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## **Costa Rica's SINEM: A Perspective from Postcolonial Institutional Ethnography**

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## Costa Rica's SINEM: A Perspective from Postcolonial Institutional Ethnography

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*In this article I suggest that SINEM — the Costa Rican version of Venezuela's El Sistema — articulates a development discourse which legitimates neoliberal policies that govern the twenty-first-century international market, in which Costa Rica figures only as a subaltern. I contend that such articulation contributes to perpetuating notions and practices that are based in the colonial period and have sustained the imagination of Costa Rican national identity since the nineteenth century. To this end, I undertake a theoretical analysis through postcolonial institutional ethnography.*

Keywords: *postcolonialism, neocolonialism, postcolonial institutional ethnography, Costa Rica education, SINEM*

**S**INEM is the acronym for *Sistema Nacional de Educación Musical* (“National Music Education System”) in Costa Rica.<sup>1</sup> This institution was established by the Costa Rican Ministry of Planning and Financial Policy within a broader, national development plan geared towards: a) The reduction of poverty and inequality; b) increasing economic growth and employment; and c) fighting rises in crime, drug trafficking, drug addiction, and civic insecurity, among other goals (Ministerio de Planificación y Política Económica 2007). According to SINEM’s Act of Foundation (see Asamblea Legislativa de la República de Costa Rica 2010), its mission is to transform the lives of children and young people on a national scale, especially in undeveloped regions and socially vulnerable communities, through pursuing the following goals:

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- a) To create and develop music schools and music education programs nationwide.
- b) To provide to the Costa Rican population — especially boys, girls and teenagers — with the opportunity to access orchestra programs and other music programs geared to [human] promotion.
- c) To use music education as a tool for human development in high-risk populations, in order to instil skills, mental abilities, and attitudes that allow the improvement of coexistence and interpersonal relationships.
- d) To discover talents within the population of children and young people that allow them to develop in the music realm.
- e) To spread music education to regions of the country that have started to use music education as a tool or employment skill for the future.
- f) To open music programs in areas suffering from poor social indicators, such as poverty, school dropout, and drug addiction; such programs will be labeled “social-musical action,” and will involve children and various ensembles.
- g) To provide artistic and cultural education to children and teenagers outside the metropolitan area, fomenting human quality and artistic production.<sup>2</sup>

SINEM’s Act proclaims the following overlapping, foundational values, as background to the above institutional goals: a) Equity of educational opportunities to people of all social classes, b) inclusion of at-risk populations, c) solidarity through low-cost education, d) discipline through instilment of responsibility, teamwork, and punctuality, and e) respect in interpersonal relationships.

Even though this is not overtly stated in its Act of Foundation, it is widely known in Costa Rica that SINEM’s mission, vision, values, and practices draw considerably from Venezuela’s *Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar* (as El Sistema is formally named today). As can be seen on the Fundación’s official website, SINEM features among the projects inspired by El Sistema in over forty countries.<sup>3</sup> El Sistema presents itself as a “model of peace and progress,” devoted to the “pedagogical, occupational, and ethical rescue of children and youth, through the instruction and

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collective practice of music,” with particular attention to “training, prevention, and recovery of the country’s most vulnerable groups, whether on the basis of their age group, or their socioeconomic condition.”<sup>4</sup> Within this Venezuelan program, orchestras and choirs are supposed to become “schools of personal and social life, where aptitudes and positive attitudes, ethical, aesthetic and spiritual values are cultivated.” Within these ensembles, “musicians develop self-esteem, self-confidence, and socialization ... gain discipline and study habits ... learn to be perseverant, practice healthy competitiveness and leadership (and) work constantly toward the achievement of goals and excellence.” In the end, students “co-exist with their peers in an environment of tolerance and solidarity, at the same time as growing under the stimulus of a culture of peace.”<sup>5</sup>

SINEM caters to around seven thousand students nationwide, within the age range 7-18 (Picado Gattgens 2012). While inclusion seems to be pursued mainly through low- or minimal-cost music studies, entrance is achieved by audition, involving tests in rhythm, coordination, and sight singing skills. SINEM operates through three distinctive kinds of programs:

- Nine music schools, located mainly in populated areas. Each admits between approximately 350 and 600 students.
- Twenty orchestral programs. These are smaller in comparison with the music school; each includes between 80 and 250 students. Orchestral programs aim to establish children’s and youth symphony orchestras in areas of high social risk, usually distant from the main, more developed urban areas.
- Several so-called “special programs,” which cater to students whose physical, emotional, or social conditions require special attention. These programs reach out to hospitals, orphan hospices, and rehabilitation centers.

Ever since its foundation, SINEM has been largely funded by the Costa Rican government, and it holds the status of a non-profit organization. SINEM’s government-based annual budget amounts to approximately 4.8 million dollars. Being a non-profit government organization has not prevented SINEM from

benefitting from international funds. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), a multinational institution and “the leading development lender” in the Latin American and Caribbean region (Nelson 2000, 405), funded a one-year evaluation of a SINEM pilot orchestra program in a poor, high socially vulnerable district in 2011. The IDB project aimed to understand the relative impact of music instruction upon the indicators of efficiency of the school system, the academic performance of SINEM students, and the quality of life of poor and vulnerable children and young people. It took place within a segregated urban district associated with drug trafficking and addiction, burglary, and other social problems. Most of its population makes a living in the tertiary sector (e.g. cleaning, construction, sales, and customers service). While the report identified several academic, administrative, financial, and infrastructural flaws of the pilot SINEM project, it concluded broadly and optimistically that the orchestra program succeeded in contributing to the transformation of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, in a vulnerable urban context, into more responsible, committed individuals, able to coexist in situations of ethnic and socioeconomic diversity (Picado Gattgens 2012). The IDB mandated the creation of a music library for the project, as well as assistance from Music4One foundation consultants and workshops with staff from the University of Vanderbilt, before the study even began.<sup>6</sup>

Besides the above-mentioned IDB research, there are almost no studies that substantiate SINEM’s alleged effectiveness in preventing violence or saving children and young people from a life of social marginality, at least at the time of writing. While Brenes Villalobos, Brenes Montoya, and Abarca Molina (2012) concur with Picado Gattgens (2012) and conclude that SINEM does make a positive impact on the lives of the students, they convey mainly emotionally-loaded raw perceptions of the program by students, their relatives, the surrounding community, and institutional authorities, with practically no analysis. A different study of the pedagogical practices at SINEM (Arguedas Quesada 2014) focuses on how its special

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needs subprogram may or may not comply with human rights legislation. I will draw from all these studies below.

### **Postcolonial challenges**

Baker (2012, 2014) makes the case that El Sistema seems to have uncritically adopted a discourse of salvation of uneducated popular masses that guided much of European nineteenth-century music schooling, part of the project of consolidating capitalism. This author reminds us that in several Western countries, mass music instruction “was seen as a way of keeping the workers out of taverns, hence increasing their productivity and decreasing their opportunities to discuss revolutionary ideas” (2012, 3). In a similar line of thought, Gould (2012) examines the example of choral singing (inherited from the British choral tradition) and music listening in the United States. To Gould, such music instruction served to train groups assumed to be in need of improvement – the working class, immigrants, and school-age children – in music literacy skills. “Good” music, in general, was aimed at improving moral character and instilling national pride. Christopher Small’s (2010) last work expands this argument in relation to the productivity goals of capitalism: Western formal music schooling’s agenda has been to incorporate students “into the fabric of knowledge, belief and custom” and to teach the values of “punctuality, obedience, toleration of boredom and standardization” (285).

I am a postcolonial, social researcher. I address music education issues from a perspective that looks closely at the material conditions of colonialism, which have shaped social practices in my geo-cultural context since the Spanish conquest and colonization five centuries ago (see Rosabal-Coto in press; forthcoming). From this perspective, I find it problematic that SINEM, like dozens of programs around the world, should copy the rationale for nineteenth-century European music education practices – control and improvement of the marginal classes – refracted through El Sistema. As Baker (2014) emphasizes, the revival of this rationale in Venezuela has not been systematically and critically analyzed, or submitted to public debate.

Secondly, I wonder if the IDB is taking advantage of a government that believes in Western art music practices as a way to save the masses.

We must be aware that the main goal of the IDB is to stimulate governance and modernization of civil society in Latin American and Caribbean countries. Modernization “envisions regional governments and the IDB cooperating to consolidate democracy, (and) strengthen[ing] democratic institutions” (405). Regional governments are expected to commit to democratic measures to promote “rights of indigenous peoples, human rights, reduced violence, reduced drug use and trafficking, and a ‘culture of peace’” (Rosenberg and Stein 1995, 91–4). However, the other side of the coin is that such countries are constructed as subaltern through the label “developing nations,” and are subject to policies and lending that often reflect the priorities of governments in the global North (Nelson 2000). Positive though the IDB’s aims may sound, then, the bank’s strategies have not been immune to criticism.<sup>7</sup>

The limited evidence of the achievement of SINEM’s Sistema-inspired goals, mission, and values — as portrayed by the government — and its close relationship with the IDB become more intriguing if we look at public, government-sponsored media statements about SINEM’s role. Let us look at the following example:

*Every day, an army of more than 10,000 Costa Rican children and young people leave their humble homes with their weapons under their arms: violins, flutes, and a firm belief in improving themselves and transforming the reality of their family, community, and country.*

The above grandiose statement opens a newspaper article by the former Costa Rican Minister of Culture and Youth on SINEM’s social legitimacy (Obregón 2014). The context of this emotive article was a nationwide climate of consternation due to the brutal murder of two teenage SINEM students — boyfriend and girlfriend — by a young felon. Against the backdrop of already rising violence at a national level (see Rico 2006), epitomized by this terrible incident, the minister claimed that SINEM had become “*our best tool against felony and violence*” (emphasis added), because of its crucial role in “strengthening the fundamental values of human coexistence.” By

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virtue of the power attributed to music practices, the Minister of Culture contended that it was not only necessary but also possible to prevent such a degree of violence, if only Costa Rica was able to produce “more musicians than felons, (offer) more musical instruments than weapons, (and produce) more artists than murderers” (15).

As a Costa Rican musician educator and scholar, it troubles me that the government image of SINEM — in this and numerous other media resources —relies on the manipulation of emotions, instead of serious, evidence-based research on both violence and music instruction practices. Huhn (2009) contends that “there is notable sensationalization of violence and crime in the Costa Rican mass media” and that Costa Ricans may not be prepared to recognize the degree of violence in the country. “[T]he public discourse about violence and crime leads to confusion and panic in Costa Rica because it is in conflict with the collective identity of the imagined Costa Rican community” as peaceful people (787) — a sociocultural phenomenon intrinsically tied to education (including music education), as I will discuss in detail below. In this sense, I concur with Baker’s (2014) concern with how people often understand El Sistema in an idealized, romanticized way, working from “valued belief to reasons for believing it” (Cook 2003, 254, cited in Baker 2014, 4). According to Baker, emotion “dominates virtually all attempts to analyze El Sistema,” so that “El Sistema seems to repel rational analysis” (4). The same could also be said of SINEM.

SINEM’s redemptive narrative had previously been conveyed by the Ministry of Culture and Youth, through emotive aesthetics, in a short TV documentary entitled *iUn instrumento para todos!* (“An instrument for everybody!”). A camera “walks” behind selected, exemplary SINEM students, as they move through their family, school, and music activities in an obviously poor country. It zooms into snapshots of daily life that reveal the very simple lives of hard-working students. Explanations by government and SINEM officers about SINEM’s social importance and goals serve as a sonorous background to these images. It is very easy to see the striking similarity of this film’s narrative and visual aesthetics to those of *Tocar y Luchar* (“To play and

to fight”), a celebrated documentary by former El Sistema student Alberto Arvelo.<sup>8</sup> This film shows the daily struggle of several poor Venezuelan children and teenagers, at home, in class, and in rehearsal and performance, portrayed as dedicated pupils or successful former students of El Sistema.<sup>9</sup>

In line with my postcolonial problematizing of SINEM’s goals, mission, and values, as conveyed through official representations, and their relationship with the IDB’s agenda, I find it unjustifiable and irresponsible to wield an emotionally-loaded, universalistic notion of music as an infallible formula to overcome material and social challenges that can be traced to neocolonial processes of financial inequality. I deem it a major flaw to overlook that escalating violence and felony are rooted largely in such processes, as I will suggest in the forthcoming discussion. Most importantly of all, I argue that music and music education in Costa Rica have historically been closely tied to such colonialist practices. We might then consider mass music instruction to be part of the structural problem, rather than the solution, as the Minister of Culture and Youth contends. In light of the above concerns, I intend to map important colonialist relationships between the discourse that SINEM instills in the Costa Rican imaginary and the macro, material, and symbolic realities that coordinate this discourse as social practice.

### **Theoretical and methodological considerations**

My analysis is based on a macro-sociological study of webs of music learning in the lives of nine music teachers in Costa Rica, through a theoretical/methodological approach that I developed and call *postcolonial institutional ethnography* (see Rosabal-Coto in press).<sup>10</sup> This approach is a multi-level model that establishes connections between the participants’ realities and: a) theories and concepts of Latin American postcolonial thinking (e.g. Castro-Gómez 2008; Dussel 1995; Mignolo 1995, 2000, 2003, 2007, 2010; Quijano 2000, 2007a, 2007b); b) the theorized practice of social research known as institutional ethnography (Smith 1987, [1999] 2004, 2000, 2005; Campbell and Gregor 2004; DeVault 1996); and c) contextual

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connections with colonialism and postcolonialism in Costa Rica. Latin American postcolonial thinking focuses on how epistemological Eurocentrism, along with its scientific and religious epistemology and world system tied to modernity, created what can be called a subaltern in what is now Latin America (Mignolo 2010; Quijano 2000; see Rosabal-Coto 2014). This was accomplished through a discourse of ethnic superiority of Europeans, based on differential phenotypic and biological structures, in other words, above and beyond geographic origin.

Institutional ethnography is concerned with how people acquire social practices without being aware of it, for purposes that may be relevant less to their local (micro) worlds than to macro-social structures that organize what they do in their everyday lives. It has the potential to problematize and decolonize institutionalized discourses and practices, which are purposefully coordinated with professional standards, family expectations, or organizational norms, and which shape teaching, policy, or funding in educational settings in contemporary capitalist society. As will be seen below, such discourses and practices have the potential to make invisible or colonize learners' empirical, interactional worlds, as they experience them (Rosabal-Coto in press).

In the light of postcolonial thinking, and my own experience as a colonized conservatory music student and music teacher, for many years I approached music teachers who had in the past shared with me stories of dislocation in relation to Western art music practices. In the light of the ontology of institutional ethnography, I deemed them to be experts in their everyday experiences with music, in their thoughts, feelings, sensations, and choices in relation to music, as they interacted with others in informal and formal music learning settings.

I collected data through mixed methods: (a) interview and focus group, (b) participant observation, and (c) analysis of artifacts shared by the participants. I used the data to assemble the participants' lifelong stories of music learning. The methodology of institutional ethnography encouraged me to start the analysis empirically at the everyday experiences of the participants, and more specifically,

what and how social actors think, feel, plan, and make choices in relation to music learning. In this first phase of analysis, therefore, I attempted to scrutinize people's actions as lived and reflected upon, rather than viewing them through theoretical discourses or categories.

In the second phase of analysis, I identified the location from which the participants enunciated their experiences of socialization through music learning, which institutional ethnography calls "standpoint." The latter is empirically performed, and shaped by overlapping webs of interaction (family, school, and market, among others). This means that the organization of music learners' bodily-located resources "is entrenched with the needs and values of empirical selves of music learners and the many social actors involved" (Rosabal-Coto in press, 213). In this context, the standpoint is postcolonial, because the experiences form part of colonialist and neocolonialist practices in education, music, and music education in Costa Rica (see Rosabal Coto in press). The standpoint comprises "physical energy, sensations, thought, self-image, and expectations, prone to suppression interactionally from the local and particular, as site of knowledge" (174). This is how the identification of the standpoint analysis transcends mere traits, like gender, race, educational background, occupation, or more abstract descriptors, which may reduce experience to mere categories.

Next, I identified theoretically, disjuncture or dislocation in the teachers' micro (local) learning webs — a sort of puzzle that needed to be solved in the realities of the study's participants. It consists of the ways they are constructed into subaltern inferiors (e.g. minor, illegitimate, unthinkable, and expendable) in music socialization, in ways they did not necessarily perceive (see Rodríguez-Silva 2012). I established connections between such disjuncture and macro-based socialization processes ruled by the mediation of texts (e.g. notions, concepts, practices, or processes), which are set up at the macro level to organize what learners do in their everyday webs of music learning. Texts are practices "to produce standardized local states of affairs or events corresponding to the standardized texts" (Smith 2000,

1147). Texts become materials in forms that can be replicated — from abstract categories, to paper, print, and electronic forms, and so on — and may thus enhance the stability and replicability of the organization of an institution. The materiality or replicability of a text allows it “to turn up in identical form wherever the reader, hearer, or watcher may be in her or his bodily being” (Smith 2005, 166). Texts connect people with other people, producing translocal social relations in time and space, through texts that are present in their everyday lives (DeVault 2006, 2013; Smith 1987, [1999] 2004, 2005, 2006b; Turner 2006). Of particular interest to postcolonial research in institutional settings is the fact that, through text mediation, discursive knowledge and power come together systematically in everyday socialization, without people’s awareness (see André-Bechely 2005; Campbell and Gregor 2004; McCoy 1998; DeVault 2006; Gerrard and Farrell 2013; Smith 2005, 2006b).

### **Implications from postcolonial institutional ethnography**

The findings of my postcolonial institutional ethnography study suggest that music learners in Costa Rica may often be constructed as inferior subalterns when they articulate the following ability-related texts (in the form of comments, instructions, and pedagogical practices), previously established by colonialist structures (such as government, education, or the market): (1) The wrong phenotypical traits or identity, (2) insufficient material or financial resources, (3) insufficient corporeal ability, or (4) insufficient Western art music background. Music learners are socialized to become: (a) Cultivated, Western art musicians, (b) modern, civilized citizens, or (c) a developed, global market labor force. Theoretically, the construction of this subaltern can be understood as following the logic of coloniality that sustained the control and subjugation of the bodies and imaginaries of the Amerindian peoples five centuries ago. This process is based on the stereotype of the cultural superiority of the European — the ideal of progress and civilization. Sustaining the transmission of an imagined white, European, Enlightenment-based Costa Rican national identity

through art music and music schooling began in the nineteenth century, and this idea endures today in the form of a development discourse that organizes formal music learning in ways that cater to the interests of the global market.

SINEM can be seen as one of the many webs where music learning is coordinated under the logic of coloniality. I arrived at this conclusion after I analyzed how institutionalized notions and practices organized what was done, with whom, with what resources, and for what purposes, in the music learning of the only study participant who was related to SINEM: Raúl.<sup>11</sup> He had been a SINEM student and was a teacher in one of its programs at the time of the study. My analysis focused on how notions of music and learning that organized Raúl's music learning socialization within SINEM reaffirmed notions and practices that could be traced back to the colonization of Amerindia (including Costa Rica) by the Spanish Empire, and renewed the cultural Europeanization of Costa Rica after it became an independent nation. Since Raúl was the only participant who could share his experiences in relation to SINEM, here I suggest some theoretical connections between textual mediation of education practices in postcolonial Costa Rica—in the light of my findings from postcolonial institutional ethnography (Rosabal-Coto in press) — and the three SINEM-related studies mentioned above (Brenes Villalobos, Brenes Montoya, and Abarca Molina 2012; Picado Gattgens 2012; Arguedas Quesada 2014). I frame such connections from a macro perspective, within the same periods of colonialism/colonialization outlined in my postcolonial institutional ethnography study (Rosabal-Coto in press). Since I rely on findings from other studies and not my own ethnography of SINEM music learners, I do not attempt to make here a definitive case with respect to SINEM, but rather to reflect on issues that require further consideration and research.

### *Neocolonialism and the development macro-discourse*

According to the account of music learning by Raúl, SINEM seems to create a symbolic space around conscientious hard work towards a collective artistic

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achievement. Raúl also reports that in this program he felt as if he were part of a family, as opposed to the more impersonal environments of more competitive, professional ensembles. His perception concurs broadly with the IDB study findings. The student members of an orchestra enjoy meeting new people from different social classes and nationalities and making friends, while they engage in collective activity. Through music training, they also seem to have gained a heightened sense of responsibility and independence, and a desire for self-improvement. The outcomes manifest in their home and school socialization: They are more able to handle scheduling, time management, and commitment to school assignments, and are obedient to parents and take care of themselves. However, these changes are not consistent or definitive (Brenes Villalobos, Brenes Montoya, and Abarca Molina 2012). Numerous IDB pilot study participants report a close bond with their musical instrument, equivalent to that with a close friend. Being able to undertake instrumental studies and learn to read and play notated music seems to generate feelings of pride and social worth in students and relatives. This symbolic capital gives them access to an activity that keeps them away from the streets and drugs, and provides opportunities for progress. The culmination of such activity, after one year of training, was a public concert in which they tuned their instruments and performed three pieces under a conductor.

Upon collecting archival and ethnographic data to back up Raúl's account, I discovered that students must undergo the usual Western art music-based, selective auditions to become members of a SINEM orchestra. It is interesting to note that according to Brenes Villalobos, Brenes Montoya, and Abarca Molina (2012) there was a significant dropout rate during the year the pilot orchestra program took place. Seventy children enrolled, but only twenty-nine made it to the end. The researchers establish causality between dropout and poor infrastructure conditions, unstable provision of teachers, and particular family situations. They make no connections with specific teaching or rehearsal styles, recruitment mechanisms, or other institutional processes that might have potentially impacted dropout. In his

ethnographic study of El Sistema, Baker (2014) suggests that there are myriad causes that may lead students to drop out of such programs, including the inability of a family to ensure their child's regular and punctual attendance or to jump through various bureaucratic hoops. In addition, exclusionary socialization around hierarchies (rank, pay, and duties) in Venezuelan orchestra settings "ensure[s] that the weakest players are constantly reminded of their lowly station" (183), and this may lead to disappointment, frustration, and finally dropout.

SINEM seems to train lower- and middle-class young people as obedient future workers. Baker (2014) criticizes this objective in relation to El Sistema. Questioning the statement by José Antonio Abreu, its founder, that "the orchestra is the only group that comes together with the sole purpose of agreement," Baker highlights the effectiveness of the conventional orchestra "for the subjection of multiple viewpoints by the singular vision of its leader." When the latter is "a powerful, charismatic individual," as is standardly the case in Venezuela, he "ensures that narratives emerging through the orchestra are dictated rather than negotiated" (204). Obedience is necessary for the reproduction of the capitalist order, which is based on accumulation, efficiency, and productivity, as well as for the success of global market policy in a developing country. The fact that the IDB partly funded a SINEM project assessment supports the suggestion that SINEM trains an obedient workforce required by largely Northern, transnational companies and investors.

This focus may be considered an expression of neocolonialism, a form of colonization that can be traced back to the 1980s, when many postcolonial governments became increasingly unable to deal with overwhelming external debt and foreign economic domination (see Sousa Santos 2010; Mignolo 2007). Latin America, Africa, and some regions in Asia and the Middle East had already been constructed as sub-continental, exotic destinations with rich natural resources and a cheap labor force, which welcomed travelers and investors. The United States and other industrialized countries intended to bring these poor and "laid-back" countries into the Western commercial system, with the purpose of obtaining their abundant,

inexpensive raw materials, as well as natural and human resources. They articulated the discourse of *development*, alongside modernization or globalization. Such a discourse claims to solve structural problems like hunger and poverty. It proposes attractive strategies like loans and co-operation, but does not really accomplish its promises, such as prosperity or world peace (Souza Silva 2011). By the 1980s, Costa Rica, along with many other nations, became a target for the implantation of financial policy by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the White House. In the case of Costa Rica, the state began to implement the so-called structural adjustment programs that aimed at putting finances in order, according to the demands of the IMF, which provided funds to an already highly indebted nation (Cuevas Molina 2006).

Souza Silva (2011) explains that this development discourse enacts and updates the civilization discourse that organized the exploitation and colonization of Latin America and the Caribbean, beginning in 1492. Civilization was then claimed to be the single, natural, and progressive path to social and political perfection, from the perspective of European sixteenth-century epistemology and ontology (Mignolo 2007). Europe was already at the end of the journey of civilization, but felt the moral imperative to conduct the imperfect — the primitive, savages, barbarians — in their long journey to a superior state of progress. To be civilized meant that one had to feel, think, do, and speak like the superiors (Europeans). It also entailed engaging gratefully with a path constructed by them, following their orders, and replacing one's imaginary by theirs (Souza Silva 2011). This is why colonization would be one of the noblest functions of societies that had achieved a high state of civilization. The idea of civilization became legitimate through the Treatise of Tordesillas, signed jointly by the Catholic Church and Spanish and Portuguese Empires in 1494. In Tordesillas can be found the seed of Rousseau's premise that the superior race had a right to domination, while the inferior races had to be conquered and dominated through physical and symbolic violence, and to learn that they had the obligation of obedience (Rousseau 1762). Since the idea of progress through civilization that

sustained the colonization of the Atlantic five centuries ago lost credibility after the atomic bomb massacre in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the discourse of development served to perpetuate the discourse of civilization in the twentieth century (Souza Silva 2011).

In line with the development discourse, neocolonialism entails unequal financial and political relationships between less and more developed countries, constructed around the latter's agendas. Such relationships are based on neoliberal policy that often involves free trade agreements to make commercial trade more "equitable" (tax-free) and competitive between the small economies in Latin America and the economies of developed countries (Souza Santos 2010). The outcomes of neoliberal policy in Latin American countries have been described as "less growth, deindustrialization, income concentration, and precarious employments" (Ibarra 2011, 238).

The impact of neocolonialism on Costa Rican elementary and secondary public education is evident in the attention and resources given to allotting substantial teaching time to English as a second language, computer literacy, and other subjects relevant to corporate development goals. In addition, World Bank loans form a large portion of the budget of Costa Rican public universities. Every five years, the conditions for the grant are revised and negotiated, usually in the light of new corporate demands. And more recently, in music education, there is SINEM.

A brief example of neoliberal market rhetoric in the Costa Rican context is useful here. Let us look at the example of the official logo of the brand "Costa Rica," launched in 2013.



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The function of Essential Costa Rica as a text is to mediate in international trade negotiations and campaigns to attract international tourism and investment. This logo was commissioned by the Costa Rican government from the advertising company Future Brand, also responsible for the latest image of American Airlines. The logo cost US \$650,000. This logo is central to a publicity campaign that is based on a totalizing notion of collective Costa Rican identity. This identity is a strategic government tool to help the country gain legitimacy in a quest to become competitive, and more developed, within the global market. “The Costa Ricans” are presented as literate, talented, hospitable, peaceful, and hardworking people. They take pride in living in a green, conservationist country and a democratic nation. However, such identity is not recent. Its emergence can be traced back to a broad political project in the early nineteenth century: the imposition of an imagined national community, based on Eurocentric political and ideological structures, for the sake of social control (see Sojo 2009).

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*Cultural Europeanization:  
Costa Rican national identity as recolonization from within*

Under the influence of Liberal ideology, based on the motto “order and progress,” and the experiences of consolidation of European states like Germany and Italy, bourgeois elites of newly independent Latin American countries perceived themselves as heirs to European political systems and culture, including the doctrine of Liberalism and the discourse of the Enlightenment (see Bignall 2010; Mignolo 2007).<sup>12</sup> They longed to become rational, self-interested, self-made, hygienic, educated, patriotic, civilized, law-abiding, and autonomous citizens of a modern, developed nation, in the image of Europe (Álvarez 2006).

A Costa Rican elite, headed by the intellectual *Grupo del Olimpo* (“Olympus Group”), disseminated and promoted a vision of a consensual, conflict-free political system organized around the territorial unit described as *the nation*. This organizational structure ideally represented a cultural unit of homogenously identified, equal citizens. To become a citizen meant that one became a worthy member of a civilized tradition by leaving behind barbaric settings and ways of living. For instance, one had to embrace an orderly, productive life, coordinated by a schedule in the workplace, and not by dawn or any other natural phenomena inherent to rural or village organization (Cuevas Molina 2006). Within this view, the *real* deeds and advancements took place in Europe — that is, outside the local setting of the newly independent peoples (Souza Silva 2011).

The “national community” was based on geo-cultural traits that were selected and articulated by intellectuals as the *meaningful* tradition or past (Cuevas Molina 2006). They imagined a mythicized, colonial-based, rural democracy comprised of small- and medium-scale agricultural producers — mainly coffee growers — who, as landowners, were considered the fundamental group in the nation’s history. This tradition claimed white, European roots for the Costa Rican people.<sup>13</sup> The wider population was thus “bleached” and misrepresented as homogeneous. For instance, the Amerindians were transformed into a new category to make the bridge: *ladinos*.<sup>14</sup>

*Mestizos* — those of mixed European and indigenous descent — were labeled “white” (Álvarez 2006). This racial mixing was idealized as a democratizing force. However, in practice, it served to suppress opposition to white supremacy (see Rodriguez-Silva 2012). The deliberate articulation of the political category *nation* naturalized racial and territorial boundaries imposed during Spanish colonization (see Bignall 2010). It is worth recalling that this process entailed subjugation of the social, political, and economic structures and the culture (including music practices) of the autochthonous, pre-Hispanic Costa Rican peoples. This colonization was sustained by a servile relationship through which the native population was obliged to provide produce and labor to the conquerors — called *encomienda* — and the forced, massive conversion to Catholicism. The articulation of the Liberal doctrine and its textual notion of citizenship allowed the assimilation of individuals under a common measure of essential, neutral human nature that remained indifferent to group affiliations and individual concerns (Bignall 2010). This contributed to the continued domination of subordinate social groups under a preventive strategy of social control (see Hobsbawm [1983] 2000; Molina and Palmer 2003).

#### *Music education and national identity*

The Costa Rican state engaged in educational enterprises — less costly than using expensive military means — to inculcate acceptance of a national-based system of norms for the Costa Rican Liberal state (Álvarez 2006). Firstly, education reforms between 1885 and 1889 institutionalized secular, universal, public school education (see Fischel 1990; Molina and Palmer 2003). Secondly, a massive program taught modern principles of hygiene, especially to the rural, working-class population. It made sense to the state to strive for racial purity and cleanliness of the population in order to favor productivity and a healthy economy, crucial to the accomplishment of modernity (Molina and Palmer 2003). In general, these projects entailed the imposition of manners, habits, and morals through a series of disciplined

undertakings upon the body, in order to outline and control the boundaries of citizenship within civilization and modernity (see González Stephan 2001).

The Costa Rican state disseminated the national identity primarily through texts and symbols like the national flag, the national crest, national heroes, the Costa Rican national anthem, and other national hymns.<sup>15</sup> The above symbols were circulated through philosophy, historiography, arts, literature, public education, and music schooling (see Carvajal 2013, 2011; Molina and Palmer 2004). They offered the masses an epic role as protagonists in national history, which was reenacted day by day in public schools, newspapers, and town squares across the country. In the service of the nation-state identity project, music schooling, already established within public education in 1849, was instrumental in the instilment of the Costa Rican imagined national community, exploiting music's potential to convey messages clothed in attractive melodies and to influence individuals and their character. Public school music focused largely on the singing of national hymns and songs to produce moral and civic feelings associated with the humanistic and democratic values of the French ideal of the republic. Teaching songs would be a means to instil love for the motherland and a disposition to study, and to perform virtuous, noble actions (see Vargas Cullell 2004). Since then, this repertoire has served the function of gathering citizens-to-be into a symbolic site characterized by stability and commonality (Rosabal-Coto 2014; see Bohlman 2011).<sup>16</sup>

Instruction in European art music was officially institutionalized in the 1890s, when the Costa Rican state decided to subsidize a national school of music, with the aim of training instrumentalists and establishing the first symphony orchestra in the country. By the end of the nineteenth century, European art music already featured in drama and poetry performances at theaters, hotels, clubs, and elite homes, and accompanied activities such as film screenings, balls, sports, and picnics. Small salon ensembles played mostly European(-style) music: opera, operetta, and zarzuela arrangements, as well as marches, waltzes, mazurkas, and other dance music. More public and private musical instruction projects also emerged then and into the first

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half of the twentieth century, such as modest conservatoires, philharmonic societies, music academies, and chamber music ensembles and concerts, most of them of ephemeral duration (Rosabal-Coto forthcoming; Vargas Cullell 2004).

As postcolonial scholar Castro-Gómez (2008) explains, all sectors immersed in a colonial society are likely to aspire to an imaginary whiteness yielded by a discourse of racial purity. This is so because both colonizers and colonized desire to partake of colonial power. To be white does not mean to have a specific skin color, but to participate in “a cultural imaginary constituted by religious beliefs, forms of dress, customs, and ... forms of producing and disseminating knowledge,” all of which become “a sign of social status, a form of acquiring, accumulating, and transmitting symbolic capital” (282; see also Quijano 1992). According to Frantz Fanon (1967), bourgeois subjects in newly independent, postcolonial nations remained colonized psychologically because they aspired to “whiteness,” notwithstanding the fact that they would never become white. These individuals also “imposed their own aspirations over the vast majority of the people, replacing the colonial rule with their own form of dominance, surveillance and coercion” (Rizvi, Lingard, and Lavia 2006, 251). It is precisely according to Fanon’s argument that I contend that the instilment of national identity by an elite for the sake of a political project that updates old colonial structures can be considered as *recolonization from within*.

### **SINEM: The neocolonial value of music education**

Socially at-risk children and young people devote their time, physical and psychic energy, and expectations to Western art music orchestral performance, a hegemonic, institutionalized practice since the cultural Europeanization of Costa Rica. It is necessary that the students submit to Western art practices and values, and be grateful for that. In other words, they ought to become what Foucault (1977) has termed “docile bodies” (see also Vaugeois 2009; Souza Silva 2011). If they work hard enough on their own and practice the music, follow the conductor, listen to and cooperate with their peers, in sections or ensembles, towards the goal of performing

musical works, they may upgrade their social worth, becoming heroes, heirs, or representatives of white, European high art culture (see Koza 2003). In the end, if they are able to embrace this legacy, they will have succeeded in becoming modern, civilized, and developed citizens.

The above dynamics are little different from the construction of the cultivated, rational, autonomous citizen through public rote learning of national hymns and songs as established in the nineteenth century through liberal educational reforms. In the neoliberal era, a new wave of colonization from within has emerged. As a neocolonial institution, SINEM does not colonize a geographic space — it colonizes bodies (though, as institutional ethnography theory warns us, those who participate in such institutional processes are usually unaware of the coordination of their work by agendas embedded in macro structures). The music learners submit their bodily-located resources to an institution that reproduces a hegemonic art tradition. This tradition celebrates music as a sonic object created by a composer (Small 1987). It explores, affirms, or celebrates relationships that have more to do with Western, art-based musical engagements than with the relationships that these learners explore, affirm, or celebrate in their vernacular musical engagements (see Small 2010). Brenes Villalobos, Brenes Montoya, and Abarca Molina (2012) mention that students have a rich space of informal entertainment, mainly through the television. This is a local world that learners might bring to music instruction, but one that traditional Western art music practices constantly overlook. In addition, according to findings by Arguedas Quesada (2014), the SINEM programs studied appear to implement quite traditional pedagogical models, which fail to address fully the whole spectrum of learning needs, as mandated by local and international human rights law and literature. These findings suggests other ways in which music learners may be subtly constructed as subalterns in need of corrective or pedagogical treatments that concur with the development discourse discussed.

To conclude this discussion, SINEM can be said to produce an individual capable of sustaining a predominant social order that has been imagined already by political

or financial elites outside his or her vernacular world, just like the Costa Rican nineteenth-century, national identity project. This neocolonization process renews the agenda of converting individuals into civilized citizens for the goals of modernity and capitalism. Paradoxically, while SINEM claims to make citizens capable of shaping a new social order, such enterprise unfolds against the backdrop of a society that displays growing inequality in various forms: crime, insecurity, urbanization, impoverishment, and less access to basic goods, nourishment, health services, and education (Ledesma 2002; Molina and Palmer 2005).

### **Closing reflections: An alternative to colonizing music education**

There is, however, a public music school curriculum in Costa Rica, worthy of brief discussion here. It too proposes to tackle social issues in postcolonial Costa Rica, like increasing poverty and violence, but it differs considerably from SINEM, with its foundations in hegemonic Western art music culture and its goal to educate homogeneous workers for global trade processes. It stems from a curricular reform initiated by the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education in 2008 called “Education in Artistic, Ethical, and Citizen Values.” The reform seeks to engage students in dialogue, cooperation, and negotiation in learning and socialization practices, “in which knowledge is constructed by the students themselves through research, active engagement, reflection and criticism, and close interaction with their community,” under the motto “To learn how to choose; to learn how to live together” (Rosabal-Coto 2010, 57). It intends to educate future citizens “who are not only socially aware, but also able to make responsible individual and collective choices and engage in healthy social relationships” (58).

The music curriculum is constructionist. The learning and assessment processes proposed by the music curriculum are expected to provide a collective space where students “explore, listen, and attest to their own and others’ performances, through listening, performing, conducting, composing, arranging, and improvising” (63). Practices include experimentation with body movement and dancing, acting, and

directing, among others, and students make use of the musical instruments and media to which they have access in their communities. The above practices are closely tied to the development of the following values: self-knowledge, critical thinking, leadership, responsibility, respect for diversity, solidarity, and creativity. The students have the chance to explore, express, and share “reactions, perceptions, sensations, and emotions in regard to sounds and musics listened or danced to, performed, composed, or researched,” during and after learning practices (69). The curriculum’s practical value relies on its goal of encouraging students “to examine who they are, how, and why, within a lived musical space where personal interactions and musical engagements acquire significant intensity” (75).

I suggest it might be helpful to look closely at this curriculum in order to promote deeper reflection about music instruction models like SINEM. Baker (2014) highlights that this curriculum “shows the confluence of various currents — Latin American critical pedagogy of the 1970s onward, more recent research on education and social justice, the region’s new social movements — into a coherent, contemporary vision of Latin American music education and social action through music.” He continues that when held up against this curriculum, “El Sistema’s ideology and practices look both conservative and outdated, yet it is the Venezuelan and not the Costa Rican example that is being lauded and copied around the world” (314). This is of particular concern in Costa Rica and non-industrialized, postcolonial countries, because art, culture, and education structures and ideologies continue to lead individuals — generally without their knowledge — to aspire to become modern, civilized, or developed, in the light of colonial ontologies and epistemologies. The Costa Rican public school program illustrates that it is possible to provide institutionalized music education that places the student’s agency and geo-cultural context at the center, and encourage self-directed learning in relation to a broad range of musics and musical practices — from music surrounding students in their community, to other local traditional musics, to Western art music. Moreover, it is important to emphasize the need to reflect extensively and constantly on

whether long-standing, European-based music education models inspired by El Sistema only contribute to the perpetuation of colonial structures and ideologies, under the guise of a disciplinary macrostructure (see Baker 2012), aiming to produce individuals that are fit to consume and reproduce capitalism rather than to take full account of the sociocultural background and needs of music learners and citizens-in-the-making. Such reflection is essential if we are to decolonize these homogenizing models and the imaginaries that sustain them.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See SINEM's official website at: <http://www.sinem.go.cr/>

<sup>2</sup> All translations from Spanish are by the author unless stated otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> The list encompasses the following countries in several continents and subcontinents: a) North America (Canada, United States of America); b) Latin America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Uruguay); c) Africa (Angola, Kenya, South Africa, and Uganda), d) Europe (Armenia, England, France, Greenland, Italy, Portugal, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey); e) Asia (India, Japan, Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam), and f) Oceania (Australia and New Zealand). See <http://fundamusical.org.ve/category/el-sistema/el-sistema-en-el-mundo>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://fundamusical.org.ve/category/el-sistema/mision-y-vision/>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://fundamusical.org.ve/category/el-sistema/el-sistema-en-el-mundo>.

<sup>6</sup> This Korean-based NGO is “dedicated to working with children and their communities worldwide to reach their full potential through music and music education,” under the philosophy “that the promotion of music fosters connection

and builds trust between people” (musicforone.org). SINEM is a partner institution, according to the foundation’s website.

<sup>7</sup> See also Logan’s article in this special issue.

<sup>8</sup> See Fink’s article in this special issue.

<sup>9</sup> The film relies on advocacy testimonies by major figures of Western art music, like Simon Rattle, Claudio Abbado, and Plácido Domingo, who unreservedly endorse and enthuse about this massive orchestral instruction project.

<sup>10</sup> See also Rosabal-Coto (2014).

<sup>11</sup> “Raúl” is a pseudonym.

<sup>12</sup> The Costa Rican bourgeoisie was able to access high European culture as Costa Rica entered the world trade market as a small producer and exporter of coffee beans to Europe.

<sup>13</sup> Coincidentally, a considerable part of the population was ethnically homogeneous — but not racially — because they shared a Spanish/Catholic-based culture.

<sup>14</sup> In this geo-cultural context, *ladino* denotes a Spanish-speaking individual that belonged to neither the Spanish-borne elite nor the indigenous population.

<sup>15</sup> The latter term refers to “hymns, marches, songs or fanfares used as official patriotic symbols” (*Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*). The application of the English term “anthem” to such a piece became current in the early nineteenth century. However, in Spanish the custom is to use *himno*, corresponding literally to the English “hymn.”

<sup>16</sup> I undertake a more detailed analysis of the national identity project, in relation to cultural Europeanization dynamics, in Rosabal-Coto (in press).

### **About the Author**

Guillermo Rosabal-Coto teaches courses in music education foundations, methods, and research at Universidad de Costa Rica, where he was Chair of the Music Education Department. He has served as arts and music education consultant to the Costa Rican Ministries of Public Education and Culture, as well as to UNESCO, UNDP, UNICEF and the Organization of Ibero-American States. At the time this article was submitted, Rosabal-Coto was a doctoral student at the University of the Arts Helsinki, Sibelius Academy.