THE SOUL IS WHOLE

Tricia Tunstall

The White Hands Choir of Venezuela is an experiment born of inspiration. Its creators were inspired by the El Sistema ideal of inclusion, that all children deserve and need the opportunity to be part of a musical ensemble. El Sistema has been experimenting and growing ever since it was founded in 1975, continually finding new ways to include more and more children. The programme presently reaches hundreds of thousands of children in Venezuela every day, giving them the chance to learn musical skills and be part of a wider cultural community. There are no fees or auditions required in order to attend; El Sistema, sponsored by a government foundation, is free of charge and all children and young people are welcome.

In 1996 two Sistema leaders dreamed of extending this ideal to include children with disabilities of all kinds. In the city of Barquisimeto, where Gustavo Dudamel was born and raised, Jhonny Gómez and Naybeth García decided to create a curriculum within the existing Sistema programme that would accommodate and nurture such children. 'We wanted to ensure the possibility of music for all young people', says García, 'and even more than that, to bring children with disabilities back into society'.
So began the White Hands Choir of Barquisimeto, an ensemble that has since grown to include 114 children. It is made up of two sections: one is comprised of hearing-impaired children who wear white gloves, or sometimes coloured gloves (depending on the occasion); in the other section are children with impairments of vision or cognition, motor disabilities, learning disabilities, Down’s syndrome and autism. There are also some children without disabilities who simply want to be part of this extraordinary endeavour.

As the hearing section sings, the hearing-impaired children express the music physically through the choreography of their gloved hands. Their movements are not a literal word-by-word translation, as conventional signing would be; rather the ‘white hands’ create patterns of beauty and feeling that convey the emotional heart of the music, as Naybeth García, who designs this choreography of dancing hands, explains.

‘I try to find the deep feeling in every piece of music and to have the children express the music through gesture. I try always to integrate rhythm, body movements, and language.’ The children perform with two conductors, one for the white gloves section and one for the singing section. The conductors help them synchronize their voices and movements to achieve unity. But why white gloves? ‘They symbolize the purity and the potential of these kids’, says García. ‘We wanted to find a way to capture and express their sweetness of spirit.’

The White Hands Choir is part of a larger initiative to bring children with special needs into the fabric of El Sistema life. In the Barquisimeto Sistema programme, which serves over a thousand children in all, there are 400 with a variety of disabilities. In addition to the Choir, these children and young people participate in rhythm bands, percussion ensembles, an *a cappella* vocal group and a handbell ensemble.

In the environment of El Sistema good ideas spread fast; expansion is in the very nature of El Sistema, which began with 11 students in a Caracas car park and now engages over 400,000 children across the country. So when the White Hands Choir in Barquisimeto became a reality, the model multiplied almost immediately. There are now 12 White Hands Choirs in Venezuela and 30 Sistema programmes in which more than 2,000 children with special needs have been enrolled. ‘Our purpose is to integrate into
society thousands of Venezuelans who have always been segregated’, says Jhonny Gómez. ‘If we can integrate them into a musical ensemble, they will acquire the skills they need to integrate in society at large.’

Gómez has been part of El Sistema since its very beginning; in 1976, at the age of 14, he became a clarinettist in the first Simón Bolívar Orchestra. He studied at the Simón Bolívar Conservatory and later earned postgraduate degrees in special education. García, who is a pianist, organist and singer, has also studied special education, focussing on ways of communicating with people who have disabilities. She describes herself as an ‘avid investigator, constantly searching for new ways to interact with the children’. García’s investigatory nature is true to the El Sistema spirit; José Antonio Abreu, the visionary founder and leader of El Sistema, often says that it is not a fixed programme but a collective exploration, a continuous inquiry. Jhonny Gómez describes how he arrived at his initial vision of a musical ensemble for children with disabilities.

When I was still a teenager I attended an El Sistema convention, with people coming from all over the country. At the convention, Maestro Abreu showed a video of Itzhak Perlman playing the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto. And when I saw that – Perlman sitting in his chair because he cannot stand, playing so happily and so exquisitely – I was very inspired. I thought to myself, “Why can’t we have disabled children participating in orchestras and choruses?”

The White Hands Choir has become internationally known in recent years, through video recordings and appearances in documentaries and television programmes. It has been praised by world-renowned musicians such as Simon Rattle, Claudio Abbado and Mirella Freni. In Bonn, in the home where Beethoven was born, there is a pair of white gloves.

Nevertheless many of the children come from difficult and challenging socio-economic circumstances. And none has ever travelled outside Venezuela. For all 114 of them to traverse an ocean and perform in this fairytale city, in this venerable Festival, is a miracle they and their families could never have imagined. ‘It’s like a dream for us’, says García.
In turn the Salzburg Festival is enriched by their presence. The Choir reminds us anew of music’s immense power to heal, transform and unite. In Garcia’s words: ‘What we do with these children is simply to believe in them. And they give back to us – they give us hope, peace, and joy. To work with them is to constantly experience joy.’

Their presence offers us an opportunity to re-think our definitions of excellence and to hear and experience music in a different way. Clearly the Choir’s musical standards are very high. But that is not the whole reason for its greatness. It has created a new dimension of excellence, one that celebrates the participation of the most marginalized children. These children, making music together on a grand and famous stage, invite us to perceive several kinds of excellence, social as well as musical. The children of the White Hands Choir are deeply interconnected and their music reverberates with the intensity of that connection. Jhonny Gómez says of this unique experiment in social inclusion:

We try to identify what each child can do and develop that. The handicap is put aside and the rest of the child is worked on. Every human being has talent and potential. Every human being has capacities that can grow. And the soul doesn’t have special needs. The soul is whole.

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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