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The Third Way is Not The Only Way: Interrogating a Centrist Agenda for *El Sistema* Research

GEOFF BAKER

Royal Holloway | University of London | United Kingdom*

ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical response to the special issue of *Music & Arts in Action* on youth orchestras and *Sistema*-inspired programs (Vol. 8 No. 2, 2023). I argue that the editorial's framing of the field and its proposed research agenda are based on a mischaracterization of books by Tricia Tunstall and myself, and fail to take account of important developments over the last five years. The special issue advocates for exploring complexity, yet promotes narrowing research down to evaluative questions – a process of (over)simplification. Its pursuit of balance and symmetry has parallels with political centrism such as the Third Way. Like its political counterpart, academic centrism deserves recognition and critical scrutiny as ideology. Given that the *El Sistema* field shows marked asymmetries, I argue that researchers should be more concerned with *rebalancing*, and should therefore be willing to "get off the fence." Balance comes from a diversity of competing perspectives given equal space, not an insistence on adopting a single approved approach. I propose four ways to push the field to a new level: quality control, engagement with existing research, taking a stand against injustices, and working together.

KEYWORDS

El Sistema; symmetry; centrism; ideology; rebalancing

* geoff.baker@rhul.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

The recent special issue of *Music and Arts in Action* on youth orchestras and *Sistema*-inspired programs uses books on *El Sistema* by Tricia Tunstall (2012) and myself (Baker, 2014) as a framing device and a foil for proposing a research agenda for the field. The editorial posits these two books as "extreme positions" and a centrist course focused on evaluative questions as the only sensible response. I find both the characterization and the proposed agenda questionable, not least because a lot has happened in the five years since the editorial first appeared as a call for papers. This essay will explore my concerns, critiques, and alternative suggestions.

A SIMPLE POLARITY?

The editorial presents an image of the field of studies of *El Sistema* as a "simple and somehow naïve polarity"; it states that "positions tended to polarize between *proponents* and *detractors* of these socio-artistic and educational projects." This thumbnail sketch oversimplifies a more complex reality and requires considerable nuancing.

Firstly, there is little sign of polarization at the level of *research*, which is the central concern of a peer-reviewed academic journal. Tunstall's book is not a work of research: its author's stated aim was "to proselytize on behalf of [*El Sistema*'s] mission" (cited in Johnson, 2012). The book shows no evidence of research questions or methods; there is no engagement with scholarship and no bibliography. Its author had no background in Latin American music research and did not speak Spanish. It is therefore irrelevant to understanding the field of scholarship. To treat it as equivalent to a specialist, peer-reviewed academic book is unjustifiable.

The 'Schenkergate' affair – Philip Ewell's article on music theory's 'white racial frame' and the responses it provoked – provides a recent example of polarization in music scholarship. *El Sistema* research shows nothing of the sort: there have been no academic articles, let alone an entire journal special issue, critiquing my book. There have been no waves of scholarly argument and counter-argument. In fact, my book received largely positive academic reviews, in important journals such as *Music Education Research*, *ACT (Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education)*, and *Music & Letters*. It was followed in short order by studies that, far from challenging it, extended and deepened its critiques (*e.g.*, Logan, 2015; Pedroza, 2015; Scruggs, 2015). The only scholar who set out specifically to test its arguments concluded that it was absolutely accurate (Scripp, 2016). A conference in 2015 and resulting special issue of *ACT* (15:1, 2016) underlined that a number of academics around the world were now engaged in similar critical thinking on this topic. Subsequent research on *Sistema*-style programs in places as far apart as the UK and Argentina bolstered my arguments (*e.g.*, Rimmer, 2018, 2020; Wald, 2017). The Inter-American Development Bank's 2017 evaluation (Alemán *et al.*, 2017) confirmed my hypotheses about *El Sistema*'s poverty and dropout rates, and it raised major questions about the program's efficacy (Baker, Bull, and Taylor, 2018). Stainova's (2021) monograph on *El Sistema*, while divergent in terms of approach and tone, echoed my portrait of an oppressive, dysfunctional organization.

Also, unpublished studies that predated mine have since come to light. Ana Lucía Frega and Eva Estrada's 1997 reports on *El Sistema* provided ample supporting evidence for my later findings (see Baker and Frega, 2018). It emerged that researchers at a major *El-Sistema* inspired (ESI) program, the *Red de Escuelas de Música de Medellín* in Colombia, had been producing similar written critiques since

2005 (see Baker, 2021). All this supporting argument and evidence, dating from both before and after my book's publication, hardly suggests that my position was extreme.

My book did indeed generate polarization, but not within the academic field. As the editorial notes, there had previously been "widespread *social*, *artistic*, *and media* recognition of *Sistema* as an astonishing demonstration of the 'transformative power of music'" (emphasis added), so my critique was unsurprisingly met resistance from the *El Sistema* sector, its advocates, and classical music journalists. Many who had bought into the myth of *El Sistema* (Baker, 2018) were unhappy at my myth-busting account. There was a clear polarization in the months after publication, then, but it was one of opinions and feelings – a popular argument rather than a scholarly one.

Crucially, this polarization decreased significantly over subsequent years, once the shock wore off. Opinions have been quietly converging since the special issue's call for papers in 2017. For example, the August 2018 issue of *The Ensemble*, edited by Tricia Tunstall and Eric Booth, two of the most prominent *Sistema* advocates in the US, devoted much space to topics such as student voice, ownership, and leadership; student-centred learning; prioritizing process over product; and the possibilities for a "Liberatory Orchestral Music Program" – very similar to the arguments presented in my book four years earlier. Also in 2018, Booth published an article singing the praises of collaborative composition and critiquing the standard practices of *Sistema* programs and youth orchestras.[1] Here were two evangelists for the Venezuelan model now embracing change and advocating for ways of working that were very different from *El Sistema*'s. Previously arch-critics of my book, Tunstall and Booth's position was now approaching mine. So much for a "simple polarity"![2]

YOLA (Youth Orchestra Los Angeles) is probably the best-known ESI program in the US. The YOLA National Symposium in 2019 focused on topics such as power, voice, and creativity, while the 2020 event included presentations on culturally responsive programming, collective composition, and youth development. The overlaps with my 2014 book were plentiful, the conflicts minimal. The 2021 symposium focused on embracing change – the precise topic of my most recent book, published six months earlier (Baker, 2021).

Furthermore, as I note in the second book, not just the *Red* in Medellín but also other leading ESI programs have made fundamental changes in recent years. *El Sistema* Oklahoma is another example of a program that has undergone a shift in mindset and practices (Raiber 2019). Longy School of Music, for years a bastion of *Sistema* in higher education, advertises its Masters in Music Education as "rooted in culturally responsive teaching" – an approach that differs starkly from *El Sistema*'s classical music salvationism.[3]

[1] https://ensemblenews.org/region/feature-the-americas-take-on-collaborative-composition-a-right-answer-to-the-hard-questions/.

[2] Nor is there an "ideological impasse," as Stephen Fairbanks suggests in his article in the special issue, since Booth and I both see a reconfigured youth orchestra as a way forward.

[3] https://longy.edu/study/master-of-music-in-music-education-online/.

In other words, prominent branches of the *Sistema* field have moved away from the conservative Venezuelan approach and towards the ideas and practices of progressive music education, which formed the bedrock of my two books on social action through music (SATM). Without saying so openly, the field has drawn steadily closer to the critical scholarship that it previously rejected. What was controversial a few years ago is now increasingly standard. Instead of polarization, we find old divisions breaking down and positions merging. Since 2017, I have worked closely with a leading ESI program, the *Red* in Medellín; in 2019, I joined the scientific committee of the French youth orchestra program *Démos*.

Important *El Sistema* supporters have shifted their stance. *The Ensemble* dropped the reference to *El Sistema* in its tagline, and now refers instead to "ensemble music education for youth empowerment and social change." ISME's *El Sistema* Special Interest Group did the same and now focuses on "music education for social change." *Sistema England* closed down, while *Sistema Scotland* publicly distanced itself from its Venezuelan mother program in the wake of the latter's sexual abuse scandal in 2021. Some ESI programs have dropped references to *El Sistema* from their websites.[4] In 2023, Jonathan Govias, formerly one of the field's most prominent advocates, declared: "*Sistema* is well and truly dead, joining the Mozart Effect as a footnote in a history of music education fads."[5] Attitudes to *El Sistema* are clearly shifting within the wider SATM field. This is no longer a simple picture of proponents versus detractors.

The Hilti Foundation, which funds *El Sistema* and the major ESI program *Sinfonía por el Perú*, called publicly in 2021 for systemic change in the field, pointing to the lack of relevant teacher training as a key problem (something that I had identified in 2014).[6] Hilti created the Academy for Impact through Music (AIM) as an 'innovation lab'. AIM's director was critical of conventional teaching for restricting students' agency and community building. The academy's website acknowledges a whole series of problems in the sector around safeguarding – another issue that I have been underlining since 2014.[7] The website states one of AIM's principles: "We challenge unquestioned acceptance of the *status quo*."[8] Hilti is a major *El Sistema* funder and supporter; now even the *status quo* is questioning the *status quo*.

Finally, the most controversial claims in my 2014 book – the ones that gave rise to polarization at the time, concerning the real poverty level, sexual abuse, and the mishandling of resources – have been verified by subsequent research and events. In 2017, a major evaluation by the Inter-American Development Bank estimated the poverty rate among *El Sistema* entrants to be 16.7 percent, whereas the rate for the states in which they lived was 46.5 percent (Alemán *et al.*, 2017). In other words, children entering *El Sistema* were three times less likely to be poor than all six- to fourteen- year-olds residing in the same states. In stark contrast to the official story, and validating my published hypothesis, *El Sistema* illustrated "the challenges of targeting interventions towards vulnerable groups of children in the context of a voluntary social program." 2021 saw longstanding allegations of widespread sexual harassment and abuse in *El Sistema* reach the national and international media, which led *El Sistema* to publicly acknowledge the problem and

[4] See, for example, the UK's Nucleo, Orchestras for All, and In Harmony Liverpool.

[5] https://jonathangovias.com/2023/06/13/sistema-is-dead-a-post-mortem/.

[6] https://www.hiltifoundation.org/stories/new-podcast-series-about-the-hilti-foundation-z4csb.

[7] https://aim-prod.netlify.app/articles/safeguarding-matters.

[8] https://www.aimpowers.com/our-work/.

introduce safeguarding measures.[9] In 2022, a major journalistic investigation confirmed the failure to build seven regional music centres, for which *El Sistema* had received a nine-figure loan from the IDB – something that I had been writing about for eight years.[10] My research has been shown repeatedly to be accurate; it is *El Sistema* itself that looks extreme.

In short, the characterization of my book as an "extreme position" is contradicted by a plethora of research, reviews, and events. Developments in the last few years point to the opposite conclusion; its critiques of *El Sistema* have been borne out, and its arguments about music education look mainstream in 2023. Rethinking and change have become commonplace topics in this sector.

Similarly, the notion of a "simple polarity" does not stand up to scrutiny. It rests on a snapshot of the field that is nearly a decade old, and one that has not aged well. Even Gustavo Dudamel's YOLA program, *El Sistema* funder Hilti Foundation, and über-*Sistema* advocates like Tunstall and Booth have shifted their position, while I work with SATM programs. Where is the polarization today? All that is left are the embers of some old animosities.

A PREVIOUSLY DEFINED AGENDA?

The editorial warns of "the danger of pursuing a unidimensional perspective that tacitly follows a previously defined agenda of seeking only *either* 'positive' *or* 'negative' aspects, producing an incomplete account based on results that fit into and confirm the observer's initial position and assumptions."

As I wrote in 2014, my project was born in a fit of enthusiasm straight after the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra's Proms début in 2007. The research proposal that predated my fieldwork in Venezuela shows no sign of a negative agenda: no doubts or criticisms of the program itself. I wanted to know the secret of *El Sistema*'s success; it did not occur to me at that stage that *El Sistema* might not *be* a success. The journey from proposal to book reveals not following a previously defined agenda but rather the opposite: a 180-degree turn. My findings contradicted, rather than confirmed, my initial position and assumptions.

Similarly, Lawrence Scripp (2016) was not a detractor with a previously defined agenda; he had previously shown enthusiasm for *El Sistema*, and he set out to interrogate my book from a position of neutrality. Jonathan Govias, today one of the most trenchant and public critics of this field, initially made his name as an advocate for *El Sistema*. His journey has been, in his own words, "from apostle to apostate."[11] Mina Yang wrote a glowing account of YOLA in 2014, before shifting to a biting critique of its ideological underpinnings by 2023 (Yang 2014, 2023). Nicolas Dobson was a *Sistema* teacher before he became a *Sistema* critic (Dobson 2016). Some of the most extensive criticisms of *El Sistema* have thus come from people who were initially positive. We did not arrive at our assessments through following a previously defined agenda, but rather through exposure to *El Sistema*'s realities and/or deeper reflection. Critical perspectives cannot be so easily dismissed, then.

[9] *E.g.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/05/27/venezuela-me-too-yo-te-creo-sexual-abuse-el-sistema-youth-orchestra/; https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2021/06/24/the-disturbing-noise-coming-out-of-el-sistema/.
[10] https://alianza.shorthandstories.com/las-notas-desafinadas-de-el-sistema/index.html.
[11] https://jonathangovias.com/2017/12/01/from-apostle-to-apostate/.

COMPLEXITY AND EVALUATION

The special issue "seeks to go beyond this simple and somehow naïve polarity by examining precisely how, when, and where youth orchestral projects work, while answering the question of why." This statement of intent raises a host of questions. This kind of evaluative goal may be an important one for the field, but is it the *most* important one, or the only one, or even an achievable one?

Since the editorial encourages the exploration of complexity, it is instructive to turn to a larger, more developed, and related field – overseas aid – to see what this might look like. Ben Ramalingam's (2013) book on development and complexity theory, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*, offers interesting pointers.

Ramalingam makes a couple of key points about evaluation. First, it is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to determine convincingly the impact of an aid intervention. Attributing outcomes to any single intervention is very tricky: it is hard to demonstrate links between actions and outcomes, and impacts are much more likely to be achieved by a combination of multiple forces. It may therefore be very difficult, perhaps impossible, to determine precisely how or why a youth orchestral project works.

Second, evaluations are often misused or ignored. As Ramalingam (2013, p. 10) notes: "When the political context is not right, research is bypassed, evaluations are forgotten, [and] studies are ignored. […] Numerous policy evaluations and research studies start out with grand ambitions to address such critical questions, but end up wrecked, abandoned, or disappearing altogether." He quotes an anonymous donor: "We say we want evaluation, but we don't, we want results, results we can put in our glossy reports, we can put on our websites that we can give to ministers to present in Parliament" (p. 120).

In short, important as evaluative questions may seem at first sight, they may be unanswerable, and the findings may not be taken seriously by key stakeholders. Should this then be the central focus of our field?

Focusing on what works equates research with evaluation, but research is much more than this. Evaluation might be considered a sub-genre of research or a different genre, but either way, it is far from the whole thing. If we look at the field of music education research, we can see scholars are interested in a far broader range of questions. There are prestigious journals devoted to critical, theoretical, and philosophical approaches, such as *ACT* and *Philosophy of Music Education Review*. What is the justification for sidelining all these other ways of thinking about music education? Why elide them if the goal is the pursuit of complexity? To reduce research to evaluative questions is a simplifying approach.

The first journal special issue on *El Sistema* revolved around political, economic, historical, philosophical, ethical, and cultural issues. The strongest critiques of *El Sistema* have focused on politics – whether the program's neoliberal underpinnings or its alignment with the socialist Bolivarian Revolution. Yet rather than going deeper on this question, the editorial elides politics altogether. Its evaluative agenda does not address the central issues laid down by earlier research so much as sidestep them.

Political critiques cannot be countered or resolved by evidence of "working"; indeed, Owen Logan has suggested that the danger of *El Sistema* lies in its successes, not its failures. Similarly, *El Sistema* rests on a discredited deficit model, stating its aim as "rescuing children and young people from an empty, disorientated,

and deviant youth."[12] This deficit vision has been transferred into some ESI programs (see Rimmer, 2020). The problems of this starting-point are political, philosophical, ethical, and cultural; the critique here concerns stigmatization and disempowerment, not efficacy. Critiques of deficit thinking are mainstream within the field of culture and development; *El Sistema* studies ought to engage with this issue, not avoid it.

One of the central theoretical pillars of my 2014 book is Foucault's (1991) work on discipline. Foucault insists on the duality of discipline as both productive and restrictive. His argument is fundamentally about the political and moral implications of discipline, not whether it works. No amount of evidence about cognitive benefits or academic achievement would invalidate a Foucauldian argument, because it is already part of the argument. Foucault does not claim that discipline has no positive effects, but rather that these effects come with a cost; focusing only on whether it works misses the point.

The Third Wave, an experiment in fascism carried out at a California high school in 1967 by a history teacher named Ron Jones, 'worked' – discipline, motivation, academic achievement, and even student enjoyment improved markedly – yet its creator brought it swiftly to a close, deeply disturbed by its political and ethical aspects (Jones, 2008). A purely evaluative approach, without taking those aspects into account, would have deemed the project a success – yet it would also have been morally objectionable to anyone opposed to fascism. Proposing a similar agenda for *El Sistema* research rings alarm bells, all the more so given the ample evidence that authoritarianism is also an issue in this field. Exploring complexity means considering the political and moral costs of efficacy.

If researchers are to embrace complexity, we need to examine starting points as well as outcomes – something that evaluations do not do. We need to complexify the question of how, when, where, and why youth orchestral projects work, by engaging with questions such as 'what does working mean?' and 'works for whom?' In my research with an ESI program in Colombia (Baker, 2021), I found that opinions varied widely among staff and students. Depending on whom I talked to, 'working' might mean student enjoyment, staff satisfaction, successful performance, boosting classical music, expanding access to music education, strengthening a sense of Colombian identity, fostering political voice, improving social skills, impacting on the community, and so on. How does one focus on measuring 'working' when there is no consensus over what this would even mean? In fact, success to one person often looked like failure to another and a matter of little interest to a third. In one internal study, parents drew much more positive conclusions than the students. So did the program work or not? As I reported in the resulting book, the program's leadership paid little attention to evaluative studies, even though the results were positive, because they were focused on different questions. Put bluntly, they did not believe that the program 'worked' just because an evaluation said so. Exploring complexity means engaging with these kinds of issues.

Arguments over private schooling are illustrative. These arguments do not revolve around whether these schools work or not for those who attend them, but rather whether they should exist. The key question for critics of private schools is their effect on those who do *not* participate – on the wider educational system, on society

[12] https://elsistema.org.ve/que-es-el-sistema/.

at large – not on those who do. For critics, whether private education 'works' for a select few children is of little importance in comparison to the larger structural questions.

Similar issues are raised by *El Sistema* and ESI programs: what are their effects on music education and policy more broadly? On wider society? Are some, as Logan (2016) argues, a "veil of culture" that covers and legitimizes the political status quo? Are others, as Yang (2023) suggests, intertwined with neoliberal policies that undermine public school music education? These are the sorts of questions that academic researchers should address, because no one else will. Evaluations will happen anyway, because they are required and commissioned. Evaluative questions are therefore safe. But there are many other more complex questions that are asked less often and fall to academics to address: the political, philosophical, ethical, and cultural issues that *El Sistema* raises and evaluations usually skirt around. As Gert Biesta argues, it is important to engage with the question of what constitutes *good* education, and not just *effective* education (cited in Dyndahl, 2021, p. 171).

The implication of the editorial is that the evaluative question is the most important one for the field, but evidence suggests otherwise. After all, *El Sistema*'s expansion nationally and then internationally over a period of nearly fifty years has not depended on evaluative evidence but rather on claims, assumptions, and beliefs. *El Sistema*'s history illustrates Varkøy's (2021) point that music education policy is usually built on ritual rather than technical rationality. Supporters' views are determined by their cultural, political, and philosophical convictions, not by evaluative evidence. Evaluations are highlighted if they support those convictions, ignored if not. *El Sistema* is an ideological formation – it is built on and reproduces ideas about music, society, development, and so on – and the major debates about it are ideological (for example, democratization of culture versus cultural democracy). It is misguided to think that ideological debates can be resolved by producing evidence, even more so to imagine that denying the importance of ideology is the way forward.

The ways that IDB's 2017 evaluation of *El Sistema* has been selectively used and misused raises major doubts about the value of pursuing only evaluative questions (Baker, Bull, and Taylor, 2018; Baker, 2018). The most striking finding, about the low poverty rate, has simply been ignored. Data revealing that *El Sistema*'s social impact is at best underwhelming has been spun into a story about "a model of social inclusion for the world." The distortion of the findings in order to make them more palatable to major stakeholders recalls the words of Ramalingam's informant: "We say we want evaluation, but we don't, we want results, results we can put in our glossy reports, we can put on our websites." The number of people who are genuinely interested in the findings – what the data tell us about how, when, where, and why youth orchestral projects work – appears to be vanishingly small, to judge from the absence of debate about this major report in academic, media, or public spheres. (This evaluation – the field's most important quantitative study – is not mentioned in any of the articles in this special issue that proposes an evaluative agenda.) Its findings appear too inconvenient for most writers on this topic.

The changes that have taken place in the *Sistema* field in recent years, mentioned in the first part of this article, were rooted in ideological shifts (such as rising interest in culturally responsive teaching and youth development) rather than evaluative evidence. The *Red de Escuelas de Música de Medellín*'s eighteen-year search for a new model has been driven by cultural and political debates, not

evaluations (Baker, 2021). Ideology is where the real action is, in both practice and research fields.

SYMMETRY

"*What needs to be done?* The discussion must be pushed into another level, encouraging researchers and practitioners to treat symmetrically (as their *a priori* departure point) both potentially positive and negative implications of these youth orchestra programs."

If society and development were symmetrical, the editorial's proposal would make perfect sense. However, there is nothing in Ramalingam's extensive account to suggest that this is the case. On the contrary, complexity theory points to the opposite conclusion. Symmetry would be a feature of a linear account of the world, which is precisely what Ramalingam argues against. Also, one of Ramalingam's central messages is that in a complex world, one size does not fit all. He is adamantly opposed to blueprints and standardized procedures. This hardly suggests that the same lens – symmetry – should be applied in every case.

Advocating for symmetry is therefore a questionable move, one that implies imposing a single, neat, simple frame on messy, complex social reality. I am all for exploring contradiction, ambivalence and complexity: it is the foundation of my most recent book (Baker, 2021). But to suggest that there is one right way to write about everything is to reduce complexity and simplify knowledge production.

The editorial critiques following a previously defined agenda, yet it replaces two agendas ("seeking only *either* 'positive' or 'negative' aspects") with a third: seeking only symmetry. It appears that following a previously defined agenda is actually fine, as long as it is the 'correct' one. The approved agenda has marked parallels with political centrism such as the Third Way, which aims to go beyond antagonistic positions and dissolve them into a technocratic middle ground in which the central question becomes what works. Like its political counterpart, intellectual centrism deserves recognition and critical scrutiny as ideology. Examining *El Sistema* through a symmetrical lens is no more inherently right or natural than Third Way politics is inherently superior to the politics of Left and Right.

El Sistema is no ordinary music education project: it was founded and run by a top-level politician, has spent huge sums of money, and today serves as a propaganda tool of a corrupt, autocratic government. Even the printable stories about Abreu and *El Sistema* are extraordinary by music education standards (see *e.g.* articles by Santodomingo, Rivero, and Medina, all discussed in Baker 2014). The Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Montero recalled *El Sistema*'s founder, José Antonio Abreu, inviting her to perform with Gustavo Dudamel and the Simón Bolívar Orchestra in a concert for the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA. When she refused to perform, because of her opposition to the government, Abreu told her: "Gabriela, if you give this concert, you'll never have financial worries ever again. PDVSA will take care of you."[13] (PDVSA has been embroiled in giant corruption scandals in recent years.) *El Sistema* marshalled 11,000 musicians for a single concert in homage to Abreu after his death and claimed the record for the world's largest orchestra (in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic). Its partly completed headquarters were costed at $437.5 million USD in 2010, yet in 2018 most of its

[13] http://actualy.es/pianista-gabriela-montero-silencio-no-una-opcion/.

employees earned less than $10 USD a month. Symmetry and balance are hardly the first words that come to mind here. *El Sistema* manifests dramatic asymmetries and inequalities, both internal (its inverse-pyramidal distribution of resources) and external (monopolizing budgets and marginalizing other arts). Academic accounts ought to reflect this reality, not squeeze it into a symmetrical frame.

It would be a mistake, then, to assume that *El Sistema* is broadly comparable to a music program one-thousandth the size in the global North, and that both may be considered as a single phenomenon to be approached in a single way. Indeed, Brook and Frega (2020) argue that the ESI field has moved so far from *El Sistema* that it should drop the reference to the Venezuelan program altogether (as some examples have indeed done). Many aspects of *El Sistema* would be unthinkable in the global North, so an approach derived from the North could lead one astray if applied to Venezuela. Indeed, supposedly "balanced" accounts of *El Sistema* have failed to spot a host of serious problems – hardly a great advertisement for such an approach. If a researcher is suspicious of extremes, how sensitive will they be to extreme behaviour? If they believe that music education should be represented in a symmetrical manner, how will they deal with an asymmetrical reality? A central problem that scholarship on *El Sistema* has faced – at the level of both production and reception – is that many people in the global North seem unable to grasp extraordinary aspects of *El Sistema*, perhaps because these aspects lie far outside the ordinary frame of reference of music education and research in the North. Bribery, political manipulation, and the normalization of sexual harassment and abuse, for example, are not realities that music educators or music education researchers habitually encounter; this may explain why so many have missed these issues, despite their prevalence. *El Sistema* is an extreme case in music education; as such, it requires a distinctive approach.

My own publication trajectory illustrates this point. I have published two books on SATM. My views did not change in between, but in the second one I took a more balanced approach for two reasons. First, there was an official narrative about the *Red*, but it was not nearly as dominant as *El Sistema*'s, and it was already much debated (unlike in the Venezuelan case), meaning that my priority was not to reveal a hidden story but rather to depict and analyze the debates. Second, the *Red* had long-documented problems, but they were not as extreme as *El Sistema*'s, they were recognized by program leaders, and there had been many attempts to deal with them. There was no need to blow the whistle on issues that were already known and taken seriously. My approaches were therefore determined by the nature of the case studies, rather than by a previously defined agenda. To deal with them in the same way would have been to flatten out major differences.

One implication of a symmetrical approach is that positive and negative elements are comparable: that they can be counterposed or weighed up against each other. Yet it is far from clear that elements that operate on different social planes (Boeskov, 2018) can be reduced to a symmetrical presentation. Also, ideological questions, which are so prominent in the critical literature, may not be susceptible to a symmetrical approach.

To return to the analogy, private schools may benefit students, but they may also exacerbate social inequalities. Putting these two arguments together in a symmetrical frame does not take us very far. How does one weigh up these factors against each other? Is this not like comparing apples and oranges? What would be good educational policy? These are political, philosophical, and moral questions that are not advanced by a symmetrical approach.

Such questions hang over Stephen Fairbanks' otherwise valuable contribution to the special issue. The reader is left with a balanced, symmetrical view of cultural capital on one side of the scales and symbolic violence on the other. Yet in a mirror of private schooling, cultural capital accrues to the individual (in the words of one of Fairbanks' interviewees, education is a "way out" for a few), while symbolic violence also affects wider society (it reinforces oppressive societal dynamics for many, or, as Fairbanks puts it, "reaffirms the dominance of the dominant culture" (p. 14)). The author's diagram presents a symmetrical portrait of "potential for continued oppression" and "potential for increased agency" (p. 15), yet these two potentials operate on different social planes. So, the symmetry is an illusion. These elements cannot simply be placed on the same set of scales. Ultimately, one has to decide how to weigh up individual benefits against societal costs, and this choice is inescapably ideological rather than technical. There is no evaluation that will answer this question.[14]

To take a starker example, one of the catalysts for *El Sistema*'s sexual abuse crisis in 2021 was a public statement by the musician Angie Cantero, who claimed that *El Sistema* "was / is plagued by paedophiles, pederasts, and an untold number of people who have committed the crime of statutory rape."[15] Numerous respondents and survivors backed up her statement. Five years earlier, another former *El Sistema* musician, Luigi Mazzocchi, had affirmed that teacher-student sexual relationships were "the norm" (Scripp, 2016). What would be a symmetrical presentation of such information? Is there anything that can balance out the normalization of sexual harassment and abuse? Or would it be morally repugnant to suggest that one student's success and another's trauma were symmetrical?

A further complicating factor is that the production of knowledge about *El Sistema* is grotesquely unbalanced and asymmetrical. On one side of the scales, there is an enormous weight of the music industry, major media outlets, and funding and advocacy bodies; on the other, a small handful of academic researchers and the very occasional journalistic critique. *El Sistema* has its own press office, and it can recruit advocates of the order of Simon Rattle, Claudio Abbado, and Plácido Domingo, whose pronouncements are broadcast by the international media. Critical voices, in contrast, are severely constrained. As Mazzocchi told Scripp (2016), his friends advised him strongly to make his criticisms anonymously: "They say, 'Don't give him your name, don't give your name.' They all tell me, 'If you had any hopes of doing any musical work in Venezuela in the future, forget about it if you give him your name.'" The word "fear" appears 22 times in Scripp's study. As a result, critical perspectives are rarely transmitted via public channels. They were amply documented by Eva Estrada in her 1997 evaluation, yet it was another twenty years before they were made public (see Baker and Frega, 2018). When I did my fieldwork in Venezuela, I frequently encountered criticisms of *El Sistema*; yet until my book in 2014, they were all but invisible beneath the mountain of official narratives. Where is the symmetry here?

[14] Boeskov's article in the special issue moves in this direction in its final section. Rather than presenting a simplistic symmetry of positive and negative, it finishes with a more ideological analysis of surface individual benefits naturalizing and concealing deeper structural costs.

[15] https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/05/27/venezuela-me-too-yo-te-creo-sexual-abuse-el-sistema-youth-orchestra/.

In short, nowhere do we find a "simple polarity." In the public sphere, there is dramatic asymmetry between positive and negative perspectives, distorting the ambiguous realities and ambivalent views uncovered by research. Any urge to pursue balance must start from this point.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE? REBALANCING, OR "GETTING OFF THE FENCE"

How should researchers respond? Proposing a symmetrical approach is like looking at a set of scales with a kilo on one side and a gram on the other and proposing to add ten grams to each. It is even-handed, but it will not change anything. Affirmative action exemplifies an alternative approach: when there is a structural imbalance of power, it may be necessary to take measures that are not in themselves balanced, but are rather aimed at rebalancing.

I argue that researchers' role may legitimately be to *create* balance rather than to *be* balanced. In our specific case, to act as a counterweight to the one-sided representations of *El Sistema* that predominate. To promote greater symmetry in the public sphere, rather than on the page.

Ramalingam's book illustrates clearly that embracing complexity is very different to taking a symmetrical approach. His work is a trenchant critique of old, established ways in development and a strong appeal for change. It also exemplifies a much wider phenomenon of deliberately asymmetrical scholarship. When scholars critique forms of knowledge that have become dominant, they are under no obligation to devote half their attention to defending the hegemonic view.

Milestones in development studies, such as Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994), Escobar's *Encountering Development* (1995), or Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998), do not adopt a symmetrical approach; these scholars marshal their efforts and arguments to critique dominant knowledge in pursuit of positive change. Are such works themselves susceptible to criticism? Of course. Should they be dismissed en masse as extreme? The idea is absurd. There are also major academic traditions such as Critical Theory and its many derivatives that have nothing to do with taking a symmetrical view. If we look at the social sciences and humanities, or more specifically at music education research, we can find plenty of influential writing that is polemical in style. The editorial presents symmetry as a superior approach as though this were self-evidently true, yet this is far from the case when we take a broad view of scholarship.

Activist research offers a different paradigm. Commonly, the researcher's ethical or political convictions move to the foreground, and there is a clear affinity with a particular set of interests over others. From such a standpoint, the value of the research is determined by its relevance or usefulness to tackling a problem rather than by formal features such as symmetry and balance.

Among the many reasons why a writer might deliberately decide *not* to adopt a symmetrical or balanced approach is the pursuit of social justice. If we look at currents such as emancipatory social science (Erik Olin Wright, cited in Wright, 2019) and decolonial music education (Shifres and Rosabal-Coto, 2018), we find scholars who are not afraid to take a position. The subtitle of Griffiths's (1998) book on educational research for social justice is indicative: "getting off the fence." She offers a vision of action-oriented educational research that "is not necessarily research *about* education or its processes. Rather, it is research which has an *effect on* education" (67). Accordingly, educational research for social justice is not

balanced or neutral, but rather ethically and politically committed and clear about what it aims to achieve: improving the practices of education. Such an approach is commonplace among researchers in fields such as community music and music education for social justice, who, as the relevant *Oxford Handbooks* reveal, frequently get off the fence (Bartleet and Higgins, 2018; Benedict *et al.*, 2015).

Criticality is not therefore a pole or extreme to be overcome via a search for balance. It is a permanent and foundational feature of much academic activity. Educational research for social justice is ethical and political, and it may require taking sides.

The route to balance is not for everyone to adopt the same approach (symmetry), but rather to ensure the presence and interaction of divergent perspectives. This is an idea that has a long pedigree. As Ian Leslie notes, Socrates proposed:

> that truth can be reached more reliably and quickly if, instead of one person weighing up both sides of an argument, two or more parties are involved, each assigned a distinct role. Callard calls this method the 'adversarial division of epistemic labour'. One party's job is to throw up hypotheses, the other's is to knock them down. (Leslie, 2021, pp. 44-45)

Leslie goes on to describe Mercier and Sperber's notion of "division of cognitive labour":

> In the ideal discussion, each individual focuses mainly on the search for reasons for their preferred solution, while the rest of the group critically evaluates those reasons. Everyone throws up their own hypotheses, which are then tested by everyone else. That's a much more efficient process than having each individual trying to come up with and evaluate all the different arguments on both sides of the issue. (Leslie, 2021, p. 57)

A court of law provides an example. There, balance does not depend on the prosecutor and defender presenting both sides of the argument. The same goes for academic research and public debate. Healthy intellectual and public spheres are ones in which a range of positions come into contact and joust with each other. Balance comes from a diversity of competing perspectives given equivalent amounts of airing, not an insistence on adopting a single approved position.[16]

[16] It is distinctly ironic that a special issue that trumpets balance includes three authors who are close associates of the *Sistema* field – Richard Hallam, Susan Hallam, and Suzanne Burns – but no critics. This article is an attempt at rebalancing.

MOVING FORWARDS

What would push our field to a new level, as the editorial exhorts? Let me suggest four possible routes (there are of course more, but space does not allow).

QUALITY CONTROL

Our field has been guilty of a kind of deprofessionalization: widespread usage of non-academic sources such as Tunstall's book as thought they were academic studies. Everyone is entitled to their opinion, but not to having their opinion treated as though it were professional, peer-reviewed, academic research. Greater academic rigour is a priority if the field is to move forwards.

ENGAGING WITH EXISTING LITERATURE

There is a widespread tendency within the field to ignore existing SATM scholarship rather than challenging or building on it. There is also a repeated failure to take account of relevant scholarship in adjacent fields such as the sociology of music education, community music, and social justice in music education, in which many of the issues that come up with SATM have been discussed for years. There is a well-established path for arriving at new knowledge, and it leads *through*, not *around*, existing knowledge. A field cannot move to a new level before it has engaged comprehensively with the old one.

Many critiques raised by *El Sistema* scholarship have not been countered or disproven; they have simply been ignored or dismissed in much subsequent writing. What would really move the field to a new level would be researchers responding directly to each other's evidence and arguments: a proper battle of ideas. Mouffe (2013, p. 92) argues for an agonistic form of politics and public spaces "where conflicting points of view are confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation." We should therefore pause for thought before attempting to move beyond dissensus and ideological conflict; they may in fact be a healthy sign, and their diminution through pursuing a "middle way" might be a step backwards.[17]

TAKING A STAND

Over the last few years, I have been struck by the contrast between the burgeoning interest in social justice in music education, and the simultaneous unwillingness to listen and respond to injustices – which, as Allsup and Shieh (2012) argue, must be the starting point. *El Sistema* has seen the blatant politicization of music students by an autocratic government. Former student Luigi Mazzocchi described *El Sistema* as "a culture characterized by autocratic leadership, inequity, and fear" (Scripp, 2016). Eva Estrada's 1997 evaluation exposed exploitation, manipulation, domination, and humiliation of students (Baker and Frega, 2018). El Sistema's patriarchal dynamics are a matter of record (Baker 2014). According to Stainova (2021), the institution threatened to sue one of its students if she pursued her idea

[17] See also my blog post "In praise of conflict": https://geoffbakermusic.co.uk/2021/04/27/in-praise-of-conflict/.

to create an all-female orchestra. Journalists and musicians have made disturbing allegations going back 30 years. The sexual abuse scandal that had been brewing for years became an international story in 2021. And yet, the response from the practice and research fields has been somewhere between muted and total silence. Most SATM researchers and practitioners have nothing to say about any of this. A small handful of ESI programs made public statements about *El Sistema*'s sexual abuse scandal, illustrating that it was both possible and appropriate to do so; the vast majority stayed silent. I do not see how any field, let alone one that evokes social justice and social change as central goals, can move to a new level without addressing such obvious and disturbing evidence of injustice.

Ien Ang argues that:

> as cultural researchers, we need to do more than articulate how things are 'complex and contradictory'. What we should also aspire to, as part of our research endeavour, is explore what kinds of simplifications need to be developed in order to cope, deal with, or navigate the concrete complex realities we are confronted with. (Ang, 2011, p. 785)

It is important, therefore, that the pursuit of nuanced scholarship on SATM does not take the place of naming problems and supporting necessary action, such as safeguarding children and challenging *El Sistema*'s damaging cult of the authoritarian maestro. Alongside exploring complexity, we should also be willing to simplify at times – to respond to injustices by taking a stand and making unambiguous calls for change.

In 2020, Black Lives Matter had a significant impact on music education, particularly in the US. It pushed issues such as equity, decolonization, and cultural responsiveness right up the agenda. Many music educators and institutions dropped their previous caution and committed more strongly to change. How did this happen? Through one-sided activism that forced the issues onto the agenda. It may be that the debate will shift again over time as other perspectives challenge these approaches, but an activist, justice-oriented approach was necessary to raise awareness and kickstart change.

In the last few years, the international *Sistema* sector and then *El Sistema* itself have introduced safeguarding policies, and AIM has made this issue a top priority. This has not come about through centrist articles in academic journals, but rather through insistent, public critique of the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse in *El Sistema* and some subsidiaries. Scholars in positions of privilege should take responsibility for saying what others cannot – to use the protection of the "ivory tower" to voice politically incorrect critical positions and take a stand against institutional injustices, something that is usually much harder for musicians who depend on such institutions for their living.

WORKING TOGETHER

A final way of moving forwards would be to prioritize forging more connections between practice and critical research. This is an area in which the *El Sistema* field has historically been weak, but the convergences described in the first part of this article point to the possibility of a different future.

My experience in Medellín illustrated that taking a critical stance does not mean that researchers cannot work constructively with the practice field. I collaborated with the *Red* for a year; in 2022, after my book was published, they invited me back to give a keynote at their annual seminar. They were using the book to guide their future strategy. This partnership was possible because the program's leaders were committed to critical reflection and change, and it already had a social team whose remit included research. When such elements are in place, there is no reason why collaboration with critical researchers should not happen. As well as joining the scientific committee of *Démos*, I am opening up new collaborations with SATM projects in Brazil. There is no essential division. In my view, researchers and practitioners working together to identify problems and seek solutions would, more than anything else, move the field to a new level.

POSTLUDE

As I write, there is a major debate taking place in Colombia following the government's announcement in late 2022 of a plan to create a Colombian version of *El Sistema*. There has been a coordinated movement of resistance from the music sector, involving open letters to the president and other senior authorities, media articles, public events, social media campaigns, meetings with cultural officials, alternative policy proposals, the creation of consultative committees, and so on. The critical position that the editorial dismisses as "extreme" is in fact a mainstream position of the music sector in the current public debate.

El Sistema might appear a topic for balanced theorizing to some scholars in the global North, but in Colombia right now, it is a hot-button political issue, and prominent music researchers are taking sides and adopting an activist approach, knowing very well that this is the only way to influence government policy. No one is writing symmetrical academic articles; there are more pressing concerns. Many simply want to dissuade the government from adopting a model that poses a threat to the nation's cultural diversity and would set cultural policy back by decades. This means boiling down academic debates and taking a clear stance in media interviews, open letters, and opinion pieces – in Ang's terms, simplifying in order to navigate a complex reality. With the music sector restive and major policy decisions at stake, in a country with a strong tradition of politically committed scholarship (exemplified by Orlando Fals Borda and Participatory Action Research), there is little sense that sitting on the fence is the most appropriate response from researchers.

To be clear, I am not dismissing the contents of the special issue. Boeskov, Rodríguez, and Fairbanks are important up-and-coming voices who have influenced my own thinking, and their articles here are valuable contributions (because they go beyond simple evaluative questions into more complex ideological ones, and build on existing debates within the field). Nor am I against Boia and Boal-Palheiros's (2017) *Sistema* article, which I find informative and thought-provoking. What I am firmly against is the idea that centrist research is the *only* or the *best* approach, and that any other one is *a priori* wrongheaded. In

Colombia, which is today the front-line of the longstanding argument over *El Sistema*, such an idea looks distinctly out of place. There, activist, justice-oriented research is alive and well – and it is needed. Decade-old academic questions have been projected onto a major stage and become a national, headline-grabbing debate, and researchers are called upon to play an important role. The terms of that debate are not technical but rather ideological (focusing on notions such as diversity, coloniality, and decentralization). To attempt to move *Sistema* research beyond ideology is not only to pursue an illusion but also to condemn it to irrelevance.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Geoff Baker is Director of Research at the music charity Agrigento, visiting research fellow at Guildhall School of Music & Drama, and emeritus professor at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author of four books, including El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth (Oxford, 2014) and Rethinking Social Action Through Music (Open Book, 2021). He has written many articles and book chapters on music in Latin America, and made a series of documentaries about music learning in Cuba and Venezuela as part of the project 'Growing into Music.' He is a founder member of SIMM (Social Impact of Making Music) and was co-investigator on the international AHRC-funded research project 'Music for social impact: practitioners' work, contexts, and beliefs.' Full details at https://geoffbakermusic.co.uk/.