

# El Sistema's Open Secrets

By Eric Booth, April 2010

On my first trip to observe El Sistema, I was dazzled by the sheer enormity, astonishing quality, vibrant joy and aliveness, and mind-boggling implications of this accomplishment in Venezuela. After a week, my jaw muscles ached from so much dropping, my brain was exhausted from surfacing so many questions and processing so many observations, and my heart and spirit were soaring. I discovered that the talk I had heard from El Sistema enthusiasts was not hype. I found a deep affirmation for my belief (almost buried by decades of difficulty and disappointment) in the life-transformative power of the arts. I launched my commitment to extend the power and potential of this achievement in Venezuela to young people elsewhere, without losing its core essential truths, even though the embodiment of these core truths may be inconvenient and challenging in different cultures.

During my recent second weeklong experience of El Sistema, nearly two years later, the enormity of its accomplishments loomed larger, some of its fundamentals grew clearer, and its power grew less explicable. The observations were deeper; the questions more confounding; and the implications more challenging. I left roiling around in a sense of “mystery” because I was struck by how much their teaching and learning practices resemble those practiced in good youth orchestra work around the U.S.—how can teaching practices that are not remarkably different produce such different results? This conundrum has prompted me to inquire into the less evident aspects of the work that lead to results so powerful and pervasive.

I often hear people attribute the success of El Sistema to the nature of the Venezuelan culture and the “character” of its people, if there is such a generalizable set of traits. Since the program has grown in this particular soil, I am sure there are many truths of this kind, and I do see some of those personality features embodied in their teachers: exuberant energy, emotional expressiveness, and vibrant physicality in everything they do. These traits pour new energy into classical music and give their touring orchestras the distinctively communicative power that earns fervent fans all around the world. I was fascinated to discover on this second trip that they don't teach students to move physically when they play, they merely allow it to emerge from the priority of emotional connection to the music. The result over 35 years is orchestras that move like schools of fish, in the flow of the music and the aliveness of creating something life-essential together. There is power in these “Venezuelan” traits—students in U.S. El Sistema programs seem as electrified in occasions of work with Venezuelan El Sistema conductors, particularly lit up by their passion and drive, as Venezuelan kids are. These embodied priorities may be the genesis of the passion-precedes-precision approach to developing technique that I and others have written about elsewhere.

However, while these cultural traits may be true and influential in the success of El Sistema, they are not the sole or even primary elements. Kids in El Sistema-related programs around the world, in Latin American as well as U.S.

and European cultures, are beginning to engage well in their cultural soils, probably as well as Venezuelan kids did 35 years ago. So, let's admit, admire and delight in those national character traits that nurtured the growth of this worldwide phenomenon, and take on the challenge and opportunity of cultivating those seeds in other national soils. And let's not accept the dismissive view sometimes aired that success of this kind is possible only in a relatively homogeneous culture such as Venezuela's (or throughout Latin America's, or Finland's or Scotland's). Heterogeneous cultures (such as the U.S.) have different but equally rich advantages to be tapped. That is part of the opportunity that awaits us as we bring the Venezuelan discoveries to life in our young people's lives.

In writing elsewhere, others and I have identified key aspects of El Sistema's success: The intensity of the work (including the sheer number of hours they involve kids, the intensity of the focus during those working hours, and the number of years of involvement). The quality and duration of student attention, and the force and durability of the motivation throughout that intensity. The start in early years and elegant transition into instruments and notation, all with an "ensemble" focus. The inclusion of family and community. The immediacy of the examples of success. The frequency of performing. The balance of personal emotional connection and focus on technique. The use of peer teaching and teachers in various roles. Those elements invite detailed analysis in order to support the discovery of success in other cultures, and the Abreu Fellows, scholars, researchers, and writers are delving into that work for the benefit of us all.

But there are other, less visible attributes of the Sistema which may be of equal or even greater significance. These are the philosophical and almost-spiritual elements of the program that grow clearer in my reflection and two years of fascinated study and musings on this most significant arts-learning program in the world. It should be no surprise that philosophical and spiritual factors hold the key to El Sistema's success, since Dr. Abreu articulates and prioritizes these elements every time he speaks.

This essay focuses on the less visible attributes for three reasons. 1) They fascinate me. 2) They hold the deep power of El Sistema that we must tap if we wish to bring its transformative power to our children's lives. Copying the pedagogy and curriculum alone will not produce the transformative power of El Sistema in other countries. 3) They offer a direct challenge to our traditional Western music traditions. If we do not address these subsurface essentials, we build new structures on old foundations, foundations that have proven to have serious limitations that El Sistema has surmounted.

The truly radical promise of El Sistema is that it invites a rediscovery of the purposes and processes of classical music. As our field in the U.S. struggles to find the relevance of classical music to more than the small "arts club" percentage of our populace, El Sistema proposes answers that can change not only the life trajectories of our at-risk children, but the trajectory of our at-risk arts culture. One statement I sometimes witness in the U.S. makes my blood run cold. As some hear about how the program works in Venezuela, they say, "We already do that." No we don't. We do many things that look very similar to the teaching and learning practices in Venezuela. This essay hopes to illuminate

what it is they are doing that is *not* what we already do, and what it is we must humbly, patiently commit ourselves to learn.

In this essay, I propose four ways in which El Sistema gains its power from less visible factors and wisdom accrued in its 35 years. I will stint an obvious and delicious element of encountering El Sistema—articulating its enormous accomplishments. Others are doing this, and doing it better than I can. The accomplishments seemed more astonishing on this second trip: the mind-boggling quality of the playing at every level, the power of the student engagement and ownership of their learning, the effectiveness and inclusiveness of the learning atmosphere, the impact on families and community, the transformative influence on young people's lives, the vitality and innovative nature of a 35-year-old institution and its many players, the clarity and intensity of focus on the most important issues, the sheer vastness of the whole endeavor. I was touched to witness extraordinarily high quality listening everywhere I turned—from the way teachers communicate (often wordlessly and in complete alignment) with each other, to the near-constant full attention and quick response of students, to the to universal presence of empathy, curiosity and play. I often write imploringly about these learning and life necessities in U.S. education and the arts, while in Venezuela's El Sistema, they were on constant display as ordinary norms. I hope my chosen focus for this essay does not diminish the reader's awe at the quality and consequence of these accomplishments.

Here is a bullet point introduction to four under-the-surface aspects of El Sistema that give it such power. Following this list, I will unpack each of the four elements and describe why each is so potent and how each one challenges those who seek to plant the effectiveness of Venezuela's El Sistema in other soil. I follow these four separate (but not discrete) ideas with one perspective that brings them all together.

- Sustaining the dynamic tension between polarities.
- The inquiry of continual improvement.
- Embodying the mission—80% of what you teach is who you are.
- The power of beauty, craft and community.

### **1. Sustaining the dynamic tension between polarities.**

Psychologists tell us that people do not engage in acts of creativity from only the logical-processing parts of the brain, nor only from of the analogical (metaphoric) parts of the brain—we are creative only when both parts of the brain are concurrently active. We engage in creative work only with a kind of dynamic tension between seemingly opposed parts of ourselves.

Similarly, I find many aspects of artistic work involve a dynamic involvement of two seemingly opposite aspects. The great 20<sup>th</sup> century physicist David Bohm said, "Any time you see seeming polarities, look for the greater truth that contains them both." Artmaking lives in that greater truth, and El

Sistema has managed to make that dynamic balancing act a part of their institutional practice.

I recall a psychological research study some years ago, with a group of visual artists. Some were commissioned to make works of art, and there was testing of what kind of impact larger and smaller sums of commission money had, and what different kinds of commissions, and what no commissions at all seemed to do. They found that well-funded commissions prompted work that was less successful and creative than work made with no commission. And they found that the best work was made by artists who were commissioned with less than large sums, but who found that the commission requirements sparked them to do new or challenging work they wouldn't have done otherwise. Tension of seeming opposites—the “structure” of a commission with some requirements vs. the freedom that seems to produce better work. And yet, when these two energies work synergistically, you get the best work. That seems part of the reason El Sistema thrives—the active balance between opposing forces.

For example, the arts live in the ongoing tension between freedom and structure. We find in every nucleo that there is a lively balance between structure and customization. Administrators can describe the general structures of their program, and then they tell you that they violate their rules often when it benefits a child. For example they have age/skill guidelines for moving students up to a more challenging orchestra, but sometimes they will just move a kid up who isn't ready because they think it will stimulate his learning. They report having a standard set of pieces they play, and then tell you that they will take on new works if that particular group of kids seems interested in something else. When I asked about this, the answer was always about what is best for the children. Like the artist with a clear vision, who uses the freedom-structure balance to create the best work, the universal and highest goal to develop the whole child allows El Sistema educators to use their freedom and structure flexibly to fulfill their mission. In all big institutions, we create policies and practices to make things work; I have never seen an organization so ready to prioritize the needs of any given child over its standard way of doing business. There is an improvisational feel to the work, a pride in continual re-discovery of how to do things as they go. Dr. Abreu refers to this as “being/not being,” the soul of the enterprise. This continual rediscovery of how to do things provides healthy aliveness with the balance of a structure the kids can rely on; “Guests are here! — so let's do a performance.” Or “Our trumpet teacher is out today, so let's learn together without a teacher... Wait, an American trumpet player just entered, let's learn from him.” Each nucleo has a learning sequence and structure, and they willingly set it aside when a good opportunity for an intensive arises (a special guest is coming, a particular piece is going to be performed in a short time and must be mastered fast), and everything stops and the intensive takes over the nucleo. As Maria Guinand says, “We plan extensively, so we can improvise well.” As Dr. Abreu says, “We believe a certain level of chaos is important for us.” I confess I am not sure all his administrators welcome the norms of chaos that Maestro Abreu enjoys, but they all go with the flow of it as an intentional part of their constantly-growing endeavor.

This same tension exists not only within each nucleo but also on the national level—there is a national structure and sequence to the learning program, and a kind of national curriculum, and yet the way it is adhered to,

adjusted, owned at each nucleo creates a vitality at the local level as they make choices that matter to them, and at the regional and national level as there is heterogeneity contributing the best ideas to the uber-endeavor they share. It is a truism from research that the greater the number and heterogeneity of the members of a group working on a problem, the greater the creative result.

Another fascinating pair of seemingly contradictory aspirations: the equity and excellence goals. This juxtaposition confounds American arts educators as they seem to preclude one another in practice here: 1) transform the lives of hundreds of thousands of at-risk young people through music, regardless of their abilities, location or background, and 2) develop youth orchestras that perform at, or above, the highest standards in the world. In the U.S., we almost despair at the difficulty of achieving excellence in breadth and depth at the same time. But the Venezuelan Sistema has created a synergistic co-existence between the child-development goals and the "high arts" goals.

Within the national embrace of El Sistema, they have an embedded "Academy" system, within which the most talented and musically motivated can participate to accelerate their development. Outside Caracas, the conservatory impulse may mean little more than precious private lessons for the most motivated students; yet this impulse funnels top talent toward conservatory tracks with extra lessons, and a conservatory like training in Caracas after they complete their high school years. It is comprised of a number of components, and brings students from all over the country to Caracas to delve deeply into the high-achievement track. But even these top students do not become self-absorbed careerists depleting energy from the nationally inclusive endeavor—Gustavo Dudamel and Edicson Ruiz, their two most illustrious graduates, return regularly to teach and coach and work within both the nucleo and academy systems. This is the norm—success in the Academy track feeds expertise back into the "whole nation" track. This healthy and ongoing interplay of the two systems keeps them feeding one another, suffused with one another's strengths.

I see the dynamic interplay of seemingly opposed aspirations in the ensemble-all-the-time pedagogy, and the individual lessons that are prized. Students' identity as musicians is with the group. An Abreu Fellow asked a series of students in one nucleo the intentionally ambiguous question, "How long have you been playing?" Every child answered in relation to the orchestra they were in, not in regards to themselves as individuals—"I have been with the city orchestra for three years," rather than, "I have been playing flute for seven years." And yet, I heard tales of remote nucleos in which students will drive all night in order to get a private lesson. The passion in their motivation thrives in the dynamic interplay of precious opportunities of private instruction within the ensemble identity.

I see the dynamism of seemingly opposed directions in the musical choices. Everyone "knows" El Sistema is a "classical music" program; and yet, there is a lively presence of folk and popular music, even jazz appears in some places. Also, many new Latin American composers are composing hybrid music that defies category and fits with El Sistema processes. El Sistema is alive with music people love, that is the greater goal, and this makes it both a classical music program and, equally truthfully, a many-kinds-of-music program.

This pattern of success *because of* rather than *in spite of* the dynamic interplay of opposing tendencies is an open secret of El Sistema's success, and vitality over the course of decades. This presents a challenge to us in the U.S. Our culture tends (for a variety of reasons, including preferences of funders) to pull programs and organizations toward a clear single identity, while multiple agendas, and ambiguous tension between them is considered bad organizational practice. And yet, many, probably most, of the excellent arts and arts education organizations I have worked with have had a rich complexity to their endeavor, finding a way to make seeming contradictions work to take them more deeply into the seemingly separate endeavors, and the larger common ground that is the shared center.

This pattern challenges us in the U.S. because our "nucleos" are not growing from a national center, but in many different locations with many different organizational identities. We do seem to share a similar vision and mission, but how can we stay connected enough to keep a dynamic tension between our unity and separateness? We have no history of success of this kind in the U.S.; indeed, the arts are famous for their separation and silo-ed identities. How do we create our own version of learning together while separate—so the sum of this movement can add up to something more than its parts.

## **2. The inquiry of continual improvement.**

Wherever the Abreu Fellows went, people descended upon them to learn from them. The Fellows had assumed they were going to observe and learn from El Sistema—that's not the way the Venezuelans saw it; here were fresh resources to be utilized, and they were hungry to learn. At one nucleo, Stan was giving trumpet lessons within minutes of entering the door. At another, Jonathan was conducting before he got his jacket off. At another Lorrie was improvising a professional development workshop for the teachers on group songs with movement within five minutes of the students leaving at the end of a long teaching day. At one, Dan was giving a trombone lesson that went on and on for hours; he finally said, "don't you have to be somewhere else?" The kid said he was supposed to be elsewhere an hour ago, but Dan was still willing to teach. In the U.S., the ethos of continual improvement is an oft-stated article of faith in many industries that is rarely fully embodied. El Sistema lives that article of faith so naturally, from top to bottom, from the youngest student up through Dr. Abreu's endless curiosity, that it is the very nature of the endeavor. Indeed, the energy of experimentation and aspiration is so palpable that El Sistema feels more like an inquiry than an institution.

This spirit of exploration appears in everything they do. The frequency of performing takes it off the occasional-destination pedestal, narrowing the gap between rehearsal and performance and making them both a healthy part of the larger exploration of getting better. The frequency of students attending performances of other ensembles, both more and less experienced than their own, places their work in a greater continuum. Indeed, they hear other ensembles perform the same pieces they perform sometimes, so they feel themselves as part of a growing process and not as a competitive entity. I have

described this elsewhere as the *proleptic curriculum*—the same pieces and practices revisited again and again over the years, accruing greater meaning each time, and providing opportunities for deep self-assessment of growth and satisfaction in success. The proleptic curriculum is a practice that serves inquiry in a deeply effective way.

At the end of the Abreu Fellows' two months of travel in Venezuela, what was the response from the El Sistema leadership to their experience? There was a celebration of sorts, but it took the form of a request for the Fellows to take some time and pull together their thoughts and then report to the Venezuelan leadership, to Dr. Abreu, what they had learned, so El Sistema could get better.

This is exactly the worldview I find in the best arts learning programs; indeed it is one of the consistent features the Harvard Project Zero study *The Qualities of Quality* found to be evident in the best U.S. programs. This is a clear call to the El Sistema movement in the U.S.: Your goal is not to create a program; your program is the laboratory in which everyone involved learns how to get better and accomplish the vision and mission in ever better ways. Every site is a lab in the U.S., and we must become effective as a network of learners if the inquiry is going to fulfill its potential as a movement. Similarly, professional development is not a special occasion for your faculty; if you wish to learn from the Venezuelan model, your entire organization is an embodiment of yearning to transform the lives of needy kids. Every class, every conversation, is a chance to learn.

### **3. Embodying the mission—80% of what you teach is who you are.**

This is a deep truth of teaching: 80% of what you teach is who you are. Yes, curriculum and pedagogical practices are important, an important 20%. What finally counts the most is the person in the room, and not just the way she teaches, but the way she thinks, listens, responds, notices, formulates questions, reflects, dresses, plays, radiates energy, etc. Think about the great teachers in your own life—it was not the quality of their handouts that made you change the direction of your life. That is why great teachers can illuminate subject areas you adore as well as areas that don't initially seem particularly interesting—Leonard Bernstein made me interested in esoteric aspects of musicology far beyond my depth; Stephen Jay Gould made me care about the shoulder humps of Irish deer; Byron Katie makes me question things I thought I knew for sure about myself.

In recent years, I have become increasingly interested in the depth of that truth about the 80%. Our cultural understandings pour through our teaching in ways we don't even consider. I have come to admit to the depth of this truth from my impact as an artist/creativity teacher in corporate settings to the delicate work of surfacing unconscious prejudices in racism awareness training. An individual's history as a learner, which includes the traditions of teaching we have experienced, deeply shapes the hundreds of choices, conscious and especially unconscious, we make as teachers. We tend to teach the way we were taught, for better or worse; and even if we react against the ways we were taught, we are still informed by them in many ways, such as how we frame questions, conceptualize the very task of learning. For example, even as I taught high

schoolers in rural Tanzania, bringing my most open heart and wise curriculum, I was delivering western views and frameworks that they felt clearly. I think those three weeks were a positive experience for them, and I hope I didn't inadvertently do some damage with my unconscious embedded colonial values. For example, my well-intended goal was to support the written and theatrical expression of their individual worldviews. When they struggled to access and refine certain personal beliefs, I supported and encouraged them, barely considering whether their struggle involved a cultural norm I was disturbing. It seemed like a basic human right to me—to know and express your truth. In hindsight, my good intentions and resulting pedagogical choices, which were engaging and effective, contained so many levels of my own background understandings, American values and expectations, that it has taken me years to realize how deep and complex the impact of my 80% actually was. Not to mention the fact of my being a white older male, one who could happily co-teach with, and be teased by, a gifted Tanzanian twentysomething woman. Not to mention the brevity and intensity of the three week encounter that had a “performance” goal. Layer upon layer of influence in my 80%.

I bring these thoughts to the marvel of El Sistema. One of Dr. Abreu's open secrets, presented consistently in his talks, is the spiritual truth that lies at the heart of the musical art, and the primacy of the whole endeavor: El Sistema is dedicated to loving children into wholeness, and the open secret is that they have learned how to do it well through music. Indeed, the single most challenging statement one might make about El Sistema's success is that they have learned how to love their neediest children well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the U.S., we must pause and admit that we do not know how to do this—no, we do not already do this—and we would do well to humbly set aside our pride and learn their success from the ground up.

They have achieved this not through the 20% of El Sistema we can videotape and document, but in the 80% that their 35 years of practice have infused and refined into the understandings, mindsets, unspoken expectations, voice of the heart and gut that create the life of these nucleos. Since a large majority of their teachers are now products of the system, the depth of the resonance of knowing how to love children into wholeness fills every hard-working hour of practice, every session with the not-so-great teachers, every brand-new nucleo that has no established atmosphere or identity but brings in the teachers who carry this spiritual value system into every formative minute. This is why their teachers can seem demanding, can drive rehearsals hard with little overt affectionate expression, can get so much done—because everything about the nucleo affirms for each child that they are loved for who they are, not what they do, and that the subtext of all the work is joy and goodness.

This deep spiritual truth about the depth of knowing how to love children well in the 80% of El Sistema presents the ultimate challenge for us as we consider how to bring the transformative power of that work to American cultural soil. Even if we replicated their 20% well, faithfully re-manifesting all the practices and institutional structures, *and* added our own natural love of children to bring the work to life, we would still have much to learn, over years of humble discovery to find out how to love children well into wholeness through music in the U.S. Compared to their 35 years of fierce dedication to this priority, we have gunk in our system. We live in a culture that presents serious challenges to the

natural processes of holistic learning, of learning anything that takes years of high-priority dedication, of learning predominantly within ensemble, of learning things that aren't at least partially career-focused. And those are not even the most serious challenges.

The biggest challenge lies in us, the leaders, to delve into our own 80% to unpack the understandings, embedded assumptions and expectations we bring to learning in music. Yes, we probably all love children and believe we can love them well. However, almost all of us come from a Western training tradition, which has shaped us, deeply, in ways we only partially recognize. What was done to us as learners, how we came into music, informs the way we bring young Americans into El Sistema related learning. I see a lot of unloving practices embedded in the Western music training traditions. In order to tap the potential presented by the Venezuelan example, we, the founding leaders in the U.S., must be willing to delve into those innate practices, unconscious understandings, language, motivational practices, assumptions and early priorities, and see how we might change our most familiar practices to love children well, the way the Venezuelans are showing us. This is a difficult, longterm challenge; one that will require personal commitment that may seem touchy-feely or too personal at a time we are all under demand to make decisions and produce results.

Also, we are rightly proud of our musical capacities and accomplishments, and want to bring the best of what we know to the kids and colleagues we love. I assert that unless we are willing to dedicate ourselves to this kind of lifelong deepest-inquiry-based learning, we are not being the leaders we are called upon to be. Indeed, I now believe that unless we are willing to examine and commit to evolving the deeply embedded understandings and expectations we bring to this work, we will ultimately fail to gain the power of our inspiring forebears in Venezuela to love our children well. Unless we become our own distributed version of Dr. Abreu, holding fiercely to the highest goals, which translate into the thousand nuances of practice and tradition we will develop, we will become a good musical learning program that does good things for those lucky kids who have time in our nucleos, but we will fall far short of this chance of a lifetime we have been given. El Sistema in the U.S. will find its potential in the ways we can open up the moments of teaching and learning music beyond the ways we were taught. What are the deep expectations and aspirations underneath every rehearsal, underneath the start of every class, at the core of the sectional work? Those who have been in such work in Venezuela know it looks like regular sectional work, but how do we infuse those ordinary occasions in an American nucleo with the atmosphere that loves kids into wholeness?

The most essential learning curve for El Sistema to succeed in the U.S., at anywhere near its potential, is in us, its leaders. As we recreate our own ways of coming to the work, as we infuse Dr. Abreu into our own thinking, and designing, and communicating, and planning—all the organizational and pedagogical work we have in front of us—we will transform the 80% of us who will set the trajectory for those who follow for our next 35 years and more.

I have never heard of a more complex challenge asked of young leaders:

- to bring a movement to life in practical ways, a movement that is complex, difficult, and must remain joyful and engaging and successful, and concurrently...
- to build that future not only on a rock of your background knowledge, but rather on an ongoing admission of what you don't know, and a self-generated commitment to the rediscovery of ways to love young people holistically and effectively through music.

I believe the ultimate success of El Sistema in the U.S. is entirely dependent on our willingness to transform who we are as we lead it.

#### **4) The power of beauty, craft and community.**

As I and others have written, one cannot overestimate the impact of the sheer number of hours students log in nucleos—20 hours a week is not uncommon (fewer hours for the littlest learners). This comprises the majority of their discretionary time dedicated to one place and one arena of exploration and endeavor. Over years, I have come to appreciate the subtle formative power of logging so many hours engaged in community, craft and beauty. In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell writes of the significance of logging 10,000 hours of highly attentive practice as a general entry gateway to beginning to make high quality choices and contributions to any field. Venezuela is nurturing hundreds of thousands of individuals who pass that threshold, entering the zone of expertise in which artistry and excellence begin. I notice three opens secrets to the impact of marinating kids in orchestral exploration as they grow up: the orchestra community, the participation in the dialectic of art and craft, and the engagement in beauty. Let me touch on each of these.

Dr. Abreu often speaks of the orchestra as a model of effective, almost ideal, community. Imagine spending such a significant part of one's formative years inside a high-functioning community that undertakes and succeeds in enormous challenges, that honors all its individual members, that is interdependent, focused and fun, inculcates the habits of mind and heart and beliefs about who one is and what a group can do. That changes the trajectory of a life, of a whole generation. This is true even if other parts of that life are far less than ideal—as Dr. Abreu states, spiritual abundance overcomes material scarcity. 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. (More Venezuelan young people area in El Sistema than in organized sports—in a sports-mad nation!) How does it work that so many hours spent inside a highly functional community create better people? A fuller answer to that question lies in the hands of psychologists, but I derive a sense of the causal connection from this quotation of Iris Murdoch: “Anything that alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity, and realism is to be connected with virtue.” And spending thousands of hours throughout the growing years dedicated in unselfish, full collaborative commitment to the power of creating excellence and beauty together seems to create healthy individuals.

Well-trained musicians everywhere affirm the impact of spending enormous numbers of hours dedicated to the development of craft. We cannot overestimate the formative impact of growing up in El Sistema amid an endless parade of occasions in which you offer evident demonstrations of your personal competence and your group's competence. Hundreds of times each student has faced a daunting challenge, has navigated the path of self-correction with caring support, to achieve success. This leads to the simple phrase I heard Gustavo Dudamel use the first time I met him, "every child feels like an asset." Craft grows within the enabling constraints of deep traditions and demands of instrument and music. The constraints limit free exploration within rehearsal, but they channel exploration to go deep. Ensemble music, and good instruction, produce satisfactions and confidence that free exploration cannot. While in the U.S. we tend to value free invention and wide experimentation in the arts, El Sistema invests in the truth that any activity raised to its highest level of expression becomes an art, like the art of bricklaying and the art of playing Bach. The fullness of the emotional and physical investment in playing music that is El Sistema keeps the craft development vital and relevant, so that it doesn't become a focus on developing technique, but rather the development of craft in order to achieve the goal of powerful expression in music. Craft to attain art. Art as the inspiration to develop craft.

I have also been musing about the impact of spending so many hours of growing up dedicated to, and inside the creation of, beauty. Music, particularly the emphasized repertoire in Venezuela, has power—concentrated, visceral, joyful, magnificent expression. There are many ways of describing this central aspect of art, but I will use the term beauty.

Please note that I am discussing the *experience* of beauty, not just the presence of beauty—indeed, there are many people who live with much beauty, but who miss the high impact personal experience it invites. The experience of beauty includes both the participation in the creation of it (and awareness of the beauty one is involved in), as well as the perception of beauty. Two of the powerful patterns of El Sistema are: 1) the frequency of performance—the frequent intentional creation of beauty to contribute to others (as opposed to our U.S. reliance on rehearsal preparing for more occasional, set-apart, occasions of sharing beauty with others), and 2) the frequency of attending performances by others, including more experienced ensembles whose skill invites an expanded and highly satisfying perception of beauty. On my first trip to Venezuela, I observed a pair of dating 15-year-old violinists at a concert of Penderecki music. As good as the playing was, I was less than spellbound. The teenage couple in front of me would lurch forward in their seats during sections of particular interest, grab one another's hands in spontaneous excitement at what they were seeing. They were in love with each other, and with music, as I found things to appreciate in the music but had an appraising cerebral experience rather than the personal-consequential engagement with beauty enacted in front of me by the El Sistema dating couple.

Consider these attributes of the experience of beauty in the light of young people spending most of their free time inside this world:

- The experience of beauty begets the impulse to create beauty. This impulse provides a healthy haven for the spirit in daily life, even stressful or materially-constrained daily life, coexisting with other, less beautiful, impulses that modern life is stuffed with.

- Beauty lives in abundance. Functioning within a market economy of money and commercialism (and a majority of El Sistema students experience material scarcity on a daily basis), El Sistema embodies the “gift economy” in which gifts must be passed along to have value, forge bonds that outlast “contractual” exchanges, and which connect people across time and space. A full life for all kids requires escape from the brutality of scarcity, which is so often spiritually damaging, with a sustainable sense of material sufficiency (rather than the commercialized hunger for more) and a palpable sense of spiritual fullness. I believe Dr. Abreu is right when he claims that spiritual abundance can overcome material scarcity, and the experience of beauty is an effective gateway to that land of plenty.

- Beauty lives paradoxically in two time frames, the immediate and the eternal; and experiencing this paradoxical reality provides essential nourishment for the challenges and aspirations of the human condition. Inside the music and its immediate challenges and processes, these young people feel like a vital part of a long important tradition. This is wisdom. Etymologically, beauty means “the good”; and this participation brings one inside the eternal aspects of goodness. It fosters a more capacious regard for the world. It cultivates caring about such bonds in an expanded sense of the world; this is empathy. This is a powerful tonic to drink daily while growing up.

- 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. Not only are El Sistema musicians welcoming and delighted by a wide variety of good music, they report being happier in life in general. When we asked students why they like to play in their orchestra, they almost all reply with some version of, “I love the sound of the orchestra.” Their growing up is marinated in that sound, in its breadth and innate goodness.

- While modern culture provides many stimulating and gratifying occasions, the experience of beauty moves us beyond the want-get exchange into the yearning that carries over time, over boundaries, into a sustainable generative participation in life’s many kinds of opportunities. Beauty carries greetings from other worlds, and when we receive them in experiencing beauty we enter an expanded, inclusive present tense—reaching back to re-connect with the past by recreating it anew in the present. I often say that paintings and written compositions are tombstones marking locations where significant acts of humanity once took place, and they await live attention to bring them back to life. Just playing old music doesn’t accomplish this miracle, but the experience of the beauty of the music does.

- The beauty made in a musical ensemble is concurrently an individual and a community responsibility and success. As Dr. Abreu says, it models the ideal civic relationship, where we take full responsibility for our own part in deep, complex accord with others who do the same, and together we create something extraordinary and valuable.

Participating in beauty is the secular sacred. It gives us a location, with others, beyond the literal, beyond material scarcity, inside eternal truths and aspirations, in a community that creates meaning in harmony with great creators from the past and present who are our colleagues, our friends. No wonder the students of El Sistema are so openly friendly to me wherever I go; they know I join in this same deep truth and present delight that they do; they know I am a friend. I have found this also to be true of students in the U.S. who participate in El Sistema-related programs—they actively welcome and are open to me. They know we are friends in an important open secret of what matters in life.

Another way of saying this comes from Plato, who proclaimed there is only one thing a society must accomplish if it is going to succeed. That one thing does not have to do with governance, or economies, or military might. A society has to teach its young people to find pleasure in the right things. Our planet is packed with different nations and cultures, but none can boast a generation of at-risk young people better led into the right things, described above, than in Venezuela's El Sistema.

A closing thought. Perhaps the El Sistema's ultimate power, hidden in plain sight, is that all four of these under-the-surface elements are basic truths about the arts themselves. El Sistema is built on a foundation not of education, nor of child development, but on a foundation of the quintessential truths of art. Few major artistic institutions in the world have managed this, perhaps none. I can think of no nationwide artistic program that has managed to keep artistic authenticity at the very heart of its corporate incarnation and growth. Institutional necessity, especially of a growing, successful enterprise, always corrupts the fragile and largely anti-institutional nature of artistic process. This has not happened in El Sistema, perhaps because of Dr. Abreu's genius, perhaps because of the unusual circumstances in which Venezuela has nurtured this program, perhaps it is merely because the gods needed to give the world new hope through the arts.

U.S. culture seems to exert an inescapable pressure on arts organizations; it squeezes the artistry out of their organizational life, creating a gap between the way they are run and their reason for being. Over time, this invisible but predictable force has a damaging, even suffocating, effect on the whole endeavor, that appears in a variety of unhealthy symptoms. Through their 35 years of dedication to the highest priorities, Dr. Abreu and his hundreds of thousands of colleagues have successfully avoided this fate. For those same 35 years, I have proclaimed (with little overt success) the importance for the arts to "be the thing"—or as Gandhi said it better, "be that change you wish to see in the world." El Sistema has found a way for its forms and function to proclaim its beliefs, and those beliefs are the essentials of art.

*Eric Booth is a freelance arts learning consultant, and he serves as the Senior Advisor to El Sistema USA. Email: eeebbb@aol.com*