"The orchestra and choir are more than artistic structures," says the visionary creator of El Sistema, José Antonio Abreu, "they are schools of social life." They are also incubators of joy through music-making—and this could be Venezuela's trickiest natural resource to export.

By Jamie Bernstein and Tricia Tunstall
Half a decade ago, if anyone had told us that a 27-year-old would be taking the podium at the Los Angeles Philharmonic ... that he would come from an obscure Venezuelan city ... and that Venezuela itself would attain international fame for creating the world’s largest and most extraordinary system for music education—we might have been forgiven for reacting with disbelief.

Just a few short years later, El Sistema is perhaps the biggest news in the world of classical music. The Venezuelan program of social development through music learning, founded 37 years ago by the visionary musician/economist José Antonio Abreu, is now a vast national network of music learning centers, called “nucleos,” serving 400,000 children, most of them living in poverty. And thanks in part to the celebrity status of Gustavo Dudamel, the Sistema alumnus who now leads the L.A. Phil, El Sistema has quickly attained the status of a global movement. Sistema-inspired programs exist in almost every Latin American country, and there are now over 60 Sistema-inspired programs in the U.S.

The question naturally arises: Can a program born and bred in the specific culture of Venezuela take root and thrive—and maintain coherence—in the tremendously diverse cultural conditions of the United States and other countries? We set out to explore this question by asking a wide variety of program leaders what was most challenging for them about
transplanting the principles and practices of El Sistema to their own environments and how they met those challenges.

But first: What exactly are those principles and practices of El Sistema? There is no Sistema handbook of rules and regulations. One comes to understand what El Sistema is only by observing it in action. We realized that we needed to clarify its essential features before discussing the challenges of adapting these features to new settings. So, based on our own firsthand experiences observing Venezuelan Sistema programs, we have put together the following list of ten “El Sistema fundamentals.”

1. **Social transformation through musical learning and playing.** This is the vision at the heart of El Sistema: that the process of learning and playing music together has the capacity to transform children, their families, and their communities. “The orchestra and choir are more than artistic structures,” Maestro Abreu has said, “they are schools of social life.”

2. **Accessibility.** El Sistema programs are open, with no auditions, and free for all children.

3. **High standards of musical excellence.** The rigorous pursuit of musical excellence is essential to El Sistema’s mission of personal and social transformation.

4. **Immersion.** Children attend five or even six days a week for several hours. Intensive daily immersion in a Sistema program gives a child an alternative world where he or she is safe, valued, competent, and connected to others.

5. **Ensemble learning.** Most music learning takes place in ensembles, either full orchestras or sectored. Private lessons are also part of the El Sistema experience, but the core experience is the ensemble, where children learn the crucial skills of working together.

6. **Peer learning.** “The secret of El Sistema is simple,” says master teacher Susan Siman. “Put a skilled child next to a not-so-skilled child.” Children are encouraged to be teachers as well as learners, and to be generous with what they know.

7. **Frequent performing.** Children quickly learn that performance is an intrinsic part of their music-making.

Short-term performance goals generate powerful incentives to rehearse intensely and strive for excellence—and the gratification of a job well done spurs the children on to their next undertaking.

8. **Involvement with families and communities.** When families and community members feel invested in the work of the program, then El Sistema becomes truly transformational.

9. **Joy.** Joy breaks out everywhere in a Sistema program: in the passion of teaching, the exuberance of playing, the spontaneous humor and friendship intrinsic to making music together.

10. **“Ridiculous ambition.”** Nicola Killean, head of Sistema Scotland, has used this memorable phrase to describe how all the above fundamentals are approached. Goals are set improbably high and then passionately pursued. What has been most challenging about adapting these fundamentals to other cultures? One clear and widespread challenge involves the need to be funded substantially enough to make the program free—or at least nearly free—and thus accessible to all. Sistema-inspired programs outside Venezuela quickly bump up against the painful reality that, unlike their source of inspiration, they do not receive lavish government support. They must therefore devote untold quantities of energy and ingenuity to keeping themselves financially solvent.

In the U.S., most Sistema-inspired programs lean heavily on the largesse of philanthropic institutions. Some programs are fortunate enough to employ “the 1 percent solution”: a single private donor who underwrites the program, usually...
through a foundation. As the programs expand, however, they must also expand their funding sources.

There are other paths to funding. Several Sistema-inspired programs are affiliated with symphony orchestras, most prominently the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s YOLA (Youth Orchestra Los Angeles) program. With Dudamel himself at the orchestra’s helm, interest and funding for YOLA come in healthy doses. L.A. Phil President Deborah Borda, who has mastered the interface of El Sistema, Dudamel, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, says: “Each of our YOLA orchestras is unique, and each requires commitment and work to create something larger and more effective than any single organization could take on by itself.”

The Baltimore Symphony supports another major Sistema-inspired program, OrchKids. Director Dan Taylor says, “In Baltimore, we’ve set a precedent for other orchestras in the world: We are not just performance ensembles, not just educational exposure, but living, breathing, community-minded educational institutions.”

Other Sistema-inspired programs find support through youth orchestras. In San Diego, San Antonio, and Philadelphia, among other cities, youth orchestras have launched such programs as a way to expand their reach beyond neighborhoods that can afford their tuition.

Some U.S. Sistema leaders hope to convince local governments that funding Sistema programs makes economic sense. Stanford Thompson, director of Philadelphia’s Play On, Philly!, makes a strong argument that investing in his program would ultimately cost city and state governments less than what they currently spend on at-risk kids who end up in juvenile detention centers, prisons, and rehab facilities.

No matter how a Sistema-inspired program is designed or underwritten, each must grapple with the issue of maintaining the highest possible caliber of musical excellence. This is, after all, one of the essential ingredients of a Sistema program. The goals of social rescue and musical excellence actually potentiate each other. As Maestro Abreu so often says, “Culture for the poor must never be poor culture; it must be the most excellent culture.”

Stanford Thompson, a graduate of Curtis Institute of Music, makes it a priority to bring the highest-rank performers he can persuade to visit his Play On, Philly! program: “Simon Rattle, Wynton Marsalis, Bobby McFerrin, and Marin Alsop are just a few of the people who have worked with our kids—these are opportunities I didn’t receive, even through an institution like Curtis.” Marin Alsop points out one strong argument for having a Sistema program under the wing of a major orchestra: “We have the huge advantage of having world-class musicians for the kids to emulate.”

Many U.S. uiceo leaders cite the difficulty of finding and preparing music teachers to undertake this very different approach to music education. Eric Booth, an international arts learning consultant and longtime advisor to El Sistema programs worldwide, notes that the adaptation process can look deceptively simple. “On the surface, it appears that we already do this work, so ‘just add hours, and, presto, youth transformation through music,’” he says. “Under that surface, however, many of the practices that make the work in Venezuela so potent directly challenge our entrenched norms and traditions.” Total immersion, ensemble learning, peer
learning, frequent performances all over the community—these are not the natural domain of a conventional American music teacher.

Says Anne Fitzgibbon, director of New York City’s Harmony Program, “In Venezuela, I was struck by the quality and passion of the teachers I observed. One of our challenges at the Harmony Program, as we prepare our teachers, is instilling in them a style of teaching they may not have experienced themselves.”

Dalouge Smith, director of San Diego’s Community Opus Project, says, “El Sistema work is equal parts music education, community building, and social intervention. Some of the first few teachers we recruited didn’t understand the complexity of working with low-income children and families. Finding and retaining the right teachers has to be our priority.”

To address this problem, a unique and promising new partnership between Bard College, Longy School of Music, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic has resulted in a new Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) in Music degree for music educators who want to employ the Sistema approach. Erik Holmgren, Longy’s Director of Teacher Education and Educational Initiatives, says the MAT’s objective is to “realign the goals of music teachers to embrace social and community development alongside musical achievement.”

The first teachers trained by this MAT program won't be ready to hire until spring 2013; in the meantime, U.S. programs have addressed the problem of finding and training teachers in a variety of ways. Many have relied on the experience of graduates from another fellowship program, the Abreu Fellowship (now called the Sistema Fellowship): born of Maestro Abreu’s TED talk “wish” in 2009 and housed at the New England Conservatory, this fellowship is now in its fourth year of training ten teachers and leaders per year in Sistema philosophy and pedagogy. Sistema programs that haven’t been able to hire graduates from the prestigious Sistema Fellowship have met the teacher-training problem by offering their teachers professional development workshops taught by Sistema experts, or by making observation visits to some of the longest-running and most experienced programs. All dream, naturally, of sending staff to Venezuela for training; but this can be prohibitively expensive, and the state organization that runs El Sistema, called “Fundamusical,” is often overwhelmed with visitors and unable to accommodate requests from U.S. start-ups.

Alongside the challenge of orienting staff toward a whole new way of teaching comes the equally difficult task of involving families and communities in Sistema programs.

There’s a kind of Catch-22 here: Community involvement is necessary for building a program, and yet parents and communities are most likely to offer committed support only after they see what success looks like.

Maestro Abreu has long known the best way through this impasse: Parents and communities are best enrolled by seeing their children play music together. Dan Trahey concurs: “In a culture where concerts are performed every week or so, parents will say, ‘There’s no way my child will not play in the orchestra.’”

For Katie Wyatt, director of the Sistema-inspired program KidZNotes in Durham, North Carolina, the task has been to meld KidZNotes with the community. She has fostered connections with every social-change enterprise in the city, and her kids play concerts for all manner of civic events. “We’re making ourselves inseparable from the infrastructure of Durham,” she says.

The project of connecting with families and communities often raises the issue of repertoire. In Venezuela, the core repertoire of El Sistema is classical, although orchestras and choirs often perform the country’s distinctive folk music as well. Sistema-based programs in the U.S.

“We want the kids to connect with the passion of making music together,” says Baltimore Symphony Music Director Martin Aikop, pictured here with the orchestra’s OrchKids Director Dan Trahey and a sextet of participants. Photo: Kirsten Beckerman / Baltimore Symphony.

“We’re making ourselves inseparable from the infrastructure of Durham,” says Katie Wyatt, director of the Sistema-inspired program KidZNotes in Durham, North Carolina. Photo: Jessica Tanner.
usually adopt Venezuela’s classical orchestra model; one of its principal advantages is that orchestras are by nature big, and can include many children. But many U.S. programs also include more familiar genres, like mariachi, jazz, and pop—music that will resonate more readily with parents and community members (as well as kids!) and may help to bring everyone on board.

In transplanting El Sistema to U.S. soil and beyond, one of the trickiest yet most essential challenges is how to sustain that very Venezuelan element of joy. It’s the first thing observers remark upon as they visit the nucleus in Venezuela: The kids seem utterly euphoric with their music. In other cultures, euphoria can be more difficult to come by. Marshall Marcus, head of the umbrella organization Sistema Europe, observes, “The bureaucratic nature of European institutions raises the question of how to ensure that the precious and unending Venezuelan joy in playing music is not lost.”

In the U.S., a majority of Sistema sites report that their number one issue is “classroom management”—code words for unhappy relations between teachers and students. In such situations, joy is hard to sustain. How do they manage it in Venezuela? Perhaps their culture allows for a higher degree of chaos or spontaneity...and yet the children in the nucleus are very attentive when there’s work to be done. It is, in the end, one of El Sistema’s many mysteries.

Finally, the challenge cited most frequently was the difficulty of successfully communicating our first-mentioned “El Sistema fundamental”: music learning as a vehicle for social transformation. It’s a radical departure from the way musicians, music teachers, and music institutions are used to thinking about their work. As Stanford Thompson puts it, “It’s hard for people to see the big picture of the program’s long-term social impact.” Dalouge Smith elaborates: “El Sistema work brings a new way of thinking and organizing the community around music that is not immediately recognizable to people raised and trained in the traditional U.S. approach of private lessons, individual achievement, and solo practice.”

Researching this article, we have encountered—in the lofty realm of U.S. conservatory education—the kind of skepticism Sistema programs can face. Robert Cutietta, Dean of the Thornton School of Music at U.S.C., speaks of the U.S. legacy of successful music programs in public schools and comments, “Now we are asked to get excited about importing another program from another country, which is not as good and has mainly non-musical ends. Why is this exciting? I just don’t get it.”

Leaders in the U.S. El Sistema movement need to be prepared with powerful answers to Dean Cutietta and to the many traditional music institutions who “just don’t get” why El Sistema is so extraordinary. Sistema advocates will need to demonstrate through their work that musical and non-musical ends are so deeply intertwined as to be inseparable, and that the outcomes include both brilliant music-making and abundant social transformation.

Despite the many challenges of their work, the directors and teachers of Sistema programs nationwide are quick to affirm the rewards. Anne Fitzgibbon says: “After four years, our daily attendance rate is typically 90–95 percent. What’s more, our children have become proud musicians, and their parents consistently report increases in their children’s academic interest, self-confidence, and receptivity to new experiences.”

And Dalouge Smith tells us: “Surprises are the most exciting part of our project: the student who begins to succeed in school for the first time, or the parent who tells us their...”
family bonds are stronger than ever before, because they now have music in their home."

Perhaps Marin Alsop sums it up best: "I think the most important rewards are the *experiential* and *emotional* aspects. We want the kids to connect with the passion of making music together, and that is the basis of everything we do."

We’ve concentrated thus far on the developing El Sistema movement in the U.S., since that is our area of greatest expertise. But we also reached out to several international leaders of Sistema-inspired programs. We soon grasped that the global Sistema movement is gathering momentum so swiftly as to outpace every attempt to document it.

Among Latin American Sistema programs, Colombia’s Batuta deserves special mention. Launched 20 years ago, and involving over 45,000 children, it is the oldest and largest Sistema program in the world outside Venezuela. Started by the federal government with the help and guidance of Maestro Abreu, the program is now financed partly by the federal government and partly by the largest private foundation in Colombia, the Fundación Bolívar Darville. By virtue of its longevity and size, Batuta has received widespread public recognition and support, and has had ample experience in training teachers and enrolling communities. As for the "joy" component—based on our limited experience, Batuta classrooms, rehearsals, and performances definitely have the Venezuelan capacity for combining hard work with fun and high spirits.

In Canada as in the U.S., many programs have recently launched, finding funding and support wherever they can. According to Canadian conductor and consultant Jonathan Goves, a few programs “receive modest provincial support, but also rely heavily on private donors and foundations. At the moment the [financial] prognosis is no different than it is for the U.S.”

In contrast, Sistema-based programs in Europe—they’ve been launched in almost every country—tend to be more nationally coordinated, and most receive public support of some kind. Even so, as Marshall Marcus points out, European Sistema programs are developing in distinct ways. "Each country has its own particular ‘bespoke’ structure," he says. "They are ‘local’: global in outlook but local in build."

Even within countries, programs may vary in response to regional cultures. "There is very little 'systematic' mentality in Italy to begin with," says Maria Majno of Sistema Italia, which was founded by the renowned conductor Claudio Abbado. "There are differences in approach between one province and another."

For the U.S. and Canada, it’s instructive, if daunting, to note that El Sistema programs in virtually every country in the world have some measure of support from the national government. The challenge here is a double one: to spend tremendous energy cobbled together other forms of support, while at the same time making a persuasive public case for the importance of future government support.

In Asia, a nationally coordinated Sistema program is thriving in Korea; Japan has launched a program; and the Philippines are set to begin one within a year. Sistema-inspired programs are also going strong in New Zealand and Australia. And in October 2012, El Sistema Africa was launched by Marshall Marcus and the composer Gabriel Prokofiev. Their goal is both to support new Sistema-inspired initiatives and to connect the many existing organizations that share elements of the El Sistema vision. Among such organizations are the Pan-African charity "Musaequality" and the Hout Bay Music Project of Cape Town, South Africa, whose orchestra and chorus combine classical string music with traditional African songs and rhythms.

El Sistema Japan, which launched earlier this year, is a particularly exciting initiative. Unlike most other Sistema programs, which serve communities suffering from entrenched poverty, this program is part of a reconstruction effort in Soma, Fukushima, an area shattered one year ago by the triple calamity of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear plant meltdown. This is a unique repurposing of the Sistema model. Founder Yutaka Kikutswas says, "Our Sistema-inspired
program emphasizes teamwork, peer learning, and joyful hard work. It will equip some children with the resources to lead the city’s reconstruction process in the next 10–20 years."

One strong frustration confronting El Sistema-inspired efforts across the world is that they must wait—and wait—for results. El Sistema Venezuela may seem like an overnight success, but its magnificent achievements were achieved only after several decades of very hard work and with the support of seven different government regimes.

Steve Payne, director of San Antonio’s YOSA (Youth Orchestras of San Antonio) Music Learning Center, observes: “We are trying to measure our impact over a whole childhood, so real results will not become apparent for many years.” And he is referring only to one generation of children. It remains to be seen whether new programs—and their funders—will be able to withstand the initial disappointment of not showing quick results.

Meanwhile, as El Sistema holds out the twin promises of social rescue in underserved communities and music-making at its optimum, there is an additional potential benefit waiting in store some years from now.

Even if only half of today’s worldwide nuclei were to endure into the future, and even if no more than two children from every nucleus decided to become a professional musician; and even if only one of those two was accepted into an established symphony orchestra, that would still profoundly change the face of what we call classical music. Orchestras will be composed of ever more diverse populations, which in turn will profoundly affect the demographics of their audiences. As today’s symphony orchestras wring their hands over their ever-growing number of empty seats, they should note: One of El Sistema’s biggest promises may be the development of the largest, as-yet-un tapped fan base that classical music has ever known.

Jamie Bernstein is a writer and concert narrator. She is also currently producing a film documentary, El Sistema USA!, about a youth orchestra program in West Philadelphia inspired by the Venezuelan model. More about Jamie’s multifaceted life can be found on her Web site: jamiestern.net.


FOR MORE ON THESE EL SISTEMA PROGRAMS

U.S. programs

- Youth Orchestra Los Angeles (YOLA): http://www.laphil.com/education/yola
- OrchKids, Baltimore, MD: http://www.bsomusic.org/main-taf?p=11.1
- Community Opus Project, San Diego, CA: http://www.sdys.org/community-opus-project
- YOSA Music Learning Center, San Antonio, TX: http://www.yosa.org/index.php/YosaPrograms/category/music_learning_center/
- Harmony Program, New York, NY: http://harmonyprogram.cuny.edu/
- KidZNotes, Durham, NC: http://www.kidznotes.org/

International programs

- Big Noise, Sistema, Scotland: http://makeabignoise.org.uk/big_noise-caploch/
- Sistema Europe: http://www.sistemaparalelo.org/
- Batuta, Colombia: http://www.fundacionbatuta.org/
- Houf Bay Music Project: http://www.houfbaymusic.org/
- El Sistema Japan: http://www.elsistemajapan.org/sistemajapen.html