

Public school orchestra programs and the El Sistema movement:
Exploring similarities, differences, and potential redundancies

Stephen Fairbanks, The Pennsylvania State University

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the El Sistema movement has burst onto the international music education stage with bold promises of social mobility out of poverty for children participating in its intense, orchestra-based music programs. From 2007 onwards, El Sistema inspired programs have proliferated across the United States, with the hope that these American programs will replicate the successes of El Sistema in Venezuela. After generating much public enthusiasm and mobilizing tremendous financial resources, El Sistema inspired programs now find themselves running parallel to existing school music programs.

The purpose of this study is to explore the similarities, differences, and potential redundancies of these closely-related, but parallel approaches to music education, namely El Sistema inspired programs and public school orchestra programs. Presented as a synthesis of reflective narrative inquiry, historical research, a critical literature review, the author invites readers from a music education background to learn about the highly specialized world of El Sistema inspired programs, providing a framework by which to make comparisons between public school orchestra programs and El Sistema inspired programs. Ultimately, the author suggests that the differences between the two approaches are less pronounced than the prevailing rhetoric might suggest. The author also proposes that the El Sistema movement could provide a way in which researchers and practitioners could develop a better understanding of the inherent sociocultural enculturation which is present in music education.

The paper commences with a narrative account of the author's personal experience of working simultaneously as a high school orchestra director and as the founding director of an El Sistema inspired program. He shows how his unique positioning in both 'worlds' has prepared him to authentically pursue research within either paradigm. He ultimately suggests that the leaders and practitioners of the El Sistema movement could benefit by associating themselves more closely with the theoretically grounded and researched field of music education, but also acknowledges that generally, music educators have yet to develop the contagious enthusiasm and community support which is so characteristic of the El Sistema movement. The paper includes a historical discussion of how the founders of the Venezuelan El Sistema looked to American music education for a model in the mid-1970s. It then briefly surveys the events that brought worldwide attention to El Sistema in 2007, namely the rise of celebrated conductor Gustavo Dudamel, the Proms debut of the Simon Bolivar Orchestra, and the \$150 million investment of the Inter-American Development Bank into the El Sistema orchestras. It then traces the rapid founding and growth of El Sistema inspired programs in the United States, which now exceed 95 in number. The study then surveys the research literature which discusses the El Sistema movement. The author traces the way in which the literature has recently shifted from advocacy to critical questioning as some of the previously made claims have come under greater scrutiny.

The paper draws some cautious conclusions, asserting that the most substantial difference between public school orchestra programs and El Sistema inspired programs is the way in which El Sistema inspired programs have instilled a nearly unprecedented level of enthusiasm among its proponents. Research recommendations include exploring the way in which El Sistema inspired programs position themselves in respect to public school orchestra programs as well as (re)situating subsequent research into the El Sistema movement within the broader field of music education.

Contact: stephentomasfairbanks@gmail.com