

## Youth Orchestras and *Sistema*-inspired Programs as Socio-artistic Intervention: the need to explore ambivalence, contradiction, and complexity

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The *El Sistema* program of youth orchestras founded by J. A. Abreu in Venezuela in 1975 aimed to foster the social inclusion of children and adolescents seen as vulnerable or at risk socially and educationally. It has since grown and extended itself well beyond the borders of Venezuela to become a well-known project internationally and globally. Although much published research on the outcomes of youth orchestral programs has focused on *El Sistema*, there are other *Youth Orchestra* projects worldwide worth investigating that are autonomous, unaffiliated, or even totally unrelated to *El Sistema* from a formal point of view, albeit driven by the same general intention: fostering positive changes in the lives of participants through learning and making music.

Widespread social, artistic, and media recognition of *Sistema* as an astonishing demonstration of the “transformative power of music” (Tunstall, 2012) has praised the program for its positive social impacts upon its young participants by fostering life changes, inclusion, and social mobility. Soon afterwards this consensual view would be challenged and criticized as being idealistic and emotionally driven: other research claims that these positive ‘effects’ and social outcomes are overstated and that there is a negative side related to autocracy and exclusion (Baker, 2014). Much more literature has been produced of course, but these two publications are taken here as examples of extreme positions and as a springboard to stimulate new perspectives.

The controversy has been set and positions tended to polarize between *proponents* and *detractors* of these socio-artistic and educational projects. For the social and artistic researcher, this leads to the danger of pursuing an 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.

*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, instead of overemphasizing one of them and neglecting the other. Put simply, while initially some research and discourses have lauded *El Sistema* for its positive social impacts, others have raised a critical voice about its limitations and failings. Such dualism has become deeply influential, notwithstanding the subsequent production of more research on this topic over the last years.

This volume of *Music and Arts in Action* 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. *Empowering or boring? Discipline and authority in a Portuguese Sistema-inspired orchestra rehearsal* (Boia and Boal-Palheiros, 2017) is an explicit manifesto to produce research on this topic in a nuanced way and equally open to evidence concerning aspects that may be considered either positive or negative – or ambivalent – in this type of programs. That study is related to a wider research on *Orquestra Geração*, a Portuguese Sistema-inspired program (Mota e Lopes, 2017), which has the merit of avoiding the pitfalls of both idealistic and detractive perspectives.

This manifesto wishes to contribute to the development of perspectives that bring out the complexity implicated in these socio-artistic projects:

- First, by developing a symmetrical perspective in the sense that it remains *equally open* to potentially positive and negative aspects of these programs.
- Second, by exploring the shades and nuances located in-between the two extremes.
- Third, by analysing and reflecting critically on the contradictions, paradoxes, and ambivalences of these projects, it intends to examine how various aspects may be, eventually, positive and negative at the same time and in different ways, depending on who is involved and on various socio-cultural variables, or even according to the perspective taken.

In this Thematic Issue dedicated to youth orchestra projects for social inclusion, *Music and Arts in Action* challenges both readers and contributors to develop an in-depth approach to *El Sistema*, *Sistema*-inspired, or smaller musical ensembles projects. This is necessary to better understand them, as well as to conceive and (re)design such programs.

Finally, this MAiA issue intends to contribute to give visibility and gain knowledge about a variety of projects – some of them moving away from the original *Sistema* aims and scope – taking place in different parts of the world.

This volume presents the following research articles:

- Stephen Fairbanks, Israel Lizarraga, Josué Corona – *The Simultaneity of Cultural Capital and Symbolic Violence in Youth Orchestras: A Tale of Two Students*
- Richard Hallam – *A Comparison of Teachers' Values and Perceptions in Sistema-inspired Programmes*
- Susan Hallam and Susanne Burns – *Supporting musical progression for children from very disadvantaged communities participating in the English 'In Harmony' program*
- Andrea Rodríguez-Sánchez and Alberto Cabedo-Mas – *A Musical-Psychosocial Model for attending to Victims of the Armed Conflict in Colombia: Contributions and challenges*
- Kim Boeskov – *Birds from Palestine: Performing national belonging in a*

*Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon*

The first three of these studies focus on projects closer to the original aims of Sistema and Sistema-inspired programs, of promoting social inclusion for socially and educationally disadvantaged children through music.

S. Fairbanks, I. Lizarraga and J. Corona address participants' lived experiences in a youth orchestra project in the USA through a narrative approach, using a Bourdieusian perspective to reveal the ambivalences and contradictions that arise from tensions between cultural capital and symbolic violence. For educators it is important to acknowledge the complexity of students experiences and the ways they find to mediate those tensions.

In turn, R. Hallam focuses on the teachers involved in these programs, by comparing the values, beliefs and perceptions of teachers across 34 Sistema-inspired programs of various countries and continents. A relevant matter since it has an impact on the effectiveness of programs and the experiences of participating children.

S. Hallam and S. Burns analyze the challenges faced by the children participating in *In Harmony* programs in the UK in continuing with their musical activities when it was no longer compulsory to continue attending the program. The *what next?* is also worth considering when analysing the implications of these programs.

The two following articles address programs that somehow move away from the original Sistema field of action, and use music as a means to help solving other problems.

A. Rodríguez-Sánchez and A. Cabedo-Mas discuss a musical-psychosocial model for attending to victims of the armed conflict in Colombia, in a program implemented by the Batuta National Foundation, and explore possible tensions for social and music professionals involved in the project, while identifying its challenges.

To conclude, K. Boeskov shows how national identities and consciousness are constituted through music in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. There is ambivalence and contradiction in the process, since the resulting social inclusion and empowerment depend on the participants' subjection to socially and institutionally valid notions of Palestinian identity.

## REFERENCES

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