‘Producing Musicians like Sausages’:

New Perspectives on the History and Historiography of Venezuela’s El Sistema

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# Abstract

A powerful and eulogistic narrative has evolved around the Venezuelan National System of Youth and Children’s Orchestras, better known as El Sistema. Recently, however, critical perspectives have begun to emerge from the academic sphere. Nevertheless, researchers have faced an acute shortage of documentary resources relating to the program’s history. The reappearance of a collection of documents from 1996-97 thus represents an important development. The sources, which include four external evaluations, relate to El Sistema’s efforts to secure funding from the Inter-American Development Bank. In this article, these documents are examined in chronological order and then analysed in comparative perspective. They shed light on both the history of El Sistema and polarised present-day debates about this famous organisation, corroborating recent academic studies and further questioning the dominant institutional and advocacy narrative about a socially transformative program aimed primarily at the poor.

Keywords: El Sistema, Inter-American Development Bank, Venezuela, evaluation, history, documents

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Over the 42 years of its existence, the Venezuelan National System of Youth and Children’s Orchestras, better known as El Sistema, has generated a powerful and eulogistic narrative.[[1]](#footnote-1) This account has been elaborated by the program itself, admiring writers (e.g. Borzacchini 2010; Booth 2008, 2010; Tunstall 2012), and many journalists around the globe. High-profile advocates have included Simon Rattle, Claudio Abbado, and Plácido Domingo. The program’s founder, José Antonio Abreu, has won many international awards and was proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012.

Recently, however, more critical perspectives have begun to emerge from the academic world (e.g. Baker 2014, 2016a, 2016b; Logan 2015, 2016; Pedroza 2015; Scripp 2015; Fink 2016). Nevertheless, research has been constrained by an acute shortage of documentary resources relating to El Sistema’s earlier history. Newspaper articles from the 1990s have proven revealing (see Baker 2014), but other kinds of documentation have been largely lacking. El Sistema’s own archive is not open to independent researchers.

However, a collection of documents from 1996-97 has recently reappeared, representing an important development in such a sparsely populated field. The sources, which include four external evaluations, relate to El Sistema’s efforts to secure funding from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). These efforts were ultimately successful: the bank provided loans of $8 million in 1998 and $150 million in 2008 – two of the most decisive moments in El Sistema’s history.

The documents form part of the personal archive of the Argentinean music education scholar Ana Lucía Frega. In 1996, Frega was contracted by the IDB to help the bank assess El Sistema’s application for a loan. As well as conducting her own research, she was also able to draw on three recent reports by other consultants, in addition to documents provided by El Sistema and the IDB. She kept these documents, and they remained in storage for the next nineteen years until she made them available to the author in April 2016.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Below, these documents will be examined in chronological order and then analysed in comparative perspective and in relation to more recent published research. They allow for a deepening of diachronic perspectives on the program, and provide a historical foundation for the stark division found today between the writings of advocates and critics. Furthermore, comparing Frega’s archival data from 1996-97 with Baker’s fieldwork data from 2010-11 provides a crosscheck on both sets, since they were produced independently. This verification process is valuable because Baker’s (2014) findings provoked prominent and polarised responses: they were dismissed by El Sistema’s spokespeople, international Sistema advocates and organisations, and several journalists, though praised by a number of scholars and Venezuelan musicians.[[3]](#footnote-3) With El Sistema the topic of growing interest today, these rediscovered sources have an important role to play, shedding light on both the history of El Sistema and present-day debates about one of the world’s most famous music education programs.

# The 1996 reports: a glowing vision

The first consultants to evaluate El Sistema were Emma Garmendia, who produced two reports (dated April 24 and July 31, 1996), and Marisela Hernández and María Teresa Urreiztieta (May 1996). These documents present a vision of El Sistema that is familiar from media reports and advocacy materials produced over the last decade: indeed, some elements of the second report have become part of the program’s official discourse and can be found (without citations) on its website.

Like so many observers since, Garmendia was overwhelmed by her exposure to the program, stating that ‘there are no words to express the amazement and emotion produced by listening to orchestras of hundreds of children and youths from the poorest social strata.’ She eulogises the program and its ‘visionary guiding idea, capable of transforming musical practice into a powerful manifestation of social order’ (1996, 1).[[4]](#footnote-4) However, her soaring rhetoric is neither tempered by critical scrutiny nor underpinned by any evidence of social benefits or proof that the participants were indeed ‘from the poorest social strata.’ The author’s critical lens is pointed only at what the program needs, which must be defined if El Sistema is to merit an IDB loan. Two recommendations that stand out are the creation of seven regional music centres in order to decentralise the program and hiring composers in residence.

Hernández and Urreiztieta’s report is equally eulogistic. The authors interviewed a number of current Sistema employees and students, though apparently no one from outside the program. A prominent feature is their emphasis on El Sistema as aimed primarily at the poor, and as a mechanism for ‘rescuing children and young people from an empty, disorientated, and deviant youth’ (Hernández and Urreiztieta 1996, 15).[[5]](#footnote-5) However, they present neither quantitative evidence nor personal testimonies to support these claims. None of their many interviewees describe themselves as poor or report having been rescued.[[6]](#footnote-6) Considering that this is an official evaluation for a development bank, the foundation for the sweeping statements about poverty is weak. Indeed, later on we read that ‘the parents have to be prepared to offer continuous support’ and that ‘the family’s contribution to El Sistema is valuable, since in some núcleos [music schools] the parents provide financial support to pay for the hire of the building and the teachers’ salaries’ (35). These statements cast further doubt on the report’s opening gambit that ‘the majority’ of the program’s beneficiaries ‘come from the lowest social groups of the Venezuelan population’ (1).

The authors evoke another idea that has become central to El Sistema: the orchestra as a perfect or harmonious miniature society. Yet a student unwittingly reveals the authoritarianism beneath the program’s conception of harmony: ‘An orchestra is democratic, although there’s always a dictator, who is the conductor; in music you can’t start debating with the musicians… it’s the only way… an orchestra has to be harmonious’ (25).[[7]](#footnote-7) It is extraordinary, and revealing, that this statement goes unremarked upon and does not inflect the authors’ vision in any way.

If one striking aspect of this report is the lack of substantiation for its key claims, another is the tone in which it is written. The interview quotations do not record a single negative perception or criticism of the program. Only one critical statement appears in the whole report (concerning the low salaries and their late payment to teachers). Other problems that are raised briefly all relate to a lack of resources, and are thus cited to justify further investment. In the authors’ vision, the program has no inherent faults, only needs. They openly admired the program’s leaders, whose style they described as ‘flexible, open, and democratic’ (8), and rather than analysing the program’s rhetoric, they adopted it, emphasising the ‘spiritual richness’ provided by music and its supposed capacity to overcome material poverty (1). Students of El Sistema will recognise this language from Abreu’s speeches and advocacy literature a decade later. What it does not resemble, however, is the language of rigorous evaluation or critical enquiry. There is no distinction between theory and practice, or between the discourse of the consultants and that of the program. With no divergent opinions presented, this report is more romantic elegy than realistic analysis.

# The 1997 reports: clouds on the horizon

Apparently dissatisfied with the two reports presented in 1996, the IDB sought out two new consultants.[[8]](#footnote-8) 1997 thus saw two further reports. The first, presented in August 1997 by Eva Estrada, draws on interviews with musicians, like Hernández and Urreiztieta’s. Here, though, longer interview transcriptions are provided, there was an even division between current and former Sistema musicians (nine of each), and critical perspectives are very much in evidence.[[9]](#footnote-9) Revealingly, criticisms are prominent in responses from current employees as well as those who had left. Participation in the program did not therefore equate to identification with it; indeed, the report underlines a sense of resignation or even active resistance among current Sistema musicians. The contrast between Estrada’s evaluation and its predecessors is thus striking.

Whereas the earlier authors had made vague claims about El Sistema and poverty, Estrada examines in minute detail the socio-economic background and status of her 18 interviewees. 3 described themselves as upper-middle-class; 11 as middle-class; 3 as lower-middle-class; and 1 as lower-class. The parents of the 9 current participants were almost all professionals, and the father of the one ‘lower-class’ musician was a doctor. Furthermore, Estrada concludes that ‘in neither of the two groups were significant changes observed between the social status from which they came and that which they acquired’ (Estrada 1997, 21). She thus found no evidence of the supposed focus on the poor or of social mobility.

The romantic idea of the orchestra as a model, harmonious society does not match the image that her interviewees portrayed. They often entered El Sistema with such notions, but for most, high initial hopes and enthusiastic beginnings gave way sooner or later to disillusionment. As time goes by, Estrada writes, ‘these individuals perceive contradictions between the stated values and the actual practices of El Sistema’; they therefore ‘developed a capacity to remain and grow within El Sistema without the expectation of receiving helpful feedback, with a distrust of both their companions and leaders, […] and at times with a certain resignation’ (6). According to one of her interviewees, ‘I believed in very solid values, and it was painful to discover that they did not exist.’ Another explained: ‘the musical world could be as bad or worse than what you saw on the streets, I thought that a world of sensitive people would be something very attractive, very interesting, I had high expectations, and I saw a lot of cruelty, a lot of meanness, apathy, ignorance’ (5).[[10]](#footnote-10) Of the 18 interviewees, 14 described themselves as feeling internally conflicted, ‘firstly because of the affective link that they establish with El Sistema and secondly because [the program] contradicts their expectations of professional and personal development’ (22).

Estrada’s interviewees came to perceive their positive values and experiences as deriving from themselves rather than from the program, which they criticised for ‘the wasting of time, excessive effort devoted solely to the performance of orchestral repertoire at the expense of general education and specialist training, as well as fomenting behaviour and attitudes in the students that are contrary to those [initial] values’ (13). One musician claimed that many of his generation ‘realised that we had wasted many years and hadn’t studied seriously because El Sistema itself, it’s not that it allowed you to waste your time but it actually made you or obliged you to waste that time, because there was no order, there was no system’ (19). Estrada noted that musicians’ responses to this scenario included ‘personal reserve, avoiding as far as possible deep relationships with either employees or everyday activities of the institution,’ ‘doing the minimum necessary to preserve the source of income,’ and ‘avoiding affective involvement with any activities of El Sistema’ (6). Consequently, one might conclude from her report that any social benefits deriving from participation in El Sistema occurred *despite* rather than *because of* the program’s practices, which stood in contrast to the lofty values associated with orchestras by musicians at the start of their training.

A fundamental problem identified by most of the musicians (16 out of 18) is that developing positive values is of lesser importance to the program than ‘merely ensuring that the repertoire is ready. The organisation, the pedagogical style, and the administration of employees are based on making the orchestra sound’ (23). El Sistema’s philosophy posits a correspondence between musical and social values, principally harmony. Estrada’s interviewees, however, suggest that musicians, employees, and leaders are far from singing from the same hymn sheet, and that El Sistema actually limits the expansion of harmony from the musical to the social realm through its near-exclusive focus on orchestral sound. In reality, then, musicians often experience social *discord* as a result of the relentless pursuit of musical harmony.

In contrast to the romantic rhetoric concerning the orchestra that is so pervasive in El Sistema’s publicity discourse and is reiterated constantly by the program’s advocates, musicians criticise an excessive focus on the large ensemble to the detriment of other musical activities. They lament the narrowness and inflexibility of a musical life that is so dominated by the orchestra. In the words of one: ‘A musician can do so many things, it’s so broad, that sometimes I think that El Sistema has made music into a single thing, it has reduced it with respect to possible expectations or routes, and I think that has distanced a lot of people’ (38). Repeatedly, the orchestra is presented as a problem, not a solution: ‘I feel that the orchestra doesn’t train you to be an artist, the orchestra doesn’t teach you to play an instrument, it doesn’t teach you to think about how to work with an instrument’ (5).

They also describe negative social dynamics within the orchestra, such as competitiveness, favouritism, dishonesty, hypocrisy, and betrayal. ‘Meritocracy doesn’t exist in El Sistema,’ states one interviewee; ‘the guy who behaves badly is rewarded, and when good things happen no one says anything.’[[11]](#footnote-11) Unsurprisingly, this led to tensions, divisions, and notably dissatisfied musicians. One reports: ‘I have seen a lot of distraction [and] disorganisation at work, improvisation, arbitrariness maybe, and I have felt part of a system that has exploited me considerably’ (26). Another states: ‘What I thought a musician must be isn’t the reality […] there is jealousy and a bloody battle to stand out.’ As a result, ‘I used to be more open and communicative, now I am distrusting, less spontaneous – there is hypocrisy, betrayal’ (27). A member of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, too, speaks about *losing* positive values – in this case, proactivity and initiative – and describes social divisions: ‘I’ve always felt isolated and I see that in general it’s not just me, all the musicians there are isolated, they go around in groups.’ Consequently, ‘we’re in the orchestra because we need the work […] it’s very sad when the recompense is only monetary and there are no other kinds of satisfaction’ (29).

Where Hernández and Urreiztieta describe El Sistema’s leaders as ‘flexible, open, and democratic,’ Estrada’s interviewees allege manipulation and exploitation from above. One describes the treatment of the orchestra as though it were a machine: ‘when it comes to managing the programming we feel like chess pawns, they put us where they want and then you have to play your part unconditionally’ (29). Another claims: ‘on a psychological level they manipulate you, they insult you’ (21). A third reports: ‘I understand that it suits El Sistema for us to be ignorant to a degree so that it can steer us and that ensures that we remain where we are and that they can manipulate us.’[[12]](#footnote-12) A fourth describes a group dynamic ‘based on disorder, on improvisation, on orchestral indiscipline, but which, beyond that, leads its members not to think critically but rather to be deeply emotional, and so in that way I see that it’s possible to control [them] a lot’ (29). These musicians’ distrust of El Sistema is striking: they regard the program’s flaws as deliberate and strategic. There are distinct echoes of Levine and Levine’s (1996, 24) characterisation of professional orchestral musicians as ‘rats in someone else’s maze.’

There are repeated complaints about a lack of guidance or limits with regard to musicians’ behaviour. Interviewees report a disorganised institutional culture in which anything goes. It is worth noting that these Venezuelan musicians do not idealise disorder, in stark contrast to the position of North American advocates who appeared a decade or so later, who tend to characterise it as a charming local feature. Estrada found ‘dissatisfaction due to a work dynamic viewed as improvised, disorganised, and extremely demanding in terms of the amount of effort’ (Estrada 1997, 4). One musician reports: ‘everyone did whatever they felt like, to a degree; one person wouldn’t study and rose up through the orchestra, people received favours, a bunch of unpleasant things’ (26). Another claims: ‘El Sistema doesn’t allow you to be self-critical, it’s complacent, it allows you to make every mistake possible without any kind of control’; ‘you have to impose guidelines, certain limits […] – musical, moral, economic – but there aren’t any in the Youth Orchestra and when you don’t have those limits you’re lost’ (23).

Given the global fame that El Sistema has acquired, it is striking how many of the program’s musicians criticise the education that it offers. As one interviewee puts it, ‘we all believe that the mistake that was made was basically at the level of education – […] the educational support was lacking’ (28). They describe a production line, focused on quantity rather than quality, with children forced into an orchestral mould. As one says: ‘We were producing musicians like sausages and that mass production isn’t what the country needs… a country that’s in a state like ours needs more than a guy who plays the violin well’ (21). Another argues that El Sistema focused on filling the country with orchestras rather than educating musicians.

Interviewees highlight the narrowness of the training, which lacks an intellectual or critical element. As Estrada notes: ‘Pedagogical effort, like orchestral activity in general, is focused strictly on obtaining immediate results – the playing of the relevant part in each case – and apparently do not extend to other technical features relating to aesthetic and musical meaning that allow the elaboration of a conception of musical activity that goes beyond mere orchestral playing’ (4). They also criticise the low priority accorded to general education within El Sistema. One recounted: ‘many of my peers didn’t get their high-school diploma, we even have figures of authority who didn’t even finish primary school, and they have high posts, [education] is like an anti-value […] anyone who talks about specific aspects of music-making, phrasing or whatever, is looked down on as a know-it-all’ (38). Such statements recall violinist Luigi Mazzocchi’s account of hearing a director say: ‘why do you even go to school at all? What you need is this [El Sistema]. Why would you go to 4th and 5th grade or try to go to high school and get a high school diploma? What are you going to do with that?’ (Scripp 2015, 23).

Interviewees identify domination, humiliation, and bullying as features of Sistema pedagogical practice. One interviewee claims: ‘the sound of the orchestras is achieved via traumatic strategies, which bring a psychological and emotional cost’ (Estrada 1997, 38). Another describes extreme working practices in the famous Sistema núcleo at La Rinconada:

the kids had to work on weekends from the morning into the late evening, when there is a concert it’s horrible, they even have to miss school and everything because they have a rehearsal in the mornings, during exams on Saturdays and Sundays, they shut them away, […] so of course they’re isolated, it’s work morning, noon, and night.[[13]](#footnote-13)

As a consequence, several interviewees ended up defining themselves *against* El Sistema rather than identifying with it. One states: ‘it’s often very unfair and very disordered, […] now that I teach, I try not to make the same mistakes that they made with us’ (25). Another says: ‘each day I copy less the way that they taught me, I’ve achieved a relationship with my students in which communication is a real exchange of feelings, emotions, knowledge, concerns, and not a weapon of power for humiliating and dominating them’ (17). A third puts it succinctly: El Sistema ‘served me as a model of what not to do pedagogically speaking’ (34).

Finally, a frequent topic of discussion was money. The picture is contradictory: considerable financial rewards were available at the top, leading to competition and manoeuvring in pursuit of scholarships and other benefits, yet ordinary teachers were generally paid poorly and often very late as well. It appears that the program did not lack resources so much as mechanisms for distributing them equitably and transparently. The result was, once again, dissatisfaction. One musician reports positive impressions of the start of his Sistema career, but ‘when the money part began to come into it, […] there was like a separation and people started acting differently’ (25). Another states: ‘the scholarships business demoralised me, it was a circus, people were fighting over that and forgot the musical purpose’ (25). A third claims: ‘we were paid a pittance as teachers, no one wanted to go and work there, we pretty much went to work for free at La Rinconada’ (34).

Estrada concluded with some proposals. She acknowledged that all her interviewees had attributed value to El Sistema, recognising it as an important national development. Most were still attached to the idea of massified classical music education. However, its creation had ‘required sacrificing quality for quantity, unhurried and rational effort for the need for immediate results’ (26). As a result, the program now needed to focus more on quality and efficiency, rather than simply offering access. She proposed modification of El Sistema’s teaching and learning model in order to promote the development and efficient use of intellectual capacities; more emphasis on creative thinking and problem-solving; and a (self-)critical attitude, leading students to participate more actively in the educational process. She urged a rethinking of the centrality and methods of orchestral training, and underlined the need to revise pedagogies and methodologies; to hire and/or train pedagogues; to develop a proper study plan for students; and to evaluate the results rigorously.

Estrada’s report is worth detailed attention because it provides unique and detailed insight into the opinions and experiences of El Sistema’s musicians at the halfway point in its history, as well as a hired consultant’s interpretation of that data (both qualitative and quantitative). With its extensive transcriptions of musicians’ very mixed testimonies, it reveals just how much the 1996 reports had omitted. It shows much closer parallels with academic studies and anecdotal accounts of the orchestral profession internationally than its 1996 forerunners, bolstering its validity.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Around the same time, the IDB also hired Ana Lucía Frega, an expert on comparative music teaching strategies, to undertake a year of research on El Sistema. She produced her report on August 15, 1997. Her evaluation concentrates on a detailed consideration of systemic features and suggestions for improvements.[[15]](#footnote-15) Frega was struck by the absence of a pedagogical system in El Sistema. Where Hernández and Urreiztieta (1996, 5) claimed to have observed a methodology that was ‘novel’ and ‘original,’ Frega – whose expertise was precisely in this area – was unable to find any coherent method at all. Nevertheless, she identified some relatively consistent features. One was a conservative approach to repertoire: her exhaustive study showed that most of the music played by the national youth and children’s orchestras came from a small corpus of European masterworks. The repertoire was repetitive and included little national or contemporary music. Frega (1997, 22) described the children’s orchestra as ‘walking in circles,’ though she also noted that the chosen works had ‘a strategic importance as spectacle,’ foreshadowing Baker’s (2014) argument that El Sistema’s pedagogical program is shaped by a ‘politics of impact’ in which spectacular display for strategic ends takes priority over educational goals. She also pointed out that ‘making music’ included listening, appreciating, performing, and creating, yet El Sistema was focused almost exclusively on just the third of these activities.

Frega’s proposals grew logically from her critical analysis. With regard to teaching, she encouraged methodological consolidation and systematisation. This would entail more training for núcleo directors and teachers, and the creation of permanent group to carry out continuous research. With regard to repertoire, she proposed a composer-in-residence scheme (like Garmendia the previous year), and recommended more focus on Latin American art music (including the creation of an international course), music since 1945, and popular and folkloric music. She thus encouraged the program to develop a broader conception of music education and work towards creating an identifiable and consistent method.

# Discussion

The two 1997 documents present a strikingly different picture of El Sistema than those from the previous year. This is not simply a case of differing conclusions, however: the 1997 reports include detailed descriptions and critical analysis of the program’s weaknesses, which were omitted from their predecessors. Also missing from the first two reports are rigorous research and robust evidence to support the sweeping statements about the beneficiaries and social impact of the program. Indeed, Frega annotated her copies of these reports in 1997, and phrases like ‘is there any *evidence* of this?’ appear frequently in the margins. No statistical information or concrete case studies are presented to support claims of a focus on the poor. Estrada’s study, in contrast, provides detailed evidence, and it contradicts the impressionistic views of its predecessors, pointing to a largely middle-class profile and a lack of social mobility. Such comparison underlines the extent to which the 1996 evaluations resemble advocacy literature rather than objective research, and it puts the validity of these studies in doubt.

El Sistema’s social claims thus look weak at this historical juncture. By 1996, the program had re-centred its discourse around social action, yet supporting statements are notably vague and idealistic.[[16]](#footnote-16) Throughout the reports and the accompanying documentation, the detail is almost all about musical activities; there is very little attention paid to how or indeed whether the social benefits actually occur. For example, El Sistema produced a document that states: ‘It is important to underline that the social character of the program is the focal point of the process’ (‘Informaciones Requeridas’ 1996). Yet its contents (describing both current activities and future plans) are focused almost entirely on musical matters. The social does not therefore run very deep at this point. There are a few general statements about how music has great social impact on children, but the report shows no interest in the detail of how this process might actually work, how it might be enhanced, or whether certain obstacles might arise and need to be overcome. Significant social benefits are simply expected to occur as an automatic consequence of musical activity, an assumption that has been questioned by much subsequent music education research (e.g. Bowman 2009; Gould 2009; Bergh and Sloboda 2010; Bradley 2015; Matthews 2015).

The same features can be found in another Sistema document (‘Bases para un Programa’ 1996). The project is described as ‘a huge Social Project for youth and children living in conditions of poverty, neglect, and marginality’ (8). The social language is prominent: ‘the forging of a spirit of solidarity and fraternity’ (2), ‘the cultivation of extremely high ethical and aesthetic values’ (3). Yet not only is evidence of the socio-economic status of participants lacking, but the concrete proposals for which El Sistema sought IDB funding concern musical matters such as audio-visual resources, intensive courses, bringing in music teachers from overseas, and paying scholarships; there is not a single mention of social aims or practices in the funding application itself. Again, it is simply taken for granted that investing in music will produce social benefits; no explanation or proof is provided. In sum, the social was present in El Sistema’s vision at this point, but largely absent in its current and proposed future practices.[[17]](#footnote-17)

If synchronic comparison is fruitful, so is diachronic. The concordances between the 1997 reports and Baker’s study (2014) are extensive: both raise questions over the socio-economic profile of participants, the relationship between social ideals and musical practices, organisational and interpersonal dynamics, the orchestra as social model, the quality of the training, and the absence of a rounded education. Given that the book was published before the reports resurfaced, the earlier documents independently bolster a number of the book’s conclusions. The reverse is also true: while Estrada’s sample was not large, the replication of her findings a decade and a half later, via a longer research project with a larger sample size, suggests that they were robust.[[18]](#footnote-18) This crosschecking of research thus confirms the representativeness of the data and supports the critical scholarly perspectives emerging in recent years.

Although most of the concordances need no explanation, a few connections between the 1990s reports and Baker’s research will be discussed briefly. One of the latter’s key arguments concerned the significant gaps between theory and practice in El Sistema. An interesting example concerns the paradox of discipline. On the one hand, discipline is arguably the program’s central value, in terms of both its official vision and the benefits that participants claim to derive from orchestral training (see Baker 2014, 190-202). On the other hand, musicians often privately describe and lament a lack of discipline in the program and the culture of chaos that results (Estrada’s interviews provide numerous examples). This contradiction goes unnoticed or at least unremarked upon, even by the sharp-eyed Estrada. Similar contradictions can be found in the reports and other documentation: they are full of claims about El Sistema’s extraordinary capacity to produce harmony, solidarity, academic benefits, and so on, yet Estrada’s interviewees (like Baker’s) reveal extensive discord, competition, and under-educated musicians who are discouraged from intellectual activity or critical thinking. The most detailed research thus reveals that many of El Sistema’s theoretical benefits are realised only partially, if at all, in practice, and that this was as true in 1997 as in 2010-11.

The reports also provide substantial backing for the argument that at no time has IDB funding for El Sistema rested on robust evidence that the program (a) reaches the poorest and most disadvantaged in Venezuelan society, and (b) has the social impacts that are claimed. Rather, the foundation for this (and indeed *all* El Sistema’s) institutional support consists of positive rhetoric, generated by the project itself, sympathetic observers, and opportunistic politicians.[[19]](#footnote-19) Claims of miraculous social effects are based largely on idealistic reports by program leaders and employees, which tend to elide complexities and contradictions. The methodological problems with such an approach are not hard to spot (see Bergh and Sloboda 2010). It also assumes that musicians and administrators can simply intuit the social effects of music, something that appears quite debatable in the light of recent research that has questioned widespread beliefs in the psychosocial benefits of traditional large-ensemble musical training (Crooke, Smyth and McFerran 2016). Frega’s archive suggests that the IDB decided to fund El Sistema without robust evidence concerning its beneficiaries and benefits, and despite troubling counter-evidence.[[20]](#footnote-20)

One feature of the program that appears to be consistent over time concerns the issue of money. The gulf between highly paid performers at the top of the organisation and low-paid ordinary teachers was identified in 1996-97 and again in 2010-11 (see Baker 2014, especially 150-53). It may therefore be seen as a systemic element of El Sistema, not a glitch. The ‘business model’ that has allowed the program to expand so dramatically rests on the exploitation of low-paid teachers, often on hourly rather than permanent contracts and with few or no benefits. The growth that has so impressed the world has come at the cost of employees, producing widespread precarity, instability, and unevenness of teaching. El Sistema’s social credentials look rather different in this light.

Finally, the polarisation of current publications on El Sistema by advocates and scholars was foreshadowed by the four reports drawn up twenty years ago. The wave of critical scholarship since 2014, which appeared to be a new development, in fact unknowingly picked up a thread that emerged in 1997 but had been rendered invisible. This leads to some important questions: given that significant problems in El Sistema have been identified over a period of many years, why have so many experienced observers failed to notice (or report) them? Why have idealistic visions of the program gained such traction, side-lining the more realistic perspectives evident in musicians’ testimonies? Why have weaker studies triumphed over stronger ones, eliding half the story? Methodological flaws, observer bias, institutional pressures, and El Sistema’s impressive public relations operation are possible explanations. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that El Sistema has longstanding, systemic flaws, and that a substantial and increasingly prominent body of literature – starting with the 1996 reports and running through Borzacchini (2010) to Tunstall (2012) and Tunstall and Booth (2016) – has failed to report them.

# Conclusions

Looking back on these twenty-year-old documents, we may be struck by how few of the problems and proposals have been acted upon since. Much international attention has been paid to El Sistema’s size and longevity, but very little to its rigidity. Resistance to change appears to be a defining feature; indeed, Estrada remarked on it in 1997. Such a characteristic is hardly surprising given that the program has been led by the same conservative ‘cultural caudillo’ (Silva-Ferrer 2014, 115) since its inception in 1975.

If we look at Frega’s proposals, for example, methodological consolidation and systematisation did not take place to any significant degree. More than a decade later, Abreu was quite open about this: ‘There is no ‘system,’ he says. ‘I have no scruples in saying this’ (quoted in Tunstall 2012, 174). Teacher training and related research remained very limited; the composer-in-residence scheme (also proposed by Garmendia) was never created; and Baker’s fieldwork in 2010-11 revealed that Latin American art music, contemporary music, and Venezuelan popular and folkloric music still played a marginal role, and musicians continued to criticise the narrowness of El Sistema’s training. Similarly, there was no sign that Estrada’s recommendations about rethinking pedagogy and placing more emphasis on intellectual, creative, and critical skills had been heeded. Although the program did not look identical in 2010, few of the substantial issues identified by the evaluators thirteen years earlier had been addressed.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Most strikingly, El Sistema failed to achieve the central goal of the IDB’s loans – the building of seven new regional centres. According to an IDB document from 1996-97 (‘Observaciones’ n.d.):

the [construction of the] headquarters in Caracas would be appropriate only if it were accompanied by the Regional Centres, for which reason the creation and strengthening of the Regional Centres should be one of the tasks that the Foundation [i.e. El Sistema] addresses as a matter of priority.

In fact, the headquarters were built, but not the regional centres – and a subsequent loan from the Latin American Development Bank, CAF, was used to build a second headquarters next door to the first one in Caracas. The outcome of the IDB’s loans is thus the precise opposite of the intention behind them: far from decentralising, El Sistema has become even more markedly centralised.

If we look at the last twenty years through the lens of the IDB, its evaluations, and its loans, failures are more apparent than successes. Little of the IDB’s original vision – and even fewer of the evaluators’ proposals – has been realised. El Sistema has grown dramatically in the intervening period, but the increased expenditure has had little impact on the core issues identified by consultants and participants in the mid-1990s – even on teachers’ pay and conditions. With the exception of the creation of Alma Llanera, there is very little evidence of systemic problems being recognised or resolved.

Nevertheless, the failures and perpetuation of weaknesses have had no noticeable impact on the program’s global reputation as an outstanding success. On the contrary, a hegemonic narrative of El Sistema as the ‘Venezuelan musical miracle’ has taken firm hold. The 1997 studies left no mark on the public discourse around El Sistema, as they were never published; it was the 1996 reports – recognised as problematic at the time – that were enshrined as official doctrine. The real miracle, then, is how a conservative music-training program with clearly identifiable problems and a poor record of addressing them became a globally renowned symbol of educational revolution and success.

Foreign admirers have played their part. The institutional disorganisation criticised by participants and consultants alike has since been romanticised by writers like Tunstall (2012), who regards a ‘system that is not a system’ and phrases like ‘being, not yet being’ (175-76) as akin to zen koans – pregnant with positive meaning, which the master (Abreu) understands and the novice (foreign devotee) must seek to unlock. In this way, the chaos and powerlessness that Sistema musicians report is transmuted into a mysterious order, ready for eager consumption by global audiences. Journalists, too, both Venezuelan and foreign, have given wings to the miracle story, rarely scratching the institutional press releases and red-carpet tours to examine the complexities and contradictions that lie beneath.

Behind the marketing triumph stands Abreu, an archetypal magician of Venezuela’s ‘magical state’ (Coronil 1997), leaving global audiences dumbfounded with a succession of apparent miracles funded by oil revenues (Baker 2014; Fink 2016). Evidence of the enchantment lies in the successful global propagation of a narrative that, in the cold light of day, ought to provoke scepticism, at the very least from scholars of music. Is an orchestra really ‘a model for an ideal global society,’ as Gustavo Dudamel claims (Lee 2012)? This idealistic story retains a firm hold on the global public imagination – Abreu’s spell is far from being broken – but it behoves academic researchers to approach the publicity narrative more critically.

The evidence presented above also raises questions about the international spread of this organisation. Sistema programs have taken root in dozens of countries over the last decade, on the presumption that the Venezuelan model is an astonishing and indisputable success. El Sistema has become an international force in music education; it is, for example, the only program to have its own Special Interest Group (SIG) within the International Society for Music Education (ISME). But with recent scholarly critiques now bolstered by the archival evidence presented above, it is high time that more researchers and policy-makers rethought the enthusiastic adoption of El Sistema around the globe.[[22]](#footnote-22) It is worth underlining that some musicians interviewed by Estrada in 1997 and Baker in 2010-11 did not see the program’s flaws as accidental – the result of benign incompetence – but rather deliberate; they repeatedly used words like exploitation, manipulation, domination, and humiliation. This is a problematic and controversial foundation for a global music education movement.

# Coda

In 2011, the IDB commissioned the largest and most thorough quantitative study of El Sistema to date. The first report was published five years later (Alemán et al. 2016).[[23]](#footnote-23) It estimated the poverty rate among El Sistema entrants as 16.7%, while the rate for the states in which they lived was 46.5%. Further research is needed to confirm whether the experimental sample is representative of all program applicants, since the central intention of the study was not to determine the poverty rate in El Sistema. Nevertheless, nearly 3000 children across 16 núcleos in 5 states constitute a broad and significant sample of El Sistema participants. The authors recognise that the study ‘highlights the challenges of targeting interventions towards vulnerable groups of children in the context of a voluntary social program.’[[24]](#footnote-24)

In terms of effects, the study measured 26 primary outcome variables within 4 domains: self-regulatory skills, behaviours, prosocial skills and connections, and cognitive skills. Only two significant outcomes were found: in child-reported self-control and child-reported behavioural difficulties. No significant effects were found in the other 24 areas.[[25]](#footnote-25)

This study sows further doubts about the 1996 evaluations, in particular their statements about the beneficiary population and social effects, and about the resulting official narrative, which has been embraced by the advocacy literature. The significant gap between the 2016 researchers’ initial ‘theory of change’ and their subsequent findings supports the more equivocal visions expressed in the 1997 reports and recent academic studies. It is to be hoped that these concordances between the 1997 evaluations, the critical scholarly literature, and the 2016 IDB report will open a wider debate and stimulate profound reconsideration of this world-famous and influential music education program.

However, there are question marks over the likelihood of such an outcome. El Sistema has shown little interest in critical views or contrary evidence. Its response to the 2016 IDB report was a press release that declared that the study had found an array of positive social effects and thus confirmed the transformative work of the program (contradicting the researchers’ published statement that they ‘did not find any full-sample effects on cognitive skills... or on prosocial skills and connections’). Ignoring the evidence of a low poverty rate and high drop-out rate, it claimed that the report ‘reaffirm[ed] the value of social inclusion via a program of artistic and musical education.’ There is no sign that El Sistema has acknowledged or addressed ‘the challenges of targeting interventions towards vulnerable groups of children in the context of a voluntary social program,’ as highlighted by the researchers.

The international Sistema field, too, has been unreceptive (at least publicly) to the growing body of critical research and mixed findings – unsurprisingly so, considering that it has been constructed over the last decade on the foundation of El Sistema’s official narrative. Self-described as ‘Sistema-inspired’ and a ‘movement,’ it has generated its own parallel literature by authors such as Tunstall and Booth (2016), with advocacy as its goal and minimal reference to research that does not support its mission. Unlike academic conferences on this topic, Sistema advocacy events have not issued open calls for papers or invited the presentation and discussion of diverging viewpoints or evidence. Even commissioned program evaluations have routinely failed to take account of the peer-reviewed research on El Sistema. At present, then, it cannot be assumed that new studies or evidence that raise further questions about the Venezuelan model will be heeded within the Sistema sphere. Indeed, the findings of this article have already been presented at ISME’s El Sistema SIG (in English) and in written form (in Spanish), but they have had no noticeable effect on the discourse or practice of the Sistema field.

The growing interest in social justice and music education over the last decade needs to be matched by a willingness to call out its opposite: as Allsup and Shieh (2012) argue, the starting point for social justice is noticing and responding to injustice. The most troubling features of our article, such as musicians’ allegations of exploitation, manipulation, domination, and humiliation, are not revelations: they echo evidence previously published by Baker (2014) and Scripp (2015). The latter’s main source, the violinist Luigi Mazzocchi, described a ‘culture of fear and retribution’ in El Sistema. This is disturbing evidence, especially in relation to a famous and much-imitated music education program that claims to prioritise social action, yet the public response from the academic world has been relatively muted.

Individual scholars have spoken out in articles and reviews, but the wider field and professional bodies could move beyond sporadic and brief acknowledgments that critical voices exist and take a firmer stand. For example, ISME’s El Sistema SIG could take a lead, by revising its mission and aims, which are still couched primarily in advocacy terms, to reflect the research and questions that have emerged since the group’s foundation in 2012.[[26]](#footnote-26) It might also consider a stronger response, such as a public statement and/or change of focus away from El Sistema and towards socially oriented music education. Researchers and professional bodies could encourage Sistema organisations with which they work to take the emerging evidence seriously, and to consider the broader questions it raises and the implications of alignment with (and hence promotion of) an institution that has been repeatedly linked with injustices. They could also rethink the justifiability of relatively narrow, technical studies of whether Sistema programs ‘work,’ which do not take full account of the wider cultural, political, and ethical issues around this model (Baker 2016a). If researchers show relatively little public concern over such issues, the Sistema industry – with a vested interest in maintaining the official narrative – can hardly be expected to pay attention.

Two decades ago, Estrada and Frega presented critical appraisals of El Sistema and a range of proposals for improving the program. Their evidence and suggestions were largely ignored and are almost completely unknown today. The consequence of dismissing criticism was not a strengthening of the program but the opposite: the perpetuation of systemic weaknesses, and a failure to make changes that could have improved the educational experience of hundreds of thousands of students over twenty years and put the program at the forefront of music pedagogy. If we imagine what El Sistema would look like today had it faced up to the criticisms in 1997 and adopted the evaluators’ proposals, we may grasp the costs of treating the program as a holy cow and ignoring its problems. Twenty years on, Estrada and Frega’s criticisms and recommendations are now back on the table. One can only hope that they will be taken more seriously this time around, for the benefit of current and potential participants alike. We therefore end this article with a direct call for the international Sistema sphere to respond to the growing critical literature, and for researchers to take the lead.

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1. A longer version of this article was published in Spanish in *Epistemus*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Since Frega’s study was not a personal research project but rather a commissioned report, she did not publish on this topic at the time. It was only after witnessing the considerable interest in El Sistema at ISME 2014 in Porto Alegre, where she met and began corresponding with the author, that the idea of publishing some of these findings first arose. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Further details of the debate can be found at https://geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com/el-sistema-the-system/el-sistema-blog/. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This reference is to Garmendia’s second report. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The final sentence of El Sistema’s official Vision statement (<http://fundamusical.org.ve/category/el-sistema/mision-y-vision/>) can be found verbatim on this page of Hernández and Urreiztieta’s report. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The definition of ‘rescue’ within the Sistema context is not clear or consistent. It sometimes has a moral flavour, as above (rescuing from a ‘deviant youth’), while at others more of a socio-economic character (the program’s mission statement refers to the ‘rescue of the most vulnerable groups in the country’). In this context, the key point is that the evaluators’ claims do not match their interviewees’ stated personal experiences. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Baker 2014 and Fink 2016 on El Sistema and harmony. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Another document in Frega’s archive (‘Observaciones’ n.d.), which is anonymous but probably written by an employee of the IDB, criticises Garmendia’s reports for failing to analyse El Sistema’s educational method or identify its shortcomings; to offer a solid proposal for institutional strengthening; to formulate proposals for monitoring and evaluating the program; or to identify the risks of the IDB’s operation. It concludes that the consultant’s focus on the musical rather than social aspects of El Sistema reduced the chances of IDB funding. Garmendia’s reports were thus recognised as problematic at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Estrada sought out interviewees from a number of different cities, in order to ensure that her sample was geographically diverse. However, she notes that a limitation on her research was the difficulty she found in identifying, locating, and interviewing informants. Seven of the former Sistema musicians that she approached declined to be interviewed and three more did not respond (possibly a telling detail, considering the size of her sample). The current Sistema musicians were hard to pin down and on three occasions did not show up for the interview. The sample is thus to a degree self-selecting, though there is no reason to suppose that this makes it unrepresentative. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. All quotations from Estrada’s interviewees are taken from the transcriptions in the appendix to her report. The pagination of the appendix begins again at 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This section appears in Appendix II of Frega’s (1997) report, which does not have page numbers. It is a copy of a testimony collected by Estrada (the original is missing). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This section appears in Appendix II of Frega’s (1997) report. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This section appears in Appendix II of Frega’s (1997) report. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Relevant academic studies of orchestras include Faulkner (1973), Levine and Levine (1996), and Cottrell (2004). More anecdotally, see also http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/apr/09/what-im-really-thinking-orchestral-musician. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Frega had a long meeting with Estrada and incorporated ten of Estrada’s interviews as Appendix 2. She confirmed that the two consultants shared similar visions of El Sistema. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. On the shift in El Sistema’s discourse from a musical to a social focus, see Baker 2014 and https://geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com/el-sistema-older-posts/professionalization-or-rescuing-the-poor-the-origins-of-el-sistema-in-abreus-own-words/. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This division between vision and practice has precedents in music education: see for example Gramit 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Additionally, Frega backed up Estrada’s research, while Larry Scripp (2015) verified Baker’s conclusions via extensive interviews with the former Sistema violinist Luigi Mazzocchi. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Although there have been periodic attempts to ground this rhetoric in evidence, they are all flawed and have been deemed unsatisfactory by the IDB: see Baker 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It is impossible to determine with any certainty why the IDB decided to fund El Sistema in spite of the 1997 reports. However, a clue may be found in the fact that at no point does Estrada argue for or against funding the program. Furthermore, the focal point of her conclusions is a set of proposals about rethinking, revising, modifying, developing, and so on. Frega’s report, too, centres on suggestions for improving the program. The nature of these evaluations implies that the decision to fund El Sistema had already been taken. When the document ‘Observaciones’ (n.d.), discussed above, is also taken into account, it appears that the purpose of commissioning the 1997 reports was to rectify the lack of critical perspectives and consequent proposals in their predecessors, not to adjudicate a decision that hung in the balance. It is also possible that these reports were more a bureaucratic requirement than a genuine consultative exercise (a view supported by the IDB’s apparent indifference to the realisation of the proposals: it provided El Sistema with a much larger loan in 2007 despite the fact that many of the recommendations in the evaluations had not been put into practice and key goals of the first loan had not been met). Nevertheless, such explanations remain speculative in the absence of further evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. In 2011, fourteen years after Frega’s proposals, El Sistema finally created the Venezuelan traditional music program Alma Llanera. Nevertheless, it took the form of a separate program, rather than part of the training offered to all Sistema students. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This critical reassessment is already well under way in the academic sphere: see for example Allan et al 2010; Borchert 2012; Rimmer, Street, and Phillips 2014; Logan 2015, 2016; Bull 2016; Fink 2016; Dobson 2016; and Rosabal-Coto 2016. However, such studies have been largely ignored by the fields of practice and policy. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See https://geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com/el-sistema-older-posts/idb-study-sheds-doubt-on-el-sistemas-claims-of-social-inclusion-and-transformation-short-version/ for a critical analysis of this report. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This picture supports Baker’s (2014, 93-95) earlier contention, based on qualitative research, that the majority of children could be described as middle- or lower-middle-class rather than deeply deprived or Venezuela’s poorest. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Forthcoming research will argue that even the minimal positive findings probably exaggerate the effects of the program during the experiment, because of the statistical methods used. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. https://www.isme.org/our-work/special-interest-groups/el-sistema. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)