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Sistema Scotland: A Critical Inquiry into the  
Implementation of the El Sistema Model in Raploch

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## **Abstract**

In the mid-1970s a group of young Venezuelan musicians, led by the economist, politician and musician José Antonio Abreu, started a youth symphony orchestra that became the social initiative broadly known nowadays as El Sistema. By offering free classical music education to deprived communities, the initiative aimed at rescuing millions of Venezuelans from poverty. Since then, El Sistema has not only grown into a solid institution in its home country but has continued to expand to other parts of the globe.

In 2008, the Venezuelan program was launched in Raploch, a community in Central Scotland with a long history of deprivation. Named Big Noise and under the supervision of the charity Sistema Scotland, the initiative seeks to positively change the life of the residents of Raploch.

This work offers a critique of the El Sistema movement and its implementation in the community of Raploch by analyzing contemporary subjectivities emerged from the current cultural dynamic in the institutional discourse of both initiatives.

**Keywords:** El Sistema, Sistema Scotland, social inclusion, discipline, symphony orchestra

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## Introduction

In the mid-1970s, a social initiative established in Venezuela by a group of young classical musicians led by the economist, politician and musician José Antonio Abreu ventured into the deprived *barrios* of Venezuela aiming to fight the devastating consequences of social exclusion. The idea sought to rescue millions of impoverished Venezuelans by providing free music education to poor communities.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its focus on Western classical tradition, the program's pedagogical proposal differed from the model usually adopted by most music conservatories. It centered on ensemble practice as a means for children and adolescents to achieve their full potential and acquire '[...] values that favor their growth and have a positive impact on their lives in society' (FundamMusical Bolívar 2012d). In the proposal, the symphony orchestra, having matured as an artistic institution around the mid-nineteenth century, assumes a central role in the program. Abreu sees it as a microcosm of social harmony; a space wherein fundamental values for individual and social life are nurtured. By being involved in orchestral practice, participants incorporate these values and retransmit them into their social environment, paving their way out of poverty.

Generally known as El Sistema, the Venezuelan program has endured much national political turmoil in the past thirty years or so and has become a solid institution that has assisted more than two million young Venezuelans. Internationally acclaimed as an unquestionable success by the most renowned world institutions, the El Sistema movement has not only grown in its home country but has recently reached out to other deprived communities around the globe. More than twenty-five nations, from 'developing' economies to rich ones, have implemented the initiative in troubled local regions. A large number of celebrities from the classical music industry have also endorsed the idea and many have become regular contributors.

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<sup>1</sup> Although El Sistema had initially focused on the inclusion of impoverished communities, the program has now broadened its scope and assists other excluded social groups, which will be discussed later in this debate.

In 2008, a small community in Central Scotland became El Sistema's first port in Europe. The neighborhood of Raploch in the affluent city of Stirling has been known for its long history of deprivation and social exclusion. With staggering low rates of human development, Raploch was chosen to host the United Kingdom's first El Sistema-modeled program. Named as Big Noise and monitored by the charity Sistema Scotland, the initiative aims at helping to change the community's harsh reality by creating a local youth orchestra and providing free classical music education. However, as an El Sistema-mirrored initiative, the program has adopted its Venezuelan counterpart's discourse, which raises some serious concerns over its method as well as its objective.

This work offers a critical analysis of the Venezuelan initiative and its implementation in the community of Raploch. In the first chapter, a brief history of El Sistema starts the debate, followed by an account of its structure and expansion, a description of its pedagogical proposal and the central role played by the symphony orchestra, closing with a critical review of the rationality behind the program's institutional discourse.

The second chapter introduces the reader to the harsh reality of the Raploch community, stigmatized by a long history of deprivation and social exclusion.

The introduction of the Venezuelan initiative in Scotland – from the idealization of Sistema Scotland to the implementation of Big Noise in Raploch – is discussed in the third chapter. An overview of the structure and pedagogy of Big Noise follows, together with comparisons between the Scottish program's discourse and its Venezuelan counterpart's. Next, the goals of the Scottish 'Sistema' are pointed out with some critical insights. The debate continues by approaching the implementation of Big Noise in Raploch and discussing the rationality behind the program's discourse.

The fourth chapter offers a critical analysis of past constructs around the orchestra renegotiated as contemporary subjectivities in El Sistema's rhetoric. In the conclusion, positive aspects of El Sistema and a critique of its ideological discourse in consonance with contemporary subjectivities are discussed. Possible

positive outcomes of Big Noise in Raploch are also approached together with a critique of its discourse.

In summary, this research critically addresses El Sistema's institutional discourse – a discourse in which social inclusion is mismatched with overall ideals of discipline and productivity, much in accordance with the contemporary cultural dynamic. The incorporation of such ideals is suggested as being a pass to social inclusion. Participation in social life seems to be conditioned by the individual's contribution to a rationality put forward by the neoliberal agenda. El Sistema, then, appears to seek to socially discipline excluded communities to function according to the same rationality that, by pushing for the current 'global' order, has driven many around the world into severe social and economic deprivation.

Throughout this work, the Venezuelan initiative is referred to as both El Sistema, as it is commonly known, and FundaMusical, an acronym for Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar. FundaMusical was formerly called Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela (FESNOJIV); a name many still use in reference to the program.

It is important to state that this research was initially planned to be a detailed empirical study. However, the request to attend Big Noise sessions and interview participants, family members and organizers was declined by Sistema Scotland, making a closer analysis of the program's implementation in Raploch difficult. According to its communications office, the community had already been subjected to much questioning and surveying, which raised concerns about the possibility of research fatigue. Facing such limitation, this work has instead examined the rationality that lies behind both El Sistema's pedagogical proposal and its implementation in Raploch.

This thesis was primarily based on current literature about the program as well as newspapers articles and scientific publications. The books about El Sistema found during the course of this investigation were written to promote the Venezuelan program, which explains their biased content. The several newspaper articles used in this research also lacked a critical approach to the

initiative. The low number of critical works about El Sistema found during this investigation seems to confirm the suspicion of an overall, uncritical perception of the Venezuelan program. This debate, thus, aims to expose such a perception by dissecting the general discourse about El Sistema.

## I. El Sistema

### A Brief History of the Venezuelan Social Initiative

In the mid-1970s José Antonio Abreu, a Venezuelan politician, economist specialized in petroleum and passionate music practitioner, had the idea to create a youth symphony orchestra in response to the lack of opportunities for young Venezuelan classical musicians to perform. From its inaugural rehearsal with eleven participants in a garage in the city of Caracas, the group rapidly grew with the addition of other young musicians from different parts of the country. The initiative readily evolved into the first National Symphony Youth Orchestra of Venezuela, which less than one year after its creation was acclaimed at the Festival of Youth Orchestras in Aberdeen, Scotland.

Abreu, however, had a much more ambitious goal than simply creating a symphonic ensemble for young musicians; he envisioned the orchestra as an instrument for social transformation. He believed that the experience of orchestral performance nurtured a sense of cooperation, solidarity and collectivity among poor communities, helping them to overcome their deteriorated condition. In the words of Abreu (in Majno 2012, p.62) himself, ‘I do not just want to train better musicians—I want to form better *people*.’ This idea, thus, took the orchestra from the limits of the bourgeois theatre to the complex reality of Venezuela’s socially deprived *barrios*.

The international recognition gained by the National Symphony Youth Orchestra of Venezuela during the Aberdeen festival, plus the local reputation acquired in the group’s performances in Caracas, together with Abreu’s idealism, eloquence and political influence, made the Venezuelan government embrace the initiative. The social character of Abreu’s idea fell outside the scope of an artistic institution; the role played by the orchestra went well beyond the musical functions expected from a regular symphonic ensemble. In order to avoid the common elitist policies of cultural government institutions, Abreu’s program was thus placed under the Ministry of Youth at the time, keeping consistent with his vision of the symphony orchestra as an instrument to change society.

In 1979, the Foundation for the National Youth Symphony was established by the Venezuelan State with the purpose of promoting high quality music education and facilitating the program's access to institutional funds necessary for its maintenance. A couple of years after the creation of the *Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela* (FESNOJIV) in 1996, which aimed at spurring and developing youth orchestras in the country as well as fostering the training of members, El Sistema entered a phase of significant expansion, and despite more recent institutional changes, it keeps growing at an ever faster pace.

### **El Sistema's Structure and Recent Expansion**

The available statistics, in fact, corroborate El Sistema's solidification and expansion. In over three decades of its existence, the Venezuelan program has assisted more than two million children in a country of almost thirty million people, and it currently has about three hundred and seventy thousand students enrolled in various community-based centers spread throughout Venezuela. A center, or *núcleo* as it is commonly known, constitutes the cell of El Sistema's structure – a structure that responds to Abreu's strong line of command with the help of his loyal team (Carnevali in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010). There are approximately two hundred and eighty-five *núcleos* in Venezuela, and they function as community programs offering free music education to socially deprived children and adolescents. Between seventy and ninety percent of the participants attending such *núcleos* come from the lower social strata (Tunstall 2012, p.36), and they are selected according to their socioeconomic situation or any other special condition such as belonging to a minority group (IDB 2007, p. 27).

El Sistema's capacity to reach out to a fairly large portion of the targeted population is due in part to its steady financial support. The program is primarily funded by the Venezuelan State, a partnership that has endured several administrations from diverse political spectrums. Aside from government assistance, the program receives monetary help from private donors as well as from world political and financial institutions. In the past decade, El Sistema's budget has consistently increased, going from US\$61.2 million in 2006, of which

91% came from the Venezuelan government (IDB 2007, p.4), to US\$120 million in 2010 (Tunstall 2012, p.36). A loan of US\$150 million was granted by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in 2007 for the expansion of the program – a scheme guaranteed by the prospects of Venezuela’s oil export revenue. The financial help aims at increasing the number of youngsters enrolled in the program from 245,353 to 500,000 by the year 2015 (IDB 2007, p.2).

With such expansion and increasing international recognition, it did not take long for the Venezuelan initiative to reach beyond its national borders. In 1995, Abreu was appointed by UNESCO as a special delegate for the development of a world system of youth and children’s orchestras and choirs. Since then, El Sistema has been expanding swiftly and not only in its home country. The goal of promoting the Venezuelan program around the globe has become a tangible reality in the past few years as over twenty-five countries, from ‘developing’ economies to prominent ones, have adopted it – all generally modeled after El Sistema’s method and goal: To use the symphony orchestra as a tool for social transformation.

Throughout the years, El Sistema has been overwhelmingly validated by a number of world institutional political powers as a transformational program. However, such validation is not just limited to the political arena; relevant corporations in the music industry have also endorsed the initiative. A clear indication of the program’s broad acclamation is the long list of prizes given to its creator. Approximately fifty-nine awards and distinctions have been conferred to José Antonio Abreu in recognition of his successful initiative, among which are the *Echo Klassic Special Prize* from the Cultural Institute of the German Music Industry Association, 2011; the TED Prize, 2009; the Foundation for Ethics and Economics Blue Planet Award, 2008; UNICEF National Goodwill Ambassador, 2004; Order of Merit of The World Future Society, 2003; the UNESCO Artists for Peace, 1998; and the UNESCO International Music Prize, 1993 (Fundamusical Bolívar 2012a).

Further legitimizing the program, these institutions have enthusiastically praised El Sistema for providing children and youngsters ‘with inspiration and a new social context’, for ‘creating a future for music’, ‘for founding [...] a

program that has provided thousands of Venezuelans youngsters with the tools to leave poverty', 'for serving as a model for other countries', for 'making the wish come true' and 'for spreading harmony throughout the world' (Fundamusal Bolívar 2012a).

The idea of El Sistema as a model social program for 'spreading harmony' beyond just Venezuela had long been nurtured by its founder. In his TED Prize acceptance speech (*Jose Antonio Abreu: The El Sistema Music Revolution 2009*), Abreu spoke of his wish to create a pedagogical program to form teachers in the El Sistema method, an idea on which a group of American musicians and educators had already been working. During a visit to the New England Conservatory (NEC) in 2007, Abreu expressed his excitement about forming a partnership with the NEC as well as other American institutions. In a speech that perhaps more closely resembled the Monroe Doctrine discourse of 'America for the Americas' than the recent political talk between the Venezuela of Hugo Chávez and the United States, Abreu (in Tunstall 2012, p.143) went on to state that 'the New World [...] is nothing less than all three Americas. And so what we are in the process of creating is really an expression of a new, transcontinental social and musical culture.' In 2009, such a partnership was sealed with the launch of the NEC's postgraduate program to form teachers in El Sistema's method – the *Abreu Fellows Program*. Despite the NEC's subsequent withdrawal from its commitment, the drawback does not seem to have significantly shaken the program's structure. At the time, there were already forty *núcleos* functioning in the United States, and the formation of an El Sistema USA Professional Association is currently under way. More recently, Bard College, the Longy School of Music and the Los Angeles Philharmonic have joined forces and created a Master's program also based on El Sistema's methodology.

Although the first years of El Sistema in the United States were somewhat turbulent, nothing really seems to get in the way of the program's ever-faster pace of national and international expansion. Since the mid-1990s, the program has been adapted to include children with special needs, which led to the formation of the White Hands Chorus, 'the flagship' of the initiative (Fundamusal Bolívar 2012g). In order to logistically support itself, El Sistema

has created workshops for building, maintaining and repairing orchestral instruments. Both the Lutherie Academic Center and the Academic and Technical Center of Wind Instruments are educational programs committed to forming professionals in the craft of building and repairing instruments. A partnership with China was sealed in 2008 for the creation of a binational instrument manufacturer aiming to bring El Sistema's production to an industrial level (Borzacchini 2010, p.156). Moreover, a new inclusive initiative has been announced; FundaMusical along with the Fundación Venezolana Pro-cura de la Parálisis Infantil (Fundaprocura), an institution devoted to assist physically handicapped individuals, have started a program for repairing and building classical and popular instruments within Fundaprocura's premises.

Indeed, there seems to be no insurmountable obstacle for the El Sistema movement. The program has shown an impressive ability to reinvent itself in response to new challenges that have emerged from its social agenda and to prolong its existence by expanding into new niches. Its longevity, according to its institutional discourse, is due to the program's capacity to promptly respond to adversities, or in the words of its founder, more in line with contemporary ideology – to adjust to the '[...] ever-changing circumstances of the modern world' (Abreu in El Sistema 2009). Such capacity, supposedly due to the often-proclaimed flexible character of its pedagogical model, is also suggested by the program's incursion into new social spaces. In 2007, a pilot program put the symphony orchestra 'behind bars'. The System of Penitentiary Symphony Orchestras, an idea that seeks to use the transformational power of ensemble playing to reduce violence in prisons as well as to re-socialize inmates, has been implemented in several correctional facilities for both men and women in different regions of Venezuela (FundaMusical Bolívar 2012e).

Funded by the Inter-American Development Bank, this new initiative is administered by the State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela and the Ministry of People's Power for Interior and Justice. It is coordinated by Lenin Mora, a lawyer specialized in humanitarian international law and criminology, who is also a member of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela. According to the Fundación Simón

Bolívar's website (2012e), a total of 1086 inmates have participated in The System of Penitentiary Symphony Orchestras.

Keeping consistent with El Sistema's pedagogical proposal, the penitentiary program emphasizes the Western classical tradition, and inmates are introduced to the 'symphonic masterworks' from the very beginning. While the main emphasis is on the classical genre, folk songs are also a part of the instructional sessions (Tunstall 2012, p.86) together with the national anthem (FundamMusical Bolívar 2012e), reiterating El Sistema's often nationalistic tone.

Although the varied repertoire may suggest some flexibility in El Sistema's pedagogy, the program's focus on symphonic performance is justified by its belief in the orchestra as a 'socializing' force. According to its coordinators, being part of the orchestra helps the participants develop discipline, self-esteem, communication and social skills as well as some sense of group belonging. As stated on FundamMusical's webpage (2012e), 'through the orchestra they [the inmates] learn to respect others and control their emotions.'

Inmates are rewarded in several ways by their participation in the orchestra. Besides dental services, the participants also receive some sort of monthly income based on perseverance and attendance. Being involved in the orchestra could also reduce an inmate's prison term since judges might accept program participation as study hours. After serving their sentence, recently released individuals have the option to continue their musical studies and even work for the program.

Whilst involvement in the program may grant privileges to inmates, playing in the penitentiary orchestra is not exactly the same as being in a regular music program. Participants are not just evaluated by their musical development; they must also follow a strict line of discipline. Besides having to show a record of good behavior in order to be accepted into the program, inmates are required by their instructors to maintain a neat appearance and good hygiene as a condition for remaining in the program (Grainger 2011). Moreover, as mentioned above, attendance is taken seriously by the organizers, and the participants are expected to endure eight hour-long sessions, five days per week.

However, such requirements may not be much of an issue among the inmates involved. In fact, the program seems to have a positive effect on at least some of the participants (FundamMusical Bolívar 2012e). Furthermore, this debate does not intend to question the need for a clear line of discipline in a program such as this. Let alone to ignore the complexities arising from working with incarcerated individuals. Nonetheless, some aspects of FundamMusical's approach to the inmates raise fundamental questions about its methods.

According to the organization, participants do not choose their instruments, but conversely, they are assigned to the candidates after a thorough interview with each one of them. No further explanation has been provided by the program to justify this approach, which could perhaps have a negative effect on the initiative. Beyond the fact that the choice of a musical instrument is without question something very subjective and interference in such a process could be highly questionable from a pedagogical standpoint, depriving participants of exerting their preference seems at odds with a program whose goal is social inclusion. It seems logical that a social initiative of this nature should always strive for as much involvement of the participants as possible. They should not be seen as simply objects of an educational experiment but rather engage in the process as social agents capable of changing their own reality. Therefore, excluding the participants from making their own decisions throughout the process could suggest a paternalist attitude risking the initiative's legitimacy.

Although interviewing inmates for participation in the program is acceptable, or even prudent if one takes into consideration the social reality in question, FundamMusical's general approach still provides plausible reasons for questioning the initiative. Criteria such as 'nature' and 'morphology' by which candidates are selected to join the program raise serious concerns about how inmates are perceived by the initiative (FundamMusical Bolívar 2012e). The evaluation of criminal individuals by such equivocal categories seems highly problematic for a socially inclusive program as they strongly suggest prejudice. The labeling of potential participants according to their supposed 'natural' or 'morphological' characteristics seems to reiterate rather than deconstruct the stigma that quite often impedes the re-acceptance of such individuals into social circles.

## El Sistema's Pedagogical Proposal: The Symphony Orchestra as a Model of Social Harmony

Given such worldwide acclamation, one might begin to wonder what differences separate El Sistema's pedagogical model from other types of music educational programs.

Despite the fact that the Venezuelan program has expanded its curriculum to include other genres such as regional folk music and jazz, El Sistema is essentially a classical music program. What then makes it apparently so different from other programs? The answer may seem obvious from the perspective of its organizers: El Sistema is a socially committed initiative. In reality, it has never intended to be a regular music program. Rather, it seeks to transform society by offering music education to the excluded lower stratum. Music, therefore, is presented as a tool for social transformation; a way of enhancing human capital and, thus, overcoming poverty.

However, El Sistema does not strictly follow the average curriculum adopted by the majority of conservatories. Neither can it be said that the perception of broadening access to music education may yield positive social results is, *per se*, an original idea – a fact also pointed out by Karen Brock (in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010), head of Arts and Music Education, London Borough of Tower Hamlets: 'while applauding the work I'd suggest that as a music educationalist El Sistema is not something that is new. [...] Sometimes when I see people taking off to Caracas I think, hang on a minute, walk to Liverpool Street Station, it's only £1.30 on your Oyster Card, to get into Bethnal Green.' What, in fact, makes El Sistema somehow distinct from other programs is, as put by the prominent American educator and El Sistema USA consultant Eric Booth (2010, p.5), its 'ensemble-all-the-time pedagogy'. According to the program, 'the backbone of El Sistema student training is preparation for participation in orchestral ensembles, which are at the soul of the *Núcleo* community and culture' (FundamMusical Bolívar 2012b).

Western classical tradition indeed seems to dictate much of El Sistema's pedagogical agenda. Popular music only made it into its curriculum in 2006, when adopted by the *núcleos Calabozo Antonio Estévez* and *San Juan de Los*

*Morros* (FundamMusical Bolívar 2012c), despite the fact that the program has been around since the 1970s. Yet, a clear sign of how much Western classical tradition permeates El Sistema's pedagogy is found in a comment by Bolivia Bettome, Director of Institutional Development and International Affairs, when addressing the concern over the possible disappearance of the Venezuelan folk traditions due to the program's emphasis on classical music:

As Sistema musicians have worked within the folk idiom, new and more complex versions of the traditional musics [sic] have evolved. It's become kind of our own, particularly [sic] Venezuelan chamber music. (Bettome in Tunstall 2012, p.183)

El Sistema assists a wide range of ages. Students are accepted into the program as early as pre-school age, when the activities are especially designed for the children to start developing their rhythmic sense. Keeping consistent with its pedagogy, introductory classes are also seen as an opportunity to introduce the children to the classical music universe, one of which they will soon be a part once joining the orchestras. Thus paying honor to the hall of 'the great classical composers', these small introductory groups are named *Baby Mozart*, *Baby Corelli*, *Baby Haydn*, *Baby Vivaldi* (Tunstall 2012, p.157).

Still before being introduced to musical instruments, the children join the 'paper orchestras', a kind of ensemble simulation in which they start developing body movement awareness, learning how to hold an instrument as well as how to position themselves in reference to the conductor – all by playing with *papier mâché*-made violins, violas, etc. As suggested by Eric Booth (2008, p.4), this is also used as an opportunity for the children to be introduced to '[...] the music they will be playing in few years'.

Despite the assertive role of Western classical tradition in El Sistema's curriculum, the program's methodology is rather flexible as repeatedly pointed out by El Sistema's organizers. It does not adopt one specific existing method of music education, allowing the *núcleos* to adapt the lessons according to student and community necessities.

By the age of seven, the pupils start their instrumental instruction. However, with ensemble playing as the core of El Sistema's proposal, the preparation for

becoming part of the *núcleo's* orchestra has already been well underway. Throughout every stage of their music education, whether singing, playing on the recorder or on the instrument of their choice, students are constantly in touch with the orchestral repertoire. Whereas the program is flexible with regard to its methodology, its curriculum is, to a certain extent, consistent among the *núcleos* around the country, allowing for the interchangeability of pupils between ensembles. In some specific sessions children learn '*the kind of discipline practice that prepares*' them for the orchestra (Tunstall 2012, p.161, my emphasis). On those occasions, 'the teacher is as ruthless as any symphony conductor about their entrances and cutoffs being exactly, precisely together' (Tunstall 2012, p.163).

With orchestral participation as the 'backbone' of the program's training, El Sistema's '[...] pedagogy has thus far focused more on performing than on creating music' as explained by its Deputy Director for Institutional Development and International Affairs (Guerrero in Tunstall 2012, p.35). El Sistema's foremost focus on symphonic performance is noted by an orchestra member (in Tunstall 2012, p.148), who explains that the difference between American traditional conservatories and El Sistema is that the primary goal of the former is to prepare soloists, whereas the goal of the latter is to create orchestras. Gloria Carnevali (in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010), former cultural attaché to the Venezuelan Embassy in London, explains that 'The Sistema will nurture a particular talent in conducting, and instrumentalists will learn as much as they wish to (there are special academies for this) but the Sistema does not educate soloists'.

As one might wonder, what is it within the institution of the symphony orchestra that makes it the heart and soul of the Venezuelan social inclusive program? For David Ascanio (in Tunstall 2012, p.71), a concert pianist and a former El Sistema teacher, it is not just about children playing music but also about 'the orchestra giving a sense of life to young people, in the deepest possible way'. According to Jessica Balboni (in Tunstall 2012, p.138-39), former L.A. Philharmonic Director of Educational Initiatives, playing in orchestras '[...] can give children a strong sense of their own efficacy in the world'. For Abreu

(*Crashendo!* 2012), ‘an orchestra is a community where the essential and exclusive feature is that it is the only community that comes together with the fundamental objective of agreeing with itself. Agree on what? To create beauty.’

### **The Rationality Behind El Sistema’s Institutional Discourse**

As stressed by Abreu (in Tunstall 2012, p.71), El Sistema ‘[...] is not an artistic program but a human development program through music’. Why, then, is El Sistema so overwhelmingly acclaimed as an effective social program?

*To Play and To Fight*, El Sistema’s maxim, suggests the program’s struggle to create an opportunity for the socially excluded population of Venezuela’s deprived *barrios* to overcome poverty. However, the fight against inequality is far from easy to win. Notwithstanding the fact that Venezuela’s Human Development Index (HDI) has risen since the 1980s, the country’s deep inequality does not differ much from Latin America’s overall situation. Venezuela’s oil abundance in relation to the living conditions of the majority of its population resembles the common pattern that has haunted the continent since its colonization; a pattern in which scarcity in the lower social stratum is not the result of the country’s lack of resources but a situation sustained by an ever-enforced policy of unequal distribution of wealth. According to the Human Development Report Office (HDRO 2011), Venezuela’s HDI has gone up from 0.623, in the 1980s, to 0.735 today, which places the country at a so-considered high level. However, when adjusted according to its inequality, this number drops down to 0.540 (HDRO 2011). In the first half of 2006, when Venezuela’s HDI was already considered high, poverty affected 33.9% of the households and extreme poverty 10.6% (IDB 2007, p.3). By the time El Sistema applied for its Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) loan, over 70% of the country’s youth lived under such conditions (IDB 2007, p.3).

It is the social and personal consequences of such a devastating reality that El Sistema tries to address with its inclusive program. For Abreu (*Jose Antonio Abreu: The El Sistema Music Revolution* 2009), El Sistema’s pedagogy positively affects three fundamental spheres of life. First, it improves the personal-social level by contributing to the enhancement of self-esteem and confidence.

Second, playing in the orchestra or singing in the choir provides the child ‘with a noble identity and makes him a role model for his family and community’. The pupil becomes ‘a better student [...] because it inspires in him a sense of responsibility, perseverance and punctuality that will greatly help him at school’. The third effect is that the participants and the surrounding community, by sharing the ‘spiritual world that music produces in itself, which also lies within itself’, can overcome material poverty.

Although El Sistema’s proposal is founded on Abreu’s highly idealized understanding of music as the number one antidote against ‘prostitution, violence, bad habits and everything degrading in the life of a child’ (*Jose Antonio Abreu: The El Sistema Music Revolution* 2009), a much more pragmatic rationality, however, seems to underlie the program’s ideology. As overly stressed by its institutional discourse, the positive impact of its pedagogy is reflected in the enhancement of the participant’s productivity outside of the program. Based on such rationale, El Sistema estimates that by the end of its expansion plan in 2015 the school dropout rate will have decreased from 6.9% to 3% with a 3% increase in attendance (IDB 2007, Annex 1, p.1). According to the IDB (in *Sistema Australia* 2012a), for every dollar spent on the program, US\$1.34 is returned in social dividends, which staves off future social problems such as drug and alcohol abuse as well as violent crimes. As a general result, by 2015 poverty should have fallen from 59% to 55%. El Sistema’s discourse around productivity is further reiterated by the program’s prediction of a 9.3% increase in individuals working in the formal sector as an effect of its expansion (IDB 2007, Annex 1).

The program statistics go even further to demonstrate El Sistema’s favorable cost-benefit relationship. Still according to the IDB proposal (2007, p.24), the cost of a participant in the program is less than half of the cost of a student attending school for the same amount of hours. Moreover, as put by the organization, El Sistema is cheaper than any other type of extracurricular activity that would assist the same number of participants, for the same amount of time, yielding the same results (IDB 2007, p.23). Comparing the program with other alternatives, El Sistema USA’s consultant Eric Booth (2010, p.11) argues that:

Indeed sports may be able to make a similar case for a high functioning community, and yet sports tend not to show such radical improvement in short periods of time, cannot embrace 200 players on a team, and do not take on the variety of challenges found in an orchestral repertoire.

Helping to increase the program's reputation, Venezuela's social development rate is said to be higher thanks to the spreading of music education throughout the country, even though the nation's social spending per capita does not differ much from that of other countries in the region (IDB 2007, p. 3).

El Sistema's appealing statistics are, nevertheless, mere predictions strongly dependent on a favorable macroeconomic situation, 'without a collapse in international oil prices or any other significant external shock' (IDB 2007, Annex 1, p.3) that could affect Venezuela's economy. Despite some positive numbers that have pointed to better performance by its participants in school, the program's overall optimistic claims are not substantiated by any sign of change in the structure of Venezuelan society since the creation of El Sistema. The explanation for any prospective favorable outcome sounds quite idealistic, which suggests that El Sistema tries to compensate for the lack of clearer evidence of its effectiveness with an eloquent rhetoric based on absolute claims.

Such claims are often pronounced by the program's supporters. For Abreu (in Booth 2008, p.11), 'material poverty can be completely overcome by spiritual richness.' 'The vicious cycle of poverty', as he explains, 'can be broken when a child in poor material possessions acquires spiritual wealth through music' (Abreu in Tunstall 2012, p.xii). Still in his views (in Sistema Australia 2012b), only art, besides religion, can provide an answer to what he sees as a current 'world spiritual crisis'. In fact, his religious beliefs seem to function as the driving force behind his achievements. The founding father of El Sistema sees himself as a '[...] humble messenger of the doctrine of Jesus Christ' (in Borzacchini 2010, p.66)<sup>2</sup>, which he understands as the ultimate source of meaning in life. Aspiring for nothing more than to be 'an ideal, sublime and insurmountable serf of God', his work, according to him, is a service to God. A goal, he explains, without which his service would become an 'anarchic discontinuity of an existence without direction' (in Borzacchini 2010, p.66).

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.

Abreu's strong religious inclination seems to provide grounds for his assumptions over the redeeming power of music. Art, for Abreu (in Sistema Australia 2012b), is capable of responding 'to mankind's deepest aspirations and to the historic demands of our time'. It is through music, though, that his Godly endeavor gets accomplished; as he himself puts it, music is 'a world with a high proximity to the essence of God' (in Borzacchini 2010, p.66).

However, Abreu's definition of music does not seem to be very broad. Besides his indifference to other musical genres such as rock for example, Abreu seems to imply in his statements that Western classical music is of a superior status. Such genre, as often suggested by El Sistema's discourse, has universal powers that can transform lives. In following such a hierarchical perception in which the classical repertoire sits on top, the symphony orchestra, the core element of El Sistema's pedagogy, assumes a much broader role than that of just an artistic institution. In the words of Abreu (in Tunstall 2012, p.xii), the *núcleos*' symphony orchestras are '[...] examples and schools of social life'. They constitute new ideal spaces, microcosms of social harmony made possible by the high values intrinsic to the Western classical repertoire acquired by the participants.

Following such constructions, El Sistema is founded on the premise that 'teaching children to play orchestral music together can save lives and heal societies' (Tunstall 2012, p.270). The program is perceived by Tricia Tunstall (2012, p.xii) as '[...] a form of re-creating social life and challenging poverty through music'.<sup>3</sup> Such statements, however, are founded on the preconception that the re-creation of social life is achieved through beauty as experienced in the orchestra; as put by Eric Booth (2010, p.12), 'the experience of beauty expands the definition of beauty, makes it more inclusive, which enables us to actually see a more beautiful world in which we live.' For Booth (2010, p.11), 'spending thousands of hours throughout the growing years dedicated in

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<sup>3</sup> El Sistema in fact attempts to produce an ideal social environment. Every effort is made to create a classless perception in the *núcleos* (Tunstall 2012, p.172).

unselfish, full collaborative commitment to the power of creating excellence and beauty together seems to create healthy individuals.’<sup>4</sup>

Although El Sistema has proven to be pretty successful at training high-quality Western classical musicians throughout the years, its overwhelming acclamation is a result of its supposed effective method to fight the devastating consequences of a problem that has significantly worsened in many regions of the globe in the past thirty years or so, namely, the social exclusion of deprived communities. A large number of world-renown institutions and authorities have praised El Sistema as the ultimate tool for rescuing these long-marginalized communities. This is in fact an idea that permeates the whole initiative, as Rafael Elster (in Tunstall 2012, p.35) again remarks: ‘Most of the kids won’t be musicians. But they will be citizens.’ A question, nevertheless, is still left to be answered: *what does the program understand a citizen to be?*

For Dalouge Smith (in Eger 2012), CEO of the San Diego Youth Symphony, ‘El Sistema is really a new way of thinking about music education. It is about building a community and productive citizens through the group experience of ensemble and orchestra.’ Once again, the idea of productivity seems constant throughout El Sistema’s institutional discourse; it is commonly evoked to punctuate the program’s effectiveness as a social inclusive initiative. According to FundaMusical’s discourse, the improvement of the participant’s performance in other spheres of social life is made possible thanks to specific skills acquired in the orchestral practice. Such argument is often evoked to justify the emphasis

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<sup>4</sup> The assumption of the orchestra as a perfectly harmonious environment seems to go against recent studies about the social dynamic in a symphonic ensemble. High levels of animosity between musicians, conductors and administrators are notorious and often responsible for conflicts which seriously compromise the overall performance of those institutions. Research conducted in the United States has argued that the high level of frustration detected among professional orchestra musicians is preponderantly a result of the highly hierarchical structure of the ensemble sustained by subjectivities such as the conductor’s omniscience and omnipotence, which consequently disenfranchises the players and leaves them with little, if any, control over their work environment (Levine, S. & R. 1996). Moreover, the overall performance pressure brought upon orchestra musicians generates high levels of anxiety, which very frequently leads to graver physical and psychological problems.

It is important to remind the reader that the dynamic of a *núcleo* may very well differ from that of a professional orchestra environment; therefore, the experiences of the pupils may not be the same as those of professional players. Nonetheless, what is valuable to this current debate is the fact that El Sistema seems to embrace and reproduce many of the subjective constructions mentioned above that characterize symphonic performance and legitimize the orchestra as a modern artistic institution.

given to Western classical tradition as opposed to any other musical genre or even non-musical activities; the symphony orchestra can provide the students with social skills that will serve as a way out of poverty.

In the IDB loan proposal (2007, p.8), El Sistema is said to have transcended ‘the artistic world to become a social development project that aspires to imbue citizens from a very early age with civic values and teamwork [...]’. Still according to the document (Summary and p.5), the program is capable of improving human capital by training individuals in good behavior. The proposal’s vague notions of ‘civic values’ and ‘good behavior’ seem to be linked by El Sistema’s ideological discourse to the concepts of discipline, punctuality and responsibility - behavioral changes not only emphasized by the program but often reported by parents of participants (IDB 2007, p.5). Indeed, discipline and productivity seem to be widely acknowledged, as well as unanimously praised, as a key feature of El Sistema’s pedagogy. Lennar Acosta (in Tunstall 2012, p.29), Director of the Los Chorros *núcleo*, explaining the program’s dynamic says that ‘[...] everything is provided by El Sistema. All we ask of them is that they learn to be disciplined. To be respectful. And to be excellent’.

When trying to explain how the key element in El Sistema’s pedagogy – the symphony orchestra – promotes the skills believed to be necessary for the inclusion of poor communities, the various positive discourses about the program again seem to firmly hold on to vague claims. For Tricia Tunstall (2012, p.175), the orchestra is ‘[...] a model for social life in which collective goals and high individual ideals are synergistically related’. However diffuse, such argumentation is never unaccompanied by the assertion over the disciplining force of the symphonic performance. By being part of the ensemble, Tunstall (2012, p.175) explains, ‘children are simultaneously learning the discipline they will need to be successful orchestra musicians and the social and emotional skills that will make them successful in family and community life.’ Following the same line, for Abreu (in Tunstall 2012, p.70) the orchestra is a ‘model of community’ because besides promoting solidarity, it teaches ‘social discipline’. El Sistema’s founder goes even further trying to establish an analogy between musical performance and society:

[...] to sing and to play together means to intimately coexist toward perfection and excellence, following a strict discipline of organization and coordination in order to seek the harmonic interdependence of voices and instruments. That's how they build a spirit of solidarity and fraternity among them, develop their self-esteem and foster the ethical and aesthetical values related to the music in all its senses. (*Jose Antonio Abreu: The El Sistema Music Revolution 2009*)

### **Brief Overview**

From a small youth orchestra initially intended as an opportunity for young music students to develop their musical skills, the initiative created by José Antonio Abreu has evolved in the past thirty years into what now seems to be a solid social institution. Generally known as El Sistema, the idea can be summarized as a program that seeks to promote the social inclusion of deprived groups by offering free music instruction. However, a few points in the initiative should be highlighted before continuing the current debate.

Although El Sistema's pedagogical proposal is centered on Western classical music tradition, it differs from most conservatory-like music programs due to its emphasis on group practice. Focusing primarily on performance, the initiative trains the participants to join one of the symphonic ensembles organized by the various '*núcleos*' – social centers dedicated to assisting deprived communities – spread throughout the country.

Due to such a pedagogical approach, the symphony orchestra gains a unique role in the initiative's proposal. It is portrayed as an ideal social organization in which participants learn fundamental skills to become active individuals in society. By playing in the orchestra, the students, most of whom come from impoverished communities, will basically learn to be disciplined and become productive citizens. Thus, acceptance in society seems to be strictly linked to ideals of discipline and productivity.

Since its creation, El Sistema has increased the number of *núcleos* in Venezuela and has expanded to assist other excluded groups in the country such as incarcerated populations as well as mentally and physically impaired individuals. As a primarily publicly funded initiative, part of the program's national success is owed to its political ability to establish and maintain good

relations with the several federal administrations from different ideological tendencies that have been in power in Venezuela throughout El Sistema's existence. Furthermore, the program in the past few years has had both the political and financial support of important world institutions, which has unquestionably catapulted its expansion.

Although sounding highly idealistic, El Sistema's proposal has become music not just to Venezuelan ears. The idea of helping the underprivileged with an 'ensemble-all-the-time' program has been imported by several countries around the world. Nevertheless, FundaMusical's institutional discourse leaves room for questioning the social rationality behind the program's efforts to fight poverty and exclusion.

## II. Raploch: A Contextualization

On its path to global expansion, El Sistema has been adopted in a number of countries throughout Europe. The first location to have a pilot program implemented was the city of Stirling in Central Scotland. Big Noise, as the program has been named, was launched in the community of Raploch, a region known for its long-degraded social conditions. In order to discuss the implementation of the Venezuelan program in the region it is important to contextualize the initiative's proposal within the community's social reality. However, any contemporary social dynamic cannot be justly scrutinized if disassociated from the more complex historical conditions from within which such reality emerged. Thus, although it is not the focus of this debate to present a deep historical analysis of the community in question, a brief overview of some of the facts that contributed to the current situation seems justified at this point.

'The Raploch', as it is commonly referred to, is part of the city of Stirling together with the two other main neighborhoods of Riverside and Randolph Road. Despite the moderate economic affluence of Stirling, Raploch's social index is far from matching the overall conditions of the region. Whereas both Riverside and Randolph range from middle to high middle class status, Raploch is currently considered '[...] the poorest and most deprived community in Central Scotland' (Robertson, Smith & McIntosh 2008b, p.86). Beyond the incidence of drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment and violence, Raploch's conditions seem to be magnified by a stigma long attached to the community's identity (Robertson, Smith & McIntosh 2008b). This perception, as argued in previous research, is deeply rooted in Raploch's distant past.

Raploch's impoverished situation dates back to the mid-fifteenth century when the bad living conditions of the village greatly contributed to its negative image. The influx of permanent Irish immigrants settling in the region in the nineteenth century due to the Potato Famine only worsened Raploch's stigma; crime in the region had often been attributed to such population since their presence as temporary farm workers in the sixteenth century. Seen as cheap hand labor, the newcomers were eventually absorbed by the mining activity

boosted by Glasgow's growing industry (Robertson, Smith & McIntosh 2008a, p. 11). Due to the refusal of the employers to provide housing near the mines, the workers settled in the old medieval slums around Stirling Castle, forming a pool of ghettos also known as the 'Top of the Town' (Robertson 2012), as well as in the village of Raploch (Robertson, Smith & McIntosh 2008a, p.79).

Despite the growing awareness about the poor housing conditions in Stirling and some government attempts to properly address the problem following the Great War, it was only with the creation of the welfare state after the Second World War that the working-class housing problem really became a consensus in the country.

The council housing scheme created in the area of Raploch after the development of Riverside and Randolph Road was seen as an ideal solution for the overcrowded old medieval slums. Keeping a 'certain' distance, the area was relatively close to the city center and, at the same time, made future expansion possible. However, at least two problems seem to have contributed to reiterating Raploch's stigma. First, as the poor residents of such ghettos had long been associated with the precarious and unsanitary living conditions of the area, Raploch again saw its identity directly linked to the status of the underprivileged newcomers. Second, the low quality of the houses built in Raploch, a consequence of their affordable prices, was in part responsible for the development's rapid deterioration. Therefore, it does not seem to be much of a surprise that soon after its completion Raploch's housing scheme was already perceived as the 'slums of the future' (Robertson, Smith & McIntosh 2008b, p. 87).

Despite various developments in the area of Raploch from the 1920s onwards, the community's stigma has proven to be resilient. Initiatives launched in the 1980s aiming to renew the area and improve the social environment also failed. National buying programs had low level sales in Raploch due to the overall low income of its residents. Likewise, renting schemes apparently only contributed to bringing new waves of 'transient and problematic population' strengthening the community's stigma (Robertson, Smith & McIntosh 2008a, p.26). The focus on inefficacious strategies, namely the implementation and renovation of council

housing, yielded a recurrent social degradation of the community with the influx of other stigmatized populations, which worsened Raploch's image.

The long-lasting social isolation imposed on Raploch as a result of such negative image had also been reinforced by its geographical location – on the 'wrong' side of the castle (Robertson, Smith & McIntosh 2008b, p.91). It was not by coincidence that the area was chosen for a specific type of population. As pointed out by Douglas Robertson, a professor at the University of Stirling who has published several articles about the community, Raploch was designed as a poor community, and its current status should not be a surprise (Robertson 2012). In reality, the different developments implemented in the three neighborhoods throughout the twentieth century have not really transformed any of them; 'rather, there was an overlaying and merging with the already established local social structures' (Robertson, Smith & McIntosh 2008a, p.39). Nevertheless, according to Robertson (2012), more recent changes in the Raploch area, including the construction of a community campus encompassing three schools, a new health center and a further education college, could eventually contribute to reduce the community's social isolation.

The global economic changes that have occurred in the past thirty years have not spared the small community of Raploch. Although Stirling has never really been a prominent industrial center, the region underwent an accelerated process of de-industrialization during this period. The mining industry, a major employer in the twentieth century, began to die rapidly after the miner's strike in 1984. A number of local manufacturers also closed, worsening employment in the community. Although a large supermarket chain has established itself in the Raploch area, it has not been able to absorb the contingent of workers previously laid off by other employers, which has increased the unemployment rate in the community. This pattern of change, according to researchers from the University of Stirling, 'illustrates the more localized impacts of broader economic changes' (Robertson, Smith & McIntosh 2008a, p.99).

Raploch suffers from severe household deprivation, a fact supported by astonishing statistics. Among the main problems are income, employment, health and education. Fifty-three percent of the community was economically

inactive in 2008; around fifty-five percent of the community's households were under some sort of housing or council tax benefits, based on data from 2004 (Robertson, Smith & McIntosh 2008a, p.32). The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2009 indicates that unemployment in Stirling was 9%, whereas in Raploch that rate reached 33% (GEN 2011, p.8). Whilst in Stirling the number of professionals with a first or higher degree reaches 26.6%, in Raploch this number drops to 6.4% (Stirling Council 2004). All of which, combined with other social indicators, contribute to the undoubtedly most disturbing statistic of the extremely low life expectancy, ranging in the mid-40s, among males born and raised in community (Whitaker in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010).

Stirling's recent history seems to resonate with a pattern that has emerged from the dynamic of the 'globalized' world economy. As explained by Chamsy el-Ojeili and Patrick Hayden (2006), the vacuum left by de-industrialization in some areas of the world in the past years has shifted a great part of the economy to the activity of tourism, which could yield the commodification of local cultures. With the disappearance of agriculture in Stirling – which was the foundation of the now also extinct industry in the region – the City Council has tried to foment tourism by capitalizing on the city's castle as its main attraction. As this strategy has not been as successful as expected, it has consequently not created new job opportunities for the city's inhabitants, let alone for the ones in Raploch.

Currently, Stirling's economy revolves around three main employers: The local authorities, which provide middle-class and white-collar jobs; the Health Board, although the number of jobs have been reduced by the transferring of the Stirling Royal Hospital to Lambert, and Stirling Hospital is about to close; and the University of Stirling, which by outsourcing of some of its services lately has not helped the problem of local unemployment (Robertson 2012). Although Robertson sees some recent improvement in the quality of life in Raploch, he agrees that in the broader perspective Raploch can be seen as an example of a poor community whose situation has been aggravated by the economic restructuring that has taken place over the for the past thirty years. According

to Robertson (2012), Raploch has always been a poor area but at least before the population was employed.

A new regeneration plan for Raploch was launched in 2004 by the Raploch Urban Regeneration Company Limited (RURC). However, this time, the initiative is not based on the provision of council housing but, instead, on the construction of new private estates. The prospects are that by the time of its conclusion 800 new homes will have been constructed, of which about 500 will be for private sale (Meadwell 2005, p.20). The plan aims to diversify the population in the community by bringing the middle class to the area, a strategy that has been largely applied in the past years as an attempt to revitalize deteriorated neighborhoods. The idea is founded on the premise that moving the middle class into those communities will promote social mix and consequently improve overall social conditions. However, recent studies have suggested that such strategy has actually increased segregation as well as polarization between classes in areas where it has been implemented. Moreover, it may even aggravate social exclusion as social scientists and urban planners have pointed out. In the view of Loretta Lees, 'gentrification is part of an aggressive, revanchist ideology designed to retake the inner city for the middle classes' (Lees 2008, p.2449). According to Robertson (2012), in the specific case of Raploch, simply introducing a new population in the locality would not yield significant social changes as this would not address the community's social problems.

However, the current regeneration project, with a total cost of £120 million, is more ambitious since it isn't just about building new houses. According to Bob Lavert (in RURC 2011, p.3), Chief Executive of the Raploch Urban Regeneration Company, the project '[...] has always been about more than just physical activities, it has also been about the social and economic activities linked to the built environment'. The project has successfully created a new community campus wherein an interesting idea<sup>5</sup> has been applied: the denominational school Our Lady's Primary, the non-denominational Raploch Primary, the CastleView special needs school and the Raploch Nursery have been placed in

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<sup>5</sup> Such an idea could contribute to the community's cohesiveness.

the same space (Stirling Council 2012). Besides the brand new campus, some new private housing developments have been built in the center of Raploch. The RURC estimates that 650 new private homes will be available for sale by 2018 – the project was originally slated for conclusion in 2014 (Robertson, Smith & McIntosh 2008a, p.26). However, Robertson (2012) points out that a previously cleared vast area has been kept in the same condition. According to him, the initiative has been halted as a consequence of the current credit crisis triggered by the collapse of the United States subprime mortgage industry. The original planned scale of improvement has not been achieved, and as a result, the population diversification planned for Raploch has not materialized. Still according to Robertson (2012), although the RURC's goals included the economic revitalization of the community, the only new jobs recently created were because of the massive expansion of the Sainsbury Supermarket, which has doubled its size. Nonetheless, Robertson asserts that such expansion has not been enough; it is likely that its effects on the community will not be considerable.

### **Brief Overview**

As discussed above, Raploch's identity has long been haunted by a stigma with deep historical roots. Several attempts to address the stigma seem to have failed, and the precarious living conditions of the community have endured. The insistence on the same ineffective strategy introduced by various programs implemented in the region over the years appears to be a considerable cause of such failure.

Despite continual attempts to improve the conditions in Raploch, some aspects of life in the community, as suggested by other researchers, seem to have worsened as an effect of the cultural changes of the past thirty years. New businesses that have recently replaced the demised local industry have not been able to solve Raploch's aggravated unemployment situation. Moreover, the future of the new regeneration project has been threatened by the current economic crisis.

Raploch then can be described as a case of deprivation and social exclusion that has endured for centuries, and despite several attempts to improve its living conditions, the local community continues to suffer from such a complex situation.

### III. Sistema Scotland

#### A Brief History of Big Noise

In the face of such a staggeringly degraded situation, a social program modeled after El Sistema has been implemented in Raploch as a potential solution for the community's problems. Although it has been recognized that the program is neither a quick fix nor can it change Raploch's condition by itself, organizers as well as authorities tend to believe in its social transformative capacity.

In 2006, a group of people funded by the Scottish Arts Council went to Venezuela to observe the Venezuelan program El Sistema. Among them was Dr Richard Holloway, the former Bishop of Edinburgh, and current Chair of the Scottish Arts Council, whose positive impression of the Venezuelan program made him determined to implement it in Scotland. After talks about introducing El Sistema in the country, José Antonio Abreu and Holloway, during a visit by the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra to the Edinburgh International Festival in 2007, publicly announced a partnership between FundaMusical and Sistema Scotland, a charity created under the directorship of Holloway specifically for the implementation of the Venezuelan program throughout Scotland. With the support of BBC Scotland, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Drake Music and the Stirling Council, the first European counterpart of El Sistema was formally established in the community of Raploch, Central Scotland (Allan 2010, p.115).

Whereas the name Sistema Scotland refers to the initiative at a national level, the pilot 'núcleo' launched in Raploch is named Big Noise. Since its implementation in the region three years ago, the *núcleo* has developed a symphonic ensemble formed by local children that has already performed to general audiences as well as national authorities. In 2012, the Big Noise Orchestra delivered a joint performance with the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, conducted by the prominent El Sistema star and current Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel. According to a reviewer from a national newspaper, besides opening the London 2012 Festival, the event concurrently sent out '[...] the far from woolly message that making music to whatever

standard is better than car-jacking, drug-dealing and being a general drain on the state purse' (Rees 2012).

Choosing Raploch as the site in which to launch Sistema Scotland was not a random decision. In the words of the organization, among the reasons for choosing the community are its clear identity<sup>6</sup> and its defined geographical boundary within the city. Stirling's central location within the country's territory was also seen by the organizers as having a strong symbolic appeal to the general public. Moreover, the local authorities' and the community's enthusiasm were also considered fundamental factors. Ultimately, and more interestingly, in the view of Sistema Scotland, both the social issues historically experienced by Raploch and the community's current regeneration project should significantly profit from the skills provided to the inhabitants by orchestral practice (Sistema Scotland 2012a).

### **Big Noise: Structure and Pedagogical Proposal**

Big Noise does not differ from the Venezuelan initiative. As matter of fact, as stated on the program's webpage, the only difference between Sistema Scotland and the Venezuelan El Sistema should hopefully be 'a few thousand miles' (Sistema Scotland 2012a). Being formally partnered with El Sistema, the Raploch program is 'completely true to the philosophy' of the South American initiative. As put by its organizers (Sistema Scotland 2012c), '[w]e work very hard to make sure that Big Noise is not just an orchestra inspired by Sistema. It is Sistema.'

Big Noise, funded by the Scottish Arts Council, BBC Children in Need as well as various charitable trusts and private donors, among which are the foundations of Paul Hamlyn and Esmée Fairbairn, is entirely cost-free for the Raploch community. In spite of its socially inclusive nature, the program is restricted to the local residents in an attempt to nurture an identity with the community. Sessions take place in the new community campus, wherein three different schools function; Nursery, Primary 1 and special needs children are assisted

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<sup>6</sup> According to Robertson, Smyth and McIntosh, the perception of a cohesive identity within the Raploch community represents more a caricature of a reality produced by outsiders than strictly the views shared by its inhabitants (Robertson, Smyth & McIntosh 2008b, p. 93).

during school hours while older students attend the after-school program (Sistema Scotland 2012a). Mirroring the Venezuelan initiative, Big Noise does not favor a specific method but adopts different ones such Suzuki, Kodály, Dalcroze and Colorstrings, and its teaching, besides being immersive, focuses on orchestral playing (Sistema Scotland 2012a). In fact, the program is designed for children of all musical capacities to learn how to play in an orchestra environment (GEN 2011, p.1). Such a goal is clearly set since the children's early stages in the scheme; aiming at preparing them to join the full ensemble, Big Noise offers a Pre-Orchestra program for the younger newcomers (GEN 2011, p. 61).

The same focus on Western classical music seen in El Sistema is even more distinct in the Scottish version as no other musical genre seems to have been included in the curriculum so far. The justification for such a choice resonates with the universal claims professed by FundaMusical as well as with its emphasis on the disciplining power of classical concert music. According to Big Noise, '[i]t combines beauty – which can transform the child on its own – with huge levels of discipline [...]' (Whitaker in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010). Moreover, as stated by the program, classical music pushes the children of the community '[...] way beyond what they ever thought they could do. And, as it push[es] those boundaries and they stick to the pain barrier, they find huge rewards' (Whitaker in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010). The patronizing inflection together with the promise of a 'better world' for those who remain resilient sounds even more in tune with FundaMusical's discourse. Such promise seems to have in fact contributed to a change of attitude among some of the residents towards classical music, not as much due to a sudden 'refinement' of their musical taste as El Sistema's enthusiasts would have expected, but because the genre is now perceived by some parents as their 'children's future' (Whitaker in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010).

From the 388 children attending the three schools and the nursery housed in the new campus, eighty percent take part in Big Noise (GEN 2011, p.11). The organizers explain that the considerable level of commitment required from the participants provides routine and structure in their free time, which helps to

develop discipline (GEN 2011, p.55) – the same argument used by FundaMusical in the Inter-American Development Bank proposal. Moreover, the assumed benefits yielded by the program are not limited to the children of Raploch but extended to the whole community. An adult orchestra and volunteer work are offered to parents as a chance for them to ‘grow in confidence, increase their self-esteem and benefit from positive and new social networks’ (GEN 2011, pp. 57-58).

### **Goals of the Scottish ‘Sistema’**

As an El Sistema-inspired initiative, Big Noise is seen by its organizers as primarily a social program in which the symphony orchestra ‘[...] is used as a tool to counter exclusion, foster confidence and provide challenges’ (Sistema Scotland 2012a). Sharing much of El Sistema’s assumptive discourse, the Scottish program states that by using the orchestra to benefit society, it ‘[...] produces not only musicians, but also happy and well-equipped citizens’ (Sistema Scotland 2012b). To prepare highly-trained musicians does not seem, in fact, to be the main goal of the initiative; as with its Venezuelan counterpart, Big Noise aims at creating ‘lots of happy, confident citizens’ (Sistema Scotland 2012a).

Sistema Scotland’s so-called holistic approach seeks not only to improve the children’s physical and emotional well-being but also to build their resilience ‘[...] to deal with other aspects of their lives now and potentially, in the future’ (GEN 2011, p.11). Again, resonating with much of El Sistema’s discourse, prevention as opposed to crisis management is the focus of the program. Therefore, preventing school evasion, anti-social behavior, drug and alcohol abuse as well as improving education attainment and yielding a positive post-school transition are the main objectives of Sistema Scotland (GEN 2011, p.6). Along the same lines of FundaMusical, such goals are made tangible by the work dynamic intrinsic to the orchestra: In the effort to learn classical music and achieve excellence, the members of the community supposedly start establishing higher standard goals for their lives (Whitaker in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010). Orchestral practice is seen by Sistema Scotland’s organizers as an opportunity for ‘celebrating success’ (GEN 2011, p.55).

Along with the Venezuelan program, the predictions for the outcomes listed above are based on assumptions. Both initiatives seem to found their views on the supposition of universal qualities inherent to Western classical tradition.

### **Implementation of the Sistema Scotland Pilot Program – Big Noise**

The implementation of Big Noise in Raploch did not occur in a way that one would expect from a social inclusive initiative. According to the program's manager, Kathy Whitaker (in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010), Big Noise was parachuted into the community. Its residents were not consulted beforehand about the introduction of Sistema Scotland in Raploch – a move that has stirred justified concerns among researchers and educators. In Whitaker's own words, '[t]his is a case study of how not to do development' (in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010). Among the justifications for such a decision is that consultation with the community was impossible due to the urgency to implement Big Noise (Allan 2010, p.117 & 118). Nevertheless, this unilateral move could prove to generate a negative impression among residents as it seems to suggest that Sistema Scotland knows better what is in the community's best interest. Indeed, such an attitude indicates a paternalistic approach, which is clearly reinforced by the justification provided by Whitaker (in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010): '[...] if we had gone to the community and asked them what they wanted I'm sure the last thing they would have said is an orchestra.'

The lack of communication between organizers and the community has in fact caused some friction. The absence of clarity regarding the program's ethos generated a feeling among Raploch teachers that the initiative was being imposed upon the local schools. As teachers have become more informed about it, some are now recognizing the contribution that Big Noise could offer to the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), a project implemented in primary schools in 2008 to raise both learning and teaching standards (GEN 2011, p.16). However, some are still skeptical regarding Big Noise's support to deliver the CfE. As attested to in the government evaluation of the program carried out in 2011, 'the majority of teachers are not using Big Noise curriculum map to demonstrate

how their class is achieving outcomes through their Big Noise activities' (GEN 2011, p.17).

Despite the fact that residents had not been previously consulted about the implementation of Big Noise (apparently the only involvement was the participation of children in creating the initiative's logo), awareness among them seems high. Nevertheless, the overall community involvement and active participation is more limited, according to the government's evaluation (GEN 2011, p.19). Whatever little communication there was between the community and organizers of Big Noise, it appears to have even decreased since the launch of the program, and probably as a result, the program's activities, aims and objectives are not widely comprehended (GEN 2011, p.54). In the government's evaluation (GEN 2011, p.19), some residents have in fact expressed disappointment with their level of involvement, which could have contributed to the perception among a minority that Big Noise was working in isolation '[...] rather than linking with other community based activities'. Notwithstanding, the government sees no evidence that the lack of community involvement could hinder the achievement of positive results (GEN 2011, p.20). Taking into consideration the social inclusive goal of the program, such a conclusion seems at best precipitate.

### **Sistema Scotland and Its Rationality**

In the crusade to 'transform children lives' and 'empower communities', the role of the symphony orchestra as a pedagogical tool clearly appears central to Sistema Scotland's proposal. As a short-term outcome of its implementation, the program aims at creating accessible and inclusive orchestras based on the El Sistema philosophy. Such 'orchestra-centered' pedagogy, according to the organizers, allows the children to develop social skills, confidence, aspirations and drive, besides nurturing respect, understanding and empathy for one another as well as emotional intelligence. Moreover, it yields new opportunities for the parents and families in general to develop not only confidence and aspirations but also social and parenting skills (GEN 2011, pp.2 & 51). All of which would promote community cohesion as well as the internal and external perception of Raploch.

According to Big Noise, the program's expected long-term goals are aligned with nine of the sixteen National Outcomes established by the Scottish government (GEN 2011, p.5). Although the researchers that carried out the program's evaluation acknowledged that, due to the short period since its implementation, there is no hard evidence yet to support any claim of long-term outcomes, they believe that Big Noise has already been contributing to the National Outcomes, and it could also do more in the future<sup>7</sup> (GEN 2011, p.ii). Moreover, the program's pedagogical proposal has been strategically designed to support the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, which aims at helping to prepare children 'for life in a fast-changing world and a global economy, [...] for jobs that don't yet exist, using technology that hasn't yet been invented, to solve problems we can't yet imagine' (GEN 2011, p.91).

Despite some initial difficulties faced by Big Noise organizers to manage the children's behavior in the beginning of the program's implementation, signs of improvement have been reported in the government's evaluation. Apparently, over forty percent of the parents have noticed a positive change in their children's behavior, a perception also shared by some teachers (GEN 2011, p.34). According to the program's organizers, such improvement is the result of the commitment that Big Noise requires from the children, which provides 'routine and structure outside of school time' (GEN 2011, p.55). In fact, organizers state that some of the common disruptions experienced in the earlier stages, such as parallel conversations among the children, standing up or even attempts from the pupils to get the organizers' attention, seem to no longer be an issue. Nevertheless, disruptions such as these do not seem to be at odds with the expected, healthy behavior among children of this young age, and strict suppression may be highly questionable at this stage.

Notwithstanding, eighty percent of the parents believe that Big Noise has had an impact on their children's discipline as well as their capacity to concentrate (GEN 2011, p.33). In the case studies reported in the government's evaluation, improvement in behavior and concentration were the modifications unanimously

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<sup>7</sup> As stated by the research team, '[m]any of the outcomes and impacts will only be accrued and evidenced in the medium and long term and so the evaluation at this stage can only provide an assessment of the outcomes to date and by using existing research, suggest the anticipated outcomes and impacts for the future' (GEN 2011, p.3).

noted by parents. The attainment of social skills and the enhancement of confidence were also frequently cited. Moreover, according to the evaluation (GEN 2011, p.31), the vast majority of parents, over ninety percent, believe that Big Noise has made their children happier. Such perception has been attributed to the children's enjoyment of the program's activities and should not be generally interpreted as necessarily a lasting attitude due to any significant social changes that have occurred in the community. According to the evaluation (GEN 2011, p.60), the program has not been in place long enough to produce any evidence of social transformation.

It is worth noting that, although Big Noise is essentially a music educational program, the outcomes highlighted in the Scottish government evaluation are not musical achievements. Besides discipline, social skills and concentration, resilience – a capacity so frequently praised by the current cultural dynamic – was also singled out by the government's researchers as a positive change among the children participating in the program. According to social workers involved in the community, building resilience is crucial for children living under chaotic circumstances, and Big Noise is considered to be 'a valuable partner' in helping them to achieve it (GEN 2011, p.35). Notwithstanding that such capacity is indeed important not only to individuals but also to communities, the emphasis devoted to it in the current dominant ideological discourse seems to suggest that the deprived conditions under which excluded groups live is supposedly a result of their incapacity to be resilient. By reversely putting the blame on those communities, the preponderant role played by the logic inherent in the contemporary social rationality is either underestimated or ignored.

The same rationale seemed to be implied in the argument of the sociologist Frank Furedi presented during the annual debate of The Worshipful Company of Musicians, entitled *El Sistema: Will It Translate into English?*. For Furedi (in The Worshipful Company of Musicians 2010), poor people in the United Kingdom are not as eager to overcome their situation as other impoverished communities around the world due to the fact that the condition of poverty in United Kingdom is not as critical as those in other parts of the globe. The severe deprivation found in regions such as Latin American and southern India, still

according to him, ‘stimulates people to become hungry for a different way of life’ (Furedi in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010). Nevertheless, Furedi does believe that programs such as El Sistema may inspire the poor in the United Kingdom to pursue new objectives in their lives. The idea underlying Furedi’s argument appears to be that remaining in poverty is almost a matter of choice; it is, perhaps preponderantly, the lack of drive to overcome their condition which keeps them in such a disadvantaged situation. Again, by opting for this simplistic model, the exclusory mechanisms intrinsic to a specific social rationality are left out from the ‘equation’. Even if communities in the regions pointed out by Furedi did show a greater drive to overcome poverty than others in the United Kingdom, according to recent statistics such effort does not seem to be as effective as some outsiders would like to believe.

Moreover, the same discourse that praises resilience as a ‘survival tool’ for the current cultural dynamic also reinforces the idea of a constant state of achievement as the only path to the ultimate earthly goal of ‘success’ – an idea that permeates many different spheres of contemporary life and is subtly conveyed in a comment by Christina Coker, CEO of Youth Music. Promptly agreeing with the argument that programs modeled after El Sistema may incite communities to strive for excellence and, therefore, ‘succeed’, Coker (in *The Worshipful Company of Musicians* 2010) describes the motivation among children attending such music educational programs as not being ‘[...] about having fun with my mates, but constantly it’s about I want to get better’.

No doubt that setting new goals in life and trying hard to achieve them sounds like a positive attitude. However, overcoming situations like poverty and social exclusion requires much more than simply the individual will to succeed. These situations emerge from a complex rationality by which life in society is conditioned, and they will not be overcome by establishing goals that contribute to the continuance of such rationality. Big Noise, as like other by-products of El Sistema, promptly adheres to this same social rationality by uncritically adopting the contemporary discourse. The recurrent emphatic appeal by Big Noise, as well as of many other El Sistema-like initiatives, to its capacity to instill communities with resilience, discipline, the will to succeed, among other

contemporary 'survival' skills, is an echo of the new pace in life set by the growing demands of productivity and consumption of 'global' capitalism. Evoking aspirations that passively respond to such demands and reaffirm the current rationality does not seem to be the answer for defeating the deprived conditions seen in communities assisted by El Sistema.

### **Brief Overview**

El Sistema was brought to Scotland by Edinburgh's former Bishop, Dr Richard Holloway, who created the charity Sistema Scotland which is responsible for supervising the implementation of the program in different regions of the country. Raploch, a small community in Central Scotland with staggering statistics of deprivation, a resilient stigma and a long history of social exclusion, was chosen for the launch of the El Sistema model in Europe.

Named Big Noise, the initiative aims to replicate the Venezuelan program in Raploch by strictly following its pedagogical proposal. Like its Latin American counterpart, Big Noise is a social program that offers music instruction centered on the Western classical tradition. Despite its flexible methodology, ensemble practice is the core of its pedagogy, and students are trained to join the program's orchestra.

Such focus is justified with the argument that the skills acquired in orchestral practice will contribute to the participants' reintegration into social life. Discipline and resilience are among the skills gained by the participants that will allow them to become productive members of society. Highly idealistic assertions about the transformative power of the orchestra are generally based on the implied supposition of inherent universal qualities of the Western classical tradition, a view also shared by FundaMusical.

Despite some initial friction between organizers and the community caused by the latter's limited participation in the launch and implementation of the program, Big Noise has now become a reality in the lives of the people of Raploch. According to recent research conducted by the Scottish government, some parents as well as some teachers seem to believe that the program has

been having a positive effect on the children's behavior as well as on their performance in school.

However, most importantly for this debate, for the organizers of the Scottish initiative, as with FundaMusical, social inclusion seems to have as a condition coping with ideals of discipline and productivity nurtured in the current social rationality.

#### IV. Subjectivities around El Sistema

As previously pointed out, El Sistema is a program based primarily on the Western classical tradition. Such focus is frequently justified as a legitimate effort to bring ‘good music’ to the masses. However, behind the eloquent rhetoric based on supposed democratic ideals hides a clear elitist perception as is evident in the often repeated slogan ‘the culture for the poor cannot be poor culture’ (Abreu in Mantilla, J.R. 2011). In various public statements about the program made by its organizers and supporters, the Western classical tradition seems to be perceived as a higher form of culture imbued with incontestable universal values. This idea is flagrantly apparent in the view of Juan Carlos Núñez, a conductor and composer as well as an early contributor to El Sistema. As he himself (Núñez in Borzacchini 2010, p.33) explains it, the main challenge since his first involvement with the initiative has been ‘[...] to make players understand that Western music has a set of high standards, and that classical music<sup>8</sup> is nothing but the acceptance of the history of universal music and its inexorable aesthetic rules’. The perception of classical music’s assumed higher status is accompanied by a condescending rhetoric that permeates most of FundaMusical’s discourse and that of its unconditional advocates, as found throughout the book *Venezuela bursting with orchestras*. In it, the author Chefi Borzacchini (2005, p.87) argues that ‘the development of an aesthetic sense’ is among the ‘benevolent’ contributions given by the program to its participants. She explains that:

The sounds of one of Beethoven’s or Mozart’s works, the splendid beauty of the wood and shape of the musical instruments they hold in their hands, the architectural elegance of the theaters and concert halls where they rehearse and perform, and even the sternness of the immaculate wardrobe they must wear at their presentations, all stimulate the development of an acute appreciation of beauty in the boys and girls of the orchestras and give them a taste of aesthetic that will be with them for the rest of their lives. (Borzacchini 2005, p.87)

The same elitist inflection is again present in the words of the world-renowned conductor and contributor of El Sistema Claudio Abbado, for whom the program is an example to the world for offering the poor the opportunity ‘to

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<sup>8</sup> In the original statement, Núñez uses the expression ‘música culta’ (‘highly cultured music’) to refer to Western classical tradition.

learn about a culture and have a *normal life*' (in Borzacchini 2010, p.190, my emphasis). Still according to Abbado, music, besides spiritually enriching the lives of poor children, can turn them into 'better human beings' (in Borzacchini 2010, p.190). In FundaMusical's institutional discourse, as previously argued, the concept of 'music' appears to be primarily linked to Western classical tradition, and as also often suggested, the ideals about life seem in line with the middle-class values symbolically represented by such tradition<sup>9</sup>.

The emphasis on classical music is confirmed by the central role assumed by the symphony orchestra in El Sistema's pedagogical model. In fact, Valdemar Rodríguez (in Borzacchini 2010, p.147), Director of the Conservatorio de Música Simón Bolívar and Sub-Director of FundaMusical, explains that seventy percent of the program's curriculum is dedicated to orchestral practice.

In FundaMusical's discourse, the orchestra is portrayed as an 'ideal of social organization'; as defined by Booth (2010, p.13), 'a community that creates meaning in harmony'. The idealization of the orchestra as such came from the effort to instill a sense of collectivity among orchestra musicians in the late eighteenth century – an attempt intended to relegate every trace of individuality and yield to the common goal of a good performance (Spitzer & Zaslaw 2004, p.394). Moreover, the orchestra's assumed harmonious character, a construct of the same period, resulted from frequent associations between the ensemble and nature, seen as being imbued with a sublime condition.

Abreu sees the program's symphony orchestras as 'creative spaces wherein new personal and social meanings are constructed' (*Jose Antonio Abreu: The El Sistema Music Revolution* 2009). In fact, in FundaMusical's discourse the web of meanings around the orchestra are renegotiated more in line with contemporary ideology and confirmed as universal values. This holds true again in a statement by Eric Booth (2010, p.13), for whom participating in the orchestra 'gives us a location [...] inside eternal truths and aspirations'.

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<sup>9</sup> The Scottish government evaluation of Big Noise provides as evidence of 'changing and growing aspirations in some of the children' the participant's desire to have 'a big house and two cars' (GEN 2011, p.32).

Ensemble practice is associated with goals that closely resonate with the demands emerged from the dynamic of 'global' capitalism.<sup>10</sup> For instance, Esteban Araujo (in Borzacchini 2010, p.107), an attorney and cultural manager that collaborates with El Sistema, sees orchestral training as being about 'teamwork, discipline and goal achievement in a collect environment'. Sharing Araujo's views, the Director of the Caribbean financial institution Bancaribe and President of the Asociación Civil Sinfónica Juvenil e Infantil de Venezuela, Edgar Alberto Dao (in Borzacchini 2010, p.213), highlights discipline, order, responsibility as well as planning as among El Sistema's virtues.

Words such as 'discipline', 'order' and 'responsibility', frequently used to confer a positive image to the program, mirror the common language of contemporary corporate culture. It is not a mere coincidence that analogies between El Sistema and current management strategies are often made. As the sociologist Túlio Hernández (in Borzacchini 2010, p.101) explains, since its beginning El Sistema has adopted a non-vertical network organizational model, which has also been adopted by the most dynamic, social organizations. According to Miguel Ignacio Purroy (in Borzacchini 2010, p.5), President of Bancaribe, the program's success is a result of its foundation on an indispensable network of actions similar to every enterprise whether artistic, financial or social. Moreover, for Purroy (in Borzacchini 2010, p.3), such success is not a miracle but '[...] the wonderful combination of the musical talent of the Venezuelan people, the limitless vision of *maestro* José Antonio Abreu, the establishment of values that provided a sense to the project together with its

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<sup>10</sup> The dynamic referred to above evolved from a new regime of accumulation that started to be implemented in the 1970s as the core of the neoliberal agenda. It is generally characterized by a flexible system of production 'with its emphasis upon problem solving, rapid and often highly specialized responses, and adaptability of skills to special purposes' (Harvey 2006, p.155). Yet, such dynamic, with the support of new technological advancements, aims at ideals of social performance which require a high state of alert from individuals, setting the pace of the current culture of immediacy. The fact that institutional policies supporting such a dynamic have also been adopted by administrations not identified as neoliberal as a supposed demonstration of governmental virtue should not give way to generalizations that suggest that the current dynamic is part of a plural, consensual, political agenda. Due to the focus, as well as size limitation of this thesis, a thorough debate on the question of social discipline in contemporary culture is not viable. For a deeper discussion on this matter, I suggest: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Marta Harnecker, *Haciendo Posible lo Imposible, La Izquierda en el Umbral del Siglo XXI* (Seiten: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1999); and Maria Rita Kehl, *O Tempo e o Cão – A Atualidade das Depressões* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2009).

organization based on clear relations of discipline, order, division of work and defined goals to be achieved’.

Another political element is evident in Purroy’s aforementioned statement. The praising of Venezuelans’ supposed ‘natural’ talent, often brought up by the program’s organizers and supporters, sets a nationalist tone that reverberates throughout FundaMusical’s discourse. Often professed appeals to an assumed musical ‘nature’ with which Venezuelans are said to be imbued seems to aim at stirring nationalist sentiments and motivate general support for the program. Such a tone, however, appears to be part of a much broader agenda; one that does not necessarily respond to the immediate needs of the general, local population.

El Sistema’s acclaimed success, which despite the program’s primary goal of social inclusion is legitimized by the musical accomplishment of a select number of former students who have made it into the exclusive circle of classical music, such as Gustavo Dudamel and Edicson Ruiz, is portrayed as a national achievement. Bewilderingly perceived as a sign of collective advancement, such achievement is advertised as a model for attaining peace through tolerance and inclusion.

Yet, behind these high ideals lies the much more pragmatic goal of world ‘progress and excellence’ (Borzacchini 2010, p.48). Invested with a positivist inflection, such a goal in reality aligns itself with a ‘global’ agenda that emphasizes high levels of social and self-discipline as a response to the demand for productivity which has emerged in the past thirty years or so. This dynamic is again symbolically represented by the symphony orchestra which, in the discourse of FundaMusical, becomes a metaphor for the country’s determination towards ‘progress’. For instance, in the view of Bancaribe’s director, Edgar Alberto Dao (in Borzacchini 2010, p.213), Venezuela must be ‘in tune’, with all of its citizens united around a single goal as in an orchestra.

Moreover, El Sistema’s ‘ensemble-all-the-time’ methodology is seen by Dao as teaching humility and responsibility besides discipline. Once again, past meanings attached to the symphonic ensemble seem to be renegotiated within

current terms: Order and discipline, constructs around the eighteenth-century orchestra that closely spoke to absolutist values such as social hierarchy and deference, work together with the ideals of participation and social solidarity, in line with the social values of individual initiative and responsibility only later linked to the modern ensemble (Spitzer & Zaslaw 2004, p.530). In fact, both individual initiative and collective effort are regarded as the orchestra's highest goals – an attempt to legitimize the program's pedagogical proposal according to currently nurtured cultural values. Moreover, the idea of the symphony orchestra as a social dynamic model that instills its participants with the capacity to overcome adversities, as suggested by Borzacchini (2010, p.7), also sounds in accordance with contemporary corporate human resources 'manuals'. Even more in sync with today's corporate culture are some of the main benefits claimed to be yielded by El Sistema. Besides learning discipline and developing a nationalist sense, competitiveness, leadership, excellence, perseverance, tenacity, as well as the capacity to set and achieve goals, are among the skills said to be gained by the program's pupils (Borzacchini 2010, pp.96-97). All of which makes them, according to FundaMusical, 'happier citizens'.

El Sistema's ideological inclination is not the only reason behind its overwhelming support and acclamation; economic interests also play an important role in this case. El Sistema has not only been marketed as Venezuela's major cultural asset but it has also been praised by the classical music industry as the future of the genre. For the world-renowned conductor Sir Simon Rattle (in Borzacchini 2010, p.40), the El Sistema movement in Venezuela represents 'a true resurrection of symphonic music'. The long list of prizes awarded to the program indeed suggests that such a perception is shared by both the music business as well as by a number of international government cultural institutions. The unanimous approval among the classical music community seems in fact to be an attempt to bring such tradition back to life from the nearly moribund state that it has been in for the past few decades. The image of a South American country 'bursting' with youth symphony orchestras, as often portrayed in FundaMusical's discourse, has perhaps fed the industry's imagination with the hope of a classical music revival.

However, aside from political discourses and market-oriented goals, factors of a more subjective nature appear to also play an important role in legitimizing the program. It must not be forgotten that the general perception of classical music is mediated by certain values held dearly by our society, which are symbolically reenacted during a concert (Small 1998). The web of symbolic meanings conveyed in the ritual of symphonic performance is insightfully described by José Miguel Wisnik in his book *O Som e o Sentido*.

The inviolability of the written score, the horror of making mistakes, the exclusive use of melodically tuned instruments, the silence demanded from the audience, all makes one hear traditional erudite music as representative of a sonorous drama of melodic-harmonic tones within a chamber of silence, wherein noise would ideally be excluded (the bourgeois concert theater turned out to be this chamber of representation). Such representation depends on the possibility of enclosing a universe of sense within a visible frame, a box of verisimilitude that must be, in the case of music, separated from the paying audience, and ringed in silence. The (free) admission of noise in such a concert would create a continuum between the sonorous scene and the external world that would threaten such representation and would endanger the socially located cosmos in which it [the representation] is practiced (the bourgeois world), where the admission of conflict with the condition of being harmonically resolved is enacted through the constant movement of tension and repose articulated by the tonal cadences. (Wisnik 1989, pp.42-43)

In such a ritual, as Small explains it, ideal relationships are enacted to reaffirm a specific type of social organization. These relationships – resulting from different forms of interactions established between all the participants, as well as between them and the whole apparatus involved in the making of the spectacle – are sustained by an economy of values and beliefs that are shared in Western culture and present in every aspect of the musical happening. Therefore, the reenactment of idealized social relations during a Western classical concert signifies, for Small, the reiteration of the dominant values found in industrialized societies. A valuable remark to our debate is added by Small (1998, pp.36-37) in support of his argument:

In countries outside the industrial heartland of Europe and the United States of America, an early sign that the conversion to the industrial philosophy and the social relationships that belong to it has taken place and become interiorized is often the takeover of the country's musical culture by Western-style musicking. As the relationships of industrial society take over and a middle class develops that has grown prosperous on

the wealth generated by industry, so professional symphony orchestras appear in the major cities, along with opulent centers for the performing arts built to house their performances.

Although El Sistema has tried to keep its image disassociated from any class boundaries by emphasizing the discourse of ‘democratizing classical music’, the program was originally a middle-class initiative, as pointed out by Gloria Carnevali during The Worshipful Company of Musicians Annual Debate (2010a). Notwithstanding its class origins, FundaMusical has been fairly successful in forging a broad national identity, at least in the eyes of the international community, which has perhaps contributed to the program’s ability to endure several government administrations from different political spectra. Such effort to imbue the program with a national character is implied in Abreu’s discourse (in Borzacchini 2010, p.60), according to which El Sistema’s achievements reveal Venezuela as an instance of ‘success, excellence and future’. However, among such achievements meritocracy is highlighted as a means to overcome adversities through constant effort and discipline.

Not so surprisingly, the symphony orchestra is again brought out as a clear example of the ‘democratic exercise in a society’ (Lanz in Borzacchini 2010, p. 101). Although the perception of the orchestra as a democratic environment seems in clear disaccord with studies about the social structure of the symphonic institution, Igor Lanz (in Borzacchini 2010, p.101), a former director of FundaMusical, associates such idea of democracy to a supposed meritocratic attitude nurtured within the ensemble’s dynamic. Yet, again according to the program, meritocracy is presented as the country’s path to progress (Borzacchini 2010, p.60). Such discourse, nevertheless, seems to evoke ideals of individual entrepreneurship and ‘social’ development in liberal democracy. Contemporary political jargon pervades the program’s discourse, and such neoliberal inflection appears even more blatant with the attribution of El Sistema’s success to the partnership established between both public and private initiatives as made by the President of Bancaribe Ignacio Purroy (in Borzacchini 2010, p.5). Purroy sees the program’s efficacy as much a result of its contemporary management structure as of the alliance between the private sector, the State and the people of Venezuela. Purroy (in Borzacchini 2010, p.5) explains ‘the first two as

incontestable and unconditional sources of support for the orchestras’, and the third, the people, incorporate the structure of this type of peculiar civil society that is consolidated into the participants of El Sistema’. Curiously, Purroy (in Borzacchini 2010, p.5) closes his argument by stating that such a triple alliance shatters any mythology that refers to the idea of indiscipline and inconsistency among the Venezuelan people, the resistance of the private sector to get involved in anything that does not necessarily yield monetary profit, and the impossibility of a respectful and productive association between the latter and the State.

Moreover, reasserting this rhetoric, the orchestra is portrayed by Abreu (in Borzacchini 2010, p.60) as ‘the most beautiful expression of national unity’.

Thus in such a discourse, the symbolic meaning that legitimized the symphony orchestra as ‘the most important foundation of the unified elite within musical life’ in the second half of the nineteenth century – when the ensemble no longer represented just ‘[...] an aggregation of individuals making music in parallel’ but ‘a single social unity, audibly and visibly acting as a group’, and ‘[o]rchestral discipline functioned both as a means to an end, the successful performance of ensemble music, and as an end in itself, a demonstration of the power of social unity’ (Weber 1975, p.44) – is reclaimed by contemporary liberal values.

The nationalist tone in FundaMusical’s discourse together with the neoliberal rhetoric suggests Venezuela’s readiness to respond to the ‘ever-changing circumstances of the modern world’. A response that, according to the same rhetoric, demands high levels of discipline, resilience, competitiveness, leadership, excellence, perseverance and tenacity, all of which are supposedly provided to the population of the country’s deprived *barrios* by the orchestra program. Such portrayal of Venezuela as being in line with the demands of the contemporary social dynamic seems to function as an attempt to guarantee the country’s seat in the hall of the so-called ‘developing countries’, integrated into the ‘globalized’ world, despite the Government’s repeated calls for a ‘21st century socialism’.

### **Brief Overview**

This chapter discussed the subjective constructions in FundaMusical's institutional discourse and questioned the political inflection in such discourse.

The emphasis on classical music in the Venezuelan program seems to be explained by a clear elitist perception about the genre. In FundaMusical's discourse as well as in the comments of some contributors, such musical tradition is perceived as a higher form of art imbued with universal values. The same rationale seems to legitimize the importance given to ensemble playing. Orchestral performance is seen as the reenactment of these values and is believed to instill the participants with them. Such values are understood as being fundamental skills for participation in society and acquiring them will give the participants a better chance to overcome poverty and social exclusion.

However, a certain political rhetoric permeates FundaMusical's discourse. The skills supposedly provided by the program resonate with a political discourse in which ideals of both individual behavior and social performance are promoted in response to a specific rationality. In the effort to link the orchestra with values nurtured in the current social dynamic, subjective constructions that conferred artistic and institutional legitimacy to the ensemble in the past are renegotiated in the discourse of FundaMusical and its contributors in accordance to contemporary cultural terms. Discipline, resilience, teamwork capacity, responsibility, entrepreneurialism and leadership, some of the skills supposedly acquired by the participants, are seen as an El Sistema-given pass out of deprivation.

It has also been suggested in the current chapter that El Sistema's political ability to endure different national governments throughout so many years of existence could perhaps be explained by the frequent association between its success stories and the country's identity. FundaMusical's solid structure together with its fast-paced expansion are frequently presented as national accomplishments. El Sistema is then generally perceived as being among the country's most important cultural assets. The association of the program's

success with the country's image, however, seems to corroborate a broader political agenda.

The reiterated image of Venezuela 'bursting with orchestras' that instill new generations with skills praised by the global market dynamic suggests an attempt to portray a nation resolutely in line with liberal values.

## Conclusion

Acknowledging the importance of music in an individual's development and the difficulty had by some in accessing music education, it seems hard to argue against an initiative that offers such an opportunity to underprivileged communities and other excluded social groups. Even so, a few points about the implementation of the El Sistema model in Raploch must still be critically addressed.

It seems unquestionable that since its creation El Sistema has not only established a bold structure for its project but has also continuously expanded it over the years. The creation of initiatives aiming to assist physically and psychologically impaired children and adolescents as well as incarcerated populations must indeed be acknowledged as a positive effort. The professional opportunities made available by the *núcleos* and orchestras to its former pupils are without a doubt a sign of the program's firm commitment to some of its goals.

Although it also seems unquestionable that throughout its existence El Sistema has been able to train high quality musicians, who in some instances became young stars in the selective business of classical music, there seems to be, in this specific case, a tendency to inflate such results by generalizing them. Even though the percentage of these successful examples in comparison to the millions of students that have attended the program in the past thirty years or so has not been found in any of the many articles, books, documents and websites consulted for this research, from the number of names listed by FundaMusical it does not seem that such outcome could in fact be the norm.

Notwithstanding, El Sistema's priority is not as much about forming highly trained instrumentalists as it is about 'saving lives'. The Venezuelan program is primarily a social inclusive initiative. Yet, such instances of unquestionable musical accomplishment are claimed by FundaMusical as successful outcomes of the program's social inclusive agenda. However, no available data comparing social backgrounds with professional ascendancy has been found in the course of this research. Furthermore, up to now there have been no empirical studies on the rate of participants that have in fact overcome poverty as a result of being

part of the program. Instead, past research carried out by the Universidad de los Andes with the support of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) focused exclusively on the behavioral changes detected in El Sistema's beneficiaries (Xiomara A. et al. 2012). The same appears to be the case in a new study being conducted by the IDB aimed at providing 'empirical, quantitative evidence about the impact of the model with regard to children's skills, behaviors, and connections' (Xiomara A. et al. 2012).<sup>11</sup> Even so, El Sistema continues to assert that it promotes upward class mobility, an achievement often referred to as the 'Venezuelan miracle'.

Such lack of precise information about El Sistema's accomplishments may contribute to a false impression of social mobility, which in this case is the product of a misleading perception that membership in a social group or class is determined by individual 'natural' talent or competence. This perception, however, ignores the total compatibility between '[...] a controlled mobility of a limited category of individuals carefully selected and adapted by and for individual ascension [...]' and the conservation of the social structure (Bourdieu in Borchert 2009, p.169).

Another important point to be addressed in this conclusion is El Sistema's methodological choice. The idea that music gives 'a sense to life' by promoting 'freedom and creative possibilities' (Purroy in Borzacchini 2010, p.4) clashes with the program's emphasis on Western symphonic tradition. Freedom and creativity are not top priorities in the professional routine of an orchestra player. In the modernist ideal of orchestral performance matured at the turn of the twentieth century and in great part nurtured in symphonic music nowadays, individuality yields to goals of collective achievement. Individual interpretation is most frequently subjected to the conductor's approval, and open disagreement is usually perceived as insubordination. Subjectivities such as the composer's true intent as represented in the abstract 'work of art' and materialized in the score through the tonal dynamic of harmonic tension and

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11 There is no room in the current debate for a thorough discussion about the possible efficacious methods to measure the results claimed by El Sistema. Suffice it to say that making people more disciplined does not necessarily prove El Sistema's success as an initiative for social inclusion nor as an art program. Moreover, why should the skills promoted by El Sistema be a prerequisite for social inclusion?

resolution permeate much of the symphonic performance by sustaining ideals of fidelity, accuracy, uniformity, precision and excellence. They play into an economy of values that provide the foundation for the orchestra's strict hierarchy in which the figure of the omniscient *maestro*, the 'living embodiment of law' (Canetti 1962, p.396), sits at the top. Moreover, they conform to the constructs of universality, objectivity, time linearity and efficiency in Western dominant ideology.

Such constructs pervade much of FundaMusical's discourse nourishing ideals of discipline and productivity, which are misleadingly portrayed by the program as passes out of poverty. The complex causes of deprivation and social exclusion are reduced to a lack of discipline and low productivity. By adhering to such a simplification its pedagogical model seeks legitimacy by claiming that it has the capacity to 'modify' people to promptly respond to contemporary social demands. This is indeed suggested in a comment by David Holt, a sponsor of Sistema New Brunswick and President of Modern Enterprise Ltd., for whom 'in the long-term *Sistema* [New Brunswick] will help create a better quality of workforce in our province [...]' (Sistema New Brunswick c. 2009).

Still regarding El Sistema's pedagogy, there seems to be a consensus among the program and other initiatives modeled after it about the 'transformative power' of symphonic music. However, this idea is brought into the community based on the intentions and expectations of the organizers; the community itself is excluded from participating in such decision-making processes. The idea that program knows what is better for such communities seems to be deeply rooted in the imaginary of the organization. Such a paternalist attitude is further suggested in the discourse of the different levels within the organization, from the administrative structure to the music professionals that work directly with the participants.

For instance, according to the Inter-American Development Bank proposal (2007, p.10), El Sistema, besides developing human capital, training people in civic values and good behavior, and creating future employment opportunities, is also said to offer '[...] alternatives for the non-criminal use of free time among its beneficiaries'. The suggestion that free time in those communities could

potentially trigger crime seems to imply an inclination among the poor towards anti-social behavior. It ignores severe social deprivation as a force behind criminality. By doing so, such discourse understands crime to be primarily a question of a moral flaw. Such lack of morality is attributed to supposed weak values held by those impoverished communities. This idea falls in line with contemporary subjectivities that tend to criminalize the poor and feed the logic that reverses the blame onto the victim. However, the idea of free time as being a catalyst to crime appears to be part of a broader rationale based on a certain notion of productivity.

El Sistema's paternalism is not just limited to its institutional discourse but is also clear in the declarations of heavy-weight contributors such as Sir Simon Rattle. Explaining his involvement with the initiative, the world-renowned conductor states that he 'came to tell them not only what music says and looks like, but *what it means* [...]' (in Borzacchini 2005, p.168, my emphasis). In Rattle's statement, 'music' seems to be narrowly defined within the boundaries of Western classical tradition. Also, it appears to assume that such communities either do not have their own musical tradition or would not be capable of creating one. Furthermore, classical music is perceived as a form of high cultural capital that lies beyond the capacity of those poor communities to establish their own relationship with it, to apprehend it and make sense out of it according to their own world views. In this light, classical music becomes a cultural asset that is bestowed upon the 'uncultured'.

For El Sistema and its organizers, the classical tradition is indeed such an asset. However, music is not seen as an end in itself; it is not valued as a way for individuals to express themselves by exercising their free creativity, as a mean to simply experiment with their senses and imagination. Rather, music, which in this context is narrowed down to orchestral practice, becomes an instrument to develop specific social skills believed by the program to be fundamental for participation in society. As such, it is essential that it be democratized across the globe; its mission

[...] transcends the horizons of aesthetic values and projects itself with growing intensity to cover, with complete and vital domination, everything

from the integral humanistic shaping of the personality to the complete insertion of the child and the youth, through their artistic development into constructive, fruitful and upwardly-mobile social life [...]. (Abreu in Borzacchini 2005, p.5)

Yet, there appears to be a fairly high toll on the path to ‘constructive, fruitful and upwardly-mobile social life’. In order to take hold of their own future, children and adolescents must accept ‘the discipline imposed by music’ (Borzacchini 2005, p.144). While no one would argue contrary to the fact that discipline is indeed an important skill in many instances of life, the concept must be understood from the standpoint of FundaMusical’s rationale which embraces a strong neoliberal rhetoric that responds to the current social dynamic. Emerged from the rationality of the ‘global’ market, such dynamic requires, in general, a high state of readiness from individuals to respond to the new patterns of production and consumption. FundaMusical reiterates this rhetoric in its discourse, in which adjusting to the actual dynamic is suggested as the currency needed to escape poverty. By doing so, it delivers a political message according to which conformity to the neoliberal rationality is an implied condition for social inclusion.

The small community of Raploch has not been spared from this dynamic, which combined with its long history of poverty and exclusion appears to have worsened the life of its inhabitants. The implementation of the *núcleo* Big Noise by the charity Sistema Scotland is an attempt to address such an aggravated situation. However, can the El Sistema model really help change Raploch’s reality?

As pointed out by Professor Douglas Robertson (2012), the positive profile put forth by the initiative has been attached to community, which could possibly improve its image. Moreover, Robertson understands that the idea of introducing a classical music program into Raploch could challenge some stereotypical as well as class oriented assertions involving the participation of a lower social stratum in an elite cultural *métier*. Still according to him, if Big Noise succeeds in producing high quality orchestral musicians, such outcome could have a positive impact on the community’s young people, and thus, Raploch’s identity.

It is indeed hard to predict any outcome at this point. Nevertheless, the initiative does not seem to tackle from a realistic standpoint the roots of the problems which the community has experienced for generations. It is highly idealistic to believe that a long history of deprivation enhanced by a new 'global' rationality could be effectively addressed by just providing free music education to the population. This, in fact, seems to be somewhat acknowledged by its organizers despite unfounded justifications based on an ideal of beauty and its supposed healing effects.

It is not the objective of this work to provide definite answers about the implementation of the El Sistema model in the Raploch community. However, El Sistema's pedagogical proposal together with its institutional discourse raises serious concerns. Universal claims about the 'beauty of orchestral music' and 'its importance' to poor communities help to mask a much more pragmatic rhetoric about the orchestra as '[...] a natural place for self-discipline and communal discipline' (Sistema Scotland 2012a). The emphasis on the disciplining power of El Sistema's pedagogy resonates with the common trend in current culture towards methods of behavior modification. The growing number of self-help books, managerial manuals and alternative therapies that aim at making people adjust to the 'ever-changing circumstances of the modern world', together with the proliferation of psychoactive drugs frequently used to tame children's moods in classrooms in countries across the world, have been pointed out by psychologists, sociologists, social scientists, among many other professionals from different areas, as responses to the new demands of social production. The overwhelming, uncritical embrace of El Sistema in the United Kingdom and around the world suggests conformity with the dominant political agenda, which has led to astonishing rates of wealth concentration and driven large numbers of individuals into poverty around the globe.

In light of what has been presented herein, a critical question must be posed for further reflection: Is El Sistema truly a social inclusive initiative that could help deprived populations around the globe, or is it a subjectivity of discipline emerged from the dynamic of contemporary capitalism?

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