El Sistema, “The Venezuelan musical miracle”:

The construction of a global myth

The Venezuelan youth orchestra program El Sistema has become globally renowned since 2007. A powerful and eulogistic narrative has evolved around this state-funded scheme. It has been hailed around the world as a miracle: a social project that has rescued hundreds of thousands of children from poverty and a life of crime, turning slum-dwellers into world-class classical musicians. This story has been elaborated and disseminated by journalists (e.g. Borzacchini 2010), arts educators/advocates/writers (e.g. Booth 2008, 2010; Tunstall 2012; Tunstall and Booth 2016), documentary makers, and major figures in the classical music world. Simon Rattle described El Sistema as “the most important thing happening in music anywhere in the world,” and other high-profile advocates have included Claudio Abbado and Placido Domingo.[[1]](#endnote-1) It has cemented a reputation as a highly successful example of socially oriented music education, and it has spawned an array of “Sistema-inspired” programs in around sixty countries, including many in the Americas and Europe. The program’s founder, José Antonio Abreu, has won a string of major international awards and honorary doctorates, and he was proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012.

Yet there are other, less widely known sides to this dominant narrative expounded by the program, its supporters, and the media. First of all, there is no robust, independent study to support it. A 1997 external evaluation for the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), which was considering whether to make a loan to the program, revealed a number of systemic problems and some strikingly disillusioned musicians (Baker and Frega 2016). Nevertheless, the bank went ahead with the loan of $8 million in 1998, and followed it up in 2007 with a further $150 million. It was not until 2011, however, that the bank decided to carry out its own experimental study of the program, and its findings were finally published in late 2016 (Alemán et al. 2016). This study found little evidence to support El Sistema’s “theory of change,” since significant positive effects were noted in only 2 out of 26 variables measured, and even that result depended on a generous interpretation of the statistics. It also uncovered two striking problems: a high dropout rate and a failure to target the poor effectively.

These findings were not a surprise to everyone, however, since by this point scholars had begun to question the eulogistic official narrative. When the international El Sistema boom began in 2007, after the Proms debut of its elite ensemble, the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra (SBYO), researchers of music education were little in evidence. This has since changed. Scrutiny of Sistema-inspired programs began in 2010, focusing particularly on Sistema Scotland (Allan et al 2010; Borchert 2012). The flow of studies increased from 2014, and more attention began to be paid to the Venezuelan progenitor, resulting in a monograph (Baker 2014); two journal special issues (*Action, Criticism, & Theory for Music Education* 15/1 (2016) and *Revista Internacional de Educación Musical* 4 (2016)); and a number of other essays and reports (e.g. Rimmer, Street, and Phillips 2014; Logan 2015a, 2015b; Pedroza 2015; Scripp 2015; Shieh 2015; Baker and Frega 2016). There were also conferences in the UK (in 2015) and the US (in 2016).[[2]](#endnote-2)

Critical academic study of El Sistema is thus flourishing. Scholars have analyzed both the practices of El Sistema and its international offshoots (e.g. Baker 2014; Dobson 2016), and the philosophy that underpins them (e.g. Baker 2016a; Bull 2016; Logan 2016). They have focused on the problematic theories of poverty on which the program is based (Scruggs 2015), its alignment with neoliberalism and neocolonialism (Logan 2015a; Rosabal-Coto 2016), and the various ways in which it “seems like an unwelcome — and unpromising — visit from the ghost of public-school orchestra rooms past” (Fink 2016, 34). Other recent scholarship within music education, too, such as *The Oxford Handbook of Social Justice in Music Education* (Benedict et al. 2015), shows up El Sistema in a problematic light, revealing that its practices and philosophy closely mirror ones that have long since been criticized and fallen out of favour among many progressive music educationalists in the global North.

El Sistema has thus become a major paradox in the world of music education, and indeed classical music more widely. On the one hand, it may be the most famous and lauded music education system in the world, not least because of the global renown of its top alumnus, the conductor Gustavo Dudamel, and it has been credited as the prime and most successful example of “social action through music” (one of the program’s mottos). On the other hand, closer examination in the last few years has revealed notable flaws in this dominant narrative, which appears to be, to a significant degree, a myth.

The discrepancy between the official narrative and research-based perspectives on El Sistema is now well established. The focus of this article will therefore be related questions: how did this discrepancy emerge? How did the dominant narrative of El Sistema grow to such proportions and take such firm hold over the public imagination in so many countries? How, in short, was the global myth of El Sistema constructed?

My central argument is that the media and program evaluations were the primary routes by which the mythical narrative was established and consolidated both nationally and internationally, though scholars have also played a part. The domestic media were strongly influenced by El Sistema’s founder and director, José Antonio Abreu, and the propagation of his celebratory account was furthered by credulous foreign journalists and problematically conceived, overly optimistic impact studies. A global Sistema industry now rests on this myth, helping to ensure its perpetuation.

I build on Pedroza’s (2015) critical study of El Sistema’s historiography and the telling of its story as an “epic history,” which also focuses on myth, but move in new directions. Pedroza’s article is focused primarily on El Sistema’s pre-history (up to 1975), on archival sources and secondary literature on orchestral music in Venezuela prior to this date, and thus on the national and historical context. As a music historian, she questions the program’s claims of innovation by revealing its continuities with the past. I concentrate on a more recent period (1989 to the present), drawing on media articles, program evaluations, and interviews with journalists and musicians, and adopt a more global and contemporary frame. My prime interest is the growth and dissemination of the Sistema myth in recent times, and my approach is more ethnomusicological.[[3]](#endnote-3) My study also contributes to the emergent critical literature on El Sistema more broadly, offering a more historiographical critique to a field in which most analyses have been primarily ideological and/or ethnographic.

My use of the word “myth” reflects its everyday senses of “an exaggerated or idealized conception of a person or thing” and “a widely held but false belief or idea.”[[4]](#endnote-4) This is because my primary aim is a somewhat quotidian one: to gather evidence on the construction of the dominant Sistema narrative. Although more theoretical analysis of myth would be a valuable exercise, it is one that plays only a secondary role below. I believe that the immediacy of the issue – the rapid growth of El Sistema into a global movement on the back of flawed assumptions and false beliefs – justifies an immediacy of approach and style that would be compromised by a focus on theoretical elaboration.

The evidence includes some material from previous publications, both academic and on social media, but the argument on which it is brought to bear – an overarching, broadly chronological analysis of the construction of a mythical narrative since 1989 – is novel. Furthermore, it is important that evidence and arguments that have appeared previously in other spheres be presented within the realm of peer-reviewed scholarship. One of the main concerns underpinning this article is that advocates and the media have had considerable (and rarely beneficial) influence on writing about El Sistema within academic music studies; they have propagated idealized views of the program and of the power of music more broadly, and some scholars, rather than exercising due skepticism, have picked up the baton, helping to cement those visions as orthodoxy. This influence needs to be countered within the scholarly field. Expositions and debates on social media are easily overlooked or ignored and rarely become an essential reference point for scholarly studies, particularly those from disciplines other than music; academic publication is therefore necessary if the historiography of El Sistema is to be revised. In sum, this article is intended to offer a more rigorous, research-based alternative to media accounts of El Sistema, while providing a more solid historiographical foundation for future scholarly writing on El Sistema.

Creating the myth

Studying the first phase of the construction of the El Sistema myth is not an easy task. Researchers are faced with a notable shortage of sources on which to draw. Nevertheless, ethnographic work by the author, supplemented by printed sources, points to a fundamental mechanism by which the narrative of El Sistema began to take on a mythical quality: the media. Yet it is also the media that allows brief glimpses of this mechanism at work.

The period from 1989 to 1994 appears to have been crucial. This is when El Sistema’s founder and director José Antonio Abreu was also minister of culture and president of the National Council for Culture (CONAC). This triple employment placed Abreu in a powerful position with respect to the media, and several journalists have claimed that he made the most of this opportunity.

In a pioneering investigative article, Roger Santodomingo (1990) claimed to have seen checks and contracts that revealed that Abreu hired consultants and journalists as part of a media campaign to polish CONAC’s image. The reams of uniformly positive press at the time suggested that this policy was working well. Santodomingo’s principal source, Joaquín López Mujica, a member of CONAC’s consultative council, claimed that Abreu had approximately forty journalists among his consultants and asserted: “Abreu’s management has been characterized by covert control of information. It’s what could be termed a totalitarianism of cultural information” (19). Santodomingo concluded, “Abreu loves the press” (21). His article was accompanied by a cartoon of Abreu conducting the media.[[5]](#endnote-5)

At the heart of Santodomingo’s critique is Abreu’s fixation, according to López Mujica, with display. The latter states baldly that “culture for Abreu is spectacle,” and “the priority is the show” (20). He also claims that there were many “phantom institutes or programs that have never been launched” (21). The sense of a pervasive gap between image and reality at this time extends specifically to El Sistema. López Mujica alleges that huge amounts were spent on foreign tours yet most provincial *núcleos* (music schools) were far from impressive. Tellingly, he describes El Sistema as “an illusion” (ibid.). By 1990, then, it appears that a divergence between reality and public projection was already underway, facilitated by a largely compliant media.

Further revealing critiques may be found towards the end of Abreu’s tenure as minister and director of CONAC. In an article entitled “The Humiliated of CONAC,” Earle Herrera (1994) mocks the neoliberal language of CONAC’s managers and the paid hacks who sing their praises, claiming that “the current leadership of CONAC owes much of its ‘shine’ to these shameful and pricey pens.” He describes a starkly divided cultural world, in which those at the top enjoy “overseas trips, self-publication of books, the traffic of influence, legions of flatterers, fine food and fine wine, self-promotion and carte blanche in the press.”

Oscar Ramos’s critique begins with the uncannily and uniformly positive coverage of Abreu.[[6]](#endnote-6) “Do you recall any criticism of the cultural policy of Pérez-Abreu appearing at any point in the press?”[[7]](#endnote-7) He mocks Chefi Borzacchini, Abreu’s leading supporter and head of the culture section at *El Nacional* newspaper, for painting the minister as a hero “in language that recalls the odes of Gómez” (Venezuela’s early-twentieth-century dictator). (Indeed, Borzacchini has played an important part in the construction of the Sistema myth, not least as the author of the closest thing to an official history of the institution (Borzacchini 2010)). Both Ramos and Herrera, then, like Santodomingo before them, point the finger at their fellow journalists for exaggerating the achievements of Abreu and the institutions that he headed.

Another major investigative article about Abreu was published by Rafael Rivero (1994). Among various disturbing claims about “The Philanthropic Ogre,” as he dubs El Sistema’s founder, Rivero highlights Abreu’s media fixation.[[8]](#endnote-8) The former head of publicity at CONAC describes Abreu as “obsessed as far as the media are concerned . . . more than capable of calling me at 3 am about a small detail of an information leaflet” (48). Rivero describes Abreu’s abhorrence of a publicity vacuum—somewhat typical in politicians—and also points to its darker side: he claims that El Nacional critic Enrique Moya’s negative report of an Abreu-sponsored event saw the author given his marching orders, and alludes to a practice of cultural institutions defanging journalistic reports. An attempt at revolution by a group of journalists, fed up with constant interference, fizzled out after a number of signatories to a mordant open letter mysteriously withdrew their support; coincidentally, almost all of them were subsequently given jobs as cultural advisors to CONAC. According to Rivero, Abreu’s micro-control of the media extended into the provinces, where journalists who published critical opinions in local newspapers were instantly reprimanded or their employers urged to take punitive action.

Like Santodomingo four years earlier, Rivero paints a portrait of a cultural sphere, presided over by Abreu, in which there were significant gaps between plans and practices and in which appearances were all-important. According to Rivero, “it is no secret that in this most recent period everyone travelled [overseas], or received money for X project which, in many cases, was never carried out” (53). Hordes of artists were sent off on lavish, state-funded tours to Europe on which they sometimes did little; the SBYO famously ended up in Paris and London without its instruments. Rivero signs off with the opinions of two cultural observers who claim that “for Abreu, culture is a fashion show, a swindle,” and that “under Abreu there has been no culture, just a lavish and self-congratulatory spectacle” (ibid.).

While on one level these four articles simply constitute a counter-narrative, there are several reasons to take them seriously as accounts of Abreu’s relationship with the media. They were produced independently by four journalists over a period of several years; they were writing about their own professional milieu; they cited or referenced other journalists by name; and Santodomingo both quoted a CONAC insider and claimed to have seen documentary evidence. Additionally, my own interviews with journalists provided further corroboration.

Key elements of the construction of the Sistema myth are thus evident between 1989 and 1994, when Abreu was the most powerful cultural official in Venezuela: a musical and political leader with a strong inclination towards spectacle; gaps between what was promised and what was executed; and a largely compliant media that was kept on side by both the carrot and the stick. This capacity to control messages and generate glowingly positive accounts was to become particularly important in the second half of the 1990s, when El Sistema underwent a major – if never officially acknowledged – discursive makeover, changing its identity from a musical to a social program.

Due to the lack of official recognition of this change, the details of when, how, and why it happened are difficult to pin down with complete certainty. Nevertheless, evidence from interviews and written sources point to the period around 1995, and the reasons behind the shift appear to have included rising populism in the political arena, a shrinkage of funding for the cultural sector due to low oil prices, the consolidation of economic and social justifications for cultural expenditure around the world (Belfiore 2002; Yúdice 2003), and the decision to seek major loans from the IDB, which required a social argument to be put forward (Baker 2014). Negotiations with the IDB were underway by 1996, and documentary evidence reveals that the discursive shift had taken place by this point (see Baker and Frega 2016).

The adoption of the new social rhetoric appears to have occurred relatively quickly and without a comparable shift in practice, and interviews suggested that it left some participants bemused. The ex-Sistema violinist Luigi Mazzocchi described the process to Scripp (2015, 38): “Due to the sudden emphasis on social outcomes in Abreu’s speeches and other publicity surrounding the program, members of the orchestras realized that their program had been reframed as a form of social action designed to benefit the poorest segment of Venezuelan youth. For Mazzocchi, the reality of his experience did not match the new rhetoric.” The violinist alleged a deliberate fostering of the new myth by the program: as Scripp notes, “[o]rchestra members were explicitly asked not to contradict, or even discuss, these issues with others outside of El Sistema.” Mazzocchi claimed:

The person presenting our concert said, “This is unbelievable! This orchestra is made up of all poor kids from the poorest neighborhoods of Venezuela. And now they’re here on our stage performing great music. What a great achievement.” But I knew for sure—because I knew some of those kids—that they were not from poor neighborhoods. […] some of them actually hated it being presented like that or being told by people, “Whoa, you were from a poor neighborhood and now you're here and you're a great musician!” And… we hated it too, but we were told not to say anything: “just smile, don’t respond.”

As Scripp concludes (39): “Mazzocchi views El Sistema’s claims of social impact on disadvantaged students as unsubstantiated assertions and insincere propaganda emanating from a secretive organization seeking more funding.”

The picture that emerges from this crucial period, then, suggests a deliberate, strategic, and somewhat sudden construction of a story of El Sistema as a social program aimed at the most vulnerable groups in society. If the previous period had seen image-management of a less remarkable kind – essentially the burnishing of El Sistema’s aura by a compliant media – the second phase saw a more fundamental, calculated divergence between the reality of the scheme (which had been created to train and provide opportunities for young orchestral musicians) and its new narrative as a program to rescue Venezuela’s most disadvantaged children. The consolidation of this mythical narrative was made possible by the political power of Abreu, an archetypal “cultural caudillo”(Rodríguez Legendre 1998; Silva-Ferrer 2014), and his control over both El Sistema’s participants and the Venezuelan media.

In our interview, the Venezuelan author and journalist Ibsen Martínez confirmed the close relationship between the newspaper *El Nacional* and the cultural sector (in particular Abreu) during this period. However, he argued that mythification was not solely a top-down process, but also depended on a willingness on the part of the Venezuelan general public to revere cultural caudillos such as Abreu or Sofía Imber, founder of the Contemporary Art Museum of Caracas. Within this context of *caudillismo cultural*, a skilled fundraiser such as Abreu quickly becomes converted into “a great captain” or “a great oracle.” As Martínez noted: “There is a tendency in my society to attribute demiurgic powers to these cultural caudillos.” As funds begin to flow into the relevant cultural sector, “society steps back and stops asking questions. That willingness of wider society to place someone on an indisputable pedestal is in my view a legacy of the colonial period. Abreu made the most of that propensity of society to fix on someone and grant them the power to decide.” This analysis thus views the mythification of Abreu and his program as deeply rooted in longstanding dynamics of Venezuelan society and cultural leadership, rather than simply a shrewd media operation.

Nevertheless, the role of the media in this key period seems clear, and there continues to be very little probing or questioning of El Sistema by the mainstream media in Venezuela, which generally serves a publicity role. Abreu’s critics have pointed repeatedly to his network of personal contacts, his unparalleled influence over the media, and the consequent difficulty in publishing critiques of his project, resulting in wide and almost universally glowing press coverage. The writer Eduardo Casanova (2009) alleged, “if someone does an audit they will find the names of several cultural journalists from high circulation newspapers who were and are on Abreu’s payroll.” In interviews, others stated that less than positive coverage was not tolerated. A prominent music educator recalled Abreu’s “brutal” and “ugly” reaction to a negative article by the music critic Gustavo Tambascio in 1979, an episode reported by Rivero (1994), and claimed that from that moment on, music critics started to be more careful: “no one says anything in the press—just positive things.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Nevertheless, Javier Sansón published a satirical piece about El Sistema on February 15, 2005, in his column “Música de solfa” in *El Universal*; he was suspended shortly afterward. In another interview, a journalist reported: “When [X] left his job as a music critic for *El Nacional*, he recommended me to [Y, a member of the paper’s culture team] to replace him, and in the interview, [Y] told me very clearly and upfront that if I were to become a music critic for *El Nacional* I would never, ever be able to say anything negative about El Sistema, not even in passing.”

Disseminating the myth

One of the most important moments in the history of El Sistema was the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra’s debut at the Proms in London in 2007. This concert was a prime catalyst for the emergence of El Sistema as a global phenomenon. During the lead-up to the Proms, the first major newspaper articles about El Sistema appeared in the UK, initiating a wave of media interest in the global North that has barely abated to this day. This wave constitutes the next phase in the story: the international dissemination of the Sistema myth. Taking two of these early press articles and one later one as case studies, we may see how foreign journalists were co-opted as overseas standard-bearers of the official, mythical narrative.

Charlotte Higgins (2006) and Ed Vulliamy (2007) both travelled to Caracas, and they present very similar portraits of El Sistema. Both visited a “show” Sistema centre and one or two schools in poor neighbourhoods. Both interviewed Abreu, Dudamel, and Rafael Elster (director of Sarria núcleo). In both cases, Abreu described social concerns as central to his vision from the start, and both took his words at face value. Higgins characterised El Sistema as a “radical social project,” while Vulliamy claimed that the musicians of the SBYO “come for the most part from desperate shantytowns.” Thus the orthodoxy in the English-language media was born.

What these journalists failed to do, like most others who subsequently visited Caracas and wrote about El Sistema, was to corroborate this story. Admittedly, this would not have been easy. They were given an orchestrated red-carpet tour, led by carefully chosen, on-message representatives. Wakin (2012), writing a few years later, described “an elaborately choreographed showcase” for visiting foreigners; he perceived El Sistema as “a well-oiled machine when it comes to welcoming outsiders,” putting on displays for which children are “rehearsed to within an inch of their lives.” Armstrong (2005, 3) notes that “[m]ythology is usually inseparable from ritual,” and Abreu – described as a master of spectacle by Venezuelan journalists – has long known how to use ritualized displays to bolster his mythical narrative.

The British journalists were told an inspiring story – or “epic history,” as Pedroza puts it – about El Sistema’s goals and achievements. On a short visit to Venezuela, they had no easy way of delving beneath the surface into the program’s more complex history, finding commentators willing to tell other aspects of the story, or ascertaining that most of the SBYO’s musicians did not, in fact, come from “desperate shantytowns” but were ordinary middle- and lower-middle-class young people from aspirational, well-organized families.[[10]](#endnote-10) Higgins sensed that the story had been carefully tailored – “The way Abreu talks about the System is clearly designed to chime with Chavez-speak” – and both writers spotted clues, but they failed to look into Abreu’s past. As a result, they did not grasp that this program had been created by an arch-conservative and lifelong neoliberal and, with its core values of discipline, respect, and hard work, was far from “radical.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Rather, they were swayed by the storyline and performance that El Sistema had created for external consumption.

A notable feature of such articles is the extent to which Abreu is permitted to create his own myths without any challenge from the journalists. Clemency Burton-Hill (2012) reported that Abreu’s “visionary philosophy has, since 1975, been based on the notion that a free, immersive classical music education for the poorest of the poor might positively influence the social problems plaguing the country.” Abreu told her that he began with a conviction of the possibility of social transformation: “I told those first 11 members of the orchestra that we were creating the beginning of a network that would eventually turn Venezuela into a musical power by rescuing children from low-income families.” Yet in a lengthy interview about the orchestra in 1978, Abreu made no mention of rescuing children from low-income families; he stated that the program’s aim was “a total transformation of the art of music in the country, opening up a path for a whole generation of young Venezuelan musicians.”[[12]](#endnote-12) The words “poor” and “social” – now central to Abreu’s vocabulary – did not appear anywhere in the interview. Nor was there any mention of rescuing children from low-income families in El Sistema’s first constitution, produced the following year (1979). Furthermore, musicians who had played and worked in El Sistema in the 1980s and early 1990s told the author that they heard nothing about social objectives at this time and saw no targeting of poor children; Mazzocchi told the same to Scripp (2015). Indeed, no evidence has ever been produced to verify Abreu’s claim, which therefore appears to involve a considerable degree of historical revisionism.

Burton-Hill goes on: “Abreu's hypothesis has been overwhelmingly vindicated.” This statement, too, rests on Abreu’s own words rather than independent investigation: “‘The Inter-American Development Bank, the Venezuelan State and the Andean Development Corporation are continually supervising the foundation's projects,’ he says, ‘because they have invested so many resources. Wherever there is an impact evaluation study, the results are unanimous. Children engaged in the programme attain above-average results in school and show a tremendous capacity for collective community action.’” Yet a major evaluation in the early 2000s, which had presented its findings to Abreu in person, found that longer-term Sistema participation had a small *negative* effect on school attendance and academic achievement, though it played down this finding (see below). Furthermore, the IDB had both publicly and privately admitted in 2011 – a year before Burton-Hill’s interview with Abreu – that none of the existing evaluations was reliable. In that year, it commissioned a new study that “would be the first rigorous evidence of the results of the program” and admitted that its 2007 cost-benefit analysis “was the result of various suppositions and not of a rigorous measurement of the impact of El Sistema on the beneficiaries of the program” (“Sistema Nacional” 2011, 2-3). The reality was much more complicated than the picture that Abreu presented to The Guardian’s readership via Burton-Hill.

A characteristic feature of these articles and other important features in newspapers like the New York Times is a vocabulary that contributes to an atmosphere of myth. “Visionary,” “radical,” and “revolutionary” appear frequently. Yet ensemble education in European music has been widespread in Latin America since the sixteenth century, and most scholars of music education today would see little that is revolutionary in a youth orchestra playing canonic European masterworks. Through Pedroza’s (2015) revisionist lens, Abreu appears more as executor and manager than originator, drawing on pioneering work by others such as Orquesta Sinfónica de Venezuela (OSV) president Pedro Antonio Ríos Reyna. Abreu was also indebted to Jorge Peña Hen, who created a groundbreaking youth orchestra project in the Chilean town of La Serena in 1964, eleven years before El Sistema’s first orchestra. Nevertheless, characterizations of Abreu tend towards the heroic or otherworldly: Burton-Hill likens him to Mother Teresa, while Wakin (2012) paints him as a “venerated high priest.” Such comparisons and language have played an important part in the mythification of Abreu and his project by English-language journalists.

It would be wrong to blame to these journalists, who were faced with a shrewd, well-prepared, and well-funded public relations operation more characteristic of a multinational corporation than a music education program. They were working in an unfamiliar context and had little time to dig deeper. Nevertheless, their articles are worth analyzing because they are representative the last decade of media coverage in the global North, which has been characterized by an over-dependence on press releases and special shows for foreign visitors and an absence of corroborating research. It is hard to find many English-language journalists who have asked critical questions of El Sistema, let along ones who have done so after visiting Venezuela.[[13]](#endnote-13)

This scenario may reflect the difficulties that a story like El Sistema poses for cultural journalism. Armed with official press releases and notes from a short red-carpet tour and a handful of interviews, music journalists were able to write feature-length stories presenting the myth of El Sistema. Uncovering the much more complex and contradictory realities that are emerging today requires a deeper understanding of the Venezuelan context, good contacts outside the Sistema sphere, and familiarity with the debates taking place in Spanish in multiple online spaces. It is the kind of story that requires the skills, contacts, and investment of time of an investigative journalist – but no mainstream media outlet has been willing to devote such resources to a classical music story. (It is no coincidence that the two most revealing articles about Abreu, by Roger Santodomingo and Rafael Rivero, were written by investigative reporters rather than music journalists.) As a result, El Sistema is simultaneously a story of great public interest and attention in the global North – it was described by *Gramophone* magazine as the second most important development in classical music of the new millennium (after the invention of the iPod), and has featured regularly in major broadsheet newspapers for a decade – and a story that has been distinctly under-researched by those responsible for conveying it to that public.

The construction of the Sistema story provides a case study of the impact of recent changes in journalism on the reporting of culture. As James Ball (2017) notes, the economic pressures on journalism in the Internet era mean fewer reporters, lower budgets, and constant efforts to reduce costs, and regurgitating sources is much more cost-effective than investigating them. The current model of maximizing clicks does not encourage journalists to spend hours looking into claims or treating them with caution, but rather to simply write them up. Ball therefore implicates the media in the rise of “post-truth,” or as he puts it more bluntly in his subtitle, “How Bullshit Conquered the World.” Thus if the effect is similar in the case of both national and international journalism – a tendency to repeat and elaborate the Sistema myth and to marginalize or ignore problems with it – the causes are quite different: in the Venezuelan case, Abreu’s longstanding influence over cultural journalists, whereas in the international case, a lack of time, resources, or incentive to investigate the story properly.

On the whole, and mirroring the national context, the international media has therefore operated more in a publicity role than an investigative one. For example, at the end of 2016, El País and other members of the Leading European Newspapers Alliance (LENA) announced that they had signed a deal with Dudamel to disseminate classical music via the newspapers’ digital platforms.[[14]](#endnote-14) The first activity would be the distribution – at a special price for readers of LENA – of the complete Beethoven symphonies, recorded by Dudamel and the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra, who would be touring them around Europe three months later. The article also included publicity for El Sistema and Dudamel’s Los Angeles project YOLA. This collective of major newspapers thus agreed to promote the Dudamel brand (and his recording and tour) rather than investigate the complex story behind it at time when the conductor’s reputation was coming under public pressure in Venezuela. Five days later, Javier Moreno’s (2016) interview in El País treated Dudamel with kid gloves and omitted contentious information that had been circulating publicly in Venezuela for two months about the intensified politicisation of El Sistema – information that undermined Dudamel’s central statement that he held no political position.[[15]](#endnote-15)

However, it is not just the media that has been responsible for the international dissemination of the myth. Most books on El Sistema have expanded on the telling of the program’s story as a social miracle. Pedroza (2015) critiques works by María Guinand, Bolivia Bottome, and Chefi Borzacchini, who provided the core Venezuelan accounts and played an important role alongside journalists in forging an “epic history” of a “musical miracle.”[[16]](#endnote-16) She also unpicks Tunstall’s (2012) mythification for English-language readers (see also Pedroza 2014). As she notes, the epic history originated to a considerable degree with certain founder members of the National Youth Orchestra and above all Abreu himself, whose stories were admiringly elaborated by Venezuelan and North American devotees. In books aimed at a general readership, then, the crucial combination of critical distance and in-depth research is absent; instead, the authors facilitate the self-mythification of El Sistema’s founding fathers.

Scholars and scholarly publishers, too, have contributed to the construction of the mythical edifice.[[17]](#endnote-17) Tunstall stated that her aim was not just “to tell a compelling tale” of El Sistema but also “to proselytize on behalf of its mission” (cited in Johnson 2012). For Washington Post journalist Anne Midgette, Tunstall’s co-authored book with Eric Booth “verges on cult literature” and “approaches hagiography,” while Sistema commentator Jonathan Govias described her writing as resembling “fan fiction.”[[18]](#endnote-18) Nevertheless, Tunstall’s sole- and co-authored books were published by W. W. Norton & Company, a prominent academic house that also publishes widely used music textbooks in the United States. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that her first book, and the mythical narrative it encapsulates, is regularly referenced by researchers in an uncritical fashion as though it were rigorous research rather than journalism, and it forms a cornerstone of undergraduate and graduate dissertations and academic article submissions and publications. Borzacchini, like Tunstall, is regularly cited by scholars who are apparently unaware or uninterested that these authors are journalists and Sistema advocates, not independent and academically qualified researchers.

Maria Majno – a senior figure in both Sistema Italia and Sistema Europe – published an article (2012) that depends heavily on institutional publicity materials, advocacy literature, media reports, and documentary films, despite appearing in the Annals of the New York Academy of Science. It has now been cited in turn by ten academic articles (at the time of writing), in neuroscience, public mental health, early child development, and psychology, among other disciplines, illustrating how partial accounts built on weak foundations can be transformed into scholarly orthodoxy in a matter of just a few years. Even the IDB’s 2016 evaluation, which was the result of a $1 million study and published in an academic journal, begins by citing Majno alongside US advocacy material and a newspaper article. Thus whether one looks at the media, books for a general readership, or even some parts of the academic field, one finds the same problems: a lack of critical questioning and research, a dependence on unreliable sources, in some cases an explicit or implicit advocacy motive, and thus an elaboration rather than examination of the Sistema myth – something that is particularly concerning when it involves published academic research.

The international dissemination of the myth also rested on advocacy by famous conductors and musicians – Simon Rattle embraced the epic history with terms like “miracle” and “resurrection” – but also by the classical music industry. The rave reviews of the SBYO’s sold-out Prom in 2007 underlined the orchestra’s commercial potential, and it became a mainstay in major concert halls around the world, managed by Askonas Holt and recording for Deutsche Grammophon. The classical music industry, long assailed by concerns over the supposed “death of classical music” and its revenues from recordings in decline, had been presented with a formula for filling halls, bringing in new audiences, and improving its image by banishing accusations of elitism. The Sistema myth plays an essential part in this formula. The (largely fictional) idea that the musicians performing in the world’s great concert halls have been “saved” from the “slums” is crucial to the marketing backstory that distinguishes the SBYO from so many other high-class orchestras (including European national youth orchestras).

The economic value of the myth discouraged critical examination and encouraged further elaboration. Deutsche Grammophon, for example, generated publicity material that described Abreu as “universally respected” and stated that 90% of El Sistema’s students came from poverty.[[19]](#endnote-19) In reality, as journalistic articles and academic studies have revealed (Santodomingo 1990; Rivero 1994; Baker 2014; Baker and Frega 2016), opinions of Abreu in the Venezuelan cultural sector are highly polarized, and the best demographic data available puts the poverty rate at 16.7% (Alemán et al. 2016). But for years Deutsche Grammophon’s claims went unchallenged.

The music education sector, too, saw fervent advocacy. Like classical music, public music education is under pressure in many parts of the global North. A music education program that promised miraculous social benefits in deprived areas was appealing to both educators and funders, including local and national governments. “Sistema-inspired” programs mushroomed in dozens of countries around the world, and the efficacy of the myth that underpinned them discouraged closer examination.

The decade since 2007 has thus seen the myth converted into a global El Sistema industry that encompasses a major record label, famous concert venues and series, residencies, festivals, agencies, conservatoires, universities, symposia, educational programs, famous conductors and musicians, institutional leaders, self-proclaimed experts, journalists, and intermediaries of all kinds. There are national and international umbrella groups (Sistema Europe, El Sistema USA, Sistema Africa) and a global advocacy network (Sistema Global). Building the Sistema brand has brought profits and bolstered careers. Institutions and individuals have boosted their profile and prestige by associating themselves with the famous “miracle.”

Even prominent higher education institutions such as Harvard University, which might have been expected to treat the story with normal academic scepticism, or at least do basic due diligence, have instead jumped on board with honorary doctorates and alliances. London University’s Institute of Education, the leading research institution of its kind in the UK, awarded Abreu an honorary doctorate in 2012 on the basis that El Sistema was proven to have an extraordinary capacity to reduce levels of poverty, illiteracy, crime, drug use and exclusion. Yet El Sistema’s main funder, the IDB, had admitted the previous year that it did not have any rigorous evidence of the results of the program, and such evidence (distinctly underwhelming, it turned out) was not to appear until 2016. The Institute of Education had thus played a part in the myth making, as did the New England Conservatory, which hosted the Abreu Fellows (later Sistema Fellows) program for five years (2010-15) – a scheme subsequently described to the author by one former fellow as “solely an exercise in evangelism,” and by other alumni as failing to analyse the Venezuelan program critically.

Major multinational organisations have offered enthusiastic support, but again on flimsy grounds: the United Nations Development Programme has supported El Sistema on the basis that “it targets impoverished young people,” despite the fact that it has no consistent targeting mechanisms (Baker 2014) and reaches relatively few poor people (Alemán et al. 2016).[[20]](#endnote-20) The UN’s multi-million-dollar contributions have been intended to help “eradicate extreme poverty and hunger” – an unlikely outcome for a program in which poor people are underrepresented.[[21]](#endnote-21) With so many influential figures and organizations invested in a positive story and thus advocating for El Sistema and Dudamel, critical scrutiny has unsurprisingly been in short supply and largely ignored; instead, the myth has simply grown.

Consolidating the myth

As a music education program led by a powerful politician with a significant degree of control over the media and public institutions, El Sistema managed not just to redefine itself as a social program in the mid-1990s, but also to cement a narrative that it was a resounding success. Nevertheless, there have also been various attempts to evaluate the program since 1996 and provide support for such claims, and the history and nature of these evaluations provide further insights into the construction of the Sistema myth. Where one might expect evaluations to test the official narrative of El Sistema, and to present robust evidence to support or contradict it, recent research has demonstrated that they have been marred by flaws and contradictions, particularly in Venezuela (Baker and Frega 2016; Baker, Bull, and Taylor forthcoming), though also elsewhere (Logan 2015b). Some evaluations have simply reproduced the myth and thus contributed to its consolidation.

Attempts to evaluate the Venezuelan program began in 1996, more than twenty years after its foundation (Baker and Frega 2016). The catalyst was El Sistema’s efforts to secure funding from the IDB. Four evaluations were duly produced by external consultants in 1996 to 1997. These efforts were ultimately successful: the IDB provided a Phase I loan of $8 million in 1998, and a Phase II loan of $150 million in 2008 – one of the most decisive developments in the history of El Sistema.

However, the first two reports, from 1996, were marked not only by eulogistic rhetoric but also by a striking lack of critical scrutiny or robust evidence of the supposed social benefits. Rather than analysing the official narrative, they adopted it, emphasizing the “spiritual richness” provided by music and its supposed capacity to overcome material poverty. It appears that the IDB was not convinced, hence its decision to hire two more consultants and repeat the process a year later, in 1997. In marked contrast to the first phase, the second pair of consultants discovered numerous problems with the program, which they documented in detail. They revealed that the earlier evaluations had either missed or omitted many problematic issues. Nevertheless, the IDB granted the $8 million loan.

Behind the successful outcome, then, lay flawed evaluations and divided opinions. However, the more thorough 1997 evaluations, which were not published, left no trace on the dominant narrative of El Sistema. In marked contrast, the problematic 1996 evaluations became the foundation for El Sistema’s self-presentation as a successful social program: some elements – and even some precise phrases – have become part of the program’s official narrative and can be found (without citations) on its website.[[22]](#endnote-22) Privately, this evaluation process revealed numerous problems; publicly, it was leveraged to bolster the myth.

A new evaluation was carried out by the Universidad de los Andes (ULA) in Mérida between 1999 and 2003.[[23]](#endnote-23) This quantitative study, too, reveals flaws (Baker 2014). As Hollinger notes (2006, 41–42), it has “a number of inherent design weaknesses” and resembles “less a scholarly endeavor than necessary documentation to advocate for The System.” As in the case of the 1996 evaluations, the researchers’ conclusions closely reflected El Sistema’s own claims and even adopted its proselytizing tone.

The most influential evaluation was carried out a few years later by José Cuesta (2011), and used to justify the IDB’s Phase II loan of $150 million to El Sistema.[[24]](#endnote-24) This evaluation was subsequently criticized by scholars. Baker (2014) noted that it presented evidence of correlation rather than causation; that the use of the terms “treatment” and “control” was misleading; that it did not consider pre-existing cognitive or social differences between children; and that El Sistema’s leaders appeared to have played a part in creating it. Scruggs (2015) critiqued the financial calculations behind the study’s conclusion, a cost-benefit ratio of 1:1.68. In fact, by this time the IDB had already distanced itself from this report (and all previous evaluations), as noted above.

The largest study to date was commissioned in 2011, carried out in 2012-14, and published in late 2016 (Alemán et al. 2016). The researchers created a “theory of change” which hypothesized that “short-term participation in orchestras or choruses may foster positive change in four child functioning domains: self-regulatory skills, behavior, prosocial skills and connections, and cognitive skills.” To test their theory, they measured 26 primary outcome variables within these four domains. Only two significant outcomes were found: “the early-admission group had higher self-control and fewer behavioral difficulties, based on child reports.” There were thus no significant outcomes in 24 out of 26 areas, and the researchers “did not find any full-sample effects on cognitive skills […] or on prosocial skills and connections.” Even the two significant outcomes may well have been a result of chance (Baker, Bull, and Taylor forthcoming).

More strikingly, the estimated poverty rate among the El Sistema children was 16.7%, while the rate for the states in which they live was 46.5%. In other words, the El Sistema children in the experiment were three times less likely to be poor than all 6 to 14 year-olds residing in the same states. Consequently, the study “highlights the challenges of targeting interventions towards vulnerable groups of children in the context of a voluntary social program.” Furthermore, 44% of students who were offered a place failed to complete two semesters. The study thus found little evidence to support the official narrative (or the theory of change) and two striking statistics that contradicted it.

Furthermore, the study did not test some key claims about El Sistema’s social impact. The proposal for the study stated that its objective was “to seek to generate rigorous evidence of the social effects of […] El Sistema, including the impacts on school dropout, illegal behaviour, and unplanned pregnancies’ (Sistema Nacional 2011, 3). Under “expected results,” we read: “The data will be used to evaluate rigorously the impacts of El Sistema on school dropout, risky behaviours, incidence of crime, and prevalence of unplanned pregnancies” (ibid.). However, the study itself, published five years later, did not mention any of these issues. It failed to provide any backing for the assumptions, found widely in the international sphere, that El Sistema has been effective in tackling such specific social problems; indeed, the disappearance of these topics between the proposal and the report raises significant questions. It is perhaps relevant here that a meta-analysis of twelve studies of after-school programs in the US suggested that such programs had a small and non-significant effect on delinquency (Taheri and Welsh 2016).

Nevertheless, a launch event for the evaluation in Caracas a few months later presented a very different picture. The IDB research team, El Sistema leaders, and government representatives were present at the occasion in March 2017, which – according to the headline displayed prominently at the top of El Sistema’s website – “confirmed the positive impact of El Sistema on children and young people.” The press release for the event declared that the research team “expressed its satisfaction with the possibility of confirming the transformative work of the program.”[[25]](#endnote-25) They had concluded, it claimed, that the children and young people who entered El Sistema showed improved connections with school and family, a higher degree of cooperation with their peers, and greater self-confidence. According to one of the researchers, Marco Stampire, “we found a decrease in levels of aggression and risk-taking […]; and a willingness to take part in collective activities. The positive effects were also manifested in childhood IQ.” These claims contradicted the evidence and conclusions provided by the same researchers in their published article, in which they had written: “We did not find any full-sample effects on cognitive skills […] or on prosocial skills and connections.”

Ferdinando Regalía, head of the IDB’s Social Protection and Health Division, underlined the importance of showing the results of the study “in order to tackle the criticisms of El Sistema’s work and reaffirm the value of social inclusion via a program of artistic and musical education.” Yet the findings about the poverty and dropout rates did not “tackle the criticisms of El Sistema’s work” but rather provided quantitative support for earlier qualitative critiques, since the same points had been made previously by Baker (2014).

The 2016 report and, above all, its public presentation cap a twenty-year history of unconvincing efforts to demonstrate the efficacy of El Sistema, marked by evaluations that lacked methodological rigour and the emergence and elision of problematic findings and differences of opinion. They underline how flawed evidence and even counter-evidence have been subsumed into the myth of El Sistema, due to the power of the institutions involved. The Caracas event in early 2017 saw El Sistema, the IDB, and the Venezuelan government collude in the presentation of findings that ranged from the underwhelming to the problematic as though they “confirmed the transformative work of the program.” Where one might expect evaluations to constitute and promote critical scrutiny, most participated in the hagiography of the program, and those that did not were either buried or their negative findings given a positive spin.

Persistence of the myth

Since 2014, the Sistema myth has come under pressure from two principal directions. Firstly, as a number of critical scholarly studies have been published or presented, there has been greater circumspection and scepticism from the academic sphere and – to a limited degree – from a few international journalists and readers who have kept up with these developments. Secondly, El Sistema’s public image has begun to fray noticeably within Venezuela, and this too has led to more questions being asked in the international sphere, though again to a limited degree.

During the intensifying economic, social, and political crisis since the death of Hugo Chávez, accompanied by a catastrophic decline in oil prices, El Sistema has become increasingly politicized. Its musicians have accompanied diplomatic missions and propaganda campaigns, and the program is regularly held up by government leaders as a shining achievement of the Bolivarian Revolution.[[26]](#endnote-26) The program’s overt ties to a regime whose popularity has sunk dramatically has placed Abreu and particularly Dudamel in an uncomfortable situation, and the latter has been repeatedly obliged to defend his refusal to take a position on the political crisis. While some Venezuelans have been sympathetic to his desire to remain above the fray, others have criticized him harshly for failing to use his prominent position to speak out – for succeeding as a musician but failing as a citizen (see Baker 2016b). The result is a higher degree of public debate among Venezuelans with respect to El Sistema than in earlier periods in the program’s history.

The publication of the IDB’s evaluation in late 2016 has the potential to increase the pressure further, as its failure to discover the miraculous social effects that had been claimed and its unearthing of systemic problems undermined the argument of Dudamel and his supporters that the social benefits brought by the program outweighed the costs of political silence. The mounting evidence of a failure to target the poor effectively poses a particular threat to the dominant narrative.

Nevertheless, the global myth has remained surprisingly resilient. Several explanations for this persistence may be advanced. To begin with, the media continues to play an important role. The proliferation of press articles on El Sistema over the last decade has seen journalists largely drawing on the readily available official narrative and existing accounts rather than investigating the story more deeply. Although there have been a few exceptions, most of the (often virulent) debate about El Sistema has taken place in Venezuelan social media and online forums such as La Patilla, Aporrea, Noticiero Digital, and Caracas Chronicles. The mainstream media has been generally silent, and has largely failed to ask obvious questions about the major issues currently facing El Sistema. The debates have thus taken place off the radar even of many Venezuelans, let alone English-speakers in the global North.

For example, at a large meeting at El Sistema’s Centre for Social Action through Music in October 2016, a government representative, the Vice-Minister of Supreme Happiness Carolina Cestari, reminded the institution’s employees that their funding came from the President’s Office, and they should therefore support the government’s revolutionary process or find a new job.[[27]](#endnote-27) They were told not to sign the petition for a recall referendum that has been the main focus of opposition efforts in recent months. Part of the speech was secretly filmed on a mobile phone and circulated online to howls of protest from many quarters. 100,000 watched the clip on the Instagram account of opposition leader Henrique Capriles.[[28]](#endnote-28) Yet the issue was not raised in the mainstream media, either in Venezuela or overseas. Similarly, no journalist has enquired publicly into El Sistema’s failure to build seven major regional music centres, for which it received nine-figure funding from the IDB a decade ago. No journalist has publicly questioned the claims about El Sistema’s size, which seem to bear little relation to reality and have never been independently verified. No journalist has written about the IDB’s most recent evaluation and the major doubts that it raises about the program’s effectiveness and targeting of the poor.[[29]](#endnote-29)

If Venezuelan journalists have been largely silent on El Sistema’s problems, so too have their international counterparts. There have been virtually no attempts to research the new developments in Venezuela and only occasional revisions to the glowing but faulty accounts of the last decade. Among the authors of the most influential US newspaper stories, Mark Swed (Los Angeles Times) maintains a resolutely boosterish line while Daniel Wakin (New York Times) has fallen silent on El Sistema. The intensifying political and economic crisis in Venezuela may have left El Sistema weakened: its claims to political neutrality are much harder to sustain today; it suffers from a lack of resources; morale and pay among many employees are low; and many accomplished musicians are leaving the country or looking for ways to do so. Yet it is unlikely that the ever-widening gap between myth and reality will become widely known without a greater response from the international media.

Nevertheless, for a more complete explanation for the persistence and continued power of the myth, we need to look further at its production, reception, appropriation, and usefulness. Two lines of enquiry will be sketched out here, one viewing myth negatively and the other more positively.

The former entails regarding myth in this instance as deliberately cultivated ignorance. It may be illuminating to consider Charles Mills’s notion of the “epistemology of ignorance,” defined by Fehr (2008, 103) as “the study of the creation and persistence of ignorance, or in other words, the study of how we don’t know things and how ignorance can be systematically generated and maintained.” Fehr examines mechanisms that are put in place to ensure that ignorance is constructed and sustained: the “procedures and systems that stop one from acquiring some kinds of knowledge about the world” (ibid., 105).

El Sistema is a powerful institution, and one that is supported by other powerful institutions. Many organisations and individuals around the world have much to gain from the maintenance of the myth and much to lose from its fading. Research in development studies reveals that “evidence informs aid policy and practice only when the political context, the networks, and the knowledge are all in alignment. When the political context is not right, research is bypassed, evaluations are forgotten, [and] studies are ignored” (Ramalingam 2013, 10). Similarly, the Sistema myth persists because critical research is politically and economically unacceptable to many influential actors and is thus sidelined.

There are various mechanisms to create and sustain ignorance. The collusion of the IDB and the Venezuelan government in misrepresenting the 2016 evaluation’s results is a case in point. The international Sistema-inspired sphere provides further examples. Unlike academic conferences and publications on El Sistema, which encourage participation from all corners of the field, the Sistema-inspired equivalents allow virtually no space for opposing ideas. Academics are only invited if their research is Sistema-friendly. Advocacy publications such as Tunstall and Booth’s (2016) book and their US and international newsletters (The Ensemble and The World Ensemble) make no mention of recent research unless it supports their views (which rules out most independent Sistema research). Some influential quarters of the media have contributed to the construction of ignorance by overlooking or dismissing academic research on El Sistema. The myth’s persistence is thus due in part to efforts to suppress critical responses to it, shield the general public from contrary perspectives, and deliberately cultivate ignorance.

Yet we also need to consider that beliefs about the positive social impact of the arts are widespread and deeply rooted and therefore relatively resistant to counter-evidence (Belfiore and Bennett 2008). For most of the history of Western civilization, music and the arts more generally have been viewed ambivalently; there are both positive and negative traditions, going back nearly 2500 years. The negative tradition sees the arts as a source of corruption and distraction, and as having potentially damaging effects on individuals and society. But ambivalence has been almost entirely displaced by the positive tradition since the 1980s as the need to argue for arts subsidy in terms of social and economic benefits has increased dramatically. The Sistema period has thus provided fertile ground for the flourishing of the myth.

Pedroza (2014) makes a more specific argument in relation to the reception of El Sistema in the US. She identifies a strain of neo-idealism in admirers and advocates such as Tunstall, who responded enthusiastically to the echoes of Romantic idealism in Abreu’s discourse. As Pedroza notes, idealism might be considered a form of mystification of music; the persistence of the myth could thus be seen to rest on its articulation to a major, centuries-old current of belief about classical music’s relationship to society, shared by Abreu and his many followers. Belief rooted in a longstanding philosophical tradition – even if one that has been much questioned – would help to explain the imperviousness of Tunstall and other advocates (and indeed many musicians and members of the public) to the gaps and contradictions in the Sistema story.

Focusing on valued beliefs rather than restrictions on the flow of information leads to the notion of myth as productive. Karen Armstrong (2005) argues that myth provides pattern, meaning, and value in a difficult and chaotic world. Raquel Z. Rivera (2012, 9), drawing on Robert Segal, coins the term “liberation mythology,” and analyzes how myths can be a tool for “personal and collective liberation from oppression, injustice, sadness, and/or fear. In other words, the goal of this mythmaking is redemption—individual and collective.” Sara Delamont (2014, 31) notes that “all pilgrims, all seekers, make myths as they go.” The construction and maintenance of myth appears here as fruitful, and at times a positive choice.

From this perspective, one might argue – and indeed some Sistema advocates *have* argued – that it is relatively unimportant whether the Sistema myth is or is not true, so long as it produces positive effects. Given the growing problems in Venezuela, such positive effects are most likely to be identified today in the growth of the global Sistema-inspired sphere. The celebratory, almost messianic tone of much discourse in this sphere does indeed point to “redemption—individual and collective.” Some in this field clearly live out Armstrong’s (2005, 3) contention that mythology “is not about opting out of this world, but about enabling us to live more intensely within it.”[[30]](#endnote-30) The picture presented by Tunstall and Booth (2016) is one of glowing successes wherever one looks within the global El Sistema movement.

However, in a critical review of this book, Govias (2017) lamented the limited number of trained music educators in the Sistema sector, in which good intentions often substituted for good practices. He portrayed some teachers who were ignorant of current social and educational thinking and painfully ill equipped to deal with disadvantaged children. A counter-argument to the position above would thus be that some myths are problematic or downright dangerous, such as medical myths and economic myths peddled by politicians. Educational myths fall somewhere in the middle, but some parents would baulk at the idea that their child’s music education program was based on myth rather than research. Scholars generally recognize that music education can do harm as well as good, meaning that propagating myths may potentially have serious consequences.

A positive perspective would thus be that myth persists because it is useful and valued and therefore resistant to challenge. However, as Govias’s review suggests, it cannot be assumed that enthusiasm or even redemption on the part of advocates and program leaders equates to positive effects on participants and wider society; indeed, the opposite might be true. Weighing up the constructive and destructive effects of the Sistema myth will require further research and exceeds the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it is worth underlining that the existing literature on the Sistema-inspired field shows a very mixed picture. On the one hand, the Sistema-inspired field has produced a considerable number of program evaluations, and the overall picture from these impact studies is uniformly positive. However, there are a number of reasons for caution.

The problems observed in the Venezuelan evaluations are a warning sign that evaluations of Sistema programs need to be assessed critically. Indeed, there is considerable debate within the field of cultural policy studies over the robustness of evaluations of the social impact of the arts more broadly (e.g. Belfiore 2002; Merli 2002; Selwood 2002; Belfiore 2009; Belfiore and Bennett 2010; Lees and Melhuish 2015; Johanson and Glow 2015). Detailed examination of some Sistema-inspired evaluations has led to criticisms. Most notably, Logan (2015b) wrote a scathing assessment of the evaluations of Sistema Scotland, while Baker, Bull, and Taylor (forthcoming) have critiqued an evaluation of Sistema Aotearoa, as well as the IDB’s 2016 report.

Furthermore, there are significant disjunctions between commissioned evaluations of Sistema-inspired projects and independent scholarly appraisals of the same programs. For example, it is impossible to ignore the gap between studies by Allan et al. (2010), Borchert (2012), Rimmer, Street, and Phillips (2014), Logan (2015a; 2016), Dobson (2016), and Bull (2016), which portray a distinctly mixed picture of the UK Sistema-inspired field, and the laudatory evaluation literature on the same programs. However well executed, then, consultancy evaluations are far from the final word on Sistema-inspired projects.

Finally, most evaluations are not based on a solid, academic understanding of the original Venezuelan model, and omit references both to the critical academic literature on El Sistema and to many broader questions that have been raised by sociological research on music education. The absence of critical social and political perspectives leads Logan (2015b) to describe the evaluations of Sistema Scotland as “hand in glove” with the program and its neoliberal underpinnings. If such evaluations support the decision to adopt and adapt El Sistema in other countries, despite the lack of evidence of its efficacy in Venezuela, it may suggest that evaluators have generally been more closely aligned with the ideological stance and myths of the Sistema practice field than with current scholarship on social justice and music education.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Conclusion

El Sistema is one of the most important music education initiatives in the world today, incorporating hundreds of thousands of students, yet also one of the most poorly understood. As such, illuminating the evolution of its public narrative, and the ways that this narrative has diverged from the realities of the program, is a worthwhile endeavour in its own right. However, there are further reasons to examine closely the construction of the Sistema myth.

One is that “power of music” discourses and beliefs have a great hold over the media and the general public, and stories about classical music saving the poor in the global South are particularly popular. There is a whole field of articles and documentaries about Paraguay’s orchestra of recycled instruments, Mexico’s music school by a rubbish dump, Brazil’s orchestration of young people in favelas, and so on.[[32]](#endnote-32) While these projects may indeed have positive effects, analyzing the construction of the Sistema myth provides a reminder that some aspects may also be idealized or exaggerated and more sobering realities elided from the picture, particularly if the story is told primarily by advocates and music journalists. The case of El Sistema illustrates the importance of healthy scepticism and critical scholarly research in ensuring that public narratives of the power of music to overcome poverty do not become too distant from realities. The consequences of such myth-making are potentially serious. Large amounts of money have been invested in El Sistema at home and abroad on the assumption that it has miraculous transformative powers on the poor. The IDB’s 2016 study is the latest to reveal the flaws in this assumption, whether the bank admits it or not. Not only does El Sistema thus demand serious examination through the lens of opportunity cost, but also greater caution seems advisable with respect to media-friendly stories of social miracles enacted through the power of music.

Such caution is needed within academia as well as towards the accounts of advocates and journalists. Some scholars have been overly ready to treat partial or superficial reports from such figures as though they constituted research data. As other academics then cite the first works, the distorted picture or myth is quickly converted into scholarly orthodoxy. The reception of Majno’s (2012) article illustrates how the myth is being rapidly consolidated via the capillary system of academia. It is important to disrupt this process by critiquing the myth within this same system before research in a variety of fields is further compromised. It is also necessary to raise awareness of the flaws in the production of knowledge about El Sistema in order to raise the bar for further scholarly contributions to this literature. Ultimately, there is a wide readership around the world that is interested in El Sistema, and it deserves to be presented with rigorously researched writing – something that has been the exception rather than the norm for much of the program’s history.

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1. http://elsistemausa.org/el-sistema/venezuela/. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “El Sistema and the Alternatives: Social Action through Music in Critical Perspective,” University of London, 24-25 April 2015; “Reframing El Sistema,” University of Maryland Baltimore County, 8-9 April 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Pedroza’s (2014) earlier study also provides a useful backdrop for this article, with its examination of Tunstall’s (2012) book and several documentary films, though the questions that it addresses (concerning understandings, roles, and effects of classical music) are quite different from mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/myth. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In a nice irony, López Mujica, who had criticized Abreu so strongly in 1990 for controlling information by hiring journalists as consultants, has been employed since 2012 as a communications consultant for El Sistema. He now writes much more positively about the program. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Oscar Ramos, “La trilogía.” I was given a photocopy of this article with no publication details. It seems to date from around 1993–94. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “Pérez” refers to the president at the time, Carlos Andrés Pérez. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The title comes from a book of the same name by Octavio Paz about the Mexican state. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Interviews without references were carried out by the author in Venezuela. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See http://tocarypensar.com/blog/in-el-sistema-there-are-no-poor-people-followup-to-the-idb-study-. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In his youth, Abreu formed part of a conservative political group at the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello with Pedro Tinoco and Marcel Granier, two key architects of Venezuelan neoliberalism, and he was a minister and right-hand man of President Carlos Andrés Pérez during the sharp turn toward neoliberalism from 1989. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. https://www.venezuelasinfonica.com/jose-antonio-abreu-la-vamos-a-llamar-simon-bolivar. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. There have been a few mainstream media critics in the UK, such as Tom Service (BBC/The Guardian), Richard Morrison (The Times), and Damian Thompson (The Spectator). US music journalists have been more enthusiastic or guarded: New York Times writers such as Daniel Wakin and Anthony Tommasini have shown occasional glimpses of criticism, but the paper’s overall coverage is largely positive. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. http://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-director-gustavo-dudamel-lena-acuerdan-difundir-musica-clasica-plataformas-digitales-diarios-20161223142851.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See http://tocarypensar.com/blog/the-tightening-of-the-screw. Ibsen Martínez, a columnist for El País, had proposed a critical feature on El Sistema to the paper shortly before the LENA agreement was announced. His proposal did not receive a reply, for reasons that were soon to become clear (personal communication). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. However, Pedroza omits the important detail that all three are or were employees and/or close associates of Abreu, which goes a long way towards explaining the nature of their works. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. However, there is also a growing critical scholarly literature, cited at the start. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. https://jonathangovias.com/2017/03/11/book-review-playing-for-their-live/. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. http://www.deutschegrammophon.com/gb/cat/4776228. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/ourstories/venezuela\_music\_orchestras\_impoverished\_youth.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. http://www.ve.undp.org/content/venezuela/es/home/operations/projects/poverty\_reduction/fundamusical.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. For example, the final sentence of El Sistema’s official Vision statement (http://fundamusical.org.ve/category/el-sistema/mision-y-vision/) can be found verbatim in Hernández and Urreiztieta (1996, 15). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. A PowerPoint copy was provided to one of the authors by the university. Creech et al. (2013) include the  original reports as Esqueda Torres 2001, 2002, and 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. The research was used in the 2007 loan report, though it was not published until 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. http://fundamusical.org.ve/prensa/noticias/el-bid-confirma-impacto-positivo-de-el-sistema-en-ninos-y-jovenes/. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. For two recent examples on successive days, see http://rnv.gob.ve/gobierno-revolucionario-promueve-la-igualdad-y-la-justicia-social/ and http://fundamusical.org.ve/prensa/el-sistema-dio-a-conocer-su-modelo-pedagogico-y-artistico-en-la-sede-de-las-naciones-unidas-en-viena/. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See http://tocarypensar.com/blog/the-tightening-of-the-screw. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. https://www.instagram.com/p/BMjwXc7hwNy/. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. 2016-17 saw increasing political criticism of Dudamel in the media (mainstream as well as social), but only rarely was this criticism extended to El Sistema. Exceptions include Martínez (2017a; 2017b) and Moreno (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. However, it is also worth heeding Dobson’s (2016) critique of the gap between discourse and experience in a Sistema-inspired program. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. For examples of the latter, see Benedict et al. 2015 and the 2007 special issue of *Music Education Research* on “Music education, equity, and social justice.” [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. For example, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/jul/13/junk-recycled-orchestra-paraguay-music-landfill; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/21/mexican-music-school-vicente-guerrero-edge-of-a-rubbish-dump; https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/neojiba-brazils-answer-to-el-sistema-lands-in-london-qdwgkcc5b05. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)