key Sistema practices. The high-intensity time commitment, for example, is important because in order to realize the kind of personal and social transformation just described, the Sistema must function as a true alternative world for children and young people—a world where they continually experience being valued, encouraged, and inspired. Many hours a week are required to create and sustain such an alternative world.

The practice of ensemble learning as the primary means of instruction also flows directly from the ultimate Sistema goal, which is to foster and develop civic qualities like cooperation, responsibility, empathy, and self-discipline in children and young people. In the process of playing and learning together, Sistema children are constantly coached and encouraged to value teamwork and solidarity and to pursue and create harmony within their ensembles.

Mentoring and peer-to-peer learning are further examples of key Sistema practices that support the central goal. The ideas that everyone is a potential teacher as well as a learner and that contributing to the greater whole involves both learning and teaching are both concepts that give rise to a high incidence of learning from mentors as well as learning from peers. Within the El Sistema learning culture, even a beginner who knows very few things can help teach those things to others who know even less.

Another major practice of El Sistema programs is frequent performance. Performance is important for several reasons: First, it is a major motivator for children in ensembles to work hard together. The process of setting high standards and striving to meet them can stimulate a sharper sense of cooperation, self-discipline, and mutual reinforcement. Also, performance is an important way to draw parents and community members into the world of the El Sistema program—as audience members, they can intensify their children's musical experience by responding with enthusiasm and pride. Eventually, parents and relatives become part of the greater community the program aims to create.

The practice of maintaining a core repertoire to which children return again and again as they grow and develop is not as restrictive a measure as Lesniak assumes it is. El Sistema ensembles in Venezuela play and sing a very wide variety of music, including a good deal of Venezuelan folk music, and the staff and leader of each program have considerable latitude in choosing what repertoire works best for their children. It is true, however, that there are certain core pieces—mostly symphonic masterworks—in the repertoire of most Sistema programs. Children begin to know these works at a very young age. Sometimes they play simplified arrangements of the works, and at other times they are taught a rudimentary part to play (e.g., downbeats) and perform along with an older youth orchestra as the more advanced group plays the original version.

This practice, like the others mentioned, serves the fundamental goals of El Sistema. If children are immersed in a masterwork at a young age, they learn early to identify with it and feel themselves a valued part of its re-creation through ensemble effort and teamwork. When they revisit the work as preteens and then as teenagers, they are already prepared to find joy in it, and they are ready to enter the collaborative process of exploring it more deeply. In addition, this practice is a way to ensure that young people can move from one region of the country to another and find an immediate entry point to another Sistema program through music they've come to love and identify with. A shared core repertoire thus extends the idea of "community" throughout the nation and beyond.

Lesniak dwells on what she terms "monetary incentives" (p. 64), but in fact monetary rewards are a very small part of the totality of motivational forces that drive El Sistema kids. It's true that the members of the highest-level national and regional orchestras receive a stipend, and that stipend makes it easier to stay in the Sistema because it helps mitigate pressures on these individuals to contribute to the family income. However, the majority of Sistema students are not motivated by any sort of financial compensation. They play for fun, for joy, for the sense of belonging, and for the satisfaction of striving toward a goal. They play as if their lives depend on it, and this is often the case.

A more accurate way to address El Sistema's financial impact would be to say that it offers instruments and years of music learning experience, all completely free. This is in keeping with the Sistema's ultimate goal of providing access to music learning to all Venezuelan children, even the very poorest. El Sistema’s
success in striving toward this goal has been unparalleled in music history. Since 1978, seven successive Venezuelan government regimes have agreed to fund the program, which currently serves 400,000 children in 286 núcleos (El Sistema music learning centers).

A substantial part of Lesniak's article is devoted to whether El Sistema can be successful in the United States. She notes, correctly, that the funding realities here are vastly different from Venezuela's. Here, El Sistema will not have federal support for the foreseeable future, and each U.S. El Sistema–inspired program has to find a way to patch together funding from private donors, philanthropic organizations, symphonies, schools, and occasionally local government agencies.

However, she goes on to say that "the structure of El Sistema is not something that would be accepted by most American parents and educators." In her opinion, there are so many other options and distractions available that U.S. children and their families won't want to take on such a large time commitment. "It would not be feasible in American society" (p. 65), she writes. "Most parents would not want their children enrolled in a program that absorbs almost all the child's extracurricular time."

The hundred or so El Sistema–inspired programs currently thriving in the United States are proving her wrong. The leaders of these programs have found that once the community understands what's being offered, they usually have more applications than they have room for. Many programs already have a waiting list. These families may or may not have many other options available. But they clearly believe that the development of their children as healthy and whole depends less on "options" than on a learning culture that consistently offers essential character-building skills in the context of the art of music.

There's no question that El Sistema–inspired programs in the United States can't copy the Venezuelan model exactly: Each program must be flexible enough to adapt the system to the real needs of its community. This is also true, by the way, of the many El Sistema–inspired programs in Europe and the emerging programs in South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

But these programs are also finding that their orientation toward El Sistema's central vision is their best asset and their most valuable guide—and that this broad vision is eminently workable in every setting. The idea that children passionately engaged in ensemble music learning and instrumental or vocal performance will develop the inner strengths and relationship skills they will need to succeed as productive members of society is a concept that travels well everywhere.

Lesniak concludes that El Sistema's main value for us is its offer "to remove economic barriers for students who would like to experience orchestral instrument study" (p. 66). As with the abstract at the beginning of her article, this misses the main point about what El Sistema actually is. The program's chief value is not for children who already know they want to play in orchestras. Its chief value, rather, is for children—all children—who need to feel the sense of being a valuable and contributing part of an entire community.

El Sistema powerfully answers that need and thus has much to offer children in North America. I believe, moreover, that the more it can form ties and cooperate with the existing structure of music education in the United States, the more effective both the Sistema and the existing musical ecosystem will be.

Readers of Music Educators Journal may be interested to learn that in November 2012, the Canadian Association of Music Educators (CMEA) took up the question of El Sistema, so members could decide for themselves what its potential effects would be on music education in Canada. The position paper created as a result of that decision states decisively: "El Sistema has benefits that resonate with the mandate and mission of CMEA." Some of the benefits cited are its outreach to underserved children, its ability to build a sense of community, and its ability to provide "transformative social interventions and expansive learning opportunities with explicit aims of fostering positive values and experiences, personal sense of well-being and identity . . . and a moral commitment to learning music that engenders personal and collective responsibility for contributing to the success of the program."

The Canadian position paper goes on to make clear that El Sistema should not be considered a replacement or substitute for existing music education programs and that "it must not lessen the responsibility of governments at all levels to provide quality music education within school systems." The two music education spheres will work best, it is concluded, in partnership. Finally, the CMEA offers encouragement for El Sistema to be a partner in a vital learning community throughout Canada.

I believe that the same kind of cooperative partnership between existing music education programs and El Sistema is what will most benefit children in the United States. El Sistema programs can function beautifully within the existing ecosystem of music education for several reasons: First, they often reach children who would not otherwise experience any sort of music education. Second, their emphasis on ensemble, on process, and on joy is a welcome and much needed contribution to our understanding of what music can mean in children's lives. Perhaps most important, El Sistema has recreated music education as a sphere for learning in community—energetic, ambitious, cooperative, and joyful community. That is a vision that can enrich and recharge the work of all music educators.

NOTES
2. Ibid., 2.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 4.