



GEOFFREY BAKER

The Search for Coexistence and
Citizenship in Medellín's Music Schools

Rethinking Social Action Through Music



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2021 Geoffrey Baker



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text and to make commercial use of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Geoffrey Baker, *Rethinking Social Action through Music: The Search for Coexistence and Citizenship in Medellín's Music Schools*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0243>

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license please visit <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0243#copyright>

Further details about CC BY licenses are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Updated digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0243#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 9781800641266

ISBN Hardback: 9781800641273

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800641280

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800641297

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781800641303

ISBN XML: 9781800641310

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0243

Cover image: Medellín, Colombia. Photo by Kobby Mendez on Unsplash at <https://unsplash.com/photos/emtQBNCrU3Q>. Cover design by Anna Gatti.

2. The Red Pushes Back: Tensions, Debates, and Resistance

The Red saves children. But it eats adults.

Former general director

In August 2018, the Red gave a workshop at an event for municipal employees, “Intermediaries of Civic Culture.” Javier, a member of the social team, led a brainstorming exercise in which participants listed “virtues of a public servant” and “virtues of a citizen” on posters and discussed their ideas. Afterwards, Fabián, a music teacher, led them in a rendition of Pharrell Williams’ “Happy.” At the end of the day, they stayed behind to discuss the following day of the workshop; they had too much material and needed to cut some. However, the conversation soon became heated. Javier accused his musician colleague of not listening to the organizers’ instructions about the importance of the social aspect and instead proposing ordinary musical activities. Fabián snapped back that Javier had said nothing in advance about leading a conceptual exercise, otherwise Fabián would have planned his own contributions differently; he also complained that he had already been obliged to cut his musical activities because the social exercise went on too long. “I’m a musician, I was invited here to do music,” shouted Fabián; “I’m confused.”

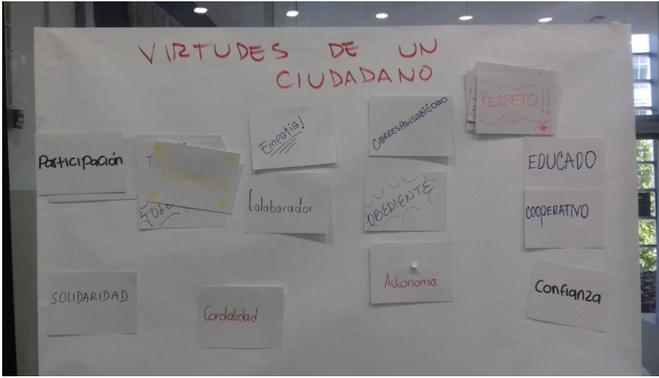


Fig. 19. Virtues of a citizen, Intermediaries of Civic Culture. Photo by the author (2018). CC BY.

“When Did We Lose the Enchantment?”

The previous chapter examined reform efforts by successive Red managements. Here, the focus is on how staff and students responded. The program of reform from 2017–19, as described so far, might sound like something out of a progressive music education textbook. The reality was rather more complex. The management’s critiques and new initiatives generated tensions and were met by counter-critiques and resistance. Indeed, relations between management and staff were variable and at times quite discordant. This tension was manifested as a passive atmosphere of disengagement in large meetings; when certain topics were presented, mobile phones, tablets, and earphones came out in greater numbers. A week-long event to showcase new initiatives coincided with the 2018 football World Cup, and some staff, while obliged to be present, conspicuously watched the games on various devices at the back of the hall. There were also occasionally more actively critical responses on such occasions, and complaints were frequent in private conversations. Despite the euphonious sounds emerging from its classrooms, the Red was not a harmonious institution during this period. As Aníbal Parra, the head of the social team, said to the musical staff in one meeting: “we need to ask ourselves, when did we lose the enchantment?”

Resistance grew over time. 2017 was a year of watching and waiting; 2018 saw more restlessness; and in 2019 discontent escalated to the point

of open rebellion, which coalesced as a formal letter of complaint from the school directors to the Red's operator, the University of Antioquia. Yet tensions were not a recent development. Former general directors acknowledged that the changes they had introduced had produced some discomfort or discord at times, including power struggles within the management team and increased turnover of staff and students.

It was not just management and staff who criticized each other; tensions between most constituencies were visible at some point. Certain relationships were more fraught than others, though. The social team and the musical staff were most clearly at odds with one another. At times the tension was evident in body language or disengagement in meetings when the social team spoke or organized activities, but there were also more open disputes.

A year of fieldwork allowed me to observe the grinding of the institutional gears as changes were implemented. In official narratives, SATM appears as a seamless whole, from the vision at the top to the practice at the bottom. The Red showed the reality to be quite different: in a multi-layered program, there is the potential for gaps and tensions at every step. New strategies forged by management are mediated and filtered by directors, teachers, and administrators, and may be embraced or rejected by students. It is a mistake to assume that a SATM program is simply what its leader states publicly; the mediators and participants may have other ideas and do otherwise in practice.

The point here is not that the Red is a dysfunctional institution; in some ways, its open disagreements point to the opposite conclusion. A certain amount of internal friction is par for the course in large institutions, particularly during moments of change, and dissonance may actually be the sound of a healthy organization. Nevertheless, the Red's internal dynamics of tension and resistance are worth exploring because public and academic discussion of SATM has barely touched on them, creating an illusory picture of harmony and unity, yet they help us to understand the field better. These sticking points in the Red illuminate points of tension in SATM more broadly and throw up some important questions for the field: how should SATM compare to conventional music education? How to balance the musical and social sides? How to mediate between the conflicting desires of different constituencies in

shaping the program? Are teachers properly trained for this job? Does SATM “work” for them?

If the previous chapter focused on growing, this one centres on the accompanying pains. What is of interest here is not friction or disharmony *per se*, but rather what lay beneath it. Hence this chapter focuses on tensions that were underpinned by conflicting visions or ideologies, rather than personal differences. These debates allow us to grasp the Red as fragmented rather than unified, contested rather than consensual, and thus SATM as a complex set of choices and challenges rather than a singular, guaranteed recipe for success.

The main organizing principle is that of “first-order” debates. These debates were foregrounded in the program, regularly articulated by a wide array of actors, and therefore particularly audible and visible. They revolved around what were widely recognized as the Red’s major issues.

Music and the Social

“There’s a weak point in the program, it’s always been a strong tension: where does the social end, where does the musical begin? How does one accompany the other?” said Diego, a school director. One of the general directors placed their fists together, knuckles to knuckles, to depict the struggle between the musical and the social. This striking gesture encapsulated the fiercest and most prominent debate in the Red, based on fundamental disagreement over what SATM should look like.

In its first phase, the program adopted the El Sistema view that collective music education *is* social action. After it changed operators in 2005, there was a recognition that some students suffered from psychological problems, so the program hired Jiménez to provide individual psychological consultations. Soon, there was a shift to focusing on collective problems and solutions, so Jiménez led a team that offered psychosocial workshops and training to the whole program. Under Restrepo’s leadership, more emphasis was placed on a socio-affective approach, which led to greater efforts to integrate social development into the music curriculum, rather than equating the social with the extra-musical. Under Giraldo, the social team refocused its efforts on research, but a year later the social team morphed into a territorial team (as detailed in Chapter 1). This thumbnail sketch is

enough to illustrate that the Red's approach to social action has shifted continually over the course of its history. Far from being the rock on which the program has been built, the social goal has been more like shifting sands, generating much of the unsteadiness and debate that has characterized the Red since 2005.

To return to the Red's first phase, the social aspect of the program—in Ocampo's account of his philosophy of SATM—revolved around key words such as "heart," "love," and "hug." Sara, a student from that period, remembered the music schools as "a space for a different kind of affectivity." The Red's social philosophy was never clarified at that time, she said, but in practice it was about being together and looking after each other. Ocampo was like a father to her, and everyone adored him. He had an extraordinary capacity to remember everyone's name and details about their life. She stressed the emotionality of students' interactions with Ocampo; he made them feel special and loved. Norberto, a fellow first-generation student, concurred that the social aspect of the Red was implicit at that time. The mere fact that a child went to music school *was* social action, because many left the house as little as possible due to the city's dangers. Creating spaces for fraternizing within violent barrios was a social act.

The transition from Ocampo to Arango in 2005 was an abrupt change in many ways, including from an emotional to a more rational approach to SATM. Ocampo's leadership style was charismatic and passionate, and he was somewhat dismissive of intellectual analysis. In contrast, Arango was a sociologist by training and a university employee, and her first major action was to undertake a critical examination of the program. The creation of the psychosocial team, too, evidenced a turn towards a more reflective approach. There was also a shift in the understanding of the word "social." For Ocampo, it was about the heart and the emotions. For Arango, however, its primary meaning was "public." She saw social action as empowering citizens to take responsibility for the Red as a public program.

2005 was a definitive turning point. It saw a splintering of understandings of SATM that continued under each successive leadership. Also, there emerged a distinction between implicit and explicit framings of social action. At first, social action was considered to flow spontaneously from music education, aided by Ocampo's warmth,

charisma, and inspirational speeches. But in Arango's phase, senior figures increasingly conceived of the social objective as something to be named, analysed, and pursued more overtly. Social action was not an automatic consequence, then, but rather a possible outcome, which required reinforcing some existing elements and adopting new ones.

The "social as implicit" argument came under pressure as soon as the program passed from a nominally public but in effect private operation run by a classical music figurehead (echoing *El Sistema*) to a genuinely public program open to external scrutiny and with a non-musician in charge. As discussed in Chapter 1, internal investigations revealed that while collective music education was capable of generating positive socialization, it could also produce more questionable social effects and fail to teach some important social skills. The transition in 2005 thus saw not just a shift in the meaning of "social," the word at the heart of the Red's mission, but also questions raised about the effectiveness of the program's original approach. The result was the creation of the psychosocial team and the consolidation of the "social as explicit" perspective. There were now two different ways of understanding SATM, giving rise to the program's major tension.

Former Student Perspectives

One might imagine that successful students from the first phase would have embraced the implicit argument, but in reality their views were quite varied. The social team's 2008 report revealed that many staff doubted that music education alone could achieve the Red's social objective. I encountered similar critiques and mixed opinions in interviews with graduates from the first phase who had gone on to become directors or teachers in the Red. Their career path indicated their talent, love of music, and commitment to the program; their ambivalence cannot therefore be put down to failure or incompatibility.

Daniel remembered the Red's beginnings as "magical," but the work rhythm of the first years, when the program was "a mirror of *El Sistema*," overseen by Venezuelan musicians, was intensive. The long rehearsals were an opportunity to escape from the problems of the city, but the atmosphere was "very military." Rehearsals had no finish time. In this sense, "it wasn't all so pretty"—it was "an education based on

fear as well." Many dropped out. "We lost out on a lot of family life," he noted; "the school practically became our home." He was sceptical of his peers who described that time as the Red's "golden age." There was "a level of competition that's incredible, that's not very pleasant, that comes from that training." They were "good performers, but perhaps people who are very rigid and who see the person next to them as a competitor and not a person who is doing a collective task." He believed that the Red's approach built character but also made students more tyrannical. Some went on to become music teachers without reflecting on their own experiences, he said, meaning that the Red continued to be a bit like *Whiplash* (2014).¹ "The first phase had its dark side," he concluded, "which was to create these people. I don't know to what extent that is the society that we want."

Estefanía cried with nostalgia as she recalled the Red's first phase. Today the program's musical level had dropped, she said, partly because El Sistema no longer sent teachers. Yet she also talked about "the Nazi-Venezuelan System" and described the present-day Red as more balanced: now "the Red is part of life, rather than life being the orchestra."

Norberto recalled how the Venezuelans brought their repertoire and set very high goals. When they came, the students would drop everything for one or two weeks of solid rehearsals, eight to ten hours a day, including weekends. At the time he regarded this as normal, as it was all he knew, and while he still had fond memories, now that he was a music school director his feelings were more mixed. He had spent years turning down social invitations in order to rehearse or perform at weekends and had sacrificed friendships outside the Red to create a new "family" within it. He too was critical of a tendency to romanticize the Red's past. Some of his peers talked about the program as though it were perfect in the Ocampo years, he said, but it wasn't. The staff's treatment of students was sometimes harsh because of the pressure to produce results: shouting, swearing, calling the children "idiots," humiliating them in front of their peers. If the children answered

1 *Whiplash* (2014) is a film about abuse in music education: "A promising young drummer enrolls at a cut-throat music conservatory where his dreams of greatness are mentored by an instructor who will stop at nothing to realize a student's potential", <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2582802/>.

back, some teachers “practically got the belt out.” He characterized the Venezuelan-style approach as rushed and demanding, which worked well for the best students but was a “torment” for others; even he, one of the more talented, sometimes got to the point of thinking “we’re no longer enjoying but rather suffering music.” One consequence of the high musical goals was that there was no time to reflect on social questions; what mattered was preparing the repertoire for the upcoming concert.

Raquel pointed to this same contradiction: the Red talked a lot about the social objective, but its key activities were concerts and all that mattered was to sound good. Music doesn’t make you good or bad, she said; you can be a good person without music, and a bad person with music. Some people who studied in the Red ended up in trouble after they left. The Red was a good option for young people in Medellín, but “having been in the program doesn’t guarantee anything.” Estefanía concurred: “That whole thing about [exchanging] a violin for a weapon has never been relevant. I had lots of friends who played [music] and were still bad [people]. That was a discourse that worked very well at the time but that’s not the real backstory.”

Diego reflected on Ocampo’s unique charisma. He likened rehearsals to being in church with a priest, only with the focus on music and dreams of the future rather than religious doctrine. Ocampo was a true leader who did everything: he secured resources, sponsors, and tours, but also talked to families and knew every student by name. He convinced people with his rhetorical skill; they felt listened to and supported. “Juan Guillermo became almost like a god”: whatever he said, people supported him 100%, because he set out dreams like playing for the Pope and made them come true. And yet, he had human flaws. He was not a great administrator, and he promised many things that did not happen. Diego was not entirely surprised at how Ocampo’s history with the Red had finished. But people stopped seeing his faults, because their devotion to him bordered on fanaticism. There were tears when Arango ordered the removal of photos of Ocampo from the schools, even though he had been jailed for a serious crime. Diego concluded that Ocampo deserved gratitude for establishing the program and making a positive contribution to Medellín, but the fanaticism concerned him.

Ocampo had tremendous charisma, concurred Sara, the only one of these graduates to go on to a non-musical career. He had such ability

with words that it was hard not to be moved by him. She had seen him as a father figure, and today, part of her retained this image of him. But subsequent experience and maturity—not to mention Ocampo's incarceration—had also given her a contradictory perspective: looking as an adult, putting aside her emotional attachments, she described him as “a snake charmer.” Thinking about all the effort the children had put in, all that they had sacrificed, she concluded: “it was abusive. I felt used—I felt used for his benefit.”

In these interviews, as in the internal reports, the Red appears as much more ambiguous than one would imagine from media stories, which painted the program as a kind of miracle. A question mark hangs over the social side, in particular. With their accounts of an atmosphere that was militaristic, sometimes oppressive, with little time for social reflection, some former students queried whether peaceful coexistence or an education in values—the program's *raison d'être*—were achieved or even seriously pursued. Their testimonies placed the “social as implicit” argument in doubt.

In the 2008 report, most constituencies expressed concern about the prioritizing of the musical in practice. Some staff recognized the Red's social deficiencies and requested that action be taken. Consequently, Jiménez urged the program to give the social dimension more emphasis and visibility and to unite behind “the goal of going beyond artistic and musical training to provide a rounded human education with social impact on the communities in which the schools are inserted” (“Informe” 2008, 3). Henceforth, the newly formed psychosocial team had its hands full organizing extra-musical workshops and activities to tone down the disciplinarian, time-consuming, all-absorbing culture that the Red had inherited from El Sistema and to pursue the social objective more purposefully. The “social as explicit” perspective moved into the ascendancy. Staff responses to the team were noted as largely positive: they appreciated that “the Red was showing concern for them as people and not just as musicians” (7) and expressed the desire for the process to continue.

The picture in 2008 thus shows some consensus about the contradictions of SATM and the need for new strategies. Certainly, opinions varied, but many staff revealed mixed feelings about the social side and encouraged more involvement by social professionals. Yet by

the time of my fieldwork, around a decade later, the relationship between the musical and the social, and between the musicians and social team, had become the program's major sticking point.

Music *versus* the Social

One day in 2018, Parra, the head of the social team, walked into a management meeting. He sat down and with no preamble declared: "this is not a social program." Around the same time, a musician from the first generation lamented that the program had lost its musical focus and become all about the social side, which was *una pendejada, una cagada*—a load of nonsense, a pile of crap. How had the Red come to generate such exasperated and diametrically opposed interpretations? Why had the ideal of SATM come to look so fraught in practice, acted out in mutual suspicion and tense encounters between musical and social staff? Why had combining music and social action become so complicated?

If there had been some agreement on the nature of the problem, there was less consensus on what to do about it and who should do it. The different approaches (psychosocial, socio-affective, territorial) that were tried in an effort to rebalance the musical and the social led to criticism and dissatisfaction from many musicians, who came to see the social team as a destabilizing force. The social team, meanwhile, viewed such responses as resistance to change.

Social team reports and musicians' testimonies point towards a fundamental, structural tension between the goals of social action and musical excellence in the Red's orchestras and bands. From its creation, the social team questioned the priority given to musical excellence over social action and proposed a shift in balance. Thus the relationship between the social and musical employees emerged as one that was in some sense antagonistic: the social team took on the role of providing a critical perspective on the musical side. The musicians had been working for a decade without anyone criticizing them (on the contrary, they were used to fulsome praise), so the sharp vision of Jiménez and her assistants was something of a rude awakening. The creation of a social team with a critical role was thus the initial source of division. As the social team wrote a decade later: "The social [side] is the one

that sees the complexities, the musical [side] sees everything as fine" ("Informe" 2017c, 72). Now the Red tried to pursue two distinct goals—musical excellence and social action—at the same time via two distinct teams, and the priorities and practices of the musical and social staff were not just different but also often in contradiction.

The division into musical and social sides led gradually to polarization. In 2008, the social team was a novelty. However, a decade of workshops, training sessions, discussions, and urgings led not to a closer embrace of the social goal but rather to a generalized sense of fatigue. By the time of my fieldwork, a significant proportion of musical staff regarded any social activity with suspicion and were resistant to non-musical initiatives. Many musicians came to see explicitly social activities as extra work, a distraction, or a waste of precious rehearsal time, and the social team as a thorn in their side. Meanwhile, the social team (and leadership) considered the program to be too focused still on musical technique and performance and too obsessed with issues such as the details of the music curriculum, reducing its social efficacy.

Some musicians reacted against the increasing profile and activity of the social team by retrenching in the "social as inherent" view. Some members of the first generation, in particular, began to hanker after the simpler days of their youth, when all efforts were devoted to music and explicit social activities were considered unnecessary. The Red had worked for them, and what they saw over subsequent phases was increasing meddling and a decline in musical quality. We never needed psychologists or territorial managers, said one, because Ocampo made us believe in him: that was the social part. According to a school director, the social discourse about children taking up instruments rather than weapons was for the politicians who provided the funds; internally, the focus was on preparing repertoire, raising the artistic level, and working with invited musicians. There was no need for a psychologist: Ocampo was a great motivator and his powerful rhetoric kept the momentum up. The whole social side is a load of nonsense, said another director; the best form of psychological attention is putting an instrument in a kid's hands and teaching them to play music. One teacher kept repeating in our interview that he was a musician—this was his identity. "This is the Music Network," he said, "not the Network of Social Inclusion with Music as a Medium." What emerges from these accounts is a sense of

nostalgia for simplicity—for a program driven by one man’s vision, with one focus: the music.

The implicit/explicit debate played out in a long, drawn-out dispute over constructing a new form for the directors’ monthly reports. The leadership believed that the Red’s social objective ought to be identifiable in specific activities, and those activities should be describable on the report form. The directors argued back that the social was inherent in everything that the Red did, and it could not therefore be tied to particular activities or spelt out in a report. For the former, if the social was the central objective of the Red, then it had to be named and narrated; for the latter, if the social was the essence of the Red, it could not be named and narrated. This long-running debate over a superficially boring, administrative matter encapsulated key dynamics in the Red, which is why the management organized repeated, painful meetings to thrash it out: not just the division over implicit versus explicit conceptions of SATM, but also the question of top-down versus collective construction. Ironically, the management insisted that the directors should be involved in creating the form, while the staff wanted the management to present them with something ready to use.

Attitudes were certainly not uniform, however, and some musical staff continued to be sceptical about the idea that social action was implicit in music and displayed more openness to the idea of reinventing themselves and the Red. One director criticized her colleagues’ recalcitrance: “introducing the socio-affective part in the lesson activities was very difficult, people put up a lot of resistance because they said that music already in itself exercises a social function. [They said:] ‘The fact that I play an instrument very well makes me a better person, I don’t need to be taught values.’” Another director regarded music education as a positive force at first, one that removed children from problematic environments and gave them another way of seeing the world. But after a certain point, he said, the ones who take it more seriously start to become increasingly egocentric: “it’s all about me and my instrument.” He claimed that musicians who spent hours practising and staring in the mirror ended up thinking that the world revolved around them. He found that advanced students were sometimes unwilling to give back to the Red. “We are very egotistical,” he said, “and I don’t know what we need to change this, because as a program we shouldn’t be like this.” A

third director remarked: “if music is the most sublime art, that which is closest to God, if it is something so great, then musicians should be humbler, but on the contrary they have a huge ego. How does one reach the divine full of pride?”

The issue of the musical and the social became a battleground because the splintering of conceptions of SATM had practical as well as ideological consequences. There are clues in the 2008 report. The musical staff generally thought that the social objective was important, but some felt that their responsibility was musical and that the social aspects were a matter for others, particularly the social team and the corporal expression teachers. This was the Red’s initial approach post-2005: employing a professional psychologist, which kept the social work separate from the musical training. But as time passed, the management and social team began increasingly to question this division of labour, and as the social staff drew closer to the musical coalface, the tensions grew. Once the psychosocial team started organizing activities in rehearsal time, relations began to deteriorate—and they worsened when the management inserted a socio-affective component into the music curriculum. The more the social team did to address social issues, the more they intruded into established musical practices; and while musical staff may have recognized underlying issues, there was less enthusiasm for rethinking their role, sharing their spaces, or giving up rehearsal time.

Many musicians supported a division of labour, seeing other professionals as more suited to the social aspects of SATM, and became unhappier as the social team encroached on their terrain. The social team was created as an attempt to take the social side of SATM more seriously, but for many musicians it had the opposite effect, reifying a distinction between musical and social work. The incarnation of the social in a critical team gave rise to two interlinked imaginaries: the social as a problem, and the social as someone else’s problem (“Informe” 2017c).

The reconfiguration of the social team as a territorial team in 2018 was a case in point. After some initial confusion about what this new role entailed, it gradually became clear that there were conflicting visions of whose responsibility it was to do the territorial legwork. For the leadership, music education should be more connected to its surrounding community, and the territorial team would act as a catalyst,

advising the musicians on making stronger connections with their communities. The leaders sought to reimagine the role of the musical staff, adding a spatial dimension. Many directors and teachers, however, argued that their hands were already full in the schools; for them, community relations required walking the streets—just the job for the *gestores territoriales*, or territorial managers, as the social team were now known.

The issue was not so much resistance to the social team, then, as differing views over its desired role. Ever since its creation, the social professionals had sought a more expansive role than simply providing psychological consultations: one that engaged with the full array and complexity of social dynamics in the Red, developed participation and citizenship formation, and generated dialogue with the city and its realities. They sought to promote reflection among the musicians and to foster greater emphasis on social skills within the music training. But many musicians preferred to see the team's purpose as social work writ small: fixing problems and thereby making the teachers' lives easier, allowing them to focus on the music. They measured the social professionals using that yardstick, and the more ambitious and expansive the social team's aims, the shorter it fell in many musicians' eyes.

An important obstacle to reform was the fact that the Red had not been designed to include explicit social strategies; it followed El Sistema's "social as implicit" line. It was constructed as a presentational program (one focused on performances to an audience), if one with a participatory discourse (Turino 2008). In practice, then, it was geared around learning technical skills and repertoire. As the social team wrote: "According to the objective of the Red, music is a tool, and the ultimate goal is a contribution to building citizenship and the rounded education of human beings; but in practice it is clear that the ultimate goal is music, performing, touring. The inconsistency is apparent" ("Informe" 2017c, 7). Thus, efforts to strengthen the social side often appeared as trying to insert something into a program where it did not fit. The Red's schedule was already full. Where and when were these social activities supposed to take place? With what budget? Many of the social team meetings that I attended were devoted to thinking of strategies with which to insert a social component into what was supposedly already a social program. The social employees perceived themselves as trying to squeeze into

small or non-existent cracks in a musical edifice; the musicians felt squeezed by these efforts and saw the edifice weakening.

The invisibility of what was supposed to be the Red's primary goal was a frequent topic in reports and meetings. The social team pointed to the detailed musical curriculum but no social equivalent, and the Red's displays of its musical side but never its social processes. Similarly, the social was not measured or evaluated. The team felt sidelined in the planning of activities. They criticized the Red for neglecting the human aspect—particularly in the integrated ensembles—and for avoiding the major issues in students' lives, providing few opportunities for them to express their emotions or chew over their dilemmas. Parra likened the Red's musical instruments to a shield or barrier between students and such questions, rather than a tool for working through them.

Time was another source of tension between the musical and the social. From 2008, the social team was concerned that the Red left students little free time for leisure, family or non-musical relationships. The philosophy of SATM was that free time was a problem and a gap to be filled, whereas for the psychosocial professionals it was a necessity and needed to be defended. They waged and won a battle over reclaiming Sunday as a free day.

Parra lamented regularly that there was no time for social reflection in the Red; the curriculum was full (of music), the work rhythm of rehearsals and performances was excessive, and meetings were usually taken up with logistical, technical, and musical matters. We need to create time in the everyday routine, he said, otherwise we will be condemned to a peripheral existence. But the Red's traditionally presentational character constrained such efforts. The program had always given regular showcase performances across the city, so directors felt pressure to produce musical results and many resisted the "distraction" of non-musical activities. One former social team member recounted that she would try to organize in-depth sessions on social topics only to be met with responses like, "we've got a big concert coming up, we need to rehearse, can you do half an hour in the break?" A school director argued that society judged musicians solely on their ability to play, so he focused on the skills needed to produce decent concerts at short notice. Even an ensemble director who was sympathetic to the need for change said that he was trying hard to make the learning process more

participatory, but there was only so much he could do with the deadline of a major concert looming; he had to put on a decent show when the ensemble appeared at the University of Medellín's concert hall.

Attempts to soften the Red's somewhat militaristic approach, too, were widely perceived as weakening its presentational side. As one school director put it, the musical staff "believe that the social [side] stops them from doing their job, this is evident in their thinking that the social team does not allow them to be demanding." A teacher confirmed this view: we're creating a society of useless people, he said, because now there are so many rules around teaching and everything risks being called out as bullying or mistreatment. Today you can't say anything to the kids; you can't simply tell them that they're no good at music. You need to be able to make demands on students, he said, otherwise we're just "educating bums."

Resistance to the social team had another practical dimension. Many musicians connected the hiring of more social professionals to the elimination or reduction of flagship musical activities such as festivals and foreign tours. A number complained that the Red spent money on social staff, who did not add any musical value to the program, instead of resolving longstanding equipment and facilities issues or raising salaries. As one social team member quipped, when they were active, the musicians complained ("why are they interfering?"); and when they were passive, the musicians also complained ("what do they do all day? Why are we wasting money on them?").

Yet even removing the social team from the picture, there were some tensions within the musical side over musical excellence versus social action. The Red's attempt to be both a musical and a social program meant that it treated music as both a professional goal and a pastime, and striking a balance was not straightforward. As one school director explained: "there are rivalries [within the orchestra] between those who go to the rehearsals and those who don't; at the moment there are many problems in my orchestra about this, because it's not fair that those who always go have to put up with someone who doesn't know their part and never goes." At times, the Red felt like two different programs forced together in an uncomfortable marriage. In the morning, the musical staff would urge the management to focus on raising musical standards and projecting musical results on prominent stages; in the afternoon, the

social team would argue for more emphasis on the social objective. Not only was the Red unable to meet fully these conflicting demands, but also, by trying to pursue musical excellence and social action at the same time, it left both sides somewhat dissatisfied.

Intermediaries of Civic Culture

In 2013, Medellín's city government created the Network of Artistic and Cultural Practices, which grouped together the Red and three smaller arts education programs in dance, theatre, and visual arts. During 2017–18, the four networks were invited to take part in a city government program called *Mediadores de cultura ciudadana* [Intermediaries of Civic Culture]. It brought municipal employees ranging from traffic policemen to helpdesk staff together for two-day workshops run by the arts networks. The workshops were repeated several times over the year with different participants. Their aim was to use arts education to develop social skills in public servants who worked as intermediaries between the government and the citizenry, and thereby to boost public trust in city functionaries and improve civic culture.

The purpose of the music workshop was thus essentially the same as that of the Red—social action through music—if with a very different constituency. Yet the Red's initial offering was quite distinct from its everyday activities. Its workshop focused on playing, but percussion instruments and Colombian music rather than symphonic ones. Subsequently there was considerable debate at management level and the offering changed, moving even further away from the norm of SATM. New facilitators were brought in to shift the emphasis away from teaching music towards imagining, creating, listening, and connecting. The final workshop I attended included creating soundscapes, relaxation/meditation exercises, working with sonic memory, connecting rhythm and life, and multi-sensorial activities. Interestingly, although the facilitators were Red employees (two school directors, a corporal expression teacher, and a social team member), much of what they brought to *Mediadores* came from their work outside of (or before joining) the Red, in traditional and popular music. While the workshop had elements of musical initiation and corporal expression, one of the directors likened their new approach to music therapy.

There are distinct echoes of the Afro laboratory and administrators' away day described in Chapter 1. To an even greater extent, Mediadores served as a laboratory of SATM, freed from the constraints of the Red's historical model. Indeed, some senior figures described it in precisely these terms. Here, the management had the freedom to bypass the Red's traditions, select facilitators with specific skills, and pursue social action by any musical means they deemed fit. By its very contrast with the Red's everyday activities, Mediadores underlined the extent to which the Red was still shaped by its history rather than more progressive management visions; the program's form was the outcome of struggle, in which tradition still had the upper hand over reform, rather than consensus.

Mediadores was itself a site of struggle, but not between old and new ways. Neither the starting point nor the end point resembled the Red's normal operations. Rather, the struggle was once again over balancing the musical and the social. It was at Mediadores that the near-fight with which this chapter began occurred. The misunderstanding between the musician and the social team member dramatized the struggle at the heart of the Red. As Fabián noted wryly afterwards, once tempers had calmed, it was ironic that two Red employees had nearly come to blows during an event to which they had been invited to teach others about listening, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence! Their dispute, at the end of an afternoon of upbeat musical activities, illustrated both a hole in SATM theory (no necessary transfer from the musical to the social realm) and the depth of the problem of the musical versus the social. Harmonizing these two sides was a lot more complicated than simply having representatives of both involved.

Much of the debate within the management board and with the organizers concerned aligning music's offering with the aims of Mediadores. At two of the events, a Red ensemble performed at the opening general assembly before the workshops. These were attractive concerts, but as a city arts official noted, they had no connection to Mediadores. It was unclear what these performances were supposed to teach the audience or how they related to the theme of mediation; rather, the Red appeared in its familiar guise as an urban ornament. In contrast, an actor delivered a presentation called "Improv for life," which not only entertained the audience but also provided them with

specific and easily memorable life lessons from improvised theatre. After the first workshop, another city official raised a similar point. She had received positive feedback from participants about how much they had enjoyed the music workshop, but the objective of the scheme was not for public servants to enjoy themselves; it was for them to learn something useful for their work. I had observed that workshop and indeed, it was clearly a fun break and a good bonding experience, but it did not provide participants with any obvious tools for their work as civic intermediaries. In this sense, as the officials noted, the Red had somewhat missed the point.

This distinction between enjoyment and fulfilling social aims is very relevant to analyses of SATM. Also relevant is the debate over implicit versus explicit social action. The workshops began in orthodox SATM fashion: involving participants in relatively conventional music-making, and then engaging in a social reading of the activities afterwards. But the Red's social team and city officials criticized this approach and over the year the management moved towards the more challenging method of designing the activities with specific social outcomes in mind. Here the Red's central debate played out in miniature. Participating in these events obliged the Red to invert its usual formula of music taking the lead and think more like a social program. In fact, the many meetings and conversations about the Red's role in *Mediadores* often resulted in discussions about changing the program itself. As one manager said, *Mediadores* was an opportunity to strengthen the Red, and he proposed taking the workshop around all the schools.

The Red's sister programs (dance, theatre, and visual arts) also participated in *Mediadores*, and they offered more innovative workshops. This put further pressure on the Red to up its game. The comparison with the other networks was doubly revealing: while they shared regular activities with the participants, the Red had to invent something new in order to resemble a socially oriented arts program.

The musical versus social debate did not go away, but the obligation to put on a series of events under the watchful eye of culture ministry officials forced it towards a resolution within the microcosm of *Mediadores*. Change went faster and further compared to the Red as a whole. Here was the Red with much of the resistance removed, working with carefully selected staff and different students, posing

music as a means rather than an end, and developing rapidly and innovatively when the weight of history and tradition was put aside. The speed and extent of transformation over one year in Mediadores contrasted with the Red's slow pace and limited reforms over the previous dozen.

These brief moments of florescence suggested how different SATM might look if torn up and started again from a twenty-first-century perspective. They also evoked a question posed in Chapter 1: if such activities were the clearest route to social action, why were they abandoned in the Red after one year of musical initiation so that students could move on to conventional orchestral or band training? Why did the Red not look more like Mediadores?

Staff Training

The answer to this question lies not just in the Red's history but also in the training of its musical staff. They had a variety of profiles and trajectories, so they were not a homogeneous group. Nevertheless, the primary route into the Red was via the music departments of the city's universities, particularly the University of Antioquia, where students received a conventional conservatoire-style education. There were two music degree programs that students followed: the *licenciatura* [bachelor's degree], a broader program with a pedagogical component, aimed mainly at aspiring teachers (but not specifically SATM); and the *maestro de instrumento* [instrumental diploma], which focused more narrowly on performance (primarily of classical music). Many of the Red's teachers came in via the latter path. Additionally, wind and brass players often had a background in directing or playing in municipal bands. There was no professional training available that prepared musicians specifically for socially oriented music education. If the Red did not look more like Mediadores, it was partly because many of the Red's staff did not look much like the Mediadores facilitators.

Judging from its fame, one might imagine that SATM had a curriculum and pedagogy designed by educational experts and delivered by specially trained teachers. The reality is often quite different in Latin America. Rather than creating a distinctive, socially oriented pedagogy, El Sistema borrowed a mixture of existing methods, and it passed on

this approach to the Red and other programs. Abreu was a conductor and performer rather than a pedagogue, and his “method” consisted of long, demanding, repetitive orchestral rehearsals. El Sistema’s approach to collective music-making was summed up in two words of advice for a conductor who visited Caracas to work with a local youth orchestra: *apriétalos* (squeeze them, i.e. be tough on the musicians) and *repítelo* (repeat it, i.e. keep going over the repertoire until they get it right). Its theory, in contrast, is quite vague, resting disproportionately on Abreu’s aphorisms. Somewhat ironically, then, considering how its name has been understood around the world, El Sistema is not a pedagogical system (Frega and Limongi 2019).

Accordingly, Abreu showed little interest in teacher training, which was unnecessary for this kind of approach, and El Sistema’s teachers are not required to be certified or qualified. The program’s philosophy is “teach how you were taught.” For El Sistema, just as collective music education *is* social action, an excellent orchestral musician *is* an excellent SATM instructor. Similarly, the Red did not provide initial training—unlike the visual arts network, which prepared its teachers full-time for two weeks before they began working.

The Red’s efforts to impact on pedagogy were therefore focused on the annual pedagogy seminar, a two-to-three-day event. My impression from attending the 2017 seminar and speaking to participants was that these seminars were widely valued by staff, but they were too short to make a significant impact on practices that had been established over many years or decades. There was also a Catch-22 element: the further a workshop departed from established norms, the less likely it was to be adopted into everyday practice. A decade of seminars had generated some interesting experiences and reflections, but it had not been enough to forge a distinctive, program-wide, socially oriented pedagogy. This is not to suggest that the program lacked skilled and engaging teachers, but rather that it had fallen short of the goal articulated in Arango’s 2006 report—to create a pedagogical model, document it, and spread it to all the schools—and that skills were therefore unevenly distributed.

Hence there is little mystery over the central tension of the Red. The program’s objective was social, but professional musicians in Medellín were not trained to fulfil it, and many received little pedagogical

formation. As long as the social element was treated as implicit, this contradiction could remain buried. But from 2005 onwards, neither the leadership nor the city government was willing to let the Red continue running simply as a music program with a social discourse. With their attempts to redress this situation, the tension began to be felt.

The disjuncture between the program's social objective and musicians' training could be observed in the gap between the elaborate descriptions of social and critical pedagogy in official documents (e.g. *Documento* 2016) and the minimal appearance of such pedagogy in everyday practice. Arango noted that, in theory, the program used "the model of dialogical community practice of Paulo Freire, which is reinforced by the liberatory pedagogical theory of Rebellato and Girardi" (2006, 9). In practice, each director applied their own method, and "neither directors nor teachers have a clear understanding of applying one method or another" (11). Furthermore, the elements that could be identified came from standard music education methods such as Suzuki, Orff, and Dalcroze. In reality, then, teachers applied the tools that they had learnt through their own training, and the Red resembled less the radical theories of Freire, Rebellato, and Girardi than the conventional learning experiences of its staff. Eleven years later, the social team devoted pages to making the same point ("*Informe*" 2017a, 173–79). This gap was hardly surprising; where teachers were supposed to have learnt social and critical pedagogy was a mystery.

In higher-level meetings, the conversation returned repeatedly to the issue that educating the students in social skills required retraining or shifting the thinking of their teachers, otherwise the Red's chances of fulfilling its social objective were limited. The social team was particularly struck by the gulf between conservatoire training and the skills needed in a large social program, but there were also recurrent discussions at management level about the desirability of staff unlearning their university training and relearning new skills for SATM. In meetings, the official objective of transforming students' lives often took a back seat to discussions of how to transform their teachers.

At one management meeting, a senior figure argued that the Red's staff had not internalized the social aspect of the program: it is a job for them; they do their contracted hours, but they have little sense of a social

mission. The Red had important work to do in raising consciousness among its own employees. Another manager responded that some school directors from the municipal band tradition treated their role in the Red as similar to that of a town band director. A third argued that the Red would only progress if it began hiring more pedagogues and fewer performers.

All four of the city's arts education networks faced the same problem to some degree. At the first meeting of representatives and researchers from the four programs that I attended, teacher training was the most prominent topic of discussion. Those present concurred that socially oriented arts education programs needed teachers with particular skills and not just conventional artistic training. They lamented that local universities generally followed a Eurocentric paradigm that left many arts graduates unprepared for and ignorant about the contexts where they subsequently went to work.

Part of the problem was that in Medellín, as in the classical music world more generally, teaching was sometimes seen as a consolation prize for aspiring performers. It was not just that many Red staff were not trained as teachers; some did not particularly *want* to be teachers. As one teacher put it, some musicians saw the Red just as a place to make some extra money or subsist while waiting for a better opportunity to come along. Quite a few teachers are in the Red because they have nowhere else to go, said one school director; they would leave if they got a better offer, but what else are they going to do in Medellín? As the principal employer of musicians in the city, with 150-odd teachers, the Red was an obvious pragmatic destination, and there was not a wealth of alternatives for the classically trained. Some saw the frequent hiring of instrumentalists rather than pedagogues as evidence that the Red had become more about providing jobs for musicians than educating students.

A school director told the social team: "The majority of the Red's teachers see the program as a source of income, not as a vocation, and this hinders the development of creativity and a rapprochement with pedagogy" ("Informe" 2017a, 75). Indeed, some of my interviewees did not see a particularly good fit between themselves and their work and did not imagine themselves staying in the Red over the long term.

The issues of training and vocation thus lay behind the sluggishness of pedagogical reform.

Some musicians, though, were attuned to the need for a shift among teachers. The 2008 social team report saw a number of musical staff doubt whether their education had prepared them properly for musical-social work. In interviews with the social team, some school directors were notably critical of their musical colleagues. “We’re stuck in an old-fashioned music education, repeating things from centuries ago; we carry on with the technical aspect and that’s it,” said one (“Informe” 2017a, 71). Another argued: “We musicians don’t have a social function within the community, we’re just ‘harlequins,’ via our education at university we become just ‘note-bashers,’ we don’t think, we’re musicians and that’s the only thing we know how to do” (73). A third argued that the program lacked joy: “this is linked to the teachers’ conservatory training; they lack pedagogical skills and so they transmit a rigid training that does not change with the present context of the city and the new context of education. This kind of training bores the students and distances the educational process from the objective of the program, reducing the enjoyment” (75).

Similar points emerged in my own interviews. For example, Daniel was critical of the attitude of many performance majors (*instrumentistas*) in the Red. According to him, some saw learning new teaching methods as a waste of time and were particularly dismissive of more experimental approaches. He was irritated that musicians who lacked important skills resisted straightforward opportunities to acquire them. Norberto, too, underlined the difference between *licenciados* and *instrumentistas*: the latter generally were more technically focused and had fewer students and more dropouts. He saw some of them as “out of context” in the Red. Carolina, also a school director, claimed that many teachers did not actually see the Red as a social program. They might be good musicians but this did not mean that they had relevant skills for a social project. She wondered why no Medellín university offered suitable training, given the size and prominence of the Red.

Some advanced students, too, expressed criticism of the teaching staff. One told me that he had seen high turnover among staff with performance degrees: they did not seem to want to be teachers and tended to leave as soon as they got a better offer. Two others students claimed

that there were numerous teachers with limited pedagogical skills and enthusiasm for the work. A meeting between student representatives and program leaders saw members of the principal youth orchestra question the attitude and teaching level of some staff. One student asked the managers outright: when is the Red going to update its pedagogy? Music is changing, she said, but the Red is stuck in the past. Another student claimed that some teachers used the notion of the Red as a social program as an excuse to provide a second-rate music education. But an important gap also opened up. If the management wanted to move the Red away from a conservatoire model, many advanced students desired the opposite.

Current Student Perspectives

Resistance to the new management proposals also came from some of the program's most experienced students. Those who remained in the Red in their late teens and early twenties often had expectations and desires shaped by many years in the program and by the wider classical music sector, and a shift in the Red's priorities was not to all of their liking. One of the new management goals, alongside diversity, creativity, and inclusion, was greater student voice—and some senior students used their new voice to express their suspicion of diversity, creativity, and inclusion.

Members of the student committee of the youth orchestra, having spent years climbing the institutional hierarchy, were keener on performing European masterworks than playing Colombian repertoire or composing their own music, and they *wanted* the orchestra to be exclusive. One described how she had cried in her audition—and then argued that aspiring members should have to go through the same experience. These students were concerned that opening the doors wider would lead to a drop in musical level. They were more interested in musical challenges (playing great works) and opportunities (high-profile concerts, festivals, competitions, tours) than in social inclusion. The Red's management was pushing for a more participatory ethos, but the most advanced students wanted a more presentational emphasis. There are echoes of Bull's (2019) finding that members of the UK's National Youth Orchestra disagreed with efforts to foster greater

equality. They had been socialized in the competitive ethos of the classical music world and wanted to retain a system of unequal rewards. As Bull reveals, young classical musicians can be conservative, defending the existing system of hierarchies and inequalities. Those who rise to the top of a competitive system tend to be socialized in its beliefs and unlikely to agitate for major reform—an important point when considering the slow evolution of SATM.

I also observed a survey at the start of a rehearsal by the symphonic band. The conductor asked the students: why are you here? Three main reasons emerged: high-profile concerts, challenging repertoire, and more specialized technical training. On another occasion, this conductor stated that every year he asked the students what they wanted to play, and they always named canonic works of the international symphonic band repertoire. Again, there was an obvious gulf between the desires of the leadership (for more creation, experimentation, and exploration of Colombian music) and the students (focused on conventional skills, repertoire, and opportunities). The students never mentioned the social objective, complicating any intention to move the program towards taking it more seriously.

Advanced students were nearing the end of an educational process that could last up to eighteen years. For most, the priority was to reap the rewards and project the results as far as possible; changing the process was of less interest. The older the students, the more likely they were to be studying music at university and aspiring to be a professional musician. The most advanced often dreamt of progressing onto a more specialized orchestral program like Medellín's Iberacademy (discussed below) or the Colombian Youth Orchestra. Improvisation classes or territorial workshops were simply a distraction for most of them. Adding reflection or creation felt more like an impediment than an opportunity for those who had already decided upon a classical career path. Tellingly, an attempt to radically reconfigure the integrated ensembles in early 2019 was the only new initiative under Giraldo's leadership that was roundly reversed, due to the scale of student resistance.

Conversations with advanced students were revealing from the perspective of SATM and educational change more broadly. These students were generally very focused on music and often disliked activities organized by the social team. Most saw the social aspect of the

Red in terms of enjoyment and socializing with their peers rather than grander goals such as peaceful coexistence or social change, confirming Wald's (2009; 2011; 2017) findings concerning SATM in Buenos Aires. Many were less keen on discussing or acting on social issues, viewing explicit pursuit of the Red's social objective as affecting musical quality and a hindrance to their musical studies. They tended to complain that the program already tilted too much towards the social aspect and ought to provide a more serious musical training, in some cases to help them get into a university music department. One senior student told the social team that the Red was "a social program... unfortunately." When I asked another about the social side, he responded immediately: I wish it granted more importance to the musical part. He wanted more pressure so that students played better. Two of his friends defined the "social" in SATM as "undemanding."

Since students generally showed limited interest in social action, they were sometimes at odds with the social team. Javier, an advanced student, explained his perspective at length:

we had two years when the social side attacked us and we seemed like an orchestra of psychologists. We'd go to a rehearsal and they'd say: today we're going to do a psychosocial activity. And we'd be like, OK... but when are we going to play? [...] During the administration of [Mayor] Gaviria, it was always all about life... Workshop for life, this for life, that for life... Lots about values, and I feel that the [musical] level dropped a lot during that time... a lot of psychology and psychosocial and we neglected the music.

He talked about how the students found the reflective activities boring, stopped paying attention, and rarely felt moved to speak up:

Now when someone talks about social, I think the word has become kind of derogatory. It's like the social side has impacted so much on the musical that we've come to see it as something repulsive. When someone says social to me, I see it as something that's going to get in the way of the musical process. [...] I think that the rhetoric about keeping the kids here so that they're not taking up a weapon is no longer relevant, and keeping the kids here passing the time in a mediocre fashion without pushing them isn't enough.

The integrated ensembles like the youth orchestra were where the contradiction between the musical and the social was most apparent. For

the management and social team, they offered the greatest possibilities for fostering coexistence and dynamic social experiences, since they brought together young people from different neighbourhoods and social strata. But they were also the showcase groups with the highest musical demands, and the musical staff and students saw them as the artistic pinnacle of the Red and thus the place to take the musical side most seriously. The social team noted that, in practice, these ensembles did not focus on their social aspect but rather on preparing and performing demanding repertoire and representing the program (“Informe” 2017a). It also pointed to these ensembles as focal points of negative dynamics such as excessive demands, bullying, competition, and exclusion, as a consequence of the emphasis on musical results. For the social team, the integrated ensembles showcased the worst of the Red.

The story of the REMM Ensemble—the new ensemble created for the US tour—is illustrative. It adopted an innovative approach, creating all its own music via two distinctive laboratories. In 2018, with a tour guaranteed, demand for participation was very high, and large numbers of the Red’s best performers auditioned for much fewer places. In 2019, the ensemble announced its continuation, but this time without a tour. The take-up was now so low that the original plan had to be shelved: the large, high-performance, freestanding ensemble had to be reconstituted as an elementary project in one of the music schools. It appeared that travel rather than pedagogical or musical innovation had been the real draw. The leadership had imagined the tour as a catalyst for wider changes, but the students had other ideas.

Foreign tours were a major source of motivation during the Red’s first phase, according to some students-turned-teachers. Going on tour was the big attraction: not because of the music, said one, but because it meant travelling with friends, away from school and family, and seeing new places. They didn’t give up all their weekends just to give concerts for their parents. “Typical adolescent thinking,” as he put it. But in recent years, such thinking has fallen somewhat out of sync with that of the Red’s leadership, focused as it has been on social, territorial, and pedagogical reform at home.

Social Action versus Pre-Professional Training

These findings lead us to a central paradox in SATM in South America. Programs like the Red and El Sistema are closely articulated to and feeders for the classical music profession and its institutions, and as such, they share its value system. Many teachers are or have been professional classical musicians, or have at least trained for this profession, and many older students aspire to this goal. Classical music is a highly competitive world and students who hope to make a career in it are therefore obliged to focus on their musical studies; it is their musical level that will determine whether they get into university, pass their degree, and succeed in an audition. In other words, as SATM students rise through the levels and become more advanced, they generally move closer to the professional world and the values that underpin it, and further from the supposed *raison d'être* of the program—social action. As a consequence, the “star students” of SATM programs often resemble conventional conservatoire students (indeed, they often *are* conventional conservatoire students), and they can be among the least engaged with the official objective and most critical of attempts to realize it more fully.

The Red’s relationship with Iberacademy illustrates this issue. Iberacademy is an elite orchestral training program based in Medellín but with tentacles reaching out across the Americas and a strong focus on touring and placing students in overseas conservatoires. It is funded by the Hilti Foundation, which also supports El Sistema, and the two programs are closely aligned. Iberacademy was an object of desire for advanced students in the Red. A number joined or aspired to join Iberacademy; sometimes they remained in the Red as well and sometimes they left, but their comparisons between the two programs rarely favoured the Red. None of this is at all surprising: one might expect advanced students, after many years learning music seriously, to admire a high-level program like Iberacademy; one might also expect them to be the most critical of the Red, since they were the ones most invested in the elite classical training that the Red’s leadership now questioned. Parra was blunt: the Red is not really a social program but rather a school of technical and artistic training that revolves around playing and touring, so it is little wonder that the best students want to leave when something like Iberacademy appears, offering better

playing and touring opportunities. Nevertheless, the fact that advanced students looked longingly at an elite classical scheme like Iberacademy illustrated the challenge that the Red's management faced in pushing the program towards greater musical diversity and social engagement.

Both programs took the professional symphony orchestra as their model and operated within the wider value system of the classical music profession. El Sistema began life as a pipeline into the orchestral profession and the two Medellín programs also served that role. Both were embedded in a local, national, and international context in which performing excellence is valued above social or pedagogical excellence and the measure of an orchestra is closely bound up with the repertoire that it plays and its touring schedule. As a result, the most talented students generally prioritized tackling harder repertoire and performing it on distant stages. In twenty years of operation as a large, flagship "social program," the Red had not shifted those values or expectations; on the contrary, it had positively fostered them. This approach eventually created a dual tension: on the one hand, with the more appealing Iberacademy; and on the other, with the less appealing official objective of social action for the benefit of the local community.

Unsurprisingly, then, there was no traffic in the other direction. The Red was not an object of desire for music students in anything like the same way as Iberacademy. Older students rarely developed a significant thirst for social action; they were mainly concerned about musical quality. Most saw the Red as a mediocre version of Iberacademy, its wings clipped by its social objective, rather than a program that offered something distinct but of equal value.

This imbalance reflects the fact that neither El Sistema nor its two Medellín disciples had forged a genuinely distinct philosophy and practice that went beyond a justificatory or publicity discourse and elevated social action to a central concern and a position of high status. Despite its stated social objective, the Red lacked indicators or criteria for evaluating social action. An advanced student was one with advanced technical ability on an instrument, not advanced ideas about social issues. Student promotion was dependent "on the achievements reached in instrumental playing [...] according to the criteria of musical quality and fulfilling a certain number of performances" (Arango 2006,

14). There was no social route to promotion, such as civic performance or community service.

These programs do not create role models for social action, only for musical success. Graduates who rise to the top ranks of the classical music profession are loudly celebrated, but in two years of fieldwork in Venezuela and Colombia, I never saw these programs hold up a music student who went on to become an exemplary citizen, a social leader, a community figurehead, or a catalyst of social change.² What is more, the figures at the top of the SATM pantheon—particularly conductors like Gustavo Dudamel—are those who have established themselves in orchestras overseas; they symbolize an ideology of music as a means of individual social mobility and transcending the local, rather than as a catalyst for collective social change within and for the community. Here we see a paradox in orthodox SATM: an idealization of the collective (the orchestra), yet an individualized conception of success (the young musician who “makes it” in the profession).

In sum, these “social” programs have historically reproduced the value system of classical music rather than social or community activism. It is hardly surprising, then, that social action figured minimally in many advanced students’ understanding of what mattered, or that there was some resistance to the leadership’s progressive reforms in 2017–19.

Family and Student Expectations

At the other end of the student age scale, there was a more subtle kind of resistance, and it too revolved around expectations concerning the musical and social sides of SATM. Several members of staff made the point that children (or their parents) do not generally sign up for the Red because of its social objective; they sign up to learn to play a musical instrument for free. The social objective justified the Red’s funding and was central to its official discourse, and there was a continual pull towards strengthening the social side from the city government, program leaders, and the social team; but families usually just wanted free music lessons and a place to keep children occupied. In other words,

2 Hess’s (2019) vision of music education for social change provides an illuminating contrast. She built her model around individuals with or without music industry success but with a clear focus on changing society through music.

in a context where SATM is the main option for free music lessons, a gap opens up between the official vision (a social program) and the public vision (a free music school). What this meant in practical terms, according to my interlocutors, was that participants were generally more interested in what was supposed to be the means (music) than the ends (social action), and their musical expectations limited the scope for more ambitious social work. As one school director told the social team: “This is a musical program with a social angle. Whatever we do, we have to start with music. *If this were a social program, we would really go and impact the communities that are in difficult contexts*, but people come here because it is a music program, [...] they come to learn music, the social is a consequence” (“Informe” 2017a, 69; emphasis added).

Another school director put it bluntly: the kids aren’t really interested in doing anything other than playing their instrument. When she tried to broaden the offering and put on non-musical activities like watching a film or tidying the park or painting a mural, few turned up. A third director lamented that few older students ended up taking part in his school project; most wanted to play difficult, well-known repertoire and be the best school orchestra in the Red, rather than engage in more innovative, creative, participatory activities with the younger students.

Howell (2017, 115–16) reveals that this multiplicity of motivations in musical-social work is not limited to the Red:

Organisers may emphasise instrumentalised value in their stated aims in order to build a compelling argument for donors, but simultaneously remain committed to the delivery of music opportunities as their *raison d’être*. Conversely, participants are often motivated to participate because of the immediate (intrinsic) appeal of the artistic undertaking; for them, the arguments around social development or healing (for example) provide little initial persuasion.

A clear official vision does not therefore make for a unified program in practice. But as we have seen, in the Red this was not just a case of students shrugging their shoulders at the formal aims; some experienced those aims as a negative factor and actively resisted efforts to realize them more fully.

A major question thus emerges: how to balance the goals of the funder and leadership with those of the participants? Should the Red be led by progressive ideas about expanding the horizons of students

and deepening impact on the community? Or should it be shaped by the more conventional expectations and desires of those same constituencies? One school director explained this tension in 2018:

Now [the students] are obliged to be creative. But no one asked them if they wanted to create. [...] If you ask the kids about being creative, a lot will tell you that [the leadership] has lost its way. [The students] just want to play like the Colombian Youth Orchestra. [...] The kids say: this [i.e. creativity] is no use at all. I want to play better so that I can join Iberacademy or the Colombian Youth Orchestra.

She concluded: "Here in the Red we're trying to change things, to revive our culture. But that doesn't mean much to the kids."

Classical versus Popular Music

Parra regularly referred to "the theme of the year." These were the issues that generated most debate and discontent during Giraldo's tenure, beyond the perennial ones such as the musical and the social. In 2017, according to Parra, the theme of the year was classical versus popular music. This was the moment that a popular musician took over as general director and began to promote an agenda of diversity and identity. In reality, the issue of classical versus popular music had been circulating since Arango's 2006 report, but now the reappraisal was led by an active performer of popular music, for whom this question was therefore a personal one as well.

This topic became the theme of the year because not all the Red's musical staff were enthused by the popular turn. Various counter-arguments were made. Some staff articulated a historical argument (classical music had always been the hallmark of the Red); others a technical one (classical music was better for developing instrumental technique); others a practical one (there were few teaching materials for Colombian popular music). But there were also those who questioned the initial premise that the Red was weighted towards the classical, arguing that Colombian repertoire had always been prominent. This question was further blurred by the issue of repertoire, formats, and instruments. When a symphony orchestra played an arrangement of a popular Colombian piece, some observers focused on the repertoire (Colombian) and others on the format (European). The lack of

consensus on the basic question of whether or not the Red *was* a classical music program only intensified the debate about what it might *become*.

In our interview, Ocampo explained: “What really carries weight in the world of music is not the wind band, it’s the symphony orchestra.” He argued that the orchestral repertoire was rich and demanding, while bands were much more limited. Although his argument was framed in pragmatic terms, it should be recalled that the Red emerged from Ocampo’s classical music company and music appreciation activities. A classical focus would therefore appear to be not only a strategic decision but also a personal and professional inclination.

However, to complicate this picture, the Red was originally created in 1997 as the Network of Bands and Music Schools of Medellín—no mention of orchestras. The newspaper article in March that year (“Escuelas de música” 1997) projected a future in which classical music appeared almost as a footnote:

around two thousand children and young people from popular barrios will be part of a huge band. But a symphonic band. The whole city will be able to listen to its youth performing [popular tunes such as] “Antioqueñita,” “La Ruana,” *pasillos*, *cumbias*, *guabinas*, and other Colombian styles, as well as classical, popular, and tropical music, and pasodobles and other tunes from around the world.

Ocampo’s remarks about bands and orchestras were made as a parenthesis during his account of his relationship with Abreu. He claimed that he only discovered El Sistema after the Red began. When he made his first visit to Venezuela shortly afterwards, he thought, “why reinvent the wheel?” Abreu agreed to provide teachers and the years of close alliance began. Students from that period recalled that the Venezuelans brought El Sistema’s repertoire. It thus appears that the surprisingly eclectic, distinctively Colombian vision at the start quickly gave way to something closer to the Venezuelan model, which had been created by a classical conductor with minimal interest in or sympathy for popular music.³ The program may have begun life in 1997 as the Network of Bands, but in 1998, a new municipal agreement was

3 On Abreu’s distaste for popular music, see my blog post “Scam, Voodoo, or The Future of Music? The El Sistema Debate”, <https://geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com/el-sistema-older-posts/scam-voodoo-or-the-future-of-music-the-el-sistema-debate-2/>.

signed, bringing the Red's youth orchestras and choirs into existence, and looking back two decades later, Ocampo's preference was clear. This ambiguity at the very outset might be seen as sowing the seeds of 2017's theme of the year.

Behind the debates and pragmatic arguments lay differing ideological positions with regard to classical music and its role in a society like Medellín's. Both defenders and critics of classical music focused on questions of difference and, less explicitly, superiority. For the defenders, classical music's difference was a strength and source of success. As it was somewhat alien to the popular barrios where the program began, classical music symbolized distance and exception from the violent social context and the destructive social norms that underpinned it. Classical music, in its very difference, was heard as the sound of Medellín's youth turning over a new page in the city's history. Classical music's association with elevation and distinction made it ideal for projecting a "new image of Medellín to the world," as the program's publicity slogan went (see Chapter 4).

As one school director told me, he was happy for the Red to diversify somewhat but it should not lose its essential character as classically-focused, serious, academic, and formal. Classical training allowed students to learn music properly from a technical perspective and to join together in large ensembles; but also, popular music was ubiquitous and so it did not generate the same response in students or their families. For novelty and personal growth, people needed a different genre to the norm. Also, he associated popular music with drinking and excess. Adults might enjoy it, but did they really want their children to learn it? When you have a symphony orchestra playing European music in a barrio, he said, that attracts people's attention; popular music, improvisation, creation, and so on simply would not have the same impact.

For critics, however, this distance was perceived more negatively. They saw the Red as reproducing old dichotomies and hierarchies of classical versus popular, cultured versus uncultured, "good kids" versus "bad kids." They argued that distancing a few children from Medellín's violent realities did little to tackle those problems, to help those left behind, or to generate attitudes of empathy. Some at leadership level and in the culture ministry saw the perpetuation of a colonialist

ideology dating back to the Spanish Conquest, which treated European music as superior to indigenous or African and as a tool of salvation and civilization. As the social team wrote: “We need to grant value to our own music, we only play international repertoire, it is as though we did not have our own history. This happens even in school, first we teach universal history and only if there is time left over, Colombian history—we disrespect ourselves” (“Informe” 2017a, 73).

This issue became the subject of lively debate in 2017. For the new leadership, opening up not just to popular repertoire but also to popular instruments, techniques, and styles was an inherent part of giving the program more of a local and national identity, embracing the musical diversity of the city, and starting to decolonize music education. For some popular music specialists in the program, talking about repertoire was something of a red herring (if the pun may be excused); the problem was not that the program did not perform popular music, but rather that it did not perform popular music *well*. The director of the popular music integrated ensemble issued a challenge to the players in one rehearsal: when we play classical music, the Red sounds good; when we play [Argentinean] tango, we sound good; but when we play [Colombian] cumbia, *porro*, or *gaita*, we sound weak. This is true even for us, the most specialized group in the program, let alone in schools where directors know less about Colombian music. We can play the rhythm, he said, but the feel isn’t there. We’ve been so colonized musically that we sound worst when we play our own music. What are we going to do about this?



Fig. 20. Archive of Red de Escuelas de Música. CC BY.

The social team argued that the atmosphere of concerts was transformed as soon as the ensemble struck up a popular tune, with both performers and audience immediately livelier and more engaged than with classical repertoire (“Informe” 2017a). A school director voiced a compatible view: “the worst thing is that we play music for an audience that doesn’t exist. We play classical music, and we’ve been playing that for twenty years, but we haven’t developed an audience that really likes classical music. Our audience is the Red parents. We haven’t created a real consumer of art or [classical] music in the city.” But other musical staff defended a focus on classical music and were concerned about a shift that they saw as potentially eroding the historical identity, musical quality, and pedagogical foundations of the program.

Matters had changed by the time of my return in 2019, when I saw a notable shift of emphasis towards popular music in the music schools and ensembles. The key driver, it seemed, was not ideological debate or management exhortation, but rather the move to project-based learning (PBL)—the “theme of the year” in 2018.

Pedagogy

From January 2018, when the new approach was rolled out, until I left Medellín in September, there was tension and open debate over PBL. The management understood PBL as a flexible, non-prescriptive, participatory approach to education, and as such, it wanted each school or ensemble director to seize the idea and flesh it out with their own individual proposals, together with their staff and students. Many directors, however, simply did not understand what the management was looking for, and they requested clear and detailed instructions—something that, for the management, went against the spirit of PBL. The leadership felt that the directors were resistant to new thinking, while the directors complained that the management was incapable of explaining the new approach.

Nevertheless, when I returned a year later, and the Red was halfway through the second year of the PBL strategy, I was struck by the variety and imagination on display during a two-day “projects fair” in which all the schools and ensembles participated. Ironically, the staff were in open mutiny against the leadership over the direction of the program,

yet large advances had been made. It appeared that much of the incomprehension and resistance of the previous year concerning PBL had been overcome as the idea had become more familiar, and now this approach was producing some impressive results (as outlined in Chapter 1). Particularly notable was the new dominance of popular and traditional music. PBL was allied with the shift to a more territorial focus, meaning that many projects focused on local history, culture, spaces or ecology. It seemed to be easier to explore and illustrate these themes with music that had a direct connection to the barrio around the school, rather than classical music from distant times and places.

The backdrop to the introduction of PBL was a wider debate—another one that dated back to 2005—over formal versus non-formal education. The Red was officially described as a non-formal program, but under Arango it began to take on many formal characteristics, such as fixed levels and educational cycles and a curriculum. For some, this change brought welcome order to a program that had been somewhat chaotic and improvised in its first phase. For others, the Red came to resemble a conservatoire in all but name, to the detriment of its official social objective. The adoption of PBL was linked to the new leadership's perception that the pendulum had swung too far in the direction of formalization. The social team, too, argued that non-formal education was a source of freedom and offered spaces for developing positive social dynamics such as self-expression and listening; they were more suspicious of the elaborate curriculum ("Informe" 2017a). However, this shift caused discomfort among many staff, particularly among those who had invested considerable time and energy over a period of years in constructing the curriculum. Non-formal approaches were quite alien to many who had received a formal training themselves.

This debate played out in discussions over ludic versus serious approaches. Franco, in particular, advocated for a more playful, spontaneous attitude towards music learning, building up from the base of musical initiation, and he perceived many of the Red's activities as overly rigid and serious, dictated from the top down by the norms of professional classical music. The Red is too much like school, he said at one meeting; it should be a different kind of experience. He described the Red as twenty-seven little conservatoires offering conventional classes, and he dreamt of more innovative, varied, dynamic experiences.

With PBL, then, resurfaced longstanding debates over whether the Red should resemble an ordinary music school, but with a broader social constituency and a different atmosphere, or a social program, embodying a profoundly different approach to music education.

“Happy Students, Teachers in Adversity”: SATM as Work

If there was one topic that rivalled the social in terms of the passions that it aroused, it was the staff’s contract with the city government via the university. The directors and teachers were on rolling contracts with no fixed duration, but typically nine to ten months in recent years. Each Christmas, they had no guarantee that they would be rehired in the New Year, and even if they were, the start date was usually unknown. From the end of one year to the beginning of the next, they remained unpaid and suspended in a sense of uncertainty over whether or when their services would be required. This situation did not just affect the staff—until their contracts began, there were no activities in the music schools for students either.

The nature of the contract and the precarity that it produced were a constant source of tension, and in a number of important meetings, at least one school director stood up and gave an impassioned speech on this topic. It regularly overshadowed discussion of new priorities such as diversity, identity, and creativity. Some of the musical staff were outraged and incredulous that after more than two decades as a flagship program of the city government, the Red still did not offer permanent contracts. They spoke of the effect not only on themselves and their families, but also on the Red’s capacity to retain existing students and attract new ones. Delays to the start of the academic year saw participants and potential recruits drift away to other programs that had already begun.

This issue could not have been more different from the musical and the social: one complex and conceptual, the other straightforward and practical. At first, I mentally switched off a little when this topic was raised in meetings; I instinctively saw it as less interesting than the philosophical intricacies of SATM. But over time I came to understand it as a specific example of an issue that is both important and commonplace

in SATM: a gap between the (supposed) benefits for students and the more ambiguous realities for their teachers.

The theme of musicians as workers is largely absent even from academic discussions of SATM, let alone media narratives. Stories and images focus on engaged and enthusiastic students; we do not see disgruntled, underpaid, or precariously employed staff who keep the wheels in motion. Belfiore (2021, 15) points to this darker side of socially engaged arts practice more broadly, as well as to the reason why it is rarely discussed: “the importance of maintaining good relationships with funders [...] perpetuates silence around the realities of working conditions within social engaged practice and works against positive change.” In writing on SATM, the focus on beneficiaries has generally elided the experience of the crucial intermediaries between SATM’s theory and its practice, thereby overlooking what was, for many musical staff in the Red, the most important topic in their professional lives: pay and working conditions.

We can see here another of the central paradoxes of SATM in older South American programs. For some musically talented students, being “rescued” or “transformed” by music education morphs into becoming low-paid, precariously employed instructors to the next generation. Music may provide a new life path for some students, but those who are good enough to become professional musicians but not good enough (or connected or lucky enough) to secure an orchestral or other performing position often end up as teachers—a destination that is more ambiguous than the celebratory narrative about transforming lives would allow. There is a certain irony in a social program that trains low- to middle-income students over many years for a competitive, uncertain, precarious, and modestly remunerated profession.

This issue of SATM as work came into greater focus with the decision to open the Red’s schools on Saturday mornings as well as Monday to Friday. Saturday opening became 2019’s “theme of the year.” The management and culture ministry wanted to open up the music schools more to the surrounding community. But for the school directors, it was the straw that broke the camel’s back, pushing hardworking staff beyond their limit and creating clashes with family and outside musical commitments. The resulting conflict was a reminder that behind the

elevated rhetoric, SATM depends on workers and labour rather than angel-musicians and miracles.

In a moment of sympathy, a member of the social team reflected that the musical staff were resistant to the social side because they saw it as extra work, and they already had too much on their plate (full-time teachers were supposed to give thirty-two hours of lessons a week); this is why they wanted the social team to take care of it. Similarly, this high workload was also an impediment to teachers' engagement with PBL, since the new approach implied adapting their teaching to each school and therefore potentially more preparation time. SATM work may be coveted by some, particularly those fresh out of higher education and with high ideals or desperate for income, but as with many jobs, its demands can lead enthusiasm to give way to ambivalence. The Red was a major provider of work for classical music graduates but not necessarily a dream job. The social team noted a feeling of monotony and a loss of motivation and interest among some staff ("Informe" 2017a). Considering SATM as work not only brings its elevated rhetoric down to earth but also, as Belfiore suggests, opens up the possibility of positive change.

The timeline meeting discussed in Chapter 1 ended with proposals from staff. Many revolved around their contract, working conditions, (in)stability, and motivation—in other words, around the Red as work rather than as social action. One teacher stood up and described the Red as "happy students, happy families, teachers in adversity."

Stress and burnout were found among all the adult constituencies in the Red. Despite its ambitious social claims, or perhaps because of them, SATM can be a challenging place to work, and employees do not always seem to feel the power of music. One of the Red's general directors quipped, tongue only half in cheek: "the Red saves children. But it eats adults."

Improvisation

One of the major and rising sources of tension in 2017–19 was organizational dynamics. The musical staff argued that the leadership lacked organizational skills and were incapable of communicating their proposals clearly and effectively. The leadership, in turn, criticized

the musical staff for an unwillingness to listen and a resistance to change. This is not the place to adjudicate the rights and wrongs of this particular argument, but it is worth considering the notion that this broken communication represented not (or at least, not only) deficient capacities and attitudes but rather the fact that the leadership and staff were not speaking the same language.

The most obvious example was the struggle of some musical staff to understand Parra, an anthropologist by profession. Yet communication between the other two leaders and the staff was sometimes little more fluid, despite the fact that all were musicians. Most of the staff had trained as classical or municipal band musicians, whereas Giraldo and Franco were rooted in Colombian traditional music, jazz, and composition. The relevance of this distinction becomes apparent when one considers the word that lay at the heart of staff criticisms of the leaders' organizational style: improvisation.

For Giraldo and Franco, improvisation was a word with positive connotations, and it underpinned the musical changes that they tried to instil in the Red. They instituted improvisation classes for the teachers, at which Giraldo would sometimes show up and participate, and they created more space for improvisatory musical traditions. More broadly, they wanted the music schools to loosen up and the directors and teachers to stop worrying so much about the curriculum and the timetable and to become more flexible and creative. They aspired to a looser, more informal approach to music making, with more joy and less routine. Franco loved nothing more than walking into a school to find little groups of students doing their own thing, without adult supervision; he was less impressed by large, adult-directed ensembles.



Fig. 21. Archive of Red de Escuelas de Música. CC BY.

The leaders were also keen to foster a more consensual organizational culture, which implied keeping plans partly formed in order to leave space for staff and student input, and more of a trial-and-error approach. They were happy to depart from business-as-usual, to take risks, and to leave outcomes uncertain. They saw leaping into the unknown as part of the creative process—organizationally as well as musically. Giraldo's conception of the management's role with regard to PBL was that of a jazz improviser: don't wait for us to tell you what to do, just get on with it and try things out, and see what works and what doesn't. Don't worry about making mistakes; learn as you go along. This is a non-formal program; if anywhere is the place for flexibility, experimentation, and error, it is here.

However, the word "improvisation" was used against them by staff as a criticism of their approach to leadership. For the school directors, in particular, there were few things worse than improvisation (in an organizational sense). What the leaders perceived as consensual and emergent struck many staff as confusing and confused. The management dreamt of a different kind of Red; the staff criticized them as distant from the schools and unmoored to reality. The directors did not want looseness, risks, uncertainty, trial and error, leaps into the unknown, or endless discussions; they wanted order and clear instructions. This was how most had been educated themselves. Furthermore, many of them had joined the Red in the Ocampo or Arango years, when there was a strong leader who told them exactly what to do. The role of staff was to implement plans, not to agree or disagree. Arango's leadership style provoked diverse responses, but even her detractors acknowledged that she was clear and organized and everyone knew exactly what was expected of them. Many staff harked back to her as an example of effective leadership; few held up improvisation as an ideal.

Improvisation was thus at the heart of both the new proposal for the Red and the staff's scepticism towards it. There were important ideological differences over the musical versus the social, classical versus popular, and formal versus the informal; but there were also copious debates over *how* the changes were implemented. The centrality of the word "improvisation" suggests that beneath the discontent over problems of organization and communication lay further ideological differences, this time over order versus chaos, fixity versus fluidity.

These ideological differences were themselves rooted in the different kinds of musical training that the various parties had received. In fact, the issue of training might be seen to underlie all of the tensions and debates in this chapter. The new approaches implemented from 2017 onwards were a challenge for many music graduates. The way that the Red had developed over the years (particularly the adoption of a relatively formal, conventional curriculum and pedagogy) reflected closely how its staff were trained, and the efforts to transform the program bumped up not just against its history and the kind of inertia that is commonplace in large institutions, but also against the limitations of this training. The new leadership's focus on popular and traditional music, creativity, improvisation, non-formal learning, PBL, participation, and territorial connections demanded skills that went far beyond those that most staff had acquired at university, though there were some notable exceptions. Musical improvisation is not a practice that is associated with classical music or conservatoire training, at least in Colombia, and therefore it was not something with which the majority of the Red's workforce was particularly comfortable. In 2018, school directors were asked to assume a role akin to a *gestor territorial* (territorial manager), one that was unfamiliar to many and demanded a kind of mobility that contradicted the longstanding static model for this role. It is unsurprising that resistance was quite widespread among those who were now asked to turn their training and previous experience on its head, transform their own role in unfamiliar directions, and develop skills in students that they themselves lacked. Much of the friction and debate stemmed from this gap between expectations and training.

Norberto, the school director, held up the example of creativity. It was hard for most staff, he said, because they came from a system—the Red and the university—where they had learnt “like parrots... just play, that's it!” More broadly, he reflected that classical musicians were used to being told what to do and not having to think; so when the new leadership arrived and asked the staff what they proposed, many “went into shock [...] What we wanted for so long, we now have—and we don't know what to do with it.”

Franco dreamt of music schools that were freer, more flexible, and more playful: less carving up of time and space into formal lessons and rehearsals, and more creative spaces where students came together to try

different instruments and jam and compose with others of varying ages and abilities. This picture of loose, creative, collaborative activities was one that Norberto and many other directors struggled to imagine, let alone enact. Many lacked a background in composition, improvisation, and other creative activities. For them, music education meant giving children a serious, solid technical grounding in one instrument and then in a conductor-led ensemble. The rapid shift was a significant practical and ideological challenge, and some advanced students and teachers argued that the leap was simply too big.

Franco had done much of his previous music education work in villages. He recalled the eagerness and openness to new ideas in such contexts, where participants were like sponges. He was somewhat shocked to find that his proposals generated so much resistance in the Red. Giraldo, meanwhile, had a background in jazz and popular music ensembles, with small formats and informal approaches. Their experience in the Red might be seen as a culture shock as they came up against the traditions of the orchestral and municipal band worlds. As one school director said, “the teachers and directors don’t have experience of research, they have no idea how a project works, so how can you ask this of them? First you need to train them, then maybe. You need to convince them why it should be done this way.” The leaders, in contrast, came from backgrounds where such activities were normal.

This was not just a matter of the Red. Most of the new leadership’s primary objectives were somewhat alien to large ensemble culture more generally. This was obviously the case with improvisation or traditional music techniques, but it was also a challenge to embed a more participatory approach in the Red and shift to a more horizontal, student-centred dynamic, because many staff had been formed in and reproduced the vertical, teacher-led ethos of orchestras and bands. This gap between training and objectives became very visible with the raft of new initiatives from 2017, yet it was not new. As seen in Chapter 1, it became clear during the diagnostic phase at the start of Arango’s tenure that many of the musical staff found the Red’s social objective laudable but also overly ambitious, and they doubted their capacity to fulfil it. From the first internal reports, then, tensions and debates were founded on a gap between the staff’s musical training and the goals that the program set for them.

Conclusion

Shortly after I began my fieldwork in 2017, the social team produced a 210-page internal report summarizing its research during the first year of Giraldo's administration. Over time, I discovered that many of the issues it highlighted had been raised in reports dating back years. In fact, the Red had been grappling with largely the same questions since 2006. The Red's repeated efforts at reform and limited progress epitomized the cultural field as a place of "vigorous and dynamic struggle" (Martin 1995, 180–81). The Red emerged as a complicated and contested organization, for all the simplicity and rosiness of its public representations. This is an important conclusion, given that the primordial objective of such programs is often expressed as fostering social harmony, and struggle is elided from most publicly available accounts of SATM.

Official accounts of SATM usually portray the pursuit of musical excellence and social action as going hand in hand, but the relationship between the two halves of the SATM equation turned out to be the Red's biggest headache. Behind the upbeat rhetoric about transformation, the social appeared as a prime locus of tension. The testimonies of students and staff revealed that, as Estrada had found in Venezuela in 1997, the pursuit of musical excellence led to a neglect of the social objective and/or the generation of negative social dynamics (see Baker and Frega 2018). Yet a shift to more active pursuit of social goals led to widespread complaints that music education was being disrupted and artistic standards compromised. For many, the Red was like a zero-sum game, in which the musical and the social were locked in struggle. The conflicts between the social team and musicians serve as a dramatization of this tension.

There are many different and at times contradictory ways of understanding and pursuing SATM. The history of the Red shows multiple changes in social strategy and a lack of consensus over how SATM should work. Having initially borrowed a model from Venezuela, the Red's history since 2005 appears as a long-term and probably unending search: a succession of approaches in constant transformation. From a synchronic perspective, the Red shows similar variation. The diachronic and the synchronic are connected: the Red included staff hired during

all its different phases, and thus those phases and their ideologies were all present in some form in 2017–18. They both coexisted and competed in the program, since they represented distinct philosophies of SATM. The Red cannot therefore be reduced to a single philosophy or approach at any single moment, much less over time.

The bagginess of the term “social” lies behind this central issue. There were major variations in what this word signified in relation to the Red: a quality of personal interaction, a space for socialization, a focus on disadvantaged populations, a collective pedagogy, a public ethos, mixing of social classes, instilling discipline and responsibility, and so on. While debate might seem inevitable in a program of this age and size, the atmosphere pointed more to competition and tension than to happy diversity when it came to the coexistence of differing visions. In Medellín, SATM appeared less like a harmonious blend between the musical and the social than a serious game that both teams were trying to win.

While debates often fell into a binary dynamic, the period that I observed also presented a three-way internal debate in which different ways of understanding SATM came into tension. The two musicians at the head of the program saw diversity, identity, creativity, and interculturality as the way forward; the social team repeated the decade-old call to take the social side more seriously; and many musical staff saw both these paths as distracting from the large ensemble performance that was the program’s calling-card and their own speciality. This three-way tug-of-war could be observed clearly in relation to the integrated ensembles: the musical coordinators wanted to shake up the pedagogical approach; the social coordinator urged more space for thinking about social questions; while the conductors and students wanted to raise the musical level and perform and tour more.

Similarly, the dynamic between the management and staff cannot be reduced only to a dichotomy of critique versus resistance. The social team interviewed all the school directors in 2017, and as with the first social team report nine years earlier, the staff conveyed a complex picture (“Informe” 2017a). Some pointed to issues such as the absence of suitable professional training and a lack of critical reflection and citizenship education by their musical colleagues. The directors were not therefore a monolithic group, nor were they unaware of problems

or resistant to change per se; the tensions revolved as much around the direction and pace of change and the way that it should be managed. Complicating matters further, individual musicians sometimes had contradictory views or saw both sides of the coin. One school director described the social team in two terms: "1. A balm that soothes the injustices and tough demands on the teachers, administrators, directors, and students, and softens the rigidity of the musical processes. 2. Interventions that make no sense" (148).

A "glass half full" perspective might be to argue that dissonance is desirable in both musical works and democratic societies (Fink 2016), and that its absence would be a worrying sign. The debates, then, would suggest that the Red is fundamentally healthy. A "glass half empty" version might regard the Red as having lost its unity of vision and purpose after Ocampo's departure, never to fully recover. It might see considerable irony in a program for peaceful coexistence that has produced such tensions. However, it is possible that both visions are valid at the same time. What was experienced negatively by many, as tensions and disagreements, may also be analysed as a sign of healthy debate and necessary adjustment. We are back to growing pains.

The process of change itself was thus ambiguous. Successive leaderships believed that change was necessary, but it also generated discontent; it was felt as unnecessary and counter-productive by many of those affected. The 2019 projects fair was a good illustration of this ambiguity. Outside the hall, in the corridors and coffee stands, staff dissatisfaction was reaching fever pitch. With the directors having sent a formal letter of complaint to the university, the Red was experiencing its biggest crisis in years. Yet inside the hall, positive achievements were amply on display. It seemed as though the directors had taken the new PBL approach on board and were producing results. I saw a program more aligned with progressive currents in music education.

Tension arose from the conundrum of how to foster participation and change at the same time. Directors were given ample opportunity to voice their views in meetings and interviews. Yet since their requests usually revolved around strengthening conventional musical features, they were routinely ignored by management, who had a different agenda, one that was influenced by the culture ministry and the city's cultural policy. Changing the Red meant attempting to break with

the past and therefore not acting on the wishes of the program's old hands—undermining the goal of participation and stoking frustration.

Ironically for a music program, listening turned out to be delicate topic. Directors felt that they had spaces to speak but that they were not listened to by the leadership. But the reverse was also true, and the large staff meetings sometimes offered concrete examples (teachers with earphones in, watching the football, playing chess, and so on). On one such occasion, a musical consultant, having observed the low level of attention, told the audience: “we musicians are not good at listening. In fact, there are few who are worse at listening than musicians. This meeting is an example.”

A further ambiguity concerns the notion of change itself. In practice, what took place from 2017 was not so much changing old ways of working as layering new ones over the old. The Red had relatively fixed commitments, expectations, and resources. Since the city continued to demand regular concerts in multiple venues, and the musical staff had (and wanted) to maintain the existing practices, the Red continued with its former approach—conventional music education to prepare students for public performances—while a number of new initiatives were rolled out alongside. Hence the new initiatives often became (and were experienced as) extra responsibilities, and for musical staff who already worked long hours and had multiple obligations, the strain on their time and mental capacity was evident.

Change thus meant more work, and also less money for what had historically been the Red's core operations. There was considerable discontent from the musical staff that there was money for new laboratories, ensembles, directors, consultants, and managers, yet not for the program's creaking infrastructure, deteriorating instruments, or stagnating salaries. What appeared as interesting innovations to some struck others as unnecessary extra costs added to an overstretched budget.

The reality of the Red was clearly more complex and conflicted than the public narrative about such programs. What deserves further elucidation is what lay behind this panorama. Within the program, criticism tended to focus on the perceived personal and professional failings of particular constituencies and individuals. Yet as an external researcher, I saw ideological tensions or incompatibilities that could not

be so easily reduced to questions of right and wrong or pinned on a particular group or person.

From this perspective, the kinds of social problems identified within the program were not the fault of students or teachers, but rather a structural consequence of a program set up in such a way that it generated such problems and did not have strategies to deal with them. They were a result of the model. Similarly, the rising tensions during Giraldo's tenure were not only a matter of communication and leadership style, but also a result of attempting to align the Red's actions with its goals and to graft progressive educational ideologies and practices onto a program that had long been imagined and organized in quite conventional ways. As one school director put it simply: "[some teachers] don't like change or adopting new pedagogies. But that comes from the way that they all learnt. Many in the Red are inherently conservative."

From this perspective, the conflicts tell us about tensions between progressive and conservative tendencies in music education and between core elements of SATM, such as musical versus social goals, classical versus popular music, music as art versus music as work, and training versus education. The grating noises within the Red were the sound of a new vision grinding against an old system. This was the fault of neither the management nor the staff; both their perspectives made sense on their own terms, but they were not easily compatible. Beyond a story of one side pushing too hard and the other pushing back, it was the sheer distance between positions and practices that lay at the heart of the matter. Had the management's progressive ideas not been so far from SATM's origins and the norms of classical music culture, the leadership might have been able to convey them more clearly and the staff might have been able to grasp them more easily. When Giraldo told a staff meeting that creativity was the Red's problem and its solution, one teacher replied: fine, maybe you're right, but we are mainly symphonically trained, the curriculum is symphonically focused, and our teaching is focused on technique, so you are talking about changing the program completely. This exchange highlighted the scale of the challenge to bring the Red into line with Medellín's cultural policy and orthodox SATM into line with contemporary educational thinking.

The first-order debates within the Red point to key challenges and dilemmas in the wider SATM field. Take teacher training, for example.

The exponential growth of SATM programs has not been remotely matched by a transformation in the education of professional musicians, meaning that there is a shortage of appropriately trained teaching staff with experience of social work and a strong understanding of social issues. Only a few years ago, Kratus (2015) argued that many teachers came out of conservatoires having received a training that differed little from that of nineteenth-century performers. As a result, it is not uncommon in SATM to find a gap between social goals and the skills and experience of some staff. As Godwin (2020, 13) notes, the international SATM field faces “insufficient numbers of teaching artists with both musical expertise and skills in teaching large groups of children with diverse learning or behavioural needs, and an absence of the necessary materials and pedagogy.” This problem is exacerbated by a tendency in some quarters to hire fresh conservatoire graduates who may not even know the local context, much less have a deep understanding of its social issues and appropriate ways of tackling them, reproducing El Sistema’s philosophy that classical performance training is the perfect preparation for such work. The Portuguese El Sistema-inspired Orquestra Geração actually boasted of hiring inexperienced recent graduates (Mota and Teixeira Lopes 2017). Yet as Schippers (2018, 29) notes drily, “the skill set that would have prepared graduates brilliantly for their role in a nineteenth century German town may not be appropriate for twenty-first century realities.” To return to Ndaliko’s point from the Introduction, this is an example of an approach that would be ludicrous if proposed in most other fields, and it makes it harder to take such programs seriously as social work.

Some issues appear particular to SATM. For example, there are echoes of the Red in Veloso’s (2016) portrait of an Orquestra Geração student who aspired to be a professional clarinettist but struggled and failed to make the transition from the program to conservatoire. The risk that SATM runs in attempting to cover both pre-professional training and social action is doing both mediocly. Other problems are found much more widely in music education. For example, numerous scholars have identified a gap between progressive educational theory and conservative practice and have pointed the finger at the training of future teachers in higher education (e.g. Carabetta 2017; Waldron et al. 2017; Wright 2019). Some issues, such as music education as work, sit

somewhere between the two. In El Sistema, I found that many teachers were poorly paid, with few benefits, working in poor conditions, and with little control over their employment. I have heard similar complaints from some SATM teachers in other countries. Certainly, this issue is not unique to SATM; but the field's idealistic rhetoric brings this problem into sharp relief.

More detailed, critical, ethnographic studies of SATM programs are required in order to have a clearer picture about the extent of such issues across the field. It may be that, for example, programs in the global North that have taken El Sistema's name but have remained much smaller than their South American counterparts have avoided some of the problems. An issue like rivalry, for example, may be proportional to the number of students and ensembles. Programs that are newer and less intensive than the original SATM model, and/or aimed at a younger constituency, may be considerably more distanced from the classical music profession than El Sistema or the Red.

Nevertheless, there is ample evidence to suggest that the issues discussed in this chapter are neither unique to nor particularly severe in the Red. Rather, I see them as somewhat typical and predictable, a consequence of the orthodox model of SATM rather than local problems in Medellín. The Red followed the El Sistema approach under direct Venezuelan supervision, and the problems discovered from 2005 match closely those found by researchers in Venezuela.

Yet there are also major differences between the Red and El Sistema. The tension between the musical and the social never came to the surface in El Sistema because the Venezuelan program did not actively pursue its social objectives, but rather treated them as an inherent feature and automatic consequence of musical training. It added the social ingredient in the mid-1990s, halfway through its history, but as a discursive construct that barely affected the educational practices. El Sistema (and its more orthodox derivations) is essentially a social reading of and expanded access to conventional music education. But in the Red, since 2005, there have been consistent attempts to go beyond naming the social to actively pursuing it. This rethinking and redirecting of SATM introduced a tension between the musical and the social that never went away. Living up to an official mission of social action while maintaining musical excellence is not easy; indeed, it is a problem that no SATM program has entirely

resolved. It is much easier to pay lip service to social action and focus on the music. The Red took a harder path.

Furthermore, El Sistema followed a much stricter line than the Red with regard to tensions and debates: it provided no room for them to be expressed or to flourish, preferring to present a single, unified, utopian vision at all times. Tensions between the musical and the social run right through Estrada's evaluation—most of her interviewees described a striking dissonance between theory and practice, between social ideals and musical priorities—but El Sistema did not allow them to surface publicly and become a topic of debate, and it had the means to construct a powerful official narrative that painted the opposite picture. It is an institution with a strong party line. In contrast, the Red has allowed much more space for debates to play out. I appreciated the critical reflections of the general directors and the ambivalence and realism that many employees showed, publicly as well as privately. The Red presented a refreshingly honest, self-critical contrast to its progenitor.

One consequence of El Sistema's single-minded focus on orchestral training and performance and its relentless dissemination of its official narrative is that, particularly at the apex of its pyramid, it can appear highly efficient. The multiplicity of visions and voices in the Red, and the greater openness with which they are expressed, makes its problems more apparent, and more time is spent on discussion and trying out alternatives. Hence the Red can seem rather chaotic in comparison, but the idea that its problems are deeper or more numerous is an illusion. Indeed, the ways that problems are hidden, suppressed, and denied in El Sistema speak volumes. Behind its public image of continuity and constancy lie educational stagnation, organizational dysfunction, and an allergy to critical thinking. If there is more evidence of tensions in Medellín, it is because the program has attempted to document, analyze, and resolve them since 2005 and has had a social team dedicated to this process. The Red's struggles might be seen not so much as a sign of failure but rather as a consequence of greater honesty and social ambition. The atmosphere in the Red was more openly charged and conflictive than in El Sistema, yet it signalled that groupthink did not dominate, employees were willing to be critical and self-critical, and differences of opinion could be expressed publicly. Clearly the Red was not perfect, but, in its very fractiousness, it seemed a healthier environment than El Sistema.

In sum, now that we have seen the Red through the eyes of management, staff, and advanced students, SATM appears more like an educational puzzle than a magic bullet, one that raises many questions. What approach would allow musicians and social professionals to pursue musical excellence and social change at the same time and in harmony? Can and should a program move towards greater inclusivity and more targeted social action if many students and staff would prefer to focus on the music and keep it demanding and competitive? Can progressive change be achieved through a participatory, collaborative approach if key stakeholders are sceptical of such change? How well can teachers prepare children for the music and society of the future if their education was rooted in a nineteenth-century conservatoire model? Does diversifying SATM require diversifying its staff? If so, where could more appropriately trained teachers be found? SATM appears as a multi-faceted conundrum, which would explain why it generated so much debate in the Red.