

Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

I S S N 1 5 4 5 - 4 5 1 7

A refereed journal of the



Action for Change in Music Education

**Volume 15 Number 1
January 2016**

Special Issue: El Sistema

Geoffrey Baker, *Guest Editor*

Vincent C. Bates, *Editor*

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**Resurrection Symphony:
El Sistema as Ideology in Venezuela and Los Angeles**

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Resurrection Symphony: El Sistema as Ideology in Venezuela and Los Angeles

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The explosive growth of Venezuela's El Sistema is rewriting the agenda of musical education in the West. Many commentators from the world of classical music react to the spectacle of dedicated young colonial musicians playing European masterworks as a kind of "miracle," accepting Sistema founder José Antonio Abreu's claim that, in Venezuela, "material poverty is being overcome by spiritual affluence." This essay attempts to clarify the epistemological slippage inherent in such talk, which deliberately conflates old-fashioned idealist notions of classical music's spiritual power with utilitarian justifications of music education as social engineering. In Los Angeles, Abreu's slippery rhetoric has been of great use to the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which under the canny leadership of chief executive Deborah Borda and Abreu protégé Gustavo Dudamel has turned El Sistema's rhetoric of social justice ("music is a fundamental human right") into a hip consumer brand.

Keywords: music education, social justice, musical canon, harmony ideology, colonialism, neoliberalism, Venezuela

Harmony suffers the same fate in late Beethoven as religion in bourgeois society: it continues to exist, but is forgotten. (Notebooks of Theodore Adorno, [1939] 1998, 158).

A specter is haunting music education: it is the specter of *El Sistema*. Admittedly, the situation today is quite opposite from that described by Karl Marx in 1848; the reigning musical institutions of Europe and America seek not to "exorcise" the revolutionary ghost, but to embrace it, to master the arcane political spells by which more such specters might be conjured. Appropriating the collectivist model and social goals of the Venezuelan state system of youth orchestras, they hope thereby to ensure the future of European classical music, which is precisely what Western observers from the leader of the Berlin

Philharmonic to the investigative journalists of the news program *60 Minutes* have seen in it. But, like Marx, I consider that most discussions of the controversial new social form exhibit the credulity of the nursery. They fail to recognize that what *El Sistema* proffers to music educators and audiences is not spectacular images of an egalitarian, unrealized future for European concert music, but faded spirit pictures from its colonialist past.

Even the material form *El Sistema* takes, a network of large youth ensembles reading European music from written parts, ought to give us pause. One American observer calls the persistence of the large ensemble model the “elephant in the room” of music education: the authoritarian style and curricular rigidity of this late Victorian innovation, with its emphasis on formal concerts that depend on large numbers of passive students learning a narrow range of “school music” disconnected from the vibrant and diverse musical culture outside the classroom, have caused enrollments in secondary-school music classes to fall steadily over the last thirty years, thus *reducing* access to musical instruction (Williams 2011, 51–3). As he points out, progressive systems of music education in (notably) England, Scotland, and Sweden have spent decades exploring alternatives to the large ensemble model that emphasize individual creativity, improvisation, and direct engagement with contemporary musical life. In this context, the reappearance of the (very) large ensemble model in the guise of *El Sistema* seems like an unwelcome — and unpromising — visit from the ghost of public-school orchestra rooms past.

Although I am not a specialist in music education, but a musicologist concerned with the state of contemporary Western art music, I think I know something about what it is to be haunted by this particular ghost. In a turn-of-the-century manifesto about the so-called “death of classical music,” I took on the canonic specter directly, perhaps over-confidently:

Boosters are right to point out the tenacity of classical music institutions, and the often-heroic struggles by individual musicians and scholars to uphold their constructions of the “classical”; *but no amount of material struggle can resurrect the epistemological power of a dead canon.* (Fink 1998, 144; emphasis added)

What I did not know when I wrote those words was that a very determined and powerful man was, even then, already working on an immense scale to test my

proposition about the power of material struggle to revive and repurpose the ideals of classical music. Under the slogan *Tocar y Luchar* (“to play, and to struggle”), José Antonio Abreu had already built a single youth orchestra into a massive state network of orchestras enrolling tens of thousands of children and adolescents. By the time I penned that quote, the State Foundation for the System of National Youth and Children’s Orchestras (FESNOJIV) was formally established in Venezuela’s Ministry of Family, Health, and Sports, its budget already dwarfing all other arts spending in the country.¹

A decade ago, Abreu’s project, long familiar to global advocates for education and the fight against poverty, burst onto the Western musical consciousness when his protégé, conductor Gustavo Dudamel, won the inaugural 2004 Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition in Bamberg, Germany. Later that year, Berlin Philharmonic Music Director Simon Rattle traveled to Caracas to conduct a massive *El Sistema* youth orchestra and chorus in a performance of Mahler’s Second Symphony, a piece whose subtitle, “the Resurrection,” was thematized in Rattle’s press conference encomium to the Venezuelan system and its creator: “If anybody asked me, where is there something really important going on for the future of classical music, I would simply have to say here, in Venezuela... These days I say I have seen the future of music in Venezuela, and that is — resurrection” (Arvelo 2006).

In the intervening decade, *El Sistema* has come under the direct patronage of the Bolivarian Revolutionary government in Venezuela and spread across the globe, with full-fledged programs in other Latin American countries and trial *núcleos* springing up across Europe and North America. Evidently it was correct to hypothesize in 1998 that European classical music must have died — else why would it need to be brought back to life in Venezuela by Abreu and his followers? On the other hand, I appear to have underestimated the appeal of Abreu’s long struggle to do the (as it seemed to me) impossible, that is, to reverse the decay of Western art music into ideological irrelevance by convincing those who control the material wealth of society to support it once more, and that so lavishly that it seems to rise from the dead. By what magic was this feat accomplished?

Fink, Robert. 2016. Resurrection Symphony: El Sistema as ideology in Venezuela and Los Angeles. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15 (1): 33–57. act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Fink15_1.pdf

Sleights of hand (material vs. ideal in post-canonic classical music)

In this theoretical discussion, I do not pretend to a definitive evaluation of *El Sistema*'s material efficacy as a social welfare program. Nor is my work based on first-hand ethnography, like Geoffrey Baker's (2014) closely-reported indictment of the way *El Sistema* "orchestrates" Venezuela's youth. Instead, I want to focus attention not so much on what Abreu has done, but on *the way he thinks*. I am interested here in the way material and ideal notions of "the power" of music have come to interpenetrate each other in the post-canonic discourse of Western art music. (I now see my earlier formulation is problematic precisely because it assumed that material and epistemological forms of power could be analyzed in isolation from each other.) In particular, twenty-first-century discussions by and about José Antonio Abreu and *El Sistema* feature a consistent slippage, an unwitting intellectual "sleight-of-hand," between material and ideal formulations of classical music. Since one of the major goals of my essay is to dramatize how confusing these sleights-of-hand can be, and how multiple passes between the material and ideal registers of thought eventually become for Abreu a style of intellectual misdirection, I will label each moment of epistemological mystification, and use the sequence of "passes" to organize my argument below.²

My tale will unfold in three sections: first, I'll analyze the early history of *El Sistema* in Venezuela as an unusual kind of spiritual welfare program, based in a pre-modern "harmony ideology" first brought to Latin America by European missionaries. Second, I'll consider the System's early twenty-first-century re-encounter with Europe, in which its assumed material social effects are mythologized through filmed propaganda and accepted as a "miracle" by Western observers. I'll suggest that the "miracle" is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Abreu's belief system, and has more to do with a desire to hold on to Western art music's cultural centrality and absolute "goodness" in a post-canonic musical world. Finally, I will explore some of the paradoxes attendant on classical music's remapping as a mode of social justice in the developed world, a complex relationship now reduced to the claim, available for purchase on a stylish black T-shirt in the Los Angeles Philharmonic's gift shop, that "music is a fundamental human right." Gustavo Dudamel, the most famous alumnus of *El Sistema*, is at the same time an agent of

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aesthetic reaction at the Philharmonic and a faux-progressive symbol for canonic classical music as a privileged social mediator in a fragmented metropolis still stubbornly segregated by race, class, and citizenship status.³ In this way, a fantasy of music appreciation as social justice functions as a powerful marketing tool for an institution whose audience is socially and politically liberal, but whose own organizational and business practices are those of the neoliberal elite.

1. Harmony as Ideology (*El Sistema in Venezuela*)

FIRST PASS: A Youth Orchestra can be a Social Welfare Project

Gustavo Dudamel once remarked to a Venezuelan interviewer that “the most beautiful thing about *El Sistema* is that it is also a social project” (Llorente 2006). José Antonio Abreu’s first trick was his most daring, a piece of political sleight-of-hand still admired with a striking lack of critical reflection in the linked worlds of classical music and arts education: He convinced the Venezuelan government to fund his personal mission to spread classical orchestral music by reinterpreting its often fuzzy idealism as the concrete material basis for a politically engaged social welfare project. Was this just misdirection? A question that is almost impossible to answer is just how many of Venezuela’s poorest children the System reaches, and what material benefit it actually provides (Baker 2014, 263–76). The simplest facts are difficult to discern through the scrim of emotionality that surrounds Abreu’s work. First-world encounters with *El Sistema* often transmit cultural stereotypes in spite of themselves, as when education researcher Diana Hollinger attempted to pin down some details of the life story of Juan de Jesús Pérez, a *núcleo* leader in Mérida:

Jesús is a temperate, gentle individual. Humble, a bit round and inelegant, he smiles easily, and his eyes are deep, dark, and sincere. “I was one of them,” he informs me earnestly. “I was one of the children of the barrio.” ... Trying to be a careful and meticulous researcher, I sought to reconfirm facts and milestones with him. “I already told you everything there is to tell!” he exclaims. “I *was* one of the barrio children, and now I am *not*.” He conveys this with great emotion, tears pooling in his round, coffee-colored eyes. (Hollinger 2006, 104)

Seeking some verifiable truth behind *El Sistema*’s social claims, Hollinger appears, by her own account, to be letting a deliberately evasive informant off the hook. One can hardly blame her: as she presents herself, she is neither a trained

ethnographer nor an investigative journalist. In politically sensitive situations — and, as Baker (2014) argues, the answer to even the simplest “factual” question about *El Sistema* in Venezuela is shot through with hidden relations of power — the challenge of ethnographic writing is to avoid both cultural insensitivity that invalidates difference (*you’re lying to me!*) and colonialist sentimentality that condescends while colluding (*you poor/noble man!*). Hollinger may have been out of her depth in trying, but no more than, to take a famously equivocal example from the anthropological literature, E.E. Evans-Pritchard attempting to get even the most basic information about names and lineages from suspicious Nuer tribesman in the British-controlled Sudan of the 1930s.⁴

What a relief it must have been for Hollinger to talk frankly with Maestro Abreu, who is in her telling anything but evasive about the social benefits of *El Sistema*. He gives a satisfying, direct, articulate answer, one that sweeps all questions of fact before it:

“Have you seen it transform their lives?” I query.

“Yes. *Absolutely!* Music attacks material poverty because it transforms the whole child.” He continues in earnest. “This transformation makes the child special, rich. As the child’s mind improves, his aspirations, his ideas also change. He is no longer a poor child. The material poverty is overcome.” (Hollinger 2006, 127)

SECOND PASS: Material Poverty can be relieved by Spiritual Affluence

Abreu’s formulation is extremely eloquent, but also sleight-of-hand number two, perhaps the crucial intellectual slippage in the entire discourse around *El Sistema*. The System justifies itself as a classical music social program that provides material benefits to poor children and adolescents; *but it defines those benefits in ideal terms*, as beneficial changes of mental state induced by the encounter with classical music itself. The material struggle turns out to be a spiritual one. As Abreu proclaimed to the world when he accepted the 2001 UNESCO Right Livelihood Award, in *El Sistema’s* Venezuela, “material poverty is being overcome by spiritual affluence.” His foundation continues to make the epistemological slip from “physical poverty” to “spiritual richness” a basic enabling fiction today:

§ Physical Poverty is Overcome by the Spiritual Richness that Music Provides

Academic music is no longer a privilege when it becomes part of the individual's life. When that happens, it is possible to see kids playing the violin at their humble homes, others playing the clarinet at their father's repair shop, attending classes and rehearsals, and participating in concerts in poor neighborhoods.... Spiritual richness provides the state of mind, ethical principles, and intellectual and emotional skills conducive to overcome physical poverty. (Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar 2013).

Overcoming material poverty through musical idealism is one of the “guiding principles” of Abreu's System, a core justification for everything it does. The equivalence reappears, with a slightly different spin, as part of the ideological armature of almost all *El Sistema*-based programs around the globe, as in this version, from the website of El Sistema USA: “Overcoming poverty and adversity is best done by strengthening the spirit, creating, as Dr. Abreu puts it, ‘an affluence of the spirit,’ and investing that affluence as a valued asset in a community endeavor to create excellence and beauty in music” (El Sistema USA 2015).⁵ Even the very few quasi-scientific studies commissioned by the System to validate its approach — the studies that have often been cited to assure skeptics of its pragmatic social impact — start by accepting this sleight-of-hand: “We cannot assume that the socio-economic conditions or the socio-educational level of the participants and their families change substantially ... but we can expect the psychosocial changes to be consolidated and established” (Torres 2002).⁶

What, then, is the “spiritual richness” that music provides? José Antonio Abreu has articulated, again and again, his absolute faith in the unique power of the classical music canon to transform lives through musical idealism. For him, playing in a classical orchestra is a spiritual activity like no other, because it combines exposure to order, beauty, and perfection with collective practice:

Art implies a sense of perfection, therefore of excellence, a road to excellence. What is it, then that the orchestra has ultimately planted in the souls of its members? A sense of harmony, a sense of order, implicit in rhythm, a sense of the aesthetic, of the beautiful [*lo bello*], of the universal, and the language of the invisible. That language of the invisible, transmitted invisibly through music. (Abreu in Arvelo 2006)

Describing this practice, Abreu resorts time and again to a small range of highly charged words—*community, order, universal, soul, spirit, beauty*—that index an

intense strain of *very* old-fashioned European classical music ideology (Weber 1999, 351–5). The ruling metaphor is *harmony*, a multivalent term whose ability to signify in both material and ideal registers allows Abreu to slip discursively between them at will: “Whoever creates beauty by playing an instrument, and generates musical harmony, begins to understand from within what essential harmony is, human harmony...” (Arvelo 2006).

Harmony is, of course, one of the most deeply rooted metaphorical concepts in the Western tradition, and Abreu, if he wished, could draw on Plato, Augustine, Boethius, Kircher, Kepler, Kant, Hegel, and a slew of Romantics to support his position (Spitzer 2004, 142–69). The analogy by which playing one’s part in a musical ensemble puts society in tune with universal creation was a favorite of Leibniz, Western philosophy’s most strenuously upbeat apostle of the harmonious universe:

One of the cardinal [political] metaphors used by Leibniz is that of an orchestra in which each instrument or group of instruments has its own part to play. The playing of its part is its whole function; the actualization of its purpose is the inner principle which, since the days of Plato and Aristotle, philosophers have affected to be able to find in all created and uncreated things. The player plays better if he “understands” — perceives the pattern — of the part assigned to him in the cosmic orchestra. He need not, indeed he cannot, hear the totality to which his activity contributes — only the conductor, only God, can do that. (Berlin 2014, 123)

But for those of us who live in a post-Enlightenment, post-Romantic aesthetic world, the Western notion of musical harmony is fundamentally *dialectical*: harmony subsumes both consonance and dissonance, and thus the message of Western music for modernity is that struggle and discord can, up to a point, be exciting; that the authentic development of the individual is often at odds with the need for order in society; and that teleological development might lead to complexity and disorder, but is preferable to simple stasis. This position, while it has profound political implications, is not simply political; it is based in a dialectical reading of tonality *as a system*:

Dissonance is the truth about harmony. If the ideal of harmony is taken strictly, it proves to be unreachable according to its own concept.... The rejection of the ideal of classicism is not the result of the alternation of styles, or, indeed, of an alleged historical temperament; it is, rather, the result of the coefficient of

friction in harmony itself, which in corporeal form presents what is not reconciled as reconciled and thereby transgresses the very postulate of the appearing essence at which the ideal of harmony aims. The emancipation from this ideal is an aspect of the developing truth content of art. (Adorno [1970] 2013, 151)

In Abreu's System, on the other hand, harmony is an absolute, non-dialectical value, functionally equivalent in discourse to something like "the beauty of total agreement." In harmony with Leibniz, who argued that when each of us "plays his part," we fulfill our deepest purpose, Abreu portrays the classical symphony orchestra as a mechanism for aestheticizing social unity — in fact, the most perfect such cultural machine ever created:

What is an orchestra? An orchestra is a community, where the essential and exclusive characteristic — it is the only one that has this characteristic — is that it is the only community that comes together with the fundamental objective of agreeing with itself [*concertarse*]... To agree on what? To generate pure beauty [*limpieza*]. (Arvelo 2006)

Abreu uses the Spanish word *concertarse*, with its double entendre of orchestral unison and social consensus, over and over; the term appears to encapsulate his deepest goals for *El Sistema* as a social program, the creation, in a totally unified society, of "solidarity, harmony, [and] mutual compassion" (Arvelo 2006).

In this context, harmony is not just an aesthetic ideal; it is an ideology. Those of a social-scientific bent will recognize this as akin to *the* "harmony ideology" identified by radical anthropologist Laura Nader. Nader, who primarily studies legal and juridical systems, was moved to conceptualize harmony as ideology after fieldwork amongst the rural Zapotec of southern Mexico, and she sees it as one of the primary mechanisms of control in colonial and post-colonial societies. Her historical perspective identifies the prizing of harmony over all other social modes of interaction as a legacy of Catholic and specifically Spanish colonialism in the New World; she has consistently argued against the notion that "traditional" societies are more naturally harmonious than those of industrialized modernity, preferring to explore the complex ways that an ideology of social harmony can be imposed from above as a mode of control (Nader 1990).

Harmony ideology as a mode of control is totally relevant to the work of José Antonio Abreu, a Jesuit-trained Latin American musical intellectual whose deep

Catholic faith pervades every corner of the System. The main goal of the System is to *concertarse*, so students learn to play their instruments by practicing, together, the orchestral parts of the pieces their *núcleo* is working on. The aim of this spiritual practice appears to be a process of indoctrination into an ideology of harmony as voluntary, loving submission to an invisible higher power: “Music sublimates the interior pulse of soul and expresses it in a harmonious way, subtly, invisibly — and transmits it, without words, to other human beings. It is the art of making wills, souls, and spirits agree [*concertarse*]” (Abreu in Arvelo 2006). In this it is not unlike the famous spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order in whose educational footsteps Abreu consciously walks. Foreign visitors and researchers consistently report how perfectly Abreu’s children have internalized their lessons in harmony ideology:

I ask the children to tell me what the orchestra means to them, and many of them eagerly raise their hands.... “Playing in the orchestra teaches us responsibility, confidence, and discipline.”

“What else?” I prompt them, letting my eyes sweep across the room.

A serious, wide-eyed girl of about eleven responds this time. “We learn to work together in the orchestra.” Many others nod in agreement.

“It is like a family here,” one dark-eyed boy, perhaps ten years of age, says boldly.

“It changes our hearts,” states another child, so quickly I do not even see where the voice comes from.

“Playing music changes our souls,” asserts a girl in the violin section... (Hollinger 2006, 119)

As Nader is careful to note, harmony ideology can cut both ways: it can be a strategy of resistance, a way of keeping outsiders from intervening in local disputes, a defense against imperial claims of the law. But it *always* involves the “redistribution of power” (Nader 1997, 714); we thus always need to ask who controls, and who is being controlled, when it comes to changing the hearts and minds of the children of Venezuela — and now the world.

2. “If just one percent of this is true, then it is really a miracle” (*El Sistema in Europe*)

THIRD PASS: Talented Young Performers are signs of a (State-Sponsored) Miracle

José Antonio Abreu’s achievement in Venezuela, impressive though it is, has been almost entirely misunderstood by European and North American musical observers. The word outsiders use that crystallizes their failure to “get it” is a religious term, but from a quite different register than the sober language of the harmony ideology: as one musical visitor from Germany, just landed in Caracas to experience Abreu’s System for herself, put it, excitedly, “if just *one percent* of this is true, then it really is a *miracle!*” (Arvelo 2006). Such “miracles” happen when visiting Europeans are shown one thing — carefully honed displays, often involving the best orchestras, schools, or students, especially the immensely talented conservatory-level students in the top Caracas orchestras — and, through a little harmless misdirection, are allowed to assume that the same thing is going on all over Venezuela.

In presenting *El Sistema* as a state-sponsored miracle, Abreu is following the cultural style of the Venezuelan petro-elite. Well before the government of Hugo Chavez made redistributive theater a cornerstone of the Bolivarian “revolution,” Venezuelan-born anthropologist Fernando Coronil had analyzed in detail how the state’s use of oil wealth to underwrite a simulation of development led inevitably to a “culture of miracles,” each shiny new development project fading unaccountably into an ever-growing welter of corruption and mutual recrimination (Coronil 1997, 317). Coronil used the metaphor of “prestidigitation” — that is, sleight-of-hand — to describe the way the “magical state” spectacularized its redistributive power while obscuring the weakness of its institutions. He noted that his home country had developed its taste for spectacle and mystification during the colonial past: “In this respect, like the Spanish imperial state analyzed by José Antonio Maravall (1986), the Venezuelan state has been constituted as a unifying force by producing fantasies of collective integration into centralized political institutions. As the heir of the culture of the Baroque, the state in Venezuela ‘captivates minds’” (Coronil 1997, 4). Substitute *Sistema* for *state*, and *musical* for *political*, and the project of *El Sistema* is recognizable as characteristically Venezuelan.

To document this “magical” cultural style first hand, allow me to present a close reading of the spectacular 2006 documentary film *Tocar y Luchar*, whose *mise-en-scène*, by Arturo Arvelo, a graduate of *El Sistema*, is replete with visual and aural prestidigitation. It is a truism of film studies that no documentary is ever a transparent recording of events, but *Tocar y Luchar* is, by anyone’s standards, an extraordinarily artificial construction, especially where its musical soundtrack is concerned. Strikingly for a film about music education, *Tocar y Luchar* largely withholds the sounds of rehearsal: we often *see* young musicians playing in rural settings, but usually we do not *hear* what they are playing. Often what we hear instead is Mahler’s Second Symphony, whose 2004 performance under Rattle in Caracas is a key through line of the film. A favorite editing trick of the film is to begin with visuals of *núcleo* rehearsals or rustic performances; strip them of sound, then sneak in the audio of the Mahler underneath; and, finally, cut to synchronized audio and video footage of the gala performance in thunderous progress. The clearest example of this cinematic sleight-of-hand comes at the climax of the film, where, in a montage of stunning mendacity, the heaven-storming final cadence of the Resurrection Symphony, played by the elite Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, is superimposed on completely different, grainy archival video footage of an outdoor concert in Rome. The children’s orchestra which was actually playing has been silenced, its diligent but ordinary sound unable to provide the necessary spectacular climax. A master stroke of musical misdirection — *look at those tiny kids ... hey, presto, listen to that amazing symphony!* — is then cinematically sutured to the approving gaze of Pope John Paul II, the one man on Earth most able, for Abreu, to validate an actual miracle.⁷

It’s understandable that foreigners are initially overwhelmed by the spectacle of *El Sistema*. The elite young players in the top orchestras *are* very, very skilled at what they do — and their ebullience is real, since they’ve climbed, often at great personal sacrifice, to the top of a very large heap.⁸ The System’s graduates, like all post-colonial subjects, are also aware of the power of harmony ideology: Abreu’s star pupils and teachers are unlikely to do anything to mar the illusion of unity and joy, no matter how much they happen to dislike their stand partner, or when they tire (as

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they do) of juggling their instruments and shaking their bodies during a *Sistema* warhorse like Bernstein's "Mambo."

Some European musicians, though, have reacted to the encounter with *El Sistema* at a much deeper cultural level than simply enjoying the ensemble and élan for its own sake. They slip, so easily, from the possible social power of group music making, to an old fantasy about the social power that a sufficiently elevated "music" possesses *in itself*. Here's Simon Rattle again, from Arvelo's film:

It's so clear that the orchestra, and the work that's being done in music here is not only enriching lives, but saving lives. I think it's a matter ... that we have to remember that music is always *about something*, it is not just itself. I think a part of the reason that the audiences get these profound emotions from these musicians is that, clearly, *it is the most important thing in the world to all of these kids*, and that comes over loud and clear (Arvelo 2006; emphasis in original speech text).

Whose (musical) life is being saved here? As a culturally-oriented musicologist, I am not at all nostalgic for the era when serving "the music itself," a Romantic ideological construct if ever there was one, was a sufficient goal for those who aspired to mastery of Western art music. But one did imagine that the chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic still believed in it. The struggle of *El Sistema* may be social in its home country, but for a certain class of Western pilgrim, the real battle is epistemological, against the cultural emptiness of a dead ideology that once championed "absolute" music precisely because it was *not* about anything in this world except its own tonal forms in autotelic motion. Does it really take an assemblage of dark-eyed, third-world youths, radiating boundless energy and unanimity of purpose as they tackle the great works of the Western canon, to remind Sir Simon Rattle that classical music was not always "just itself," that it used to be "about something"? If pressed on this "something," Rattle would doubtless respond tautologically, along deeply inscribed lines of Western idealism, noting that it has long been assumed by European philosophers, musicians, and educators that deep immersion in musical harmony can lead to life-changing epiphanies of the individual spirit. If *El Sistema* could take even a fraction of its alleged 700,000 participants on *that* intellectual journey, it truly would be a kind of miracle.

FOURTH PASS: (Their) Being in Harmony can revive the Meaning of Harmony (for Us)

But that is not Abreu's project. Rattle perceives — and there's no reason to doubt him — that, for the kids of *El Sistema*, “it is the most important thing in the world.” The unanswered question: what is “it”? Climbing out of poverty? Becoming part of a community in which everyone is in agreement? Understanding for oneself the meaning of great works of art? The latter two cultural goals are not identical; they may well be antithetical. The “miracle” turns out to be another sleight-of-hand, this one highly dependent on a Western audience that actively wants to be fooled. If we, like Simon Rattle, misidentify Abreu's non-dialectical concept of musical harmony with our own, we might well mistake their display of collective happiness at being *in* harmony for the individual meaningfulness we derive *from* harmony. If the trick works, our emotional reaction to the classical orchestra repertoire in Venezuelan hands — the “profound emotions” we feel when watching harmony ideology in spectacular action — will be proof that the System works: not just “for them,” but, perhaps more importantly, *for us*.

3. El Sistema as Simulation (Report from Los Angeles)

The problematics of this tautological, sleight-of-hand linkage can be summed up in the misuse of a slogan that has traveled from Abreu's Venezuela to Dudamel's Los Angeles: “music is a fundamental human right.”⁹ Let that phrase, printed on an expensive T-shirt, stand as a sign of the commodification of Abreu's “miracle” by an arts organization — the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association — that has mastered its environment as thoroughly as Abreu once mastered the redistributive politics of the Venezuelan oil ministry. *El Sistema's* confounding of classical music ideals with the material struggle for social justice allows alert arts marketers to use it to entice audiences into a form of “hip consumerism” (Frank 1997), a veneer of progressive politics disguising the retrograde nature of the luxury cultural goods on display.

FIFTH PASS: Art as Social Justice enables Social Justice as Marketing

El Sistema functions in Los Angeles as a simulacrum of itself, as almost pure image-making. The Philharmonic helps fund the three *núcleos* that collectively make

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up the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (YOLA) at a modest level, spending on them a small fraction of its approximately \$100 million budget.¹⁰ The orchestra is thus able to rebrand itself as a “forward-looking” agent of social change, a marketing goal about which Deborah Borda, the Philharmonic’s president, is refreshingly candid. At a March 2013 symposium on the future of music education at the Barbican in London, she replayed a key moment from a press conference just past, with the satisfaction of a conjurer recounting the details of a particularly successful piece of misdirection. She and Gustavo Dudamel had just announced the details of the 2013–14 orchestra season:

But at the end of the conference, when we opened up for questions, the focus was literally *all about YOLA*. Questions poured in in Spanish and English... Imaginations were clearly fired up by this program.

Yes, the LA Philharmonic’s identity has been changed, and, to a significant extent, reoriented.

This is not by accident. (Borda 2013)

Borda has consistently positioned YOLA as a form of disruptive innovation, which “turns the traditional middle-class youth orchestra program upside down.” But this superficial radicalism can misdirect us from the increasingly classist reality over which Borda presides: in a city ever-more stratified by wealth, she has leveraged the Philharmonic Association’s *rentier* position as landlord of the Hollywood Bowl to quadruple the orchestra’s endowment while still paying the highest musician salaries in the business. Still, the orchestra in front of which Gustavo Dudamel stands has but a single Latino musician on staff, while Borda has been credited with supercharging the Philharmonic Association’s Board of Directors, where the financial commitment only begins with \$60,000 in annual dues, into an international “billionaires club” (Fleischmann 2015).

As of this writing, that club has one very new, very prominent Latina member: Adriana Cisneros, heir to the most powerful media and branding conglomerate in South America, the Grupo Cisneros, which built Venevisión, Venezuela’s oldest and largest television network, into a global media, branding, and real estate empire that controls, among other properties, the glitzy Miss Venezuela pageant and a significant percentage of the entire hemisphere’s *telenovela* market. The Cisneros family, one of

the richest in Latin America, was also deeply implicated in both the spectacular politics of the Venezuelan petro-boom and its collapse into corruption, consolidating power and then moving assets offshore during the 1990s, the country's most floridly neoliberal period.¹¹ In this context, YOLA's social mission seems like Venezuelan-themed window dressing, not fundamental change. Offering free orchestral education to a small slice of Southern California's underrepresented and underprivileged may make our own large ensemble *seem* politically progressive — but under Borda's leadership, the Los Angeles Philharmonic has allied itself not with (Latin) America's poor immigrants and workers, but with the same old class of entrenched oligarchs who have manipulated their world for so long.

SIXTH (AND FINAL) PASS: Marketing “Change” while programming The Same Old Stuff

YOLA also misdirects us from the growing aesthetic conservatism of the Philharmonic's concert programming in the era of Gustavo Dudamel, a fundamentally provincial musician who developed his view of the canon under the arch-traditionalist Abreu. Perceptive American critics have not forgotten the equivocation with which Dudamel took over the mantle of musical progress from Essa-Pekka Salonen, who had worked tirelessly to make it the basis of the Philharmonic's brand identity. What once read as charming modesty on the part of the incoming music director, eight years later, looks more like Jesuitical evasion:

At the press conference, when Salonen introduced him with an uncharacteristically florid fanfare — “We are interested in the future. We are not trying to re-create the glories of the past, like so many other symphony orchestras” — Dudamel got a laugh by advancing to the microphone, pausing for a long moment, and saying, “So-o-o-o...” The art of understatement isn't dead at Walt Disney Concert Hall. (Ross 2007)

The Philharmonic has become deeply involved with the glories of the musical past in recent years: the centerpiece of its 2013–14 season was a festival devoted — and it doesn't get more retrograde than this — to the orchestral music of Tchaikovsky. The sales pitch was precisely calibrated to deliver the promise of what we might dub the “Rattle effect”: “To experience Gustavo Dudamel leading the music of Tchaikovsky is to hear favorite masterpieces *as if for the first time*” (Los Angeles

Philharmonic 2013; emphasis mine). The life-giving passion for music transmitted through Dudamel, the *Sistema* kid from Venezuela turned international superstar, could rejuvenate even the most overplayed warhorses, making their familiar pleasures feel new and “progressive.” Dudamel did not have to deliver this miracle all by himself: as with the previous year’s Mahler symphony cycle, the Philharmonic brought the flagship Venezuelan *Sistema* ensemble, the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra, to Los Angeles to play half the concerts. A cynical observer might see this as a form of outsourcing, diluting the cost of unionized orchestral labor by importing Third World workers to do the job for less. Dudamel reserved Tchaikovsky’s “canonical” final pair of symphonies for his adult professionals, leaving the Bolívars with less demanding repertoire — and less demand for tickets.

Meanwhile, back in Venezuela, decades of poorly thought out import substitution, populist subsidies, and overt corruption in governments of the right and left, have strained the economy to the breaking point. Hyperinflation, shortages of basic consumer goods, and devaluation of the currency are decimating the very middle class into which the graduates of *El Sistema* are supposed to ascend (Kronick 2014). In 2014, thousands of students took to the streets, protesting against the government of Nicholas Maduro, and were met with gunfire and mass arrests. Some of them, doubtless, were graduates of *El Sistema*’s musical courses in harmony and/as social unity, but they seem not to have learned their lessons.

It is truly striking, in the context of violent street protests and increasingly heavy-handed repression from the government of Nicholas Maduro, how doggedly both native and foreign commentators have clung to the ideology of harmony. It is completely unsurprising that Gustavo Dudamel, challenged in early 2014 to justify his close relationship to what increasingly appeared as an authoritarian regime, took refuge behind an idealized notion of harmony:

It is a difficult time in my country. I can say first of all that I believe in the right of people to protest because this is a right... I condemn violence — from wherever it is coming from. We will not solve our problems with violence... Music is my instrument. When we play for an audience, in my country, they think differently. The people in the audience have different social positions, different religions, but when we are playing, they are united. The *Sistema* in Venezuela is a symbol of this unity. (Dudamel 2014)

But when Rubén Blades, a Latin American cultural icon with no ties to either Abreu or Maduro, in an open letter to Venezuela harshly critical of what he called the “sterile polarization” of political discourse, used *El Sistema* as a symbol of non-partisan pragmatism, as a success that both government and opposition could agree on, and that rebellious students should strive to emulate, one had to stop and take notice:

With the love and respect I have for this country, I venture to suggest that the young people present their arguments with objectivity, that they set themselves the task of convincing their parents and neighbors all across Venezuela, that they organize their arguments outside of the sterile divisions created by the government and the opposition, and make them public. Kids, you need to act with the maturity and capability demonstrated by the musicians of *El Sistema*. (Blades 2014a)

This is how the harmony ideology works: the call is not for justice and freedom (utopian, disruptive values, however they might be defined), but for “maturity” and “capability.” Learn to follow the beat, kids.

Need it be pointed out that Venezuela in the waning days of *chavismo* is one of the most *in*-harmonious places on Earth, with decaying industrial infrastructure, skyrocketing rates of street crime and inflation, an openly paranoid style of official diplomacy, and regular shortages of basic consumer goods that socialist and capitalist factions can only explain by accusing each other of sabotage? The motto of *El Sistema*, the title of Arvelo’s film, is “tocar y luchar” — *to play and to fight* — but it may be time to stop playing around in the fantasy utopia of classical music, and start fighting in the real world.

Meanwhile, like his mentor, Gustavo Dudamel continues to trade in classical music festivals as spectacular stagings of harmony ideology. This was how he began his tenure in Los Angeles, taking a page from the *El Sistema* playbook and folding a well-drilled group of disadvantaged young musicians into a free performance — at the Hollywood Bowl, the Philharmonic’s celebrity venue and cash nexus — of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the single most canonic attempt in the West at a musical statement of harmony ideology. Then came the festivals devoted to Mahler and Tchaikovsky, both *Sistema* staples. Under the sign of pan-Americanism, Dudamel brought Rubén Blades himself to Los Angeles, attempting to recreate the

excitement that had, for a night, united his compatriots, when the Simón Bolívar Orchestra brought a long-lost orchestral salsa masterpiece, *Maestra Vida*, back to vivid life in front of 200,000 spectators at an airfield outside Caracas. But in Hollywood, the Latin-themed summer concert did not even fill the Bowl, leaving critics musing about the role of the Philharmonic's trained musicians in a confusing spectacle mostly "lost in translation" (Swed 2014). Blades himself, though fiercely defensive of the cross-cultural, cross-genre impulse, admitted he'd felt out of place: "many of those in the 'picnic area' in front of the stage gave me the impression that we were a part of some sort of National Geographic-type of evening. Most of them seemed to have no clue about what was going on" (Blades 2014b). Gustavo Dudamel is doubtless sincere in his desire to unify Latino and Anglo Los Angeles through music. But sometimes the multicultural sleight-of-hand does not come off; no amount of good will and idealism around the YOLA program can change the material fact that the musicians, management, and audience of the Los Angeles Philharmonic remain overwhelmingly white, upper-middle class, and strongly committed to a Eurocentric view of the musical classics.

Meanwhile, challenged in early 2015 by local critic Mark Swed to take a position on the discordant material reality of contemporary Venezuela — and *El Sistema's* increasingly tricky financial and political position within it — Dudamel fell back one more time on José Antonio Abreu's ideal of harmony:

Despite criticism at home for not taking sides in a divided country, he said he is doubling down his efforts to keep Venezuela's El Sistema education system out of politics.

"It is something beautiful that works, that gives hope," Dudamel explained. "It is the symbol of union that we need so much in our time." (Swed 2015)

And, heading back to Ground Zero of the orchestral canon, he promised Los Angeles another hemisphere-straddling spectacle, a Beethoven symphony festival in which the culminating statement, thundered out by hundreds of musicians from Los Angeles and Caracas, would be the old familiar refrain of social unity, "*alle Menschen werden Brüder.*"

It may have been churlish of me, but I did not embrace the Beethoven-Fest. Not because I didn't think Gustavo Dudamel could lead technically satisfying

performances of these canonical works; or even because I am tired of the works themselves (although it did irk me to be told again how Dudamel and the Bolívars would make me hear them “as if for the first time”). I recoiled from the prospect because I hear in the works of Beethoven an unresolved dialectical tension — a tension that was long ago banished, as if by sleight-of-hand, from *El Sistema*’s translation of the “great” works of orchestral music. In this, I am a follower of Theodore Adorno, not José Antonio Abreu. If you ask me to choose between music making as a specter of social justice and actual social justice, I’m going to choose real-world dissonance over idealized harmony every time.

I don’t believe in ghosts.

Sic ista sine noxa decipiunt quomodo praestigatorum acetabula et calculi, in quibus me fallacia ipsa delectat. Effice ut quomodo fiat intellegam: perdidit lusum.

Such quibbles are just as harmlessly deceptive as the juggler’s cup and dice, in which it is the very trickery that pleases me. But show me how the trick is done, and I have lost my interest therein.

– Seneca, 45th Epistle to Lucilius

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Notes

¹ The history of *El Sistema* is both contested and extremely difficult to research. The Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar actively seeks to mystify its own origins. Given the “off the books” nature of Abreu’s maneuvering during decades as both a government official and arts philanthropist, and the pervasive politicization of almost every fact about Venezuela since the advent of Hugo Chávez, a researcher has no choice but to triangulate between the official, quasi-hagiographic narrative (Tunstall 2012, 52–96), and much darker stories of institutional cooptation and outright corruption laid out in Baker 2014, 63–91.

² The “pass” is the fundamental move in any exhibition of sleight-of-hand; originally, it was literally the ability to pass balls from hand to hand while juggling them with cups (“faire passer la coupe”). Later it was generalized to any hidden “pass” from one hand to another, especially involving coins or playing cards; cf. Guyot, *Nouvelles Récréations*, 1769, III, 224: “Pour être en état d’exécuter cessorites de Récréations, il faut savoir faire passer la coupe...” In English, when prestidigitators “make the pass,” they rely on dexterity, choreography, and misdirection. Often a series of passes is necessary to set up a complex illusion.

³ The literature on the spatial reality of racial and class segregation in Los Angeles is voluminous. To get a sense of the situation of cultural industries and the city’s cultural center(s) within this landscape, fundamental theoretical texts like Soja 1996 can be supplemented by quantitative research (Scott 2000) and ethnographic fieldwork (Peterson 2010). Sadly, the raw outrage over the concretized injustice of Los Angeles’ built environment in Davis 1990 is still ethically relevant.

⁴ This example comes from a key document of the “literary turn” in anthropology, James Clifford’s and George E. Marcus’s 1986 collection *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. See the account of Evans-Pritchard and the evasive Nuer in Renato Rosaldo, “From the Door of His Tent,” 91–7.

⁵ This language also appears, word for word, as a “core principle” in a planning document available for download from the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles website (http://www.laphil.com/sites/default/files/media/pdfs/shared/education/yola/el_sis_fundamentals_jan_2013.pdf, accessed June 2015). One of YOLA’s *núcleo* sites is officially a member of El Sistema USA, and primary authorship of the YOLA document is assigned to Mark Churchill, the Director of El Sistema USA, who was himself introduced to the Venezuelan system while guiding Sistema Fellows at the New England Conservatory ca. 2009–10.

⁶ The most thorough-going evaluation of the possible social benefits of an *El Sistema*-style program to date has recently been released by a consortium of Scottish educational researchers and government auditors. *Evaluating Sistema Scotland: Initial Findings Report*, jointly released in June 2015 by the Glasgow Center for Population Health, Education Scotland, Audit Scotland, and Glasgow Caledonian University, is a quite guarded document. Most of the research is avowedly qualitative, relying heavily on self-reporting from teachers and parents, and the skilled interpretation of drawings and structured conversations with small children. A multimodal logic model by which Big Noise *might* cause beneficial social outcomes is hypothesized, but, as the report itself notes, correlation is not causation: “Future work needs to develop an understanding of the specific ways in which the Big Noise programs ‘cause’ the range of ‘effects’ outlined in this evaluation” (78). Researchers qualify their generally positive assessment by noting that it is still too soon to provide quantitative data on life outcomes of students in the program, categorizing those as “long term” effects whose existence can at present, only be hypothesized: “The outcomes described as long term within the logic models are projected into the future and are thus *theorized*, not based on the Big Noise evaluation evidence” (43; emphasis in original).

⁷ The cultishly religious atmosphere of *El Sistema* is well-known, and at least one U.S. press account has compared Abreu’s recent public appearances to those of a secular pope: “For a correspondent who covered a number of Pope John Paul II’s trips abroad in his later years, it was an uncannily familiar scene: the charisma, the need to touch, the patient greeting of the people, special solicitousness for the handicapped” (Wakin 2012). As Geoffrey Baker notes early on in his carefully shaded portrait of Abreu, the Maestro, a deeply conservative Catholic layman, is seen by many to be angling for some level of beatification after death (2014, 25). The climactic scene of *Tocar y Luchar* is, in this context, readable as an eloquent and carefully aimed piece of auto-hagiography.

⁸ They are often not as young as they are assumed to be. In a sleight-of-hand that would have been familiar to Leopold Mozart and Joseph von Beethoven, the top “youth” orchestras of *El Sistema* tend to have a significant contingent of experienced players who have reached legal majority.

⁹ It is outside the scope of this essay to follow up the interesting divergence between this Los Angeles formulation and the original claim, made by proponents of *El Sistema*, that in Venezuela, “music is a social right.” Abreu, so slippery in other regards, has always been clear about this: for him, the right to music is no different than any other social right guaranteed in the Venezuelan constitution. It is fundamentally an *economic* right tied to a guarantee of material well-being, requiring massive state intervention and control. This view of classical music has proven totally compatible with Bolivarian socialism; when Chávez threw his support behind *El Sistema* and several years later declared it the foundation of his *Misión Música*, he was simply folding Abreu’s project into a larger set of governmental “missions” devoted to other constitutional social rights, including housing (*Misión*

Habitat), literacy (*Misión Robinson*), medical care (*Misión Barrio Adentro*), and food (*Misión Mercal*). But in the West, cold war liberals have never liked the sound of “social rights,” preferring to champion “human rights” instead. Rights theorists note that this implies a negative, individualistic, rather than a positive, collectivist ethics (Putz-Chekwe and Flood 2011, 41-43): rights are protected when the government refrains from, to take some familiar American examples, making any law that abridges freedom of speech, or restricts the right to bear arms, or establishes a state religion. Thus it is not quite clear what it means, outside of his native Venezuela, for Gustavo Dudamel to claim music as a “fundamental human right.”

¹⁰ YOLA claims to serve “over 600” students at three locations in South and Central Los Angeles (LA Philharmonic website, 2015). The program is growing, and has recently begun to partner with local educational institutions like the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, a somewhat underutilized facility just east of the downtown fine arts district along Grand Avenue. It has cast its net of “stakeholders” very widely, committing a phalanx of diverse local arts organizations (including, unbeknownst to me, my own university!) to “identify and secure resources on local, regional, statewide, and national levels — in both the public and private sectors — to support and sustain the success of Youth Orchestra LA.” The Statement of Common Cause (http://www.laphil.com/sites/default/files/media/pdfs/shared/education/yola/yola_stakeholder_statement_of_common_cause.pdf) which LA stakeholders are required to sign is superficially inclusive of multiple traditions, but, like *El Sistema* — and the Philharmonic’s Walt Disney Concert Hall — places Western art music at the center: “Los Angeles County is home to musical traditions from every part of the globe, and we believe in the value of each of them. We also believe that training in classical music is not only intrinsically valuable but also serves as the best foundation for any other musical endeavor a child might wish to pursue.”

¹¹ Coronil notes the close relationship between the Cisneros group and the ill-fated second administration of Carlos Andrés Pérez, and Baker points out that Jose Antonio Abreu’s own brother was tangentially caught up in the web of elite corruption that brought the President down (2014, 44–5). Coronil’s description of mid-1990s Venezuela seems sadly *apropos* of Los Angeles in 2015: “The crisis of the protectionist state and the opening up of the economy have split the nation into two: an internationally connected upper class and its local associates (about many of whom it could be said that ‘money is their country’), and an impoverished majority that includes a shrinking middle class” (1996, 381–3).

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