

## ***A new musical educational model: The Orchestra System*** ***Un nuevo modelo educativo musical: El Sistema de Orquestas***

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### **ABSTRACT**

The primary objective of this essay is to examine the new educational model in music represented by the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras and Choirs of Venezuela, founded in 1975 by Dr. José Antonio Abreu. This work is situated within the research line of the Magaly Feo de Correa Linguistic Research Unit, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Carabobo, specifically in the area of Theoretical and Transdisciplinary Studies of Language; under the theme of Discourse Analysis; within the framework of Academic Texts, and in collaboration with the Center for Research and Documentation of El Sistema (CIDES). Based on documentary research, the study reviewed literature dedicated to the study of music from various perspectives: pedagogical, academic, compositional, and historical. It is concluded that both collective and individual practice of music constitute the recursive pedagogical principle and fundamental pillar in the process of consolidating musical, human, social, familiar, and enlightening competencies. These converge at the central point known as the Núcleo, as a structural entity, which is fostered by musician-teachers across the twelve academic programs of El Sistema.

#### **Keywords:**

El Sistema; Music education model; Core; Academic programs

### **RESUMEN**

El presente ensayo tiene como objetivo primordial aproximarse al nuevo modelo educativo musical que representa El Sistema Nacional de Orquestas y Coros Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela, fundado el año 1975 por el Dr. José Antonio Abreu. Se inserta en la línea de investigación de la Unidad de Investigación Lingüística Magaly Feo de Correa de la Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación de la Universidad de Carabobo, en su línea Estudios teóricos y transdisciplinarios de la lengua; temática Análisis del discurso; en la sistemática El texto académico y del Centro de Investigación y Documentación de El Sistema (CIDES). Sobre la base de una investigación documental se revisó una literatura dedicada al estudio de la música en diferentes aspectos: pedagógicos, académicos, compositivos e históricos. Se concluye que la práctica colectiva e individual de la música es el principio pedagógico recursivo y pilar fundamental en el proceso de la consolidación de competencias musicales, humanas, sociales, familiares e iluminadoras que confluyen en el punto neurálgico llamado Núcleo, como estructura y que es fomentado por los profesores-músicos en los doce programas académicos de El Sistema.

#### **Palabras clave:**

El Sistema; Modelo educativo musical; Núcleo; Programas académicos

## INTRODUCTION

The Orchestra System is considered a social program of Venezuelan origin that proposes a pedagogical model based on the orchestra and the collective practice of music. This model was founded in 1975 in Caracas, Venezuela, by José Antonio Abreu. The philosophy of El Sistema is based on a clear artistic and interpretive foundation; it conceives music as a language and considers its purpose in society to be the establishment and reinforcement of the moral values of identity, belonging, and solidarity through encounter and communication among human beings. Concerning the above mentioned, it is clear that El Sistema was born as a socio-musical program in a context of high social vulnerability and cultural capital, in which its deployment is intentional through an expanded organizational structure that, in any case, satisfies a teleological rather than a formal order. (Alarcón, 2021)

From the second decade of the 20th century, and after the undeniable decline experienced by the arts as a consequence of the “caudillismo” that was established at the turn of the century, the main concern of the musicians who inherited the colonial tradition of the *School From Chacao*, and from the refined republican atmosphere that prevailed throughout the Guzmán era, is the compilation and dissemination of the Venezuelan academic and folkloric musical repertoire. (Calcaño, 2001)

One of the primary precursors of Venezuelan academic music was the Chacao School, in its first and second generations, which gave rise to the School of Singing and Declamation (today known as José Ángel Lamas), where maestro Vicente Emilio Sojo oriented his teaching toward composition, which he promoted as a thematic reference point for national composition. From 1923 to 1964, nine generations of composers established themselves as points of reference for madrigal composition on the American continent. This is clearly explained in the book *La Escuela de Santa Capilla* (The School of Santa Capilla) of the Collection of Choral Music by Latin American Authors (2005):

Among his activities, one of the most significant for the Venezuelan musical movement

was his dedication to teaching composition. An extraordinary generation of songwriters was formed around him. From the early years of the 20th century, Sojo instilled in his students the ideals of this movement, which also flourished in literary and visual arts circles. He succeeded in awakening in future creators an interest in and love for national values, as well as encouraging the use of various elements of popular and folk music to serve as a basis for new nationalist creations. (p. 7)

In this particular, Astor (1989) also tells us:

Sojo is, therefore, a revolutionary. He understands that the new orchestra and choir are meaningless unless accompanied by an efficient musical education institute. And within this institute, the composition department occupies a prominent place. Thus, both the orchestra and the choir will have meaning to the extent that they perform the music of new Venezuelan musicians. (p. 25)

From the eighth class of the Sojo Composition Chair, José Antonio Abreu graduated in 1964 (Ramón y Rivera, 1988). For nine years; in the mind, in the heart, in the soul, the idea began to take shape to bring to every corner of the country and to all Venezuelan children, without distinction of race, color, social status, sex or social discrimination, the message and experience that music, in accordance with the thinking of its founder, is the way that allows to experience the beauty of being in all its dimensions, and to transform the collective experience into the sublime spiritual advancement of the human being. (Sánchez, 2024)

In this reflective writing exercise, we aim to encompass and approach conceptual elements of the pedagogical proposal that El Sistema upholds and that is replicated in more than seventy countries.

## Development

Since ancient Greece, the formal study of music was an activity of supreme importance for the citizen to be modeled. It was considered a path to moral perfection. Music was omnipresent in Greek life. It occupied a prominent place in field work, in the march to battle, in gods worship, at weddings and duels, at banquets, and in school (Redondo and Pérez, 2021). For them, it was the

greatest gift from the gods, so much so that Orpheus, the god of this art, was able to go to the underworld to find his beloved and conquer a beast with his lyre.

Music never ceased to have intellectual prestige and, based on its role in *paideia*, was placed alongside the study of astronomy, arithmetic, and geometry (what would later be known as the Quadrivium). The poet of this period not only recited but also sang his rhapsodies to the sound of a lyre. The Muses are the patrons of the arts and sciences; the invocation acquires meaning if one takes into account that myths were transmitted by poets who set their texts to music (in epic poetry, lyric poetry, and drama) (Redondo and Pérez, 2021).

For more than fifteen centuries, poetry and music were intertwined; one need only recall the French troubadours. This poetry deals with love as a stimulus for intellectual, moral, and social improvement related to the subject of courtly love. (Alberni, 2021)

With the arrival of the Renaissance, the choirmaster became the representative figure. He was the focal point of all activities related to music and those directly involved with it, as he was responsible for composing the annual works for liturgical celebrations. With this arrival, the time came to make way for the formal study of music (Báez, 2019).

For a musician to be able to play or sing in the most important theaters in their city, they would have to complete at least ten years of formal studies, not including specializations in, for example, chamber music, style, or repertoire.

In Venezuela, the 19th century left the Chacao School, its first and second generations, with the best European canon. Later, a man from Guatire was born who would write Venezuelan musical history on musical staff. I'm referring to Vicente Emilio Sojo, director of one of the country's most important music schools: the José Ángel Lamas School, better known as the Santa Capilla School.

Here, in this space, on Urdaneta Avenue, in the heart of Caracas, he would nurture a generation of musicians, and especially musicians, spanning nine generations. In 1930, he founded the Orfeón Lamas and the Venezuela Symphony Orchestra. The two

great musical laboratories of the era.

Music education has traditionally been linked to the spaces of a conservatory of music school, characterized by elites of the fine arts. Despite some exceptions, its main captive audience, as students, was people with a high cultural level.

However, in recent years, the El Sistema de Orquestas educational model has gained significant notoriety and prestige, and more and more countries have shown interest in importing and replicating this model. This phenomenon rests on three main dimensions. First, the model artistic effectiveness, due to the trained professionals' high quality. Second, the social dimension, which is the result of inclusive musical training programs that generate greater solidarity and build community social ties. Finally, and third, the educational dimension. Several research studies agree that certain organizational and methodological characteristics used in El Sistema have proven to be key elements to its educational impact. (Falco, 2024)

From this point on, it is important to define the characteristic features of the musical educational model that El Sistema represents through its great academic pillar called: the collective practice of music.

Regarding this, Ascanio (2023) quotes the master Abreu:

...first, the linear, bookish methodology of instrumental teaching must be replaced by a course-workshop system that is embedded in ongoing orchestral practice; and second, I would say, the young musician must be incorporated into a very intense relational dynamic from their first steps in the arts. In this sense, we are talking about changing the much more individual student-teacher-classroom dynamic to a broader social dynamic that involves the young person's daily confrontation with the orchestra, the choir, the conductor, the audience, the community, the state, and the country. (p. 37)

Thus, this incorporation of the musician-in-training produces significant effects that are reinforced in conjunction with the voices and instruments of their peers, from the very first class. This practice, which becomes their daily work, forges the character of a future musician, sensitive

to the arts in all their forms.

The System of Youth and Children's Orchestras and Choirs of Venezuela, the Simón Bolívar Musical Foundation, is affiliated with the Ministry of People's Power of the Office of the Presidency and Monitoring of Government Management of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. It offers twelve academic programs: orchestral, choral, penitentiary, lute, Alma llanera, new members, Simón Bolívar, hospital care, special education, academic training, musical initiation, and popular music and other genres. These programs are responsible for the musical and artistic development tailored to the interests of those who join.

Each one is developed in appropriate spaces to ensure its proper functioning. The age group ranges from prenatal to senior citizens. Music is offered in all its forms: academic, popular, folk, symphonic, and choral, but with a common goal: the collective practice of music.

### **Pedagogical and philosophical principles**

Collective-centered education is one of the most relevant pedagogical principles of El Sistema. Teachers must believe in education as a collective phenomenon, in the need for solidarity and teamwork, and in the fact that the self is built within a community. In El Sistema, physical and temporal space, as well as emotional and intellectual space, is shared. The musical physical spaces that foster learning relationships are not only the core, the studio, the auditorium, and the concert hall, but also the neighborhood, since El Sistema is born from communities. (Baraona et al., 2020)

An enlightening education, as the founder, Maestro Abreu, rightly expresses, permeates not only the instrument's player, but also the entire family, the neighborhood, and the community. Music is the central axis; it is a gust that spreads everywhere an education that is not only musical, but also civic, with values, with ethical elements of the human being, becoming ever more human. Maestro Abreu expresses: "An orchestra is a caring community. The child learns from the beginning that their instrument, their sound, their participation are fundamental for the orchestra to be in tune. Everyone participates in an indissoluble

musical whole." (Simón Bolívar Program, 2024)

The collective practice of music is a learning process or life experience in which a group of complementary members participate. Collective relationships enable individual reflection to emerge from the contrast and feedback of other perspectives. This is what the Suzuki method develops, which aims to ensure that everyone possesses the skill and can develop it in a favorable context. Maestro Abreu takes this oriental flavor and tropicalizes it, promoting not only the music of European musicians, but also following the legacy of his own teacher, a national music of indigenous authors and composers.

Let's highlight some of the characteristics of the Suzuki method:

*Exposure to musical environments.* Children are exposed to environments that offer a diverse array of sounds. When this occurs, students are able to internalize music and understand it from an external perspective. The more frequent this activity is, the better the results will be for learning any instrument.

*The role of parents.* One of the most important foundations of talent education is the work parents do to improve their children's learning. Based on this, it is recommended that parents attend classes with their children. This way, they will learn the appropriate methodology to apply at home during their free time.

*Early training.* The earlier children practice music, the more opportunities there are to take advantage of their cognitive abilities. It's been proven that motor skills and muscle memory are best developed in the early stages of development. This factor will determine the time it takes to learn the instrument and their skill level (International University of Valencia, 2022).

Another pedagogical principle, highly relevant to El Sistema, is pedagogical individualization within **El Sistema Schools**; "it involves the academic and formative development of instrumental and choral technical-musical improvement of the member from the moment they enter the core, through the intermediate level implemented in academic centers and conservatories until reaching the professional level." (El Sistema, 2018)



This section focuses on two pedagogical axes: the collective and the individual. Each has its own characteristics. A person, who begins through the collective practice of music, playing or singing, builds a collective sound that allows them to focus on their individual sound. This is reinforced by teachers in the respective instrument schools. What is the impact of this novice musician? Now, their individual sound strengthens the collective within the musical group, and it is also a pillar in the initiation process of others. In this sense, the System's pedagogical principle is recursive.

All of this is implemented in the core: a central and essential organizational structure of El Sistema, which purpose is to systematize the collective practice of music as a formative, humanistic, and inclusive social organizational model, where the Programs and Schools are developed. (El Sistema, 2018)

### **Implementation of the Orchestra System in different contexts**

The penetration achieved by the Orchestra System is the result of internal coherence, which can be aligned with the success of its sound results, again complemented by the aesthetics of the music from other perspectives. Accepting the challenge demanded by the search for artistic depth inevitably entails developing a pedagogy conceived as a social art, capable of expanding the usual boundaries to become a symbolic reference for students, who feel they are no longer being offered easy, superfluous, or fallacious solutions, but rather invitations to become an integral part, valid for the achievement of new and real cultural goals.

The Orchestra System places its music as the primary mechanism of integration. The diversity of origins, the desire to surpass the repertoires themselves, the embodied gestures of specific work, the systematized offerings of the daily festival, and the possibilities of historical formations have all succeeded in suppressing, within the students' stands and armor, the small and self-interested divisions between peoples and social classes, inherent to their level of cultural development. The circumstances that gave rise to it were theater: the projection of the singing voice, gesture, and word above practical action;

academies and academicisms above fluid, popular ties. The Orchestra System differentiates its own gesture from a common praxis, from pure technique, known and used by the older educated classes. He masters the most rigorous information, places it on the lecterns, and interprets it with gestures, ensuring that the information possessed by a few can become desired, understood, and accepted within their cultural climate and within the fabric of their shared affectivity (López, 2022).

### **Impact and benefits of the Orchestra System**

There is a consensus in the literature regarding the different areas in which music education contributes to child development, which go beyond the professional training of the musician. Some of this knowledge was indicated above. We would therefore like, in this text, to highlight two areas of impact of the Orchestra System that, to date, have not been widely studied: values formation and education for coexistence. However, we must note that these "benefits" do not alone justify the pedagogical proposal of an Orchestra System; rather, it is based on the comprehensive musical development of children (Aragón, 2024).

The contribution to the areas of values and coexistence actually focuses on another benefit of music education: students' active participation. The literature is unanimous in considering that, thanks to children's active participation in contrast to a passive concert, a richer and more creative learning is fostered. If, in addition, this participation occurs in a group, in addition to other benefits, attitudes of respect and coexistence, dynamics of support and collaboration, work guidelines are fostered, and all kinds of social skills inherent to group physical and artistic practice are learned. It is precisely in collective practice that the Orchestra System can offer an exemplary model (Rodríguez-Castro, 2024).

### **Social and community development**

Educating with an understanding of people's contexts involves taking into account the cultural aspects, needs, interests, and particularities of each social group. The setting where it has proven effective has very special characteristics, ranging from the immediate environment, to the population structure, to the lifestyle they lead. Because it is located in marginalized neighborhoods of cities,

one of the serious problems it faces is unemployment. Most of this population is engaged in rented labor or runs small businesses or workshops, either on a freelance basis or as part of forced labor.

They work actively to offer the inhabitants of these neighborhoods the most important advantages of social progress: justice, individual and community hygiene, domestic economy, purity of morals, practical exercise of solidarity, and the intellectual and moral well-being of individuals and families, a source of domestic peace and collective strength. Of all these institutions, one that stands out is that it carries out beneficial work among the youth of the neighborhood, instilling intellectual curiosity and encouraging their efforts toward greater knowledge and the proper use of their free time.

### **Individual and academic development**

As noted, a child's individual development is an end in itself; it is also a means to achieving broader educational goals. That is, individual development contributes to the child's human and social development. This implies the need to incorporate a hierarchy of human and social values into the perspective of individual development. It also indicates that individual development, in and of itself, while allowing for a position in the internal and external world, does not provide the individual with the mechanisms, agencies, and regulations necessary to achieve attachment and love for the creative act.

### **Innovations and adaptations of the original model**

Typically, in the El Sistema educational model, the various introductory music classes are taught in different classrooms (Simón Bolívar program), in the same building as the orchestra (Introductory Program, Orchestral, Choral, Alma Llanera, Special) held at the Núcleo, the nerve center of enlightening and transformative education. This way, children can be transported for the first time; they feel safe and know in advance where all their classes will be.

Subsequently, attendance at the orchestra is called a rehearsal-workshop and is considered a separate class, for which there are associated weekly activities. In fact, it is the duration of the

rehearsal-workshop, a section carefully planned to ensure the children's daily attendance limits are not exceeded. Those in charge of this process are called **FIAM** (Comprehensive Academic Musical Trainer), i.e., the teacher-musicians.

### **The Orchestra System as a tool for social inclusion**

El Sistema is one of the most important musical education programs administered by a national authority. Developed more than fifty years ago, it offers children, youth, and adults the opportunity to develop their musical skills and participate in numerous orchestras and choirs located throughout the country. Half of the participants come from the poorest and least privileged classes of society, from marginalized areas on the outskirts of large cities, located in the barrios and other impoverished sectors of Venezuela's main cities. In this situation, the program is, more than anything, an effort to socially reconstruct a society that, far from developing its cultural capital, has lived culturally immersed in a subculture that combines the miseries of a consumer society with a growing population excluded from access to what the program calls "the Arts." The program's mission is to enable Venezuelan children and young people to cultivate a space within the arts in general through high-quality musical training enrolled in higher musical institutions, thus preventing them from dropping out towards more profitable ways of generating monetary income. This substantially expanded the number of orchestras that could barely maintain what was considered their level, but which eventually allowed contact with the practice of listening to music performed in a solid, coordinated, and artistic way that pleased Western society (Perez Cavero & Sanchez Vargas, 2023).

To see these orchestras and choirs was to observe a living example of youth escaping into a professional reality that, at best, would be a life between mediocrity and limited talent, with no prospects for the future, or dedicating one of the five and a half days of the working week to doing, with the corresponding financial compensation, one of the two things that provide true motivation and satisfaction for their tolerance: practicing their activity or the great feeling that high-level artistic

work provides when it is admirably appreciated.

### **The role of teachers and conductors in the Orchestra System**

The FIAMs (teacher-musicians) are a key link in the System. Sound production depends on them. They must be prepared for their roles. The FIAM plays, breathes with the child, sets the pulse, demands proper posture, etc. But they do not control, in the educational sense of the word: the child acquires their knowledge of music-fancy while some instrumentalists teach them the exercises, so that the child, in their persistent search for the group, performs, out of pure necessity and determination, a work of creative and voluntary improvisation. They then perfect themselves naturally. Hence the importance for instructors of cultivating the ideal that the coincidence between the pleasures produced by the sensation of beauty and by the participation itself in artistic creation is also a natural and stimulating process for the child.

The FIAM should work with simple groupings, and then let the group assemble independently, so that the child feels responsible for reaching the moment of performance, and the directors are merely a support, an invisible guide. The FIAM must realize that children do not perceive teachers as role models, since they admire them from other perspectives: as close people, from whom they recommend themselves, with whom they live, motivated by their emotional and personal authority (Quezadas et al., 2023).

If the nucleus is the neuralgic point, the FIAMs are responsible, like dendrites, for impulses not only musical but also emotional and familiar, for creating human beings, as Maturana puts it. They introduce neural connections into the being that approaches music, regardless of age, to illuminate their soul, but also the space where they reside.

### **The academic structure of El Sistema**

The pedagogical distribution of El Sistema has a structure supported by three main pillars: The *Strategic Level*, linked to the Executive Directorate, the Academic Council, and the Musical Directorate; The *Tactical Level*, made up of the Sectoral Directorate of Academic Training; and the *Operational Level*, served by the National Center for Social Action through Music, the

Directorate of Orchestral and Choral Management, the Directorate of Nuclei, the State Management, the Academic and Musical Directorate, El Sistema Programs, and El Sistema Schools. Through these important pillars and their components, strategic planning, systematic support, action plans, project execution, and results reporting are developed (El Sistema, 2018).

El Sistema's academic program consists of pedagogical spaces designed to maintain a linear educational sequence, with progressive steps that allow for the academic, professional, and artistic growth of the institution's members. The educational path has two important aspects: the physical structures contained in the Academic Nuclei and Centers, where their members are served through the Schools and Programs; and the programmatic content embedded in the Conservatories and the University, where the Schools and Professional and Regional Groups are developed (El Sistema, 2018).

El Sistema is the emotional, musical, familiar, and artistic vessel that encompasses the legacy of two centuries. From the first class of students at the Chacao School, through the Santa Capilla, to the Youth Orchestra.

El Sistema has promoted great changes both nationally and internationally. The educational model has expanded and, in fifty years, has yielded tremendous results. It began with a trial run by nine young musicians and today boasts more than one million members, emulated in more than seventy countries. Each philosophical and pedagogical principle is justified by the following thought of José Antonio Abreu: "A single child justifies all the effort in the world."

### **CONCLUSIONS**

On countless occasions, the enormous power of music is highlighted from areas outside of music professionals and music education. The ideas that have been developed have shown that it is important not to underestimate the power of music as a tool for educating people, since from this premise, other areas can be addressed; from the fact that the instrument is an exceptional tool for developing motor skills, to the idea of the educational value of studying an artistic discipline itself, which may reside in the phenomenon known

in art pedagogy as the "project of meaning." We understand a project of meaning as each of the interaction projects (understanding interaction projects as procedural, communicative behavior related to personal interests and expectations) that shape a specific aspect of a person and their environment.

An aspect of the standard person that the subject manages to constitute becomes an aspect of his developed self: a value, an ability, etc. The meaning tends to be confirmed by the subject himself and by the community in which he operates.

Therefore, music represents a good opportunity to present a methodology that excels at stimulating student engagement, improving self-esteem, emphasizing interaction and learning through powerful positive reinforcement, and where presenting challenges to students serves as a stimulus to internalize and advance knowledge, rather than a threat to increase anxiety. The key elements of the method to achieve these goals would be the use of student tutors, grouping, direct listening, and active assessment.

The National System of Youth Orchestras and Choirs of Venezuela is a fundamental pillar currently at the forefront of musical education. Countless countries emulate this dream of that great Trujillo native, who, in an initial rehearsal with nine students and fifty music stands, said to himself: "I have to multiply this." And so it was. Today, in the year 2025, fifty years after that hope, there are more than a million people directly benefiting from it, and more than seventy countries are multiplying Maestro Abreu's enlightening education: Play, sing, and fight!

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