

Ten Core Principles of El Sistema
and possible applications in Japan

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Introduction

In July 2012, I was privileged to visit Japan as part of a small delegation of El Sistema leaders from the United States. Our host and guide was Yutaka Kikugawa, founder of the organization Friends of El Sistema Japan. The experience of going to Soma, prefecture of Fukushima, for several days and working with local music teachers and schoolchildren is one that none of us will never forget. The dedication of the teachers, and their eagerness to learn about El Sistema, were remarkable. And we were touched by the spirit and sweetness of the children, many of whom had experienced trauma during the earthquake and tsunami of 2011,

At the end of the trip, we talked with Mr. Kikugawa about the promise and the challenge involved in bringing El Sistema to Japan. The promise is great, we agreed. The main challenge lies in helping teachers and administrators to understand and implement Sistema practices and methods. Precisely because Japan has such a developed music education tradition, it might be difficult for music teachers to reorient the way they approach their work, to grasp the principles of El Sistema and to understand how those principles might work in the classroom or rehearsal hall.

We decided that a list of El Sistema core principles, along with some simple suggestions about how they might be put into practice, might be useful at this preliminary point in the development of El Sistema Japan. Therefore I have formulated the following list of ten fundamental principles of El Sistema, along with some thoughts about their implications for pedagogical practice.

In putting together this list, I have drawn on a trove of collective wisdom accumulated over the past several years, as a number of U.S. El Sistema leaders have attempted to identify fundamental principles of El Sistema. I must particularly

acknowledge the work of my colleagues Eric Booth and Jamie Bernstein in this area. There have also been substantial efforts by the Sistema Fellows of the New England Conservatory to define and explicate core principles

I offer the list in the hope that it might offer some guidance to musicians, music educators, administrators, and any others who are interested in working to make El Sistema Japan a reality. Along with the list comes a caveat: El Sistema resists codification. After thirty-seven years, there is still no “Sistema Handbook,” for the very good reason that the Sistema is always in process, always evolving. The visionary El Sistema founder and leader José Antonio Abreu makes this point with a Spanish phrase for which there is no apt English translation: *Ser no ser todavía*. Being, yet constantly becoming.

That is El Sistema. “As soon as you try to pin it down, it changes,” says Eduardo Mendez, the president of the government foundation that runs El Sistema in Venezuela. With apologies, therefore, to Maestro Abreu, Maestro Mendez, and the thousands of dynamic, spontaneous, and improvisatory teachers and leaders of El Sistema, here is a list of ten El Sistema fundamentals, accompanied by brief remarks about the practical dimensions of each one.

1. Social transformation through musical learning and playing together is the mission at the heart of El Sistema. The process of learning and playing music together in an engaged, committed way has the capacity to break the cycle of hopelessness that attends childhood poverty and trauma, and to create an “affluence of the spirit,” in José Antonio Abreu’s words, which makes possible the transformation of young people’s lives.

Among the influences helping to form and shape his vision was the philosophy of Shinichi Suzuki, which was based on the conviction that learning to play music helps form children’s characters. “If children hear fine music from the day of their birth and learn to play it,” wrote Suzuki, “they develop sensitivity, discipline and endurance. They get a beautiful heart.”

Thus the idea of music as transformative resonates deeply in Japanese culture. Just as Dr. Suzuki’s method was originally developed as a way to rehabilitate children

devastated by the Second World War, El Sistema has the potential to restore the spirits of children traumatized by the tsunami and earthquake of 2011.

2. The collective, committed pursuit of musical excellence is the means through which El Sistema seeks to effect personal and social change. “Unreasonable” ambition and very high standards characterize the music-learning process, because it is only through high artistic aspiration and achievement that social goals can be realized: the intensity of engagement required to attain musical excellence is precisely what stimulates young people toward self-discipline, cooperation, and mastery. And the gratification of high achievement is what builds self-esteem and creates zest for new endeavors.

This aspect of the Sistema vision is entirely consonant with Japanese culture. Rigor and high standards are the hallmarks of all learning in Japan, and music teachers are so aligned with the idea of musical excellence that no mental adjustment will be needed in this instance! The challenge will be to reimagine that idea in the context of a mission to create not virtuosic musicians but good citizens.

3. Programs are free and are accessible to all, regardless of musical talent. One of the biggest challenges we have encountered in bringing El Sistema to the United States is the immense difficulty of obtaining adequate and sustainable funding for our programs, so that we can make them truly accessible to those who do not have the means to pay. Because Federal support is not likely to be forthcoming for a long time (if ever), our programs have sought funding from a variety of sources: private donors, private or public foundations, orchestral support, university support, or local government funding. Often, programs are financed by a combination of sources. Finding sustainable support in a recessionary economy can take an overwhelming amount of time and energy on the part of those who found and direct Sistema-inspired programs.

In Japan, perhaps this process will be somewhat less arduous. The degree of consensus and cooperation already in place between several sectors – academic, local and government – bodes well for an El Sistema Japan that might be reliably and robustly supported by a combination of public and private sources.

4. Ensemble learning is El Sistema's primary method. Individual lessons are included in most Sistema programs, but the emphasis is on learning within ensembles (either sectionals or full orchestras or choruses), because the essential skills developed through ensemble learning – cooperation, mutual understanding, self-discipline, shared aspiration – are precisely the skills needed for becoming a productive and fulfilled member of society. “The orchestra and choir are more than artistic structures,” Maestro Abreu has said. “They are schools of social life.”

Because of Japan's strong tradition of music ensembles in public schools, music teachers are already highly skilled at teaching in the context of ensembles. What is new in El Sistema's approach is an emphasis on developing and reinforcing the social skills upon which good ensemble playing relies.

For example, while drilling an orchestra or chorus in repetitive exercises or passages until perfection is achieved, a teacher might draw the students' conscious attention to the skills being developed in the service of ensemble perfection. Self-discipline in mastering one's own part, attentive awareness of what others are playing, cooperation with the whole group, intuitive striving for harmonious connection – all of these marvelous skills are simultaneously being sharpened in each player, as they play together. *And*, by the way -- the music gets better! Awareness of this complex process can help children to understand that these are life skills as well as musical skills.

Going further, a teacher/conductor might trust the ability of an ensemble to work together on their own, to solve problems of balance or dynamics or intonation. When asked to problem-solve themselves, ensemble members can be intensely motivated to work together for the good of the whole. Working in this way achieves two goals – not only does the playing improve, but the students also experience their own ability to be perceptive, contribute cooperatively, and work together as an inter-dynamic whole that is greater and more effective than the sum of its parts. Thus does the ensemble truly function as a “school of social life.”

Certainly, such a change in orientation requires a degree of courage on the part of teachers. But my experience in Venezuela has shown me how highly motivated young musicians can be when they feel a sense of responsibility for their ensemble.

Eric Booth, Senior Advisor to the Sistema movement in the U.S., writes about the essential difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The best learning, he says, occurs when a student is guided by her own intrinsic motives – when she learns because she longs to know, or because it feels satisfying or sounds wonderful or tastes good, or because it reinforces her sense of being an expert learner. When students are extrinsically motivated – by the desire to get a good grade, for example, or by fear of the teacher’s disapproval – the quality of learning will be compromised.

In El Sistema, ensemble learning often depends upon intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation. Most children are intrinsically motivated to be part of a successful, dynamic group – whether a sports team, a boy-scout troupe, or a musical ensemble. Sistema teaching taps that powerful motivation, and encourages students to be relentlessly ambitious about the quality of their ensembles. The more the students behave successfully as “citizens” – being disciplined, cooperative, empathic, attentive, and focused – the more splendid the music-making will be.

When students in Venezuelan Sistema programs are asked what they like best about playing in an orchestra, almost everyone answers, “I love the *sound*.” Being immersed inside the great wash of symphonic or choral sound is so intrinsically exciting, viscerally and aesthetically, that children usually want to return to that sound again and again – and to do everything in their power to make it even bigger and better.

For the teachers who are helping to create El Sistema Japan, the idea of intrinsic motivation will be very important. When children are extrinsically motivated, the music they make may sound polished, but it will lack spontaneity and vitality. When they’re intrinsically motivated – by the fun of playing with friends, by the excitement of reaching for new goals together, and by the sheer thrill of orchestral sound – their playing will come from the heart, and their music will come alive.

5. Intensity of experience is necessary to the success of El Sistema programs. Most programs are in session four to six days a week, for several hours a day. This intensity allows for rigorous learning, rapid musical growth, and the sustained experience of being part of a loving and productive musical community.

Children whose lives are stressful, whether because of poverty, trauma or

anxiety, need more than music lessons. They need an alternative world, a world predicated upon harmony and hope, in order to realize the possibility of internal change. El Sistema provides that world. Only through an immersive daily or near-daily experience will a child be able to internalize the positivity of El Sistema in place of the negative, critical or destructive energy of the world outside the program.

In Venezuela, the task of creating an immersive program is relatively unproblematic: funding for long hours is available from the government, and children do not have many other competing claims on their after-school time. The situation in the U.S. is reversed: funding is hard to come by, and even poor and at-risk children often have after-school alternatives – even if only the after-care programs provided by many public schools, where convenience overrides quality. And in a free-market culture where choice is exalted as an absolute good, parents often resist the idea of enrolling their children in programs that occupy every afternoon.

It's possible that a Japanese El Sistema program that meets on a daily basis after school might run into similar resistance from parents, the public school system, or both. But my experience in Soma was powerful proof that the opposite reaction is possible, and that educational leaders and parents who understand El Sistema's vision might be united in favor of a Sistema program that, through immersion, really extends the possibility of transformation for their children and communities.

6. Peer teaching and learning are central to the process. A master teacher in Venezuela once said that the El Sistema method is simple: “Put a skilled child next to a less skilled child. Both children will get better.” All children are encouraged to be teachers as well as learners, and to be generous with what they know. Peer learning supplements teacher-student learning in a deep and daily way that raises the level of the entire ensemble.

As a music teacher trained in the conventional western tradition, I know firsthand that the principle of peer learning can feel foreign and unworkable. Building a youth orchestra by putting skilled and less-skilled children together at music

stands? Conventional wisdom would call this a guaranteed way to produce a mediocre youth orchestra.

But I have seen peer learning work wonders in Venezuela. It works because the children have internalized the central precept: if you know something, it's your privilege and your responsibility to teach it. If the more-skilled child at the music stand sees that her less-skilled partner is stumbling over a triplet passage – and if she understands how the triplet passage should sound – she feels a responsibility to help correct the problem, and she will find time during a rehearsal break to work with her stand partner until those triplets are perfect.

The Abreu Fellows, a group of young musicians/teachers who spent six weeks in Venezuela as part of a fellowship program studying El Sistema, like to tell a dramatic story about peer learning. At a “nucleo” (the Venezuelan term for an El Sistema music learning center) in a provincial town, the Fellows observed the director handing an oboe to a boy who had never held one before. The boy was told to sit in the oboe section of the nucleo orchestra, which was in the midst of preparing for a performance of Tchaikovsky's “1812 Overture” in two weeks' time. How, the Fellows wondered, could this result in anything but disaster?

Over the next two weeks, they discovered how. The children who sat on either side of the new boy taught him how to play one note – an E flat, the tonic note of the piece. And as rehearsals proceeded, they nudged him whenever it was time for him to play that note.

On the day of the performance, that boy never played a wrong note. And through his two-week crash course in orchestral playing and in the harmonic structure of the 1812 Overture, he learned some valuable first principles about playing the oboe – and about the power of peer teaching and learning.

The peer learning principle dates from the very first days of the Sistema, in 1975, when José Antonio Abreu set an ambitious performance date for his fledgling youth orchestra, three months from its inception -- in spite of the fact that he could only rehearse with them at night, since he worked as a government official during the day. He enlisted a few supportive music teachers to work with the orchestra several times. But he also counted on the young orchestra members to help one another as much as they could

– and they did. Peer learning was the only way that the orchestra, whose members’ skills were highly uneven, could have gotten to performance level. It was a matter of simple necessity.

In the musical cultures of Japan and the United States, the teacher/student relationship tends to be conventionally structured: the teacher is the authority, the student merely the recipients of knowledge. Introducing the element of peer learning requires a conscious effort and a willingness to experiment. Teachers might try a gradual approach, for example sometimes offering a student the opportunity to lead part of a sectional rehearsal; or, when a student is having difficulty with a passage, asking a stand mate to help. The goal is to establish, over time, new habits of mind in students – the habit of thinking of themselves as potential teachers as well as learners, and the habit of assuming responsibility for the success of every ensemble undertaking.

In the process of this reorientation, positivity is essential! Through example, teachers can demonstrate that successful teaching is always positive and constructive in tone, never critical or negative.

7. Frequent performance is another key element. The prospect of performing adds urgency and intensity to the rehearsal process, and provides extra incentive for striving to achieve passion and precision. And children experience the music they make as a gift they can give to their community.

This is another principle formulated by Maestro Abreu at the very beginning of El Sistema. He saw clearly that his orchestra would make radical improvement only if they had a radical incentive. So he scheduled a concert at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to commemorate a visit to Caracas by the President of Mexico. That gave the orchestra exactly three months to go from startup to performing ensemble at a national ministry. The challenge galvanized them, and the concert was a triumph.

Ever since, frequent performance has been standard operating procedure for Sistema programs. Again, for those of us trained in western musical traditions, this requires a dramatic change of mindset. Instead of thinking, “We’ll schedule a public performance when the orchestra is ready,” we need to think, “We’ll schedule a

performance *much sooner than we think we should*, and the children will do whatever it takes to rise to the challenge.”

Another advantage of frequent performance is that children will be less likely to develop anxiety around playing in public. If the process of mastering music and sharing it with others becomes a common occurrence, children will experience this process as a natural part of music-making.

8. Inclusion of family and community is crucial for the success of El Sistema. Parents and community members are encouraged to help out at the nucleo, to come to the concerts, to be part of the nucleo “family.” The El Sistema philosophy embraces the goal of transformative experiences not only for the children of a nucleo but also for families and communities.

El Sistema programs find a wide variety of ways to involve parents and community members. Often, the primary way is to offer those frequent performances discussed above -- not only in the nucleo, but also in various places throughout the community: public parks, churches, street fairs, anywhere people congregate. Seeing and hearing children perform well can be tremendously compelling for family members, neighbors, and friends, and can evoke a strong sense of identification with, and ownership of, the program.

There are many other ways to involve parents. In programs for very young children, parents and caregivers attend sessions with their children. Songs and rhythm games learned in the program can be practiced at home.

The “paper violin” orchestra is a key way to include parents and family members. Active help from family members is encouraged and solicited as children construct and decorate their paper violins, with the result that sometimes entire families feel pride in their beautiful paper-maché creations.

Many El Sistema programs, both in Venezuela and in the U.S., have created parent orchestras or parent choruses, for those parents who want to be involved in music-making themselves. A kind of rapturous energy occurs when parents and children perform for each other, or with each other.

9. A multi-age continuum for children is an El Sistema ideal. Fully developed Sistema programs aim to involve children from pre-school to high school age. However, most new and developing Sistema-inspired programs throughout the world, confronted with the necessity to start small, begin with elementary school-age or even younger children. It's important for such programs to be building toward the future even as they concentrate on the present, to make sure that as students grow, they can continue to be involved.

This is a critical element of El Sistema's success, because while children of any age can be touched and transformed by Sistema programs, it is during the pre-teen and teenage years that children become most vulnerable to feelings of worthlessness, loneliness, and despair. No matter how flourishing a Sistema-inspired program may be, it isn't fully successful if it does not continue to serve children as they reach and progress through these years. Children whose lives are structured and given meaning by El Sistema need to have this support system powerfully in place throughout the challenges of adolescence.

In addition, multi-age programs allow for the mentoring of younger children by older ones – a variation on peer learning that is widespread in the Venezuelan Sistema. The mentor relationship is a critical part of musical and social maturation, for both mentor and mentee. Older children learn the full value of their skills, expertise and social competence, in the process of teaching others. Younger children open their hearts and minds to older children who can act as role models as well as teachers. El Sistema programs therefore aim for a social fabric cross-stitched with many interconnected mentor relationships.

It's interesting to note that very first Sistema orchestras were composed not of young children but of teenagers. Only as the Sistema became a national foundation and began spreading across Venezuela did the early childhood components begin to develop. And while there are sound reasons for Sistema leaders in the U.S., Japan, and elsewhere to begin with elementary-level programs, the mentoring component of multi-age programs should be kept in mind as programs grow.

In fact, it's not unreasonable to consider alternative designs for start-up programs, designs that would build in mentoring from the very beginning. Adam Johnston, the

founder and director of the Sistema-inspired ICAN Music Program in Santa Barbara, CA, has imagined a start-up design that would include one group of first- or second-graders and another group of high schoolers; the high school kids, regardless of prior musical experience, would be given instruments and taught a few rudiments, and would then immediately become mentors for the children, perhaps even for a small stipend. The appeal of this unorthodox scheme is that the older children would become teachers and learners simultaneously and would be given a clear message that they are valued for their teaching and mentoring skills -- and younger children would have violin-playing teenagers as role models!

10. Joy! Joy breaks out everywhere in a Sistema program: in the passion of teachers, in the excitement of being inside an immensity of orchestral or choral sound, in the spontaneous humor and friendship intrinsic to making music together. Joy is the ultimate intrinsic motivator, so powerful as to trump all others. When Venezuela's youth orchestras perform, the palpable vigor and zest of the young musicians play makes it clear that they are playing with joy and with all their hearts.

As with any art form, the work itself is a kind of play. This is so true of music that we actually use the word "play" to mean musical work. There is no playground on earth more fun than a musical ensemble, no amusement ride more thrilling than the wild rush of the William Tell overture.

Sistema teachers often play games with younger children, as do good early-childhood music teachers everywhere: rhythm games, rhyming games, interpersonal games. They make sure that children are in physical motion as they sing, play, or listen. If a game occasionally devolves into silliness, they don't panic. Order is usually restored within a few minutes. And children go home with the knowledge that giggling has a place in music too, along with more serious expressive behaviors.

With older children, teachers focus on the musical tasks at hand. But I seldom saw an unsmiling rehearsal in Venezuela. It is the teacher, above all, who can convey the sense of serious play and playful joy in music-making. If students can sense their teacher's visceral pleasure, they will feel pleasure too. Even a D scale played twenty

times in a row can be an occasion for delight, if students feel there is absolutely nothing their teacher would rather be doing than clapping downbeats and cheering them on.

Closing Thoughts

Before I came to Japan, I asked my friend Michiko Shimuzu, whose help was essential to achieving a Japanese edition of my book *Changing Lives*, what she thought El Sistema had to offer to Japanese society. She thought for a while, and then answered. “Joy,” she said.

Indeed, I began to see the truth of her observation even in my brief visit to Soma. The Soma music teachers who watched our master teachers work with pre-schoolers, elementary school students and a middle school band commented on the heightened pleasure and high spirits they observed in the children. “You focused more on enjoying and on finding the feeling in the music than on technical perfection,” they said. In fact, the El Sistema ensembles I have seen are compelling proof that when joy is the priority, technical precision often follows. In the words of Gustavo Dudamel, the young conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic who is the Sistema’s most famous alumnus, “In the Sistema, we never forget fun.”

So perhaps this vision is what El Sistema has to offer Japan. In turn, Japan has already offered a great gift to El Sistema in Venezuela and across the world: the insight that the Sistema model can be life-transformative for children of trauma as well as children of poverty.

When Maestro Abreu visits the Sistema programs of other countries, he never leaves without saying, “We want to learn from you!” The spirit of El Sistema has always reflected the spirit of its founder: open, responsive, continually inquiring. So as the passionately skilled and dedicated teachers, musicians, and leaders of El Sistema Japan go about the work of turning vision into reality, the world of El Sistema will no doubt find much to learn from their example.