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Reading *El Sistema*: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth in Ontario

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Reading *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth* in Ontario

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Review of *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth* by Geoffrey Baker. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014, 376 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 978-0199341559.

I read *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth* by Geoffrey Baker in Kingston, Ontario, a university-government-prison town with a third-tier symphony orchestra, where there has been no public school string instruction by certified music specialists in about 20 years. Back then, the school-owned instruments were sold and the district purchased more computers. The district re-assigned music specialists to general classroom teaching. Now, if students receive any lessons on string instruments in the schools, it is from professional musicians who come to the schools; however, parents pay the tuition privately and provide the instruments. Meanwhile, this spring at the university, the School of Music made its first full-service faculty hire since 1997. Even so, it is now an amalgamated School of Drama and Music with only one-third the music education professors it had in 1997. During the autumn semester, the Queen's Conservatory¹—an affiliated but private conservatory—plans to begin Sistema Kingston as an after-school program at a soon-to-be-closed public school in a working-class neighborhood. Although the program is supported by the local school district and foundations, the director of the conservatory must raise thousands of dollars before Sistema Kingston opens.

Certainly, I knew of Venezuela's El Sistema before I read Baker's book. My introduction to it had been through a presentation at the Community Music Activities Commission of the International Society for Music Education in 2000. Over the ensuing 15 years, El Sistema emerged as a phenomenon in its relationship to music education. As a professor dedicated to equity, the idea of music as a means

for achieving that goal intrigued me; however, my experience as a musician and my research into the master-apprentice model of conservatory musical training (see Lamb 1991, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999) contradicted the notion that orchestral training leads to social progress.

Much more recently, the Canadian Music Educators' Association/ L'association canadienne des musiciens éducateurs (CMEA/ACME) presented a position paper on El Sistema in 2012 and published two articles (Govias 2014², Morin 2014) in its journal, *Canadian Music Educator/ Musicien éducateur au Canada*. Canadian music educators regularly read the U.S.-based *Music Educators Journal* also, and almost simultaneously with the CMEA/ACME position paper (December 2012), that journal published an article about the possibilities for El Sistema in the U.S.A. (Lesniak 2012). The publication of this article resulted in criticism from an El Sistema advocate (Tunstall 2013) and a response from Lesniak (2013), both published in September 2013.

Major newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, published reviews of El Sistema before the book was available in North America. The blogosphere featured discussions, too: <https://geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com/>; <http://sistemaglobal.org/>; <http://jonathangovias.com/>.

That CMEA/ACME found it necessary to post a position paper distressed me. It is a carefully constructed document hinting at deep discussion in its qualified and conditional support for Sistema-inspired projects. Even more distressing is the way El Sistema advocates brook no criticism, as is evidenced by Tunstall's misreading of Lesniak's article and Govias' blog post that he "took a lot of heat" for presenting a paper at a one-day conference organized by Baker. (<http://jonathangovias.com/2015/05/09/bonfire-of-the-inanities-international-censorship-in-sistema/>) We need more research and discussion, not less. We do not need positions, but dialogue. Accordingly, it is within this context that I read Geoffrey Baker's book.

The Book Review

The book begins with an introductory chapter followed by four sections: The Institution and Its Leaders; Music Education; Social Education; and Impact. The

introductory chapter sets the parameters of the study. Baker clearly delineates his motivation, goals, methodology, and limitations. Baker attended the 2007 concert debut of Gustavo Dudamel with the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra at the Proms. Thrilled by the experience, he wanted to study the phenomenon. Thus, Baker began his research with an official visit to the Montalbán núcleo in Caracas during November 2010 followed by a year of ethnographic work at several sites in Venezuela. His purpose was to reveal the experiences of those teachers and students within El Sistema who would speak with him and to set these experiences within the context of more public perceptions. Baker states,

Ethnographic studies are concerned less with counting or proving than with analyzing perceptions, meanings, and the construction of social worlds. I am primarily interested in culture, ideology, and understandings of El Sistema; quantitative analysis of the impact of music learning on individual achievement or the national economy will have to be left to others. (19–20)

He acknowledges that his book is not

a comprehensive or conclusive narrative but rather a critical, informed analysis of some of El Sistema's key actors and core claims pointing to existing questions and debates . . . there is much more to be explored, many more research methods to be applied. (20)

Although mainstream media reviewers questioned Baker's methods for not being "journalistic," from the perspectives of music education and ethnomusicology he followed established procedures for ethnographic research. The current practices required by university research ethics boards protect the identity of vulnerable populations and limit any negative impact. Baker would be required to protect anonymity of his participants if they believed that being identified would have a negative impact, whether or not this belief was accurate. Journalists protect their sources, too, so Oesterich's (2014) objections to this practice do not make sense.

Readers may be tempted to skim or ignore the Introduction and begin with Chapter 1; however, to do so with this book would be to miss important information that sets the stage for the body of *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth*. Throughout the book, Baker comments that many students and teachers enjoy participating in El Sistema, but that his purpose is to provide a counter narrative to the all good news story.

Part 1: The Institution and Its Leaders provides an overview of Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de Oquestras Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela (FESNOJIV), the proper name of El Sistema, beginning with the most obvious elements: founder José Antonio Abreu, Dudamel, and the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra. Abreu and Dudamel each feature in their own chapter. Long-term alliances with particular politicians, the Inter-American Development Bank, and questionable actions by the FESNOJIV are identified and analyzed. The paucity of documentation, including a lack of archives for the 40-year-old institution, presents challenges in portraying demographic and factual background.

Based on the topics, Part 2: Music Education and Part 3: Social Education interest me the most. I am pleased that Baker pursued background reading in music education to support his analysis. The names he cites will be familiar to those in the profession (listed alphabetically and not inclusively): Allsup, Bowman, Bradley, Burnard, Elliott, Gould, Green, Hallman, Hargreaves, Hebert, Jorgensen, Philpott, Regelski, Reimer, Small, Spruce, Woodford, Wright, Younker. He relies heavily on Jorgensen's *Transforming Music Education*, citing a debt to her thinking for his analysis of El Sistema as music education. It is refreshing to read a scholar from a related discipline acknowledging our scholars for their contributions to his research. Both of these sections require careful reading.

Baker points out the paradox of FESNOJIV calling its pedagogy new and the future of music, when no curriculum is explicitly mentioned and what is observed in practice is the same old master-apprentice pedagogy that has been in use for hundreds of years. From his observations in the núcleos, Baker surmised that the only change from that centuries-old practice is the extensive group practice of small segments of orchestral repertoire. He saw very little creativity or innovation but a lot of strict discipline focused on following the music director. Peer teaching becomes a necessity because the young teachers, really older students, are not guided in how to teach, nor are they well-supported. "Teach as you were taught' is El Sistema's philosophy" (141). Such an approach runs contrary to contemporary thought in music education internationally. From what Baker reports, it appears to me that not only is there little reflection on teaching and learning within FESNOJIV, but critical reflection is discouraged in favor of everyone agreeing to do what the conductor directs as quickly as possible and without discussion.

Baker presents cogent discussion of the social issues, too. He demonstrates, through the presentation of a wealth of sociological studies of the orchestra as an organization, that it has not been the model of democratic and creative social life that FESNOJIV publicity portrays. He infers generously:

In one sense, then, the cornerstone of El Sistema is a simple misconception: a confusion of orchestra as metaphor with orchestra as reality. . . . El Sistema's expansion has depended on persuading politicians and institutions that there is a direct correspondence between metaphors and realities, thereby securing funding not just for a symbolic orchestra but also for a nationwide program. (123)

While the metaphor of an orchestra as a family or as a model for society may be attractive, the careful study of orchestras reveals that obedience and uniformity are what is actually demanded for orchestral musicians to be successful, rather than freedom and creativity. Baker identifies gender issues, favoritism in teaching assignments and auditions for the top orchestras, poor pay for teachers in smaller núcleos, and salaries in the form of scholarships to students in the top orchestras as problematic in a program that is supposed to foster social inclusion.

“Social action through music” is one of El Sistema's claims and central pillars, but Baker concludes that documentary evidence is not available either to support or deny this claim. This is a point where he recommends grounded program evaluation to identify what it accomplishes. Baker asks, what kind of social action does playing in an orchestra produce? Throughout the book, he poses many questions that could become the beginning of numerous dissertations: How realistic is rapid program expansion, and how will it benefit the children and Venezuela? (83) What would El Sistema look like if “it adopted a more inclusive, forward-looking organizational philosophy” and embraced dissidents as well as team players? (91) How is El Sistema “an example of developmentalist thinking” and what would be the possibilities for a more culturally pluralist paradigm of music education in Venezuela? (107) How might “the symphony orchestra . . . require reform if social objectives are to be prioritized?” (118) What makes orchestral performance skills transferable to the wider musical and social lives of children, and how is this accomplished? (141) How do music educators address the debate between playing-orchestral-music-makes-one-a-better-person and music-education-needs-to-engage-directly-with-urgent social-and-political-issues? (150) How does El Sistema

prioritize social action over musical goals in the broader realm of classical music and social action? (170) “Might the individual . . . and the social . . . come into conflict under certain conditions? Might the beneficial effects of learning music be reduced . . . by simultaneous negative counter effects”? (178) Does Venezuela “need more subsidized professional orchestras” and is this “the best way to spend development funds?” (275) “What does the future hold for El Sistema and classical music in Venezuela?” (302) What would be the benefits of “pursuing social action through collective musical practice” in other kinds of “music-related activities”? (308)

El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth's last chapter is entitled “Advances, Alternatives, and the Future.” It is exciting to me to read about progressive music education in Latin America as an alternative to El Sistema. Baker cites a hip hop school, a digital cartography project, Costa Rica's new (2009) public secondary music education curriculum, and Brazil's Pontos de Cultura. These examples demonstrate possibilities that point towards social action and do not employ a “salvation” narrative.

I wish that the book had received better editing to remove some repetition. On the other hand, repetition of similar ideas in different contexts is necessary for such a thorough examination. There were a few items cited within the text that were not included in the bibliography. The one that everyone needs to know about is Creech et al. (2013). It is available from the Sistema Global website and is a useful, albeit flawed, document.³ After reading Baker's book and Creech et al., the need for additional research on El Sistema is obvious. Music educators should be cautious about jumping on yet another bandwagon, without having enough evidence to support their decisions.

I highly recommend Geoffrey Baker's book to you. You do not need to agree with him, but you will learn some interesting lessons about music education from reading it. Every library should have a copy.

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Notes

¹ Sometime during July 2015 this entity has been renamed “Queen’s Community Music.”

² *Canadian Music Educator/Musicien éducateur au Canada* published an earlier article by Govias in 2011. It is quoted widely by El Sistema advocates.

³ This document lists 130 items about El Sistema or Sistema-inspired programs, of which only ten in Spanish and ten in English are peer-reviewed documents. However, it is extremely difficult to determine which of the articles in the list are peer-reviewed, making this publication a challenge to use.