



The Five Fundamentals of El Sistema

By Jonathan Andrew Govias

Abstract: This article provides an inductive examination of the practices in Venezuela's national youth orchestra network.

Imagine being asked to describe the music education system of the nation in as few words as possible. Omitting the wealth of privately paid and managed activities (such as specialized day schools, independent instructors, conservatories, youth orchestras, and Suzuki, Kodaly, Orff and Dalcroze Institutes, among others) reduces only the scope of the problem, not the complexity. Even within the public realm alone, schools are regularly compelled to balance the requirements of state-wide curricula against unique regional demographics, levels of public funding and community support. In the end, it would be virtually impossible to speak in any terms save the broadest and most general if only for the sake of clarity, if not brevity, focusing on philosophical fundamentals rather than day-to-day minutiae.

These are precisely the challenges applicable in describing or explaining the national music education program of Venezuela, popularly known as *el Sistema*. In some ways, the analogy to its more northerly counterparts is exact: the word *Sistema* encompasses the wealth of publicly-supported music-making educational activities across an entire nation, just as health care or justice “systems” refer to broad structures rather than specific medical or judicial procedures. There are systems within *el Sistema*, some of critical importance, but none in the strict sense of a curriculum or pedagogical method. In fact, much of the actual practice within *el Sistema* would be very familiar to and resonate strongly with music educators in this country. The primary differences between it and practice in this nation, apart from issues of scope, lie on the level of the philosophical fundamentals.

In the most prosaic of terms, *el Sistema* is a national after-school music education program offering classical music ensemble experiences for individuals from ages 3 to 30. The supporting theoretical model is organized around five fundamental principles, the distinct guiding characteristics which can be identified consistently across

the 180-plus music schools (also known as *núcleos*) collectively serving more than 300,000 children. These principles were derived inductively through a combination of firsthand observation and practical hands-on experience by the author within multiple *núcleos* across a broad geographic distribution. They are qualitative distinctions only in the sense that they attempt to identify and explain the roots of practice without defining the proficiency or sophistication with which that practice is delivered. Finally, with the exception of the first Fundamental, the most significant differentiator from which the remainder unfold, the other Fundamentals are presented in no particular order.

The Five Fundamental Principles of el Sistema

- 1 Social Change: The primary objective is social transformation *through* the pursuit of musical excellence. One happens through the other, and neither is prioritized at the expense of the other.
- 2 Ensembles: the focus of *el Sistema* is the orchestra or choral experience
- 3 Frequency: *el Sistema* ensembles meet multiple times every week over extended periods.
- 4 Accessibility: *el Sistema* programs are free, and are not selective in admission
- 5 Connectivity: Every *núcleo* is linked at the urban, regional and national levels, forming a cohesive network of services and opportunities for students across the county.

Social Change

As each fundamental is described or elaborated upon, it will become readily apparent how interconnected they all are, yet the first stated characteristic of *el Sistema* is the one that defines and shapes all the others. The objective of social transformation lies at the heart of *el Sistema*, with myriad implications and consequences. At the most concrete level, the *núcleos* provide a safe environment for youth dur-



a student's continuation in the program is dependent upon effort and commitment, as sharply differentiated from musical progress: attendance and hard work are both prioritized over acquisition of technical mastery

ing times they would otherwise be at greatest risk. The tangibility of this function resonates strongly with some policy-makers and parents, but ultimately it's merely the baseline effect. As music educators worldwide will readily appreciate, the activities within the *núcleos* are structured, focused, disciplined, demanding and rewarding on multiple levels. The inherent rigour of these qualities is well-concealed by the artistic – and enjoyable! – nature of the activities, but therein lies the essence of the program, in which social and artistic missions are intrinsically connected. In *el Sistema*, social change comes through the pursuit of musical excellence, with the discipline it demands and the emotional bonds it creates through mutual struggle and celebration.

Ensembles

Mutual struggle and celebration both require group interaction, so the primary vehicle for the execution of the *el Sistema* mission is the ensemble. Historically this has taken the form of the classical orchestra, but in recent years has come to include choirs as well. *El Sistema* puts instruments and music in the hands of children, but rather than ushering them immediately into practice rooms for solitary exertion, it places them first into the collaborative, interdependent environment of the ensemble. As members of an orchestra or chorus, students must learn and contribute simultaneously; they receive immediate, practical support from their peers while confronting challenges as a team, and must build and model the cooperative attributes of a healthy symbiotic community in order to achieve success.

Frequency

Ensembles in *el Sistema* meet four, five, even six times a week, under the simple logic that the more contact the program has with students, the easier it is to influence their lives positively. The degree of contact is part of the baseline social argument of minimizing high-risk opportunities, but also plays a critical role in creating the essential environmental ethos of the program: that of fun and relaxed music-making. The constant interactions also foster development of peer groups of like-minded individuals, as relationships are forged and reinforced through long-term shared experiences.

Accessibility

Music is undeniably an expensive pursuit, so a program seeking so-

cial change would fail from inception if it excluded individuals on socio-economic grounds. All activities within *el Sistema* are free, with instruments and instruction provided at no charge to program participants. As importantly, admission is not based on musical proficiency, so students can avoid the invariable Catch-22 in which need-based aid is offered only to those who can pay for the instruments and training necessary to pass entry auditions.

The twin policies of accessibility and non-selectivity demand that *el Sistema* function entirely as a meritocracy, but under a very different evaluation rubric. Fiscal realities limit availability of both program places and instruments, so a student's continuation in the program is dependent upon effort and commitment, as sharply differentiated from musical progress: attendance and hard work are both prioritized over acquisition of technical mastery. It's reasonable to ask whether this policy of accessibility and non-selectivity has compromised the level of excellence in the program, but the answer is resoundingly in the negative. In their acclaimed performances throughout the world, the youth orchestras from *el Sistema* have demonstrated conclusively that if anything, the program has identified and fostered much greater excellence by giving opportunities to many more individuals.

Connectivity

The ideal of social change demands an optimal learning environment for every participant, one in which the level of challenge and opportunity for growth is complemented by the feasibility of constructive contribution. Students also require extrinsic motivators, new levels of engagement and participation to which to aspire. This is where the national network, the *Sistema* of the name, plays a crucial role. With more than 180 *núcleos* across the country, many with multiple orchestras, there's always an appropriate place for each individual to play and to grow. Students move freely within the network to their best advantage, with the path from beginner orchestra to the world-famous orchestras clearly defined. The network also makes possible the extraordinary geographic scope of the program through resource sharing; it eliminates competition between *núcleos* by coordinating gatherings at the regional and national levels; it is a formidable capacity building engine through its ability to identify and nurture future leadership; and it offers a world of musical opportunities for participants. So when Maestro Abreu stated: "There is no system to

el Sistema,” he spoke only in the narrow confines of teacher-student interaction. There is a system, one that is neither pedagogical nor curricular but structural, and it is crucial to the program’s success.

Omissions

The process of deriving Five Fundamental Principles was certainly not easy for an organization as complex, dynamic and wide-reaching as el Sistema, and grounds undoubtedly exist for further inclusions. But any discussion of the above principles would be incomplete without some acknowledgement of those omitted as well. For example, there are many other qualities that could rightfully be attributed to the program, such as:

- Passion for the mission
- Quality of product
- Outstanding governance and leadership
- Ethical and responsible financial management
- Commitment to innovation and learning
- Political neutrality

These were excluded under the simple logic that they represent the hallmarks of all successful organizations, rather than the characteristics that distinguish and differentiate *el Sistema* specifically. The absence of qualifiers such as musical genres or media is also quite deliberate; *el Sistema* may have originally been an orchestral program, but recent forays into choral, Big Band and folk music traditions, among others, make any such distinctions injudicious. But there are two other qualities that have been suggested as being essential to *el Sistema*, **Intensity** and **Passion**, which have also been omitted from the Five Fundamentals, and they are worth exploring in further detail.

Intensity

This is one of the most misunderstood issues within el Sistema. Crucially, within the Venezuelan model there is an inverse, not direct, relationship between frequency and intensity. The “once a week” frequency for orchestra or private lessons is deeply ingrained in Western music pedagogical traditions, but bringing a “once a week” intensity to rehearsals five days a week is a formula for student burnout. Music making in Venezuela is fun and relaxed, precisely because the frequency allows participants and faculty to approach the craft with more patience, humour and far less stress. Yet stress and intensity can be healthy in moderation, as is well known, which is why several times a year *núcleos* may have “Seminarios,” high-pressure periods never exceeding two weeks, in which students prepare in a very focused way for a special concert.

Passion

Audiences at concerts of el Sistema orchestras universally remark on the extraordinary energy and full emotional and physical commitment with which the musicians play. It’s what makes the performances so visceral, so inspiring. But to suggest that passion is a fundamental quality of the teaching within el Sistema is almost insulting to all the teachers outside of Venezuela who also strive to bring an honest fervour for their subject to their classrooms.

Passion comes from creating the right environment, an environment generated through understanding the Five Fundamentals and all their implications, not mindless exhortations to play louder and faster or move the body more. The enthusiasm and energy of teachers play a major role, as always, but the framework for passion is first laid when the relationship between frequency and intensity is clearly understood, when rehearsals are low-stress, and when the emphasis is on playing music and having fun, not getting everything right as quickly and efficiently as possible. Passion is also facilitated by the network of *núcleos*: when the level of challenge is always appropriate, when no one is ever bored, or conversely, frightened or

overwhelmed, the experience becomes much more enjoyable. And finally, to make great music with friends and “comrades-in-arms” is both a joy and privilege, as musicians both professional and amateur will agree. The goal of *el Sistema* is to give its participants every opportunity to succeed as musicians and human beings, and as importantly, to give them the framework to love what they do through multiple positive associations. And *that*, more than anything else, is what *el Sistema* is: a context for music making that brings out the best in people.

Conclusion

With many arts organizations, cities and even nations racing to replicate el Sistema in extremely diverse social, cultural and economic contexts, understanding the program in terms that guide actions as much as spirit has never been so important. With that in mind, the Five Fundamentals are not intended to be prescriptive, but to clarify the core differences between traditional music education systems and el Sistema. The rationale is simple: the greater our understanding of the philosophical or practical divergences, the more opportunities for bridging them successfully will emerge.

But in the end, the discussion should not and will not end here. *El Sistema* as an organization is in a constant state of evolution, its leadership having a genius for identifying and assimilating new best practices. Is that another Fundamental? Let the conversation begin.

Dr. Jonathan Andrew Govias is a conductor, consultant and educator for el Sistema programs on four continents. A member of the inaugural class of Abreu Fellows at New England Conservatory, he has established an international reputation for his thoughtful, pragmatic and experience-based insights into el Sistema theory and practice, delivering keynote addresses at Royal Festival Hall (UK), Salvador (Brazil), Cape Town University (South Africa) and the University of Western Ontario in the past year. His articles exploring the pedagogical, social, academic and even economic dimensions of the Venezuelan national music program have appeared in international publications such as *The Strad* and Canada’s national music magazine, *La Scena Musicale*, and he has actively contributed to the development of national el Sistema initiatives in the UK and South Africa. Appointed music director of a professional orchestra at the age of 22, he has since earned a Doctorate in orchestral conducting and performed with symphonies worldwide, including a June 2009 debut with Canada’s National Arts Centre Orchestra. 2010 saw his debut with the famous youth orchestras in Venezuela, an appointment as Music Director of a major summer festival there, and an invitation to the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival Meisterkurse in Germany.



Britannia Printers^{INC}

138 Main Street, Toronto, Ontario M4E 2V8
Tel: (416) 698-7608 • Fax: (416) 698-7904
Email: print@britannia.ca

**FULL COLOUR / BLACK & WHITE
OFFSET AND DIGITAL PRINTING**

STATIONERY • BUSINESS CARDS
BROCHURES • MAGAZINES • BOOKS
FOIL STAMPING • THERMOGRAPHY
DIE CUTTING • POST CARDS
VINYL CUT SIGNS AND BANNERS
PRESENTATION FOLDERS
and much more!

“Making a good impression . . . for you”