Southern Youthquake

by Heidi Waleson

The Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela has galvanized audiences and won converts to its music-education “sistema.” What’s the secret to their success?
The 200 musicians of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela were so tightly jammed onto the stage of Carnegie Hall for their New York debut concerts in November that one wondered how the ten bass players had space to move their bows. But cramped or not, the entire orchestra played with tremendous verve and precision, responsive both to the hyperkinetic signals of their music director, 27-year-old Gustavo Dudamel, and to the lower-key direction of Simon Rattle, who conducted the final work, Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 10. This was vivid, pictorial music-making, from the brassy comedy and breakneck speeds of Bartók’s Concerto for Orchestra, to the conversational passages of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5, and the serene accompaniment of Emanuel Ax in Chopin’s Piano Concerto No. 2. At the conclusion of the first concert, the players changed into bright jackets in the colors of the Venezuelan flag and launched into a trio of Latin-American themed pieces, including Leonard Bernstein’s “Mambo” from West Side Story, in a style more typical of a marching band. Trumpets were raised to the sky, cellists twirled their instruments, and whole sections stood and danced while playing—all without missing a beat. The audience went wild.
These young musicians, most of whom are in their 20s, are the tip of the iceberg of a remarkable music-education venture that has been underway in Venezuela since 1975. La Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela (State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children’s Orchestras, or FESNOJIV), based in Caracas and known colloquially as “El Sistema,” is the creation of José Antonio Abreu, an economist and musician who believes in the transformative power of music. Today, it involves approximately 250,000 children and youth, who are being trained to play instruments and perform in orchestras all over Venezuela. The program is free to the participants (with instruments provided), and is funded almost entirely by the Venezuelan government. Perhaps most remarkable of all, the estimated two million children who have passed through El Sistema are predominantly from disadvantaged families. FESNOJIV is as much a social venture as it is a musical one; its goal is not so much to train musicians as to rescue children from the poverty and crime prevalent in Venezuela.

While news about El Sistema has been circulating in the music world for some years, U.S. audiences finally got to hear its results first-hand last fall. The visit to Carnegie Hall was the final stop in a highly praised tour for the orchestra, which began in Los Angeles, where the orchestra joined the Sibelius Academy Symphony Orchestra (Finland) and the UBS Verbier Festival Orchestra (a training ensemble made up of young musicians from 30 countries) in a three-week International Festival of Youth Orchestras hosted by the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The festival included a day-long symposium examining models for music education, and the LA Philharmonic announced its intention to launch its own Sistema-inspired program, Youth Orchestra LA. The Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela (SBYOV) got an enthusiastic response there, and in its subsequent stops in San Francisco and Boston. The orchestra had already visited Europe in August, playing to excited reviews at the Edinburgh Festival (Scotland is also exploring the creation of a Sistema-like program), the London Proms, and six cities in Germany. Reviews, despite a few minor cavils, were ecstatic; in an essay about the SBYOV in The Wall Street Journal, Greg Sandow commented, “The simplest reaction would simply be, ‘Wow! This is what classical music should be.’ ” Clips of the youth orchestra’s uniquely energetic performance of Bernstein’s “Mambo” have won wide popularity on YouTube, making the SBYOV a classical-music phenomenon.

In many ways, the El Sistema operation is the opposite of the way Western classical music is taught and experienced in the more developed world. “In the U.S. and Europe, culture tends to be owned by the elite, and shared as much as possible with others,” says Mark Churchill, dean of preparatory and continuing education.
at New England Conservatory, which has a longstanding relationship with El Sistema. “What’s so fascinating is that in Venezuela, they are doing it the other way around. The culture is being introduced from the lower economic strata. It has become the hallmark of the lower classes; and the middle- and upper-class kids who participate are the minority.”

Clive Gillinson, executive and artistic director of Carnegie Hall, is also intrigued by El Sistema’s upside-down quality. “Almost all of us who are involved in music education think of the top-down approach—you find the right teachers, identify talent, etc. For me, effectively this has been a bottom-up process, with a small number of people who wanted to make music together and helped other people do it. It’s amazing, and almost counter-intuitive, the way it has grown up out of passion, not out of particular skills or talent. And now that it has grown exponentially, all of that has reached a point where skill level is very high, and these players become impassioned ambassadors for the next generation.”

When Abreu launched the program 33 years ago, Venezuela had only two orchestras, and the musicians were predominantly European émigrés. To change that, Abreu started what he called the Youth Orchestra of Venezuela: a handful of children and some volunteer teachers who met in a garage to rehearse. As the rehearsals went on, more and more people came to play. In a few years, the orchestra had performed successfully abroad, and Abreu had collected many friends and supporters. Most importantly, he persuaded the government, rich in oil money, to fund his operation. Abreu’s astute and charismatic leadership, and his messianic zeal, have kept that state funding of El Sistema’s budget (currently $29 million US) through many changes of administration, from the far right wing to the current socialist regime of Hugo Chávez, who announced on national television last summer that he was supporting a major expansion of the program. The Venezuelan government funds FESNOJIV as a social service program, but the positive attention that it
has drawn from abroad, both for its social gains and for its artistic achievements, is clearly an important factor in the government’s continued support.

Today, FESNOJIV is a far-flung, complex operation. It is essentially an after-school program, operated through local centers, or “núcleos,” in all 24 states in Venezuela. In a November interview, Eduardo Mendez, director of núcleos and training for FESNOJIV, said that the system now has 161 núcleos, with the largest ones in each state’s central city, and smaller, satellite ones in smaller towns and rural areas. There are several in Caracas alone: the Montalban núcleo serves approximately 2,300 students.

The núcleos are open every weekday afternoon and on Saturdays. There is
no exam for entrance; all are welcome. Beginners (some are as young as two) come for several hours and learn basic musical skills by singing and participating in rhythm bands. (Mark Churchill is particularly intrigued by the fact that children are assigned instruments early, and those instruments are part of their training even before they get them; wind players do breathing exercises, for example.) After the introductory period, students receive their instruments and begin daily group lessons covering technique, reading, and rhythm; they also have daily choir. Once they have gained enough familiarity with the instrument, they join one of the orchestras of the núcleo.

Both the intensive nature of the training, and its group orientation, continue as the students advance through the system. Students come every day after school, and spend approximately four hours there. The first two hours are spent in a sectional rehearsal, in which they work on the music that they are playing in the orchestra, sometimes in smaller groups. The next two hours are spent in the full orchestra rehearsal, during which students are pulled out for one private lesson of 40-45 minutes each week. The orchestras perform regularly. There are no seating auditions: Students join the orchestras based on age, and seating rotates for different pieces.

Affluence of Spirit
Susan Simán, a FESNOJIV graduate who directs the Montalban núcleo, created the teaching method that has been adopted by El Sistema. As described in an in-depth graduate thesis that examines the program, “Orchestrating an ‘Affluence of Spirit’” by Jennifer Diana Mei-Lyn Chang, Simán takes her inspiration in part from the techniques of Sinichi Suzuki, who believed that making music is as natural as speech, and that all children can learn to play. The training is supportive and collaborative rather than competitive in nature. Older students teach and mentor younger ones, and the ideal of the orchestra—a group united in a single artistic goal, rather than the aspiration of the soloist—is the model for
the program. What is more, the children of the núcleo and its orchestras develop close personal relationships—they create a family built around music.

At the same time, standards are high, and the intensive nature of the program produces a remarkable artistic result. As Churchill points out, the intensive focus on orchestra and the group orientation “develops their ensemble playing skills much earlier, and to a much larger degree.” Simon Rattle, visiting the program in Caracas, watched an orchestra of 800 play Tchaikovsky and was astonished by their ability to “phrase the same way, and be able to communicate backwards and forwards. I saw in everybody's faces what I believe music to be about—pure joy.”

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was astonished by the ability of such a large group to “phrase the same way, and be able to communicate backwards and forwards.” The excitement and enthusiasm for music of the young people in the program is also one of its hallmarks. In Tochar y Luchar, a 2006 documentary film about El Sistema, Rattle went on to say, “I saw in everybody's faces what I believe music to be about—pure joy.”

Abreu’s twin goals for the program—artistic excellence and social improvement—have worked hand in hand to create this result. Anecdotal evidence points to the betterment of the children’s lives as their families, proud of their accomplishments, work harder. Numerous stories tell of children rescued from the streets, and from prisons: A Caracas núcleo, El Chorro, is one of five in Venezuela that specializes in high-risk children, victims of homelessness, extreme poverty, abandonment, violent abuse, and drugs, who are referred to it through a government program. El Chorro offers intensive psychological and social services, as well as providing residential care for those in need. The Inter-American Development Bank, based on its studies of FESNOJIV’s effect on Venezuelan society, has invested millions of dollars in buildings for FESNOJIV, including the $25 million Center for Social Action through Music in Caracas, an eleven-story building with concert halls, studios, and classrooms; seven more are planned for other cities.

FESNOJIV has its own reward system...
as well. The very best players audition and are invited to join the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra. They live in Caracas and are paid a stipend and provided with housing. The orchestra rehearses daily for three hours and tours extensively. The players may also attend conservatory or university, working their studies around their musical obligations. The 24-year-old violist Jhoanna Sierra has been in the orchestra for five years, and recently began studying journalism and communications in college. Rafael Payare, a 27-year-old French horn player, did two and half years of university study in chemistry and engineering, but gave it up, deciding that his future was in music. “In chemistry and engineering, everything was too square,” he said. “It was too easy—you study, you do well on your exams, you get a job. When you study music, and play concerts, anything can happen. Magic things.”

The best-known products of FESNOJIV are the bass player Edicson Ruiz, who at seventeen became the youngest player ever to join the Berlin Philharmonic, and 26-year-old Gustavo Dudamel, now the young rock star of the conducting world and music director-designate of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Dudamel was always precocious: He started violin at five at his núcleo in Barquisimeto, became the concertmaster of the youth orchestra at twelve, began conducting studies at fourteen, and at eighteen was named music director of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra. Dudamel’s identification with his orchestra is complete, and in New York, as on several CDs recorded for Deutsche Grammophon, they play passionately for him.

But Dudamel’s skills obviously translate: His debut with the New York Philharmonic at the end of November was a lively affair, with the orchestra impeccably following the young conductor’s lead. At times during the Philharmonic program of Carlos Chavez, Dvořák, and Prokofiev, he seemed like a young race car driver taking on a finely tuned Maserati and having the time of his life: “Let’s see how quickly it can accelerate! Let’s see how well it takes this corner!” Yet there was narrative tension and color as well as excitement; the music-making was never just display. At the end of the concert, Dudamel plunged into the orchestra, hugging the players and urging sections to stand for applause. Churchill says, “He’s in love with the music. It’s a pure, direct love affair with those players who are making the music with him. It was just like Lenny Bernstein.”

For most of the musicians of El Sistema, however, the future is in Venezuela, not the international stage. Unlike the bleak prospects of three decades ago, there are now opportunities for them to work as musicians. There are more professional orchestras, and most importantly, El Sistema itself is a frequent employer of its graduates, who become its teachers. This is certainly Jhoanna Sierra’s plan. “It’s important to communicate what we’ve learned to the younger generation,” she says, “and make certain that they can do the same.”

It will be up to such followers of the gospel according to Abreu to carry on the work of keeping El Sistema flourishing. In a question-and-answer session at Carnegie Hall before one of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra concerts, Abreu commented that Dudamel “desires profoundly to devote himself to the task of helping to form a new generation of musical leaders in Venezuela.”

Dudamel insists that his new international responsibilities will not prevent that from happening. “I am from Venezuela and I love my country and the people of my country,” he says. “This will very happily exist along with my commitment to the Los Angeles Philharmonic. I will always work to give the people of my country the advantages that I had.”

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