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Editorial Introduction: El Sistema in Critical Perspective

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The Venezuelan youth orchestra network El Sistema is one of the largest and most famous music education programs in the world, and it has spread to dozens of countries, yet it has received relatively little academic scrutiny. This editorial introduction frames a conference, “El Sistema and the Alternatives: Social Action through Music in Critical Perspective,” which was organized in April 2015 to address this lacuna. The editorial explores three themes that ran through the conference papers: history, social justice, and politics (in particular, poverty, inequality, and neoliberalism). It then introduces the six articles in this special issue, based on papers from the conference. These articles shine a critical light not only on Venezuela but also on the global spread of the Sistema model, examining developments in the US, Scotland, England, Costa Rica, and Sweden. The editorial concludes with a critical summary of the issues raised by El Sistema.

Keywords: *El Sistema, social justice, poverty, inequality, neoliberalism, neocolonialism*

El Sistema is one of the largest and most famous music education programs in the world. Beginning in 1975 as a single youth orchestra, it today comprises around 420 music centers (called *núcleos*), more than twice as many orchestras, and 700,000 participants (according to official statistics). Two further distinctive elements are its intensive schedule and its emphasis on orchestral practice. Many students spend four or more hours a day in the *núcleo*, five or six days a week. Instruments are loaned to students, and tuition is offered at low cost or for free. El Sistema focuses primarily on the classical orchestral canon, which is held to be “universal,” though it also includes genres such as Hollywood film music. Since the creation of a new traditional music program, Alma Llanera, in 2011, the curriculum has diversified somewhat, though Venezuelan music retains a subsidiary role.

Although the program’s original focus was on musical and professional goals, its

emphasis shifted in the 1990s towards the social. Its current mission statement describes “a social program of the Venezuelan state devoted to the pedagogical, occupational, and ethical salvation of children and young people via the instruction and collective practice of music, [and] dedicated to the training, protection, and inclusion of the most vulnerable groups in the country.”¹ It has operated in recent years under the banner of “social action through music,” and now presents itself as a motor of social inclusion, also instilling values such as discipline, teamwork, obedience, and good behavior (Borzacchini 2010).

Accordingly, El Sistema is handsomely funded both by the Venezuelan government, as a social inclusion policy, and by international development banks, which have provided some \$500 million in loans since 2007. In that year, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) justified a \$150-million loan with the claim that the program was responsible for a range of social benefits, including reducing the school dropout rate and the rate of youth violence and imbuing children with civic values (“Program to Support” 2007).

The idea that this youth orchestra program is in fact a social development project aimed at “saving our children from the horror of violence, drugs, and material and spiritual poverty” (Borzacchini 2010, 7) has put El Sistema firmly on the global map. It has garnered extraordinary praise from the classical music sphere: Simon Rattle has described it as “the most important thing happening in music anywhere in the world.”² In recent years, admiration from figures such as Claudio Abbado and Plácido Domingo has bolstered many attempts to adopt and adapt it overseas. There are now hundreds of “Sistema-inspired” projects in dozens of countries around the world, and umbrella organizations like El Sistema USA, Sistema Europe, and Sistema Africa.³

“El Sistema and the Alternatives: Social Action through Music in Critical Perspective”

Combining children, classical favorites, and a heartwarming story, El Sistema has an extraordinary emotional appeal. This effect is deployed strategically; as Bolivia Bottome, El Sistema’s former head of Institutional Development and International Relations, stated: “In Venezuela, we don’t show numbers — we do a lot of large

showcase demonstrations to fundraise. We sit people down and make them listen to a huge orchestra of children playing Mahler 2 and then they fund us.”⁴ Such orchestration of emotion can be a spur to political action and social change, but it can also support oppressive ideologies and militate against the critical examination of pervasive assumptions — such as classical music performance as a route to salvation for the poor.

This approach has been a driving force behind El Sistema’s global expansion and success, but it has also crowded out critical thinking in many perspectives on the program. The former Abreu Fellow and current Sistema commentator Jonathan Govias noted a tendency toward “intellectual intoxication” — “to lose sight of all perspective, to buy into propaganda, to be unreasonably passionate.”⁵ El Sistema has been the subject of countless newspaper articles, blog posts, documentaries, TV programs, and even several books, yet most are celebratory rather than critical.⁶ Their considerable number stands in stark contrast to the extreme paucity of peer-reviewed research. Similarly, there has been a surge of Sistema-inspired advocacy symposia, but a lack of corresponding academic events.

This striking shortage of rigorous analysis and debate lay behind the decision to organize the first conference explicitly devoted to critical thinking on El Sistema.⁷ “El Sistema and the Alternatives: Social Action through Music in Critical Perspective” took place in London on 24–25 April 2015, and brought together nearly two-dozen papers on El Sistema, Sistema-inspired programs, and other socially-oriented music education projects.⁸ Speakers came from South, Central, and North America as well as Europe, and drew not only on their research but also on their experience of working in Sistema-inspired projects, music education more widely, professional music making, community arts, curriculum development, policy formation, and social and political activism. The conference was convened by Owen Logan, who had researched the Venezuelan and Scottish Sistema programs for the co-edited volume *Contested Powers: The Politics of Energy and Development in Latin America*; Gustavo Borchert, formerly a professional orchestral musician in Brazil, who had investigated Sistema programs in Scotland and Sweden, as well as the symphony orchestra as a tool for social inclusion and corporate management model; and

myself, author of *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth*, the first in-depth study of the Venezuelan program, and a blogger on El Sistema since 2012.⁹

If El Sistema has been presented by the media as an unambiguous “good news story,” the conference papers represented a significant divergence from this dominant public narrative. The conference program resulted from an open call for papers, and all proposals that were both relevant and analytical were accepted. The fact that they leant strongly towards the critical pole is suggestive as regards the weight of scholarly opinion.¹⁰ Indeed, peer-reviewed academic research in support of El Sistema is very limited; most positive accounts are non-academic and have been produced by journalists or advocates and representatives of Sistema organizations.¹¹ (The problematic intermediary category of official evaluations by consultancies is discussed below, and by Logan in his article.) A feature of the Sistema boom is thus the shortage of robust arguments and evidence behind claims made by and for the Venezuelan program. Even the IDB's \$150-million loan was poorly founded and its justification later quietly withdrawn by the bank (see Baker 2014a, 267–9). At present, there are no rigorous studies and little scholarly backing to support claims of miraculous social effects.

This special issue of ACT

The articles in this special edition are drawn from the conference, and they move beyond the published research and responses to it to consider not just Venezuela but also its links with other places — particularly Scotland, an early and ardent adopter of the Sistema model, and Los Angeles, where Gustavo Dudamel now lives and works, but also England, Costa Rica, and Sweden. They shine a critical light on the global spread of the Sistema model. Whereas *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth* paid considerable attention to the shortcomings of the Venezuelan program, Logan articulates a different argument, one that is implicit in the other articles: that the risks posed by El Sistema lie not in its failures but rather in its successes. An important strand in this special issue, then, is a perception of El Sistema as a program that is inherently and ideologically problematic, rather than a good idea that has been poorly realized. For the authors, serious political and cultural issues

are therefore at stake, ones that require robust challenges to prevailing beliefs and assumptions.

A number of themes run through the articles and the wider conference of which they formed a part. The following discussion focuses on just three of them — history, social justice, and politics — and draws on conference papers beyond the six published here.

History

This special issue demonstrates that El Sistema may be understood more clearly by placing it in a historical frame, whether Romantic idealist views of classical music (Fink), the development of music education in nineteenth-century Europe (Bull; Kuuse, Lindgren, and Skåreus), or political thought since the Enlightenment (Logan).¹² Furthermore, El Sistema's combination of European music, a rhetoric of salvation, and a proselytizing approach invites comparison with the colonial era (Rosabal-Coto). The program has distinct echoes of the "musical conquest" of Latin America from the sixteenth century, when churchmen began to found schools that taught music as a core subject (Baker 2008; 2010). Their aim was to instill in the indigenous population what the Spaniards called *policía* — order, Christianity, and civilization. El Sistema may be seen as part of a 500-year history of attempts by Latin American social elites to "civilize" or "improve" social or ethnic Others through education in European-style music.

El Sistema's creator, José Antonio Abreu, said: "As an educator, I was thinking more about discipline than about music."¹³ With the program's leaders and advocates focusing on the issue of poverty, the intention to discipline the poor is overt. As such, the program picks up a thread that has run through music education for centuries, even millennia: its employment as a way of controlling particular social groups (Baker 2014b), or, in Foucauldian terms, a tool of biopolitics (Guazina 2011).

Social Justice

Whether such an approach should be considered a form of education for social justice in the twenty-first century is open to much debate. Indeed, the relationship between El Sistema and social justice is not straightforward.¹⁴ The program has its

roots in a training orchestra founded in a Caracas conservatoire, and it was created to provide Venezuela with more young classical musicians and to offer them more performance opportunities.¹⁵ There was nothing at the outset about social justice objectives; the priority was to boost the country's classical music scene. Over time, its goals began to be expressed in different terms — above all social inclusion and citizen formation — to the extent that it now describes itself as *primarily* a social program.¹⁶ It has become more targeted at lower socio-economic groups in some areas, above all Caracas.¹⁷ However, the training itself has undergone no comparable change to align with contemporary ideas about education for social justice; indeed, the program rarely uses this term, preferring the vaguer, less challenging, and more problematic “social inclusion” and “social action.”¹⁸ In fact, Abreu has publicly dismissed the idea of economic justice, stating: “The rich have a duty to the poor which they will never pay financially. But they can pay it socially: to deprive the poor of the beauty of the highest art is a terrible form of oppression” (quoted in Vulliamy 2015).

Furthermore, there are question marks over the extent to which a program designed primarily to deliver a curriculum based around the performance of classical orchestral music is compatible with ideas of social justice.¹⁹ El Sistema is built on the notion that the symphony orchestra is, in Gustavo Dudamel's words, “a model for an ideal global society” and “the best example there is of what a community can be” (quoted in Lee 2012 and Swed 2014). This is not an idea, however, that receives much support from academic studies or musicians' reports.²⁰ Three papers at the conference by current or former professional orchestral musicians underlined that El Sistema's claims rely on an idealization of the orchestra; the dynamics of real ensembles are usually more complicated and regularly produce various kinds of coercion, stratification, and exclusion. The hierarchical structure of orchestras can often lead to dissatisfaction among professional musicians, described in one well-known study as “rats in someone else's maze” (Levine and Levine 1996). The idea of the symphony orchestra as a vehicle and model for social justice is thus problematic.²¹

El Sistema's conceptualization of social action is generally limited to the repetition of its founder's beautifully constructed aphorisms, such as “culture for the

poor cannot be poor culture.”²² Such sayings elide the complexities around education for social justice, which are rarely recognized or debated within the program. Issues of class, gender, and race in the transmission of classical music (Bull) have been downplayed or ignored. Consequently, “social action through music” operates less as a fully fleshed-out philosophy than as a funding strategy and marketing slogan (Fink).

Indeed, contributors in this special edition suggest that El Sistema’s approach treats music education as a tool less of social justice than of capitalist development. It has attracted much interest from banks — both international development banks like the IDB and CAF (Rosabal-Coto, Logan), but also Bancaribe, the Venezuelan bank that sponsors El Sistema and whose president stated that “between both of us, El Sistema and our bank, we saw from day one an exceptionally clear convergence of values” (quoted in Borzacchini 2010, 3–5). It may be little surprise, then, to find that Sistema programs overseas have been enthusiastically embraced by business and financial organizations.²³ Beneath the language of social action lies a program that is revealingly attractive to and shaped by the ethos of business.

Politics

It is, however, the topic of politics that produced the most intense debates at the conference and forms the backbone of this special issue. The centrality of politics is understandable, not just because of the volatile and intensely polarized situation in Venezuela today, but also because of the career path of El Sistema’s founder. Abreu began his political involvement in the early 1960s with future architects of Venezuelan neoliberalism; he became a parliamentary deputy in 1964, and went on to serve as minister of culture in the neoliberal administration of Carlos Andrés Pérez from 1989 to 1993. Over the last decade, however, he has forged ever-closer links with socialist presidents Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, and El Sistema now operates out of the Office of the President. Such a trajectory has opened Abreu up to scrutiny from both sides of the political spectrum in Venezuela, with public debate intensifying around the program’s relationship with the Bolivarian Revolution and its orchestras’ public relations role for the government overseas.²⁴ But critiques in this special issue take a different angle, focusing on the political ideology

underpinning the program (identified as neoliberalism) and questions of class, poverty, and inequality.

In a television interview, Abreu explained his vision of social action through music: “El Sistema breaks the vicious cycle [of poverty] because a child with a violin starts to become spiritually rich: ... when he has three years of musical education behind him, he is playing Mozart, Haydn, he watches an opera: this child no longer accepts his poverty, he aspires to leave it behind and ends up defeating it.”²⁵ One striking aspect of this account is its erroneous depiction of poverty. It is far from an isolated example. In his TED prize speech, Abreu declared: “the most miserable and tragic thing about poverty is not the lack of bread or roof, but the feeling of being no one.” He argued that the world was suffering “not an economic or social crisis, but a spiritual one. I believe that to confront such a crisis, only art and religion can give proper answers to humanity.”²⁶ More recently, he stated: “the most terrible poverty is the lack of an identity” (Márquez 2013). “Deficit theories, whether cultural, personal, or social, have been largely discredited” (3), notes Vincent Bates in his foreword, yet they form the foundation of El Sistema. In Abreu’s vision, not only are the poor reified and stigmatized (as lacking culture and identity), but the structural issues that they face — broad social, economic, and political conditions — are elided in favor of problems (such as an alleged lack of aspiration) that may potentially be solved by playing in an orchestra. Abreu’s definitions of poverty work to justify the expansion of El Sistema, but they entail downplaying economic and material realities.

A second point to highlight in Abreu’s vision is that poverty is transcended individually through social mobility. It revolves, then, around the selective amelioration of poverty (which may actually stabilize an unequal distribution of social and economic opportunities) rather than an egalitarian effort to tackle the structural reproduction of poverty (Logan). Bull critiques such individualizing strategies aimed at working-class children, which “involve a displacement and negation of broader social structural problems such as high levels of inequality, a stratified education system, and low pay and insecure labour conditions for working class people” (131).

Abreu expresses no concern with wider structures of inequality (the gap between rich and poor) or communal strategies for combatting them. Indeed, far from tackling such structures, El Sistema actually recreates them.²⁷ Its fundamental unit is the orchestra — a stratified, hierarchical miniature society. Similarly, at a national level there is a pyramid of orchestras, with the local children’s orchestras at the bottom and the international touring ensembles at the top. Individuals may move within the micro- or macro-structures, but without disturbing them. Those at the top of the pyramid — the Simón Bolívar orchestra — enjoy extraordinary privileges (very high salaries, top-of-the-range instruments, world tours); those at the bottom, considerable hardship (economic and material scarcity, poor facilities).²⁸ El Sistema thus models a society of extreme inequalities, in which the top 1 percent reaps a disproportionate share of the benefits. The construction and maintenance of this inequality is fundamental to the program, which uses it as a spur to individual aspiration and social climbing.

Furthermore, on a national scale, El Sistema represents a parallel music education system, separate from public schools and conservatoires, using a mix of public and private funding and effectively operating in private hands. Only a small fraction of Venezuela’s children has access to the training that El Sistema provides, and a tiny elite within that small fraction is disproportionately favored. For Logan, then, the program is “a spectacular support act for the structured inequality of schooling” (70).

Why is this important? Because development agencies and experts increasingly argue that poverty and inequality must be considered together, or even that inequality is now a higher priority. A major report by Oxfam (“Even it Up” 2014) argued that inequality is a barrier to poverty reduction and a peril to society. The organization’s Executive Director wrote that progress in the struggle against poverty is being threatened by rising inequality. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) assembled considerable evidence that highly stratified societies are unhappier and more prone to a range of social problems (see also Brule and Veenhoven 2012), and Pickett states that reducing inequality is “an essential step for development and wellbeing.”²⁹ Indeed, critiques of the “1 percent society” have become mainstream since the 2008 crisis.

The idea that poverty is a consequence of structural inequality was widely accepted in the three decades after WWII. The rise of neoliberalism, though, saw the separation of the two problems and a focus on the first (Rittich 2002, 265; Judt 2011; Davutoğlu 2013; Zamora 2014). From the World Bank's adoption of the theme of poverty in 1972 to the Washington Consensus to the Millennium Development Goals, poverty was high up the agenda, but structural inequality was not (Talwar 2004; Houtart 2005). Inequality, however, is now returning to prominence. Veltmeyer and Petras (2011, 1–2) draw on a 2010 report by the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC/CEPAL) to argue:

'exclusion' is not the problem that development practitioners should be concerned with.... Nor is inclusion the solution. The problem rather is a system which is designed to benefit the few who have the power to advance their own interests at the expense of the many, who have suffered and continue to suffer precisely from their inclusion and participation in this system, under conditions of what CEPAL ... terms 'the structure of inequality' (ECLAC, 2010). The report, which parallels reports published recently by UNRISD and the UNDP, essentially views this structure, and the policies of neoliberal globalization that reproduce it, ... as responsible for the devastating poverty that still affects a third of the region's population even with a 30-year plus war waged by the World Bank on poverty...

Drawing on both recent thinking in development and older social democratic ideals, then, there is good reason to question whether a program built up over the last four decades as a highly stratified "structure of inequality," and operating more recently under the banner of social inclusion, serves as an effective model for social development in the present day, and to ask whether it may actually be counter-productive in the fight against poverty. Even if its "voodoo" (Toronyi-Lalic 2012) or "sleight-of-hand" (Fink) economics work, and musical and spiritual harmony do actually reduce material poverty (which seems questionable), what it gives with one hand it may, by reproducing inequality through education, be taking away with the other.

Outline of the Articles

At its heart, then, El Sistema is a conservative political ideology framed as a revolutionary social and educational one, and such contradictions abound in the Sistema field. In his essay, **Robert Fink** argues that a fantasy of disciplined

orchestral music as social justice and harmony has not only emerged from “one of the most *in*-harmonious places on Earth,” but also become a powerful branding and marketing tool for a hard-headed business organization, Dudamel’s Los Angeles Philharmonic, whose organizational practices are those of the neoliberal elite. Beneath the dashing conductor’s superficial radicalism lie his mentor’s “intense strain of *very* old-fashioned European classical music ideology” (39) and musical harmony pressed into service as a mode of control.

Why have such contradictions received so little public attention? One answer is the international media’s repetition of El Sistema’s institutional propaganda in the guise of reporting, which Toronyi-Lalic (2012) described as an “unthinking whitewashing” in which “few have thought it appropriate to ask even the most basic questions” (21). Fink, however, posits another: El Sistema is built on Abreu’s “sleight-of-hand” — above all, his constant slippage between material and ideal realms — which serves to confuse observers. Abreu appears here as an archetypal politician of Venezuela’s “magical” petro-state, leaving the public dumbfounded with a succession of apparent miracles. Yet, as Fink points out, it takes two to make a magic trick, and Abreu the magician needs an audience, preferably one that combines limited knowledge and a desire to be convinced. This is in large part, then, a story of the reception of El Sistema in the US.

Fink’s argument helps to explain how El Sistema has ridden to global fame on the back of claims of miraculous success despite the absence of any rigorous supporting research. Indeed, as Logan reports, the program’s fastest expansion has coincided with sharply rising crime rates in Venezuela — an inconvenient truth, given Abreu’s unshakeable belief that “[o]rchestras and choirs are incredibly effective instruments against violence” (Wakin 2012a). Given the lack of reliable evidence or explanation for a direct correspondence between ideal and material realms, El Sistema effectively operates as a belief system. Indeed, the functioning of this music education program as though it were a religious cult has struck many observers, as has the missionary tone and fervor of some Sistema advocacy (e.g. Allan et al. 2010; Wakin 2012a; Baker 2014a, 66–8).

Ideas of illusion and masking also underpin **Owen Logan’s** article, a political economy critique of El Sistema in Venezuela and Scotland, though in this case what

is obscured by a “veil of culture” is social injustice in the form of structural inequality. Logan punctures the illusion that El Sistema offers a revolutionary agenda and posits it as an enemy of egalitarianism. His essay highlights an array of issues that El Sistema sweeps under rug. In his vision, El Sistema is anti-realist, because it obscures the things that realists make visible and audible, such as exploitation and the structural causes of poverty. For Logan, El Sistema “turns music into a cultural veil to be draped over failures of the state and the inconvenient facts of everyday life” (61), and his article is a call to arms to identify this veil for what it is — a handmaiden of neoliberalism — and lift it in order to confront the socio-economic problems that it covers.

Official evaluations of Sistema-inspired projects outside Venezuela have generally presented a glowing picture, but it is one that Logan (2015) directly questions, arguing that such evaluation has a “hand in glove” relationship with the Sistema sphere and its neoliberal underpinnings. Published scholarly research and public and private statements during the conference point to a more equivocal panorama than that presented by most official reports.³⁰ There is thus a pressing need for debate on issues such as the distinction between consultancy evaluations and academic research, the methodologies employed by both, and the potentially blurred line between assessment and advocacy.³¹

As a former teacher in a Sistema-inspired program, as well as in refugee camps in the Palestinian Territories, **Nicolas Dobson** is well placed to tease out some of the issues that tend to be elided in official evaluations of and public discourse around such projects. He provides an insightful account based on his personal experience and reflections, offering a valuable window onto the detail of Sistema-inspired practice and a spur to further critical thinking and theoretical elaboration. His article consists of a detailed analysis of a program’s practices, discourses, and texts, which reveals complex continuities and tensions behind simple statements about the “adaptation” of El Sistema to other national contexts. The project pledges allegiance to El Sistema and its methods, such as a belief in “drilling” young musicians, yet it also references pedagogical ideas and practices that run quite contrary to them, leaving it in limbo between democratization and authoritarianism, child-centered discourse and teacher-centered learning, implicit criticism of and public obeisance to

the original Venezuelan model, a desire for passion and an approach that systematically undermines it.

Anna Bull, an orchestral musician turned scholar, underlines that El Sistema's appearance in Europe over the last decade is really the return of ideas and practices that originated there long ago, so understanding those European roots better is a high priority. She explores the pre-history of Sistema's salvation discourse, illustrating clear continuities between nineteenth-century Britain and twenty-first-century Sistema. Bull's central focus, however, is on the dynamics of youth orchestras, viewed through the lenses of gender, race, and above all class. Her starting point is that "classical music in the UK is consumed and practiced by the middle and upper classes but is being used as a social action program for working-class children and young people" (121), and she analyzes classical music practice as a mechanism for the reproduction of bourgeois values.

Concordances with the other contributors are striking. Bull, too, sees Sistema programs as bound up with neoliberalism: as promoting an aspiration to social mobility, and as legitimizing and reinforcing inequality. Echoing Logan (2015), she notes that in the late nineteenth century, as lower-middle-class girls were taking piano exams, their brothers were joining the Boys' Brigade and then the Scouts. El Sistema appears uncannily like a synthesis of the two. "Be cheerful," Scouts were told. In youth orchestras, meanwhile, "exhortations from adults to 'look like you're having fun' were common," yet "around me I could see slumped bodies and zoned-out expressions, amidst a palpable mood of low energy, frustration and boredom" (140). Bull's report of "frequent appeals to young people to show enjoyment they clearly were not feeling" (140) echoes Dobson's, with its analysis of hyperbolic rhetoric and an emphasis on displays (or simulacra) of enthusiasm. In El Sistema, such displays play a vital role: inspiring funders and generating positive press, both of which have served as alternatives to evidence of efficacy.

Guillermo Rosabal-Coto provides a different kind of insider voice: a critical perspective from within Latin America and its scholarship on music education. His "macro" analysis of Costa Rica's Sistema program, SINEM, coincides with other contributions in illuminating the model's congruity with neoliberalism, yet here the focus is firmly on processes of colonialism and neocolonialism. Rosabal-Coto draws

out the marked continuities between Spanish cultural colonization, nineteenth-century elite nation building, late twentieth-century neocolonialism, and SINEM's program, which is aimed at forming productive workers more than actively participating citizens. Like Bull, he sees the roots of Sistema above all in nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology and identifies the reproduction of that ideology behind misleading claims of novelty and radical change. However, Costa Rica also offers music education through its public schools, and a recent overhaul has seen its curriculum and pedagogy draw much closer to contemporary music education research. Here we can see a glimpse of a Latin American program that has set its sights on providing a rounded and carefully conceptualized musical and social education for all children, rather than focusing on producing star conductors for the global classical music industry and orchestral players "rehearsed to within an inch of their lives" (Wakin 2012b).³²

Documentaries have been central to the global spread of El Sistema. While such films are discussed in passing by Fink, Logan, and Rosabal-Coto, they are the central concern of **Anna-Karin Kuuse**, **Monica Lindgren**, and **Eva Skåreus**. These authors' analysis of the rhetorical constructions on display in two short Sistema films underlines that such texts are usually designed to persuade, rather than simply to document. Yet all too often such films are confused with disinterested and reliable research, even in academic publications. While other writers have recorded scepticism towards such media representations on the part of those depicted in them (e.g. Wald 2011; Baker 2014a), these authors focus on narrative, rhetorical, and dramaturgical strategies, and explore filmic constructions of music and social relations. A Manichean vision, a salvationist narrative, and an idealized view of music as object rather than process may serve to justify the program's interventions, but they also have significant side effects, such as stigmatizing the world outside El Sistema as deficient. The authors conclude that "the films rest on and communicate several debatable ideas about music, education, and society," and the documentaries' framing of classical music education "as charity and a route to salvation is closer to aesthetic discourses developed during the nineteenth century than to contemporary discourses about socially situated meaning-making activities" (209).

Conclusion

El Sistema is a large-scale project, hegemonic in Venezuela and with global ambitions, led by an influential public figure and with hundreds of millions of dollars to spend. It is already a major classical music success story, and it is fast becoming a dominant paradigm for socially-oriented music education. Its current boom has significant consequences for music education as a whole, and as such, it deserves critical engagement and careful scrutiny by scholars. While the heightened attention to the social aspects of music education is very welcome, it is accompanied by the re-normalizing of conventional practices of institutional music education of the past, ones of a kind that scholars have critiqued extensively in recent years: learning that is sequential and repetitious, teacher-centered and hierarchical; emphasizes the transmission and “banking” of existing knowledge rather than creativity; is dedicated to performance rather than composing, improvising, arranging, or listening; and marginalizes discussion of broader social and cultural issues. In the light of the history of music education, El Sistema appears as less revolution than counter-reformation: in Fink’s words, a “visit from the ghost of public-school orchestra rooms past” (34).

El Sistema revives the ideas that music education is above all about discipline; that being a musician equates to learning an orchestral instrument; that symphony orchestras are the summit of collective music making; and that positive social action happens automatically when people make music together. It rests on a salvationist narrative — the idea of saving the poor through the transmission of high art — which has been problematized by scholars (see e.g. Vaugeois 2007). It propagates the idea of music education as expensive, requiring substantial government and/or private funding, rather than sustainable. It holds itself up as a model for the world to follow, yet depends locally on a steady stream of petro-dollars and a readiness to serve as a political tool (“Denuncian hostigamiento político” 2015). It produces some impressive musical results, yet in the process manifests some of the most worrisome aspects of music education (see Baker 2014a; Scripp 2015). Finally, it shows minimal interest in research or critical thinking on music education: it has little time for free and open discussion about pedagogy, curriculum, or educating for social justice, meaning that it has been slow to adapt and, pedagogically speaking, has been

left behind by music education developments elsewhere in Latin America and beyond.

It is therefore a high priority, and in the public interest, for researchers to scrutinize El Sistema and its offshoots. Musicians and institutions often claim that they are innovative or radical, and an important role for scholars is to examine such claims critically (Born 1995). If they cannot be sustained, there are important implications beyond simply presenting a more accurate picture, valuable though that may be in itself. For one, problems with such a model may already have been identified and solutions proposed and debated. This is certainly true in the case of El Sistema. Practitioners and scholars are already engaging constructively with problems around large ensemble education (e.g. Kratus 2007; Green 2008; Davis 2011; Williams 2011; Morrison and Demorest 2012; Abrahams n.d.). In the UK, organisations such as Musical Futures and Youth Music, and ensembles like Animate Orchestra and Future Band, provide existing and viable alternatives, and similar examples can be found in North and South America, Australia, and elsewhere (see Baker 2014a). The problems raised by El Sistema are old ones, and a search for solutions has been underway for some time.³³ All that is required is a willingness to look beyond advocacy and media representations of El Sistema and think more critically about what lies beneath. From there, paths to better and more socially just music education, via a wealth of existing practice and research, are not hard to discern.

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Notes

¹ <http://fundamusical.org.ve/category/el-sistema/mision-y-vision/>.

² <http://www.elsistemausa.org/el-sistema-in-venezuela.htm>.

³ I use the term “El Sistema” to refer to the Venezuelan organization, and terms such as “Sistema-inspired” and “Sistema sphere” to refer to the broader international movement or industry.

⁴ http://www.laphil.com/pdfs/education/2010_symposium/symposium_social_outcomes.pdf (document no longer available).

⁵ <http://jonathangovias.com/2012/04/06/drink-up-reflections-and-video-from-ottawa/>.

⁶ The lack of public critical perspectives also rests on the restriction of public debate; see Baker 2014a and <http://tocarypensar.com/blog/censorship-and-selfcensorship-in-the-sistema-sphere>.

⁷ Conferences on the topic had taken place in 2011 in Montreal and at the University of Western Ontario, but their aims were explicitly advocacy-related.

⁸ For the full conference program, see <https://geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com/el-sistema-the-system/el-sistema-and-the-alternatives-social-action-through-music-in-critical-perspective/>.

⁹ Bilingual blog (English/Spanish) at <https://tocarypensar.com>.

¹⁰ For further evidence of growing scholarly skepticism from the Americas and Europe, see Aharonián 2004, Lesniak 2012, Lamb 2015, Scripp 2015, Araujo (2015), Allsup (forthcoming), and <https://tocarypensar.com>.

¹¹ Uy 2012 and Shieh 2015 are partial exceptions, though both come with significant caveats, such as the problems associated with a focus on the classical symphony orchestra and the lack of a broad social and political vision. The title of Shieh’s essay

(“How El Sistema Might Work”) exemplifies the speculative nature of even the most insightful accounts.

¹² Nineteenth-century European efforts to discipline the working class and twentieth-century modernist developmentalism are other important historical frames: see Bergman and Lindgren 2014 and Baker 2014a.

¹³ <http://elsistemausa.ning.com/forum/topics/dr-jose-antonio-abreu-talks-el-sistema>.

¹⁴ Interestingly, Shieh (2015) makes very limited claims in this regard. Despite his essay appearing in a book about social justice in music education, his only attempt to link El Sistema to social justice concerns medical services offered in some núcleos in Caracas. Insofar as music education itself is concerned, he warns that limited student agency may work against social justice.

¹⁵ Decree 3093, dated February 20, 1979, published in the Gaceta Oficial de la República de Venezuela.

¹⁶ On this discursive shift, see Scripp 2015.

¹⁷ Targeting consists primarily of opening núcleos in poorer neighborhoods, rather than actively seeking the most disadvantaged children.

¹⁸ For detailed consideration of social inclusion, see Baker 2014a, 179-90. In the Sistema sphere, there is frequently a slippage between social inclusion and social justice, despite the significant differences between the two.

¹⁹ See Baker 2014a, 147-50.

²⁰ See Baker 2014a, 112-15.

²¹ Further doubts about social justice are raised by marked gender discrimination at the top of the organization and everyday disciplinary practices throughout it, analyzed in Baker 2014a.

²² Abreu uses this phrase frequently; see e.g. <http://elsistemausa.ning.com/forum/topics/dr-jose-antonio-abreu-talks-el-sistema>.

²³ For example, David Holt, the president of Modern Enterprise Ltd. and a sponsor of Sistema New Brunswick, stated: “in the long- term *Sistema* will help create a better quality of workforce in our province” (quoted in Borchert 2012, 57). An Israeli program is built on the “Baldrige Core Values and Concepts,” espoused by a program called Baldrige Business Excellence (presentation by Adena Portowitz at the Sistema Special Interest Group, ISME conference, Porto Alegre, July 2014).

²⁴ For example, a report in the newspaper *El Nacional* claimed that El Sistema pressurized *núcleo* directors to ensure that their employees voted for the government in the December 2015 elections (“Denuncian hostigamiento político” 2015).

²⁵ <http://www.aporrea.org/poderpopular/a94940.html>.

²⁶ http://www.ted.com/talks/jose_abreu_on_kids_transformed_by_music.html.

²⁷ See Scripp 2015.

²⁸ See Scripp 2015 and Baker 2014a, particularly 150–3 and 271–4. Internal inequalities are a major source of complaints by the program’s musicians.

²⁹ <http://www.progressiveeconomy.eu/content/reducing-inequality-essential-step-development-and-en>.

³⁰ Compare, for example, academic research by Allan et al. (2010) and Rimmer, Street, and Phillips (2014), which portrays a mixed picture of UK Sistema-inspired programs, with the laudatory “Evaluation of Big Noise” (2011).

³¹ For example, Rosabal-Coto discusses an official report that begins “may this evaluation benefit SINEM” [the Costa Rican Sistema]. Issues around methodology and the confusion of research and advocacy are explored in Belfiore 2009 and Belfiore and Bennett 2010.

³² For a similar example in Venezuela’s neighbour, Guyana, see Sagar and Hebert 2015.

³³ Some individuals within non-Venezuelan Sistema programs, too, are trying to address problems with the Sistema model, for example by exploring collaborative composition though the extent to which they can innovate while tied to the Venezuelan program (even if only by name and inspiration) remains to be seen.