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

Rethinking Social Action Through Music

Geoffrey Baker
3. The Red through a Social Lens

Teaching people that their love of Schubert makes them better people teaches them nothing more than self-regard, and inspires attitudes that are the very opposite of humane.

Richard Taruskin, “Is There a Baby in the Bathwater? (Part II)"

With the characteristic friendliness and generosity of the paisas, as the inhabitants of Antioquia and surrounding provinces are known, the Red opened its doors to me, and I got to know representatives of all of its constituencies. I followed the reform efforts of the management (described in Chapter 1), and I investigated how those efforts were received by directors, teachers, administrators, and students (Chapter 2). Yet it was in the social team that my research questions about citizenship and social development found their natural home. The social team was at the heart of the matters that most interested me: both the principal source of critical thinking about the Red and also a focal point of criticisms by the Red’s musical staff and students.

When I arrived in Medellín, I was met with two pleasant surprises. The first was that with the appointment of the new leadership at the start of the year, the Red’s social team had switched its focus to internal research. The second was that the four members of the social team shared many of my questions and concerns. This convergence of activities and perspectives served us all, if for different reasons. I hoped to develop a collaborative angle to my research, and an internal social team exploring similar questions offered the perfect opportunity. Furthermore, they did not know my publications on El Sistema, so their views on SATM served

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as a triangulation point on my own. It quickly became apparent that while we had independently studied different programs in different countries at different times prior to meeting in September 2017, we had come to similar conclusions. All four were Colombian and employees of the Red, so their subject positions were very different to mine, but there was no obvious distinction between local and foreign perspectives on SATM or internal and external critiques. I thus saw their work as cross-checking, illuminating, and reinforcing my earlier work on El Sistema, critical scholarship on SATM more broadly, and my new research on the Red.

The social team was also interested in collaboration and corroboration, but for different reasons. They saw me as a useful ally: firstly, because I was a senior foreign researcher; and secondly, because I was a musician with a masters in performance from a European conservatoire and a PhD in musicology. As they explained, the former (rightly or wrongly) provided me with extra kudos in Colombia, and the latter meant that I could talk to the Red’s musicians as an equal, which the social scientists felt they could not, and thus help with connecting social science concerns to the musical world.¹

Why did this matter to them? The social team occupied a peculiar position in the Red: at the heart of its mission and its discourse, and yet strangely marginalized in everyday practice, constantly trying to carve out spaces and justify their existence within a sceptical musical community that often saw them as a burden or an obstacle. The social team struggled to find a role for itself in a program that was supposedly social in orientation but in which few staff wanted more than psychological support for specific students with problems. The team’s experience was frequently one of frustration, its members worn down by battles to persuade staff to engage more fully with social questions. The social team thought that the Red and even the city government would be more likely to listen to them if I were on board. Indeed, as we will see below, the issue of artistic citizenship moved up the agenda as a result of our shared interest and collaboration.

¹ The social team documented this point, noting that my arrival “can strengthen the possibility of translating the social to the musical. [...] It is important that he be part of our research as a team member” (“Informe” 2017a, 64),
Like the social team, the questions addressed in this chapter are simultaneously fundamental and somewhat peripheral to the Red: they lie at the heart of what SATM does and claims to do, yet they were not day-to-day topics of discussion in the way that the issues in Chapters 1 and 2 were. The main organizing principle here is that of “second-order” debates. These were issues that reared their head on occasion but without ever being fully and publicly debated. When discussions did occur, they were generally limited—behind closed doors in a small meeting, in a private conversation, or in the pages of an internal report that few people read. While such debates were less urgent and thus had a lower profile than those in the previous chapter, they are just as important for a thorough understanding of SATM. They hovered in the background for the Red, but in the foreground for its social specialists. This chapter amplifies such issues and gives them the prominence that the social team and I believe they deserve.

Here, then, the emphasis shifts towards the voices of the Red’s social team, though not exclusively so. The involvement of social scientists (particularly psychologists and anthropologists) in key roles has been a significant and consistent feature of the Red since 2005. The social coordinators have been high-ranking and influential figures, working alongside the general directors. The first (Rocío Jiménez) lasted a decade, the second (Aníbal Parra) four years at the time of writing; other team members, too, spent years in the program. This long-term, full-time involvement contrasts with the more fleeting contact by most external evaluators of SATM programs, and it gave the social team a much more detailed and accurate picture of the central issues than appears in any published evaluation of SATM. They also took a more critical approach than most evaluators, since their role was to analyze and improve, not to justify funding; it was an inward-facing role more than an outward-facing one. As one member put it, the team’s job was to move the staff out of their comfort zone and stretch them in new directions. Although theirs was an internal perspective, they observed from a position of critical distance, without the rose-tinted glasses of classical music ideology. Placing enquiry at the heart of the program, the social team understood the importance of “going beyond an idealized view of the Red” (“Informe” 2017c, 27).
I worked with or interviewed over a dozen current or former members of the social team, and they all held positive views about arts education and the Red’s social objectives; however, most gave fairly short shrift to ideas that were prevalent among the musicians, such as music education as inherently socially beneficial. Most were concerned by some of the social dynamics that the Red generated and felt that musical training alone did not make a genuine and effective social program. Lacking musicians’ socialization into the norms of symphony orchestras or bands, and with training and experience directly related to the Red’s social objective, they felt the gaps between theory and practice more acutely than many of their musical colleagues.

The voices of the social team blend considerably with mine, since what began as an observer/observed relationship developed immediately into something much more collaborative. After a year of meetings, conversations, and reading internal documents, it was sometimes hard for me to know where one perspective ended and the other began. As far as possible, I will try to differentiate them, but a certain blending simply reflects one of the most salient conclusions from my fieldwork in Medellín: there was little that separated the social team’s internal critiques of the Red from my decade of research on SATM.

Citizenship

At the first meeting of the student representatives in 2019, described in Chapter 1, Giraldo asked what the fundamental purpose of the Red was. “To form good citizens,” came back the answer. He nodded approvingly. Indeed, citizenship discourse was regularly invoked in and around the program. The Red was supported by the Ministry of Civic Culture and stated that its pedagogy was based on “citizenly values.” In 2006, the program’s primary objective was stated as “education in civic and citizenly capacities” (Arango 2006, 5). Yet discussion of what a “good citizen” or “citizenly values” might actually be was rare during my fieldwork. This might have been due to a widespread assumption that everyone meant broadly the same thing when they invoked such terms, but in fact they did not. Citizenship is a notoriously complex and multifaceted concept, so it is perhaps unsurprising that beneath the linguistic surface lay conceptual disjunctures.
3. The Red through a Social Lens

A prominent citizenship campaign undertaken by the administration of Mayor Federico Gutiérrez (2016–19) was based on the slogan “Pórtate bien” [behave yourself]. It involved attempts “to eradicate the main forms of behaviour that upset civic coexistence, such as quarrels, loud music, and poor disposal of rubbish.” This campaign was viewed askance by some of the city’s more liberal inhabitants, including several of my interlocutors. In the cultural sphere, the touchstone text was the city’s Cultural Development Plan 2011–20, produced under the earlier administration of Alonso Salazar. Here one finds a very different vision of citizenship, emphasizing democracy, participation, inclusion, diversity, creativity, and critical reflection. Culture is portrayed as “rooted in political ethics” ("Plan" 2011, 31), and: “The citizenry should be understood as active, critical, and proactive in relation to the major problems that confront the city as a whole and as a protagonist in cultural policies; but this requires civic participation and public deliberation” (48).

This urban-level dichotomy—behaviourist versus political conceptions of citizenship—was replicated quite closely within the Red. Interviews with school directors pointed to understandings of citizenship formation in terms of the inculcation of values such as discipline, order, responsibility, punctuality, and respect, and behaviours such as asking permission, not interrupting, and saying hello, please, and thank you. In the Red’s official history, one director stated that the program taught students to be better citizens by instilling four values: discipline, respect, responsibility, and order (El libro 2015, 20). The centrality of such values has been in evidence since the first evaluation of the Red ("Medición" 2005), in which teachers highlighted discipline, work rhythm, organization of time, perseverance, and concentration as the main social impacts of the program. This was consistent with a pedagogy based on inculcating citizenly values, as declared in the program’s mission. If this conception of citizenship echoed what Bull (2019) calls classical music’s “ethic of correction,” there are also parallels with the city campaign of pórtate bien. Parra’s social team, however, held a vision of citizenship that was much closer to the Cultural Development Plan. This proximity was partly because of a shared intellectual grounding and partly because the

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social scientists explicitly rooted their analysis in the city’s official plan so that it might be perceived as having a solid foundation, rather than being a matter of intellectual caprice or personal preference. The social team upheld a political rather than behaviourist conception of citizenship: it was concerned with the “political subjectification of students via music”—or rather, its absence.

The cultural plan imagined artistic education as forming “active, critical, proactive citizens” (“Plan” 2011, 100). It spoke of “developing potentialities and capacities more than giving instruction or information to the citizens, and it is aimed at developing a civic consciousness capable of living freely and being autonomous, and thus it does not seek the standardization of behaviours; as a result, it privileges active and reflexive pedagogies over instructive and directive pedagogies” (95). The 2017 social team saw a clear gulf between this cultural policy and the everyday practices of SATM (which exemplified precisely what the plan rejected), and so it developed a critique of citizenship formation in the Red. Its report was blunt:

although the Red has citizenship formation as its mission, it does not fulfill this because it is not found in the curriculum and because the kind of training that it offers via the symphonic format—whose characteristics do not allow for reflection—does not foster critical subjects, as Martha Nussbaum puts it, nor people who construct collectively with others. The information collected to date speaks of values education and not citizenship education, which is more political. (“Informe” 2017a, 28, emphasis added)

Its diagnosis was that in focusing on technical and aesthetic matters and inculcating good behaviour, the program failed to develop the political subjectivity of students or their capacity to reflect critically on the world through music. The team doubted whether values education through music was sufficient “to educate citizens with the capacity to participate actively in the life of their community and the city” (187), and it therefore questioned whether the Red constituted citizenship education at all.

The social team’s critique revolved around the program’s focus on musical matters and its relative neglect of key constituent elements of citizenship such as reflection, voice, and agency: “[Belief in] the Red as salvation and social impact via concerts detracts from the (social) need to connect art with the fostering of subjects’ agency” (115). Both the social team and the management board more generally often
characterized Red events as students turning up, playing, maybe listening to some adults talking, and then leaving again. An earlier report insisted on the importance of including the voices of the students in decision-making, otherwise the program would lose legitimacy as an exercise in civic participation and students would stop believing in the possibility of dialogue and conflict resolution for social transformation (*Jornada* 2014). In other words, citizenship needed to be modelled and practised through real participation in taking decisions; just playing in an ensemble was not enough. But solutions were elusive. Three years later, another report noted: “Sometimes the students are treated like an object or an instrument; the only real interest would seem to be the music itself, rather than the musicians; the aim is for [the music] to sound. We don’t ask what the students want” (“Informe” 2017c, 72). In a large staff meeting around the same time, a manager asked: are the students *participants in* the Red or *instruments of* the Red?

For the social team, the main problem was the symphonic format. They simply could not find evidence of a connection between large ensemble training and the stimulation of critical thinking, creativity, dialogue, respect for diversity, capacity to read the city, civic participation or the formation of “autonomous and free citizens” (188). Rather, they connected this training to “the conservative character of the Red” (98). “What kind of citizen does the symphonic format produce?,“ asked the report. “What kind of citizen does the Red form?” (31). Its answer was: a subject who followed norms and did not question. The team argued that the Red’s values education might distance some young people from drugs and violence, but that it also pointed to “the formation of a ‘good citizen’ who is characterized by thinking that is conservative and uncritical with respect to their surroundings” (98). Their report suggested that the Red’s students “will probably be citizens who comply with the norms and regulations of authority, but they will struggle to question them when they disagree or their interests are affected” (195). “To what extent can a musician in a symphonic format become an agent of their own transformation?” (31), asked the team. Not a great extent, they concluded, since this format demanded obedience, following a script, and keeping quiet (as the conductor had the last word). A school director revealed the social values inherent in conventional orchestral culture: “I have always said that music is social by its very nature [...]. In
the orchestra they learn to be disciplined, responsible, to know that they have to obey the rules, to look after their instrument.” Where, then, would autonomous, critically reflective citizenship come from? How would a student learn to become “an agent of their own transformation”?3

However, such critiques were not unique to the social team and management; they were also expressed by some musical staff. One school director stated:

I think that I’ve done nothing as regards aspects like politics and citizen education, perhaps just be an example. [...] The very fact that in music the recognition goes to one person already closes off the possibility of equity and critical reflection. [...] The Red is lacking in the formation of political subjects, it’s something that has not been developed; what is taught is to be always a group, to move in the same direction; when have you seen a kid criticizing something?” (“Informe” 2017a, 71–72)

Another director mused: “I wish the Red taught us to be more critical [...] we’re like sheep, we just follow, we don’t teach the kids to have their own opinions.” A third director decided to focus on developing critical thinking after finding that “in a rehearsal, when faced with various questions, the students ‘go blank’ because they lack their own voice to express what they think about the place they occupy in the ensemble, the school, and their context; it is common to find that the students constantly want to be told what to do” (“Informe” 2017d, 47–48).

The social team acknowledged positive dynamics in the program, such as a closer connection and greater degree of human warmth between staff and students than is the norm in ordinary schooling. Some directors and teachers took on a kind of a parental role. The team recognized the usefulness of values such as discipline, commitment, and pursuing goals. The schools offered potential for positive socialization, then. But the social team believed that the Red needed to go further, rather than just reinforcing the same norms and values upheld by other societal institutions (such as school and family), and to educate “human beings with a civic consciousness” (186). They envisaged a more socially comprehensive education, in which students could take lessons from

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3 There are distinct parallels between the social team’s critique of the Red and Spruce’s (2017, 728) argument that “[c]onformity lies at the heart of Sistema discourses. [...] Conformity becomes a condition of participation where voices are heard only when they articulate accepted discourses.”
the music school and apply them to their community and the city at large. In this way, young musicians might

advance in their understanding of their role as citizens and not just as students who carry out duties to achieve goals. The question is how to create consciousness and stimulate the exercise of citizenship, the valuing of the public sector, and the sense of belonging to a city, along with an understanding of the role that they play, as musicians and artists, in the society of which they form part. (195)

There were close parallels here with my earlier work on El Sistema. Confronted with Abreu’s pithy statement that “when you educate musicians, you educate better citizens,” I had asked whether this was really the case. This question gave rise to a chapter in the volume Artistic Citizenship (Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016), in which I reflected on the lack of voice or political participation of El Sistema’s students (Baker 2016a). I compared the realities of playing in a conventional large ensemble with the characteristics of citizenship education, which the Ancient Greeks called paideia and had “the overall aim of developing the capacity of all its members to participate in its reflective and deliberative activities, in other words, to educate citizens as citizens” (Fotopoulos 2005). In citizenship education, emphasis is generally placed on modeling democracy, involving students in decision-making, and promoting critical and creative thinking. In comparison, El Sistema appeared to be designed to produce loyal subjects, trained to obey authority, rather than good citizens, educated to participate in democratic processes.

I drew on Roger Hart’s (1992) famous study of children’s participation. Hart argued that participation is the fundamental right of citizenship, but he was careful to break it down into eight categories, which he conceptualized as a ladder. It is only when we get toward the top of his ladder of participation, where we find child-initiated and shared decisions, that participation shifts away from tokenism towards citizenship. The bottom three steps on the ladder—manipulation, decoration, and tokenism—may resemble participation but, according to Hart, they are not the real thing, and so they do not foster citizenship. I argued that most of El Sistema’s activities fell within Hart’s category of tokenism, which describes “those instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity
to formulate their own opinions” (9). As the program became more overtly aligned with the Venezuelan government in the twenty-first century, it showed increasing signs of decoration and manipulation. Hart’s study provides good reasons to be sceptical of Abreu’s optimistic claim that playing in an orchestra necessarily constitutes an education in citizenship.

Citizenship is thus intimately connected to participation, and as Brough (2014, 50) explores, numerous scholars have nuanced the latter term, distinguishing between “functional” and “transformative” participation, “deep” and “narrow,” “nominal” and “transformative,” “pseudo” and “authentic,” and minimalist and maximalist “participatory intensities.” Many writers agree that participation often positions those who participate as beneficiaries rather than citizens. Brough states that “a participatory culture should be characterized as such based upon whether participants have meaningful influence over decisions that affect themselves, their communities of practice, and ultimately the culture itself” (202). She argues that expanding access to technologies and skills does not necessarily promote a more participatory public culture or bolster the power of citizen voices; such efforts must be linked to communicative practices and spaces characterized by horizontality, dialogue, openness, and autonomy. Brough uses these four categories to analyze the extent to which digital programs in Medellín promoted a participatory culture and thus youth citizenship, and a similar process could usefully be applied to SATM programs that aim to educate citizens, and indeed to the label “participatory music making.” Her argument that digital citizenship requires a lot more than simply giving people access to a computer and some Microsoft software and teaching them how to use it is equally relevant to music education.

We must therefore dig beneath citizenship discourse and observe closely the processes that lie beneath. “Discourses of participation can easily be appropriated to serve a variety of ideological (and economic) agendas while the corresponding practices of participation may, in fact, be minimal” (319–20). With its focus on putting students on display rather than entrusting them with taking decisions, orthodox SATM is a presentational rather than participatory culture (Turino 2008) and thus resembles Hart’s tokenism more than citizenship education.
Returning to the Red, a useful analytical perspective is provided by Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) article, “What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy,” which poses precisely the same question as the social team in its 2017 report. The authors identify three answers or categories in citizenship education in the US: the Personally Responsible Citizen, the Participatory Citizen, and the Justice Oriented Citizen. They argue that each vision has positive aspects but is also incomplete. Of particular relevance to SATM is the Personally Responsible Citizen—one who is respectful, obedient, attentive, hardworking, and well mannered. Westheimer and Kahne argue that these are important values, but they are not inherently about democracy. Indeed, government leaders in a totalitarian regime would be as delighted as leaders in a democracy if their young citizens learned the lessons put forward by many of the proponents of personally responsible citizenship: don’t do drugs; show up to school; show up to work; give blood; help others during a flood; recycle; pick up litter; clean up a park; treat old people with respect. These are desirable traits for people living in a community. But they are not about democratic citizenship. (5–6)

The authors suggest that democratic citizenship education must go beyond values education to encompass participation (in Hart’s and Brough’s senses) and social justice.

In Medellín, the vision of the musical staff aligned closely with the first category, while the social team’s perspective had much in common with the second and the third. There were clear parallels between the social team’s critique of the Red’s approach to citizenship and Westheimer and Kahne’s critique of the Personally Responsible Citizen. However, the social team’s conception of citizenship did not fit precisely with either the second or the third category. What became more marked in the Red in 2018 was a focus on territory and the relationship between citizenship and the city.

The Red was founded in a decade of extreme violence in Medellín, and its aim was to provide entornos protectores [safe spaces] for young people. The Red began as an attempt to contain the issue of violence by isolating young people from negative influences. One of its key slogans became “transforming lives.” Twenty years on, there was mounting concern at the management level that this approach was outdated;
the city continued to be a challenging place, but the levels of physical violence had declined substantially since the 1990s. The leaders now viewed the schools as somewhat divorced from the city and its cultural currents, and they questioned the extent to which the Red fostered reflection and action on issues outside its walls. The social team sought to broaden the conception of citizenship in the program from correcting individuals (transforming lives) to addressing issues facing urban society (transforming the city).

The team concluded its argument for a shift from values education to citizenship education:

- There is a consciousness and care in transmitting some values through musical practice. Despite this, it is necessary to generate strategies that allow the development of capacities like creative imagination, critical thinking, and active, deliberative participation by the students, not just in relation to the learning process, but also in relation to the role and contributions that they as musicians can make to the positive transformation of their immediate surroundings: the barrio, the community, and the city. (“Informe” 2017a, 202)

This vision is underpinned by the city’s cultural plan, which states: "The challenge for the educational system is to promote a citizenship education that acts on the city, which implies viewing the latter as an object of analysis and a source of learning” (“Plan” 2011, 96). In an article connecting Westheimer and Kahne’s work with arts education, Kuttner (2015) proposes that future research might seek to test and go beyond the former’s three categories and explore what other kinds of cultural citizenship arts education programs may be encouraging. What the social team (and the management and culture ministry more broadly) sought to form, I would argue, was something akin to a Locally-Oriented Citizen—a young person in dialogue with their neighborhood and committed to its transformation.

Our shared interest in the issue of citizenship led the social team and I to have regular discussions on this topic, and as a result the program incorporated artistic citizenship as a strategic priority in 2018. The Red also offered me a formal role as its consultant on artistic citizenship. Unfortunately, I was unable to take up the offer for contractual reasons, so the Red hired a local researcher. But before I left Medellín, I gave two presentations to the program and proposed a model for thinking
about this issue. I presented a vision of artistic citizenship based on the notion of the citizen as an individual who plays a role in the creation and changing of the social order, and artistic education as an important domain in which to develop the necessary capacities. I offered a very simple model, focusing on four notions: reflection, creation, participation, and action. Reflection and creation allow students to build agency and an autonomous voice, while participation (in Hart’s sense) and action encourage them to project that voice, dialogue with others, and put their music to work in their communities and city.

This proposal attempted to draw together relevant external research with the Red’s internal deliberations and priorities since 2017. On the one hand, I sought to translate (literally and figuratively) and condense ideas that were in circulation elsewhere so that they might be easily accessible to the Red. I drew on my earlier work and the sources already mentioned, but I also took considerable inspiration from Brad Barrett’s (2018) DMA thesis, which had built on the volume Artistic Citizenship (and my chapter within it) to construct a model for an El Sistema-inspired program at the Conservatory Lab Charter School in Boston. I was also influenced by the work of the Red’s sister program, the Network of Visual Arts, which had articulated a vision of citizenship that focused on transforming the social context (Organismo vivo 2016; La ciudad 2017), in contrast to the Red’s “transforming lives”; and by Hensbroek’s (2010) argument that cultural citizenship requires co-authorship (creative input) and not just visibility (performing someone else’s script). On the other hand, there was nothing in my proposal that had not already been discussed or tried out somewhere within the Red. One school director, for example, emphasized to students that they had a responsibility to society and should give something back to the community in return for the free education that they received; she took actions such as taking the school orchestra to play in an old people’s home. My aim was not novelty but rather to draw together promising threads from the Red with wider international currents, present key ideas in as simple and memorable a form as possible, and use my privileged position to help the social team give citizenship education more prominence within the program.

Like the social team, I founded this proposal on a critique of the equation of citizenship formation with inculcating good behaviour. The
work of scholars such as Michel Foucault (1991) and James C. Scott (2012) suggests that inculcating discipline may actually be antithetical to fostering citizenship. SATM programs generally strive to produce “good citizens,” but if they are to pursue social change, they need to ask: “does the role of educators imply an obligation to help students learn to be ‘bad citizens’—to make their own artistic political or social statements?” (Bradley 2018, 79). Vujanović (2016) argues for the social importance of “bad artistic citizens”—those who are critical and disobedient. For dominant groups, a good citizen is usually orderly and obedient, but from the perspective of social change, a good citizen might be the opposite (think, for example, of civil disobedience in pursuit of social justice).

In the realm of SATM, El Sistema seeks to forge “good” citizens (loyal, obedient), but some participants in recent years could also be seen as “bad” citizens (disengaged from democratic processes, propping up a dubious political regime). Gustavo Dudamel was criticized in Venezuela for avoiding discussion of politics and thereby failing to model a good citizen (see Baker 2016a). Who were the good citizens, the musicians who obediently performed as propaganda for Venezuela’s government or those who disobeyed and rose up against South Africa’s apartheid regime (Hess 2019)?

“[B]ecoming and being an artistic citizen does not come about automatically; artistry must be integrated with other forms of knowing and doing,” suggests Bowman (2016, 81). More specifically, “[s]tudents cannot and will not become fully engaged citizens unless they are prepared to penetrate, unmask, and transform their worlds positively. This is what full-blooded citizenship, and artistic citizenship, involves and demands,” argue Silverman and Elliott (2016, 100). Action is thus crucial to artistic citizenship, but it is a very different conception of action than in orthodox SATM. In the latter, music education and performance are considered to be social action. But as a Red school director admitted, “concerts are like band-aids because people go back home and find the same problems waiting for them” (“Informe” 2017a, 78). Artistic citizenship, however, implies engaging in some way with those problems waiting back at home and not just providing a space for avoiding them. It entails action in and on society, which springs from critical reflection and has ethical, political, and civic dimensions,
rather than disciplining oneself. Artistic citizenship entails putting the arts to work. As Bowman (2016, 65–66) writes, “the notion of artistic citizenship suggests a necessary relationship between artistry and civic responsibility. [...] Artistic citizens are (or at least aspire to be) socially engaged, socially aware, and socially responsible.” This was something the social team grasped fully. They quoted the city’s cultural plan: “citizenship should be understood as active, critical, and proactive with regard to the major problems that challenge society at large” (cited in “Informe” 2017a, 201).

In short, my proposal represented an effort to take seriously the issue of citizenship formation in the context of SATM programs, where citizenship discourse has been quite prominent but deeper reflection rather less so. It appeared from interviews that many Red staff and students had not thought much about this topic before; that in-depth, collective discussion had been somewhat absent outside of the management team; and that the program consequently lacked a clear, shared conception of citizenship education. My hope was to contribute to the social team’s efforts to stimulate further reflection and action around the goal of citizenship formation, and to distinguish this objective from other SATM aims such as social action or inclusion. Here, my intention is to highlight an important question for a field with aspirations to citizenship education: what kind of citizen?

Question Marks over Citizenship

Reflecting the complexity of this topic, a number of doubts began to exercise me after presenting on artistic citizenship to the Red. In a spirit of promoting self-critical reflection, I will outline three of them here.

The Ambiguity of Citizenship

The Red’s official objective, *convivencia* [coexistence], is the central term of *cultura ciudadana* [civic culture], a widely-used concept in Colombia that is associated with regulating citizenly behaviour and promoting positive social norms. The Red falls under the Sub-Ministry of Art and Culture, which forms part of the Ministry of Civic Culture. Institutionally, then, culture (narrowly defined, as in the arts) forms part
of a wider strategy focused on culture (broadly defined, as in norms and behaviours). In other words, for all that the values that the Red upholds may be positive ones for living in a community, as Westheimer and Kahne acknowledge, the confluence of culture and citizenship appears here as a form of government. The Red, with its historical emphasis on producing well-behaved, “responsible citizens” (Barnes and Prior 2009), looks like a conduit for a behaviourist or disciplinary conception of citizenship within a behaviourist urban ideology of civic culture. The program aims to produce subjects that accord with the dominant political ideology, and effects that are sought and claimed are ones that are politically sanctioned. Even the social team’s attempt to inject more politics into the program involved alignment with official policy, if a more progressive one (the Cultural Development Plan).

The Red exemplifies a governmentalization of culture that dates back to the nineteenth century. Culture was instrumentalized to serve as a tool of social control, aimed at changing the behaviour of the urban poor (Belfiore and Bennett 2008; Mantie 2018). This period saw a blossoming of claims that the arts promoted moral progress and public order and attempts to push the working classes towards “rational recreation” (the cultural pursuits of the middle and upper classes).

There are close links between the Red and Medellín’s “Metro Culture” program, which seeks to promote good behaviour on the city’s metro system. As Brand (2013, 10) writes: “‘Correct’ behaviour is permanently reinforced by the ‘Metro Culture’ programme […], with its messages concerning the ‘good citizen’ and the values, attitudes, and everyday habits which it expects of users. The Metro system offers classical music and book-lending facilities of local authors. The culture it promotes is bourgeois and traditional; a strategy of ‘social improvement.’”

Accordingly, there was some scepticism over citizenship discourse from less institutionalized branches of Medellín’s cultural scene. Acosta Valencia and Garcés Montoya (2013) note that youth collectives generally saw citizenship as a somewhat empty, official discourse of the
state and preferred to speak of empowerment. In a public debate on culture and citizenship, Lukas Perro from the audio-visual collective Pasolini characterized citizenship as a civilizing, disciplining, normative discourse directed from the centre to the periphery and underpinned by a will to control. He was more interested in disruptive voices from the margins.

It is worth comparing the Red, an official musical response to violence in Medellín, with local scenes such as hip-hop and punk, which have offered a more critical, resistant vision, not just of violence but also of the dominant order that contributes to its production. Wiles (2016, 27) evokes this kind of dichotomy when he asks: “What is the purpose of art—to bind people together into some kind of community, or to provide a radical dissenting voice that subverts an unthinking status quo?” So too does Vujanović (2016, 114–15): “One of the most powerful potentials of art […] is to produce an affective knowledge wherein the images and narratives of actual society can be discussed, distorted, perverted, and confronted by images of what the arts and society might be and could be.” Hence, “as a public activity, art is more ‘bad’ (rebellious, noisy, disturbing, thought provoking, on the edge of being punished) than ‘good’ (silent, obedient, keeping the public order).” Such perspectives question the use of the arts (and arts education) as a support act for dominant ideologies.

Citizenship is thus an ambiguous, contested term, and it is often employed by dominant groups to further their aims. As Levinson (2011, 281) notes, “elite-legitimating, authoritarian citizenship is alive and well.” This was clearly the case in El Sistema, which used the term liberally while systematically denying participants any political voice. But in a more subtle way in Medellín, citizenship was a discourse that tied together a disciplinary, corrective conception of music education with the priorities of city politicians and policy. Music education that is focused on values education appears as a vehicle for a top-down, official, behaviourist conception of citizenship: cultura ciudadana and pórtate bien. In return for free music education, the target population was expected to assume the subject position of self-disciplining citizens who behave in appropriate ways (Nuijten 2013). As such, music education conformed to the norm in citizenship education in Colombia: legitimating political
elites and the dominant social order, and eliding fundamental problems of inequity, injustice, and exclusion (Galeano and Zapata 2006).

However, the ambiguity of citizenship can also be exploited. As a hallowed official discourse, it can be used to smuggle in a more progressive or even radical agenda without scaring institutions and funders. For the Red’s social team, invoking citizenship was a way to open up space for thinking about forming young people as autonomous political subjects and not just obedient robots. In the visual arts program, citizenship was bound up with imagining youth as agents and creators of their own social reality. The latter program (discussed further below) serves as an example of using the officially sanctioned language of citizenship to push arts education in more innovative and progressive directions. Some conceptions of citizenship, such as “insurgent citizenship” (Holston 1999) or “subversive citizenship” (Barnes and Prior 2009), appear promising from the perspective of social change.

The discourse of citizenship thus has conservative and progressive valances, and it covers (or covers up) both social reproduction and social change. Dagnino (2007) writes of a “pervasive confluence,” since the language of citizenship and participation can hide very different political positions, ranging from radical democracy to neoliberalism. Even within Medellín’s city government and its policies, the word “citizenship” did not have consistent or stable connotations. In part, this was simply about changes of mayor and government every four years, but it also reflects citizenship as a contested and ambiguous field.

Consequently, citizenship is both a risk and an opportunity for SATM; it can support either stasis or change. It may act as a kind of Trojan horse. It can open up space for more progressive agendas; but it can also be used to smuggle conservative ideologies and practices into progressive spheres. There is nothing inherently progressive about citizenship discourse, so it needs to be scrutinized and handled with care. A risk is that artistic citizenship could be divorced from critical debates and employed as a new label for conventional practices. It is a notion that holds great potential, but the trajectory of terms like citizenship, participation, and creativity suggests the importance of guarding against neutralization or cooptation to other (including neoliberal) agendas.
I also had ideological doubts that made me question my own perspective on citizenship. I began to ask whether a normative approach, deeply rooted in European thought, was really justifiable in a Latin American context. Did it rest on or perpetuate a colonialist notion of Latin American peoples as deficient and in need of correction (Rosabal-Coto 2019)? Was my proposal not just as much a manifestation of coloniality as the El Sistema model that it critiqued and sought to supplant? Would a version more closely based on Colombian realities rather than European norms not be more appropriate (Galeano and Zapata 2006)? Why did I give such prominence to autonomy and critical reflection, which are much less salient in indigenous systems of knowledge? And yet, I had spent a year talking to the Red’s leadership and social scientists and reading their reports; my proposal chimed with their thinking and was well received by them. They had, after all, offered me a job as a consultant on artistic citizenship. Was I now being more papist than the pope?

I do not have easy answers to these critical questions. I continue to find considerable value in the notion of artistic citizenship, and I still believe that a program that embraced reflection, creation, participation, and action would be stronger than one that did not; however, the questions are also valid. I suspect strongly that this model requires further elaboration in a Latin American context (and I offer some pointers in Part II). It may simply be that this topic does not lend itself to conclusive solutions, and that, rather like SATM more broadly, honest investigation of citizenship education will be an unending search with more questions than answers. Perhaps we need to be skeptical of all models, including mine.

**Action or Activism?**

Growing out of the critique of a normative approach is a question mark over action—the last of the four words in my model. This choice of word itself reveals my doubt, because in *Artistic Citizenship* and other recent work on this topic (e.g. Hess 2019), the emphasis is on *activism*, with its more political connotation. While I support this approach in theory, I am also aware that activism implies something different in Colombia than in much of the global North. Activism is potentially dangerous in
Colombia—the regular murder of social activists is a national scandal—and so many shy away from it. Hence there are reasons to be cautious about framing artistic citizenship as *necessarily* centered on activism.

One might also question whether a constant pressure to engage in action or activism might be a burden and/or limitation on music education programs, whatever their context. Consequently, I prefer to think of action as a possible or desirable outcome, rather than a necessary one. It is also one that might take place beyond the music program (whether outside or later). By promoting reflection, creation, and participation, music education might give young people tools to engage in action or activism in other areas of their lives or when they are older, if they so choose. In a context like Colombia, this would mean SATM laying the groundwork and fostering activist capacities rather than putting students on the line. This view finds an echo in Hess’s vision of music education as “set[ting] the conditions for activism” (156) rather than guaranteeing action.

There are undoubtedly other critiques that could be made, and I hope that they will be. I do not believe that there is a blueprint for artistic citizenship within SATM. But I do believe that approaching citizenship as a question to grapple with and not just a publicity discourse would be a productive path for the field to follow.

“Music Education Is Political”

The issue of citizenship is closely tied to that of politics; indeed, it might be argued that politics is what differentiates citizenship education from social action. Mullin (2016) suggests that “deep” artistic citizenship is politically reflective and engaged, and, for the social team, citizenship education was inseparable from political subjectification. Politics was a “second-order debate” par excellence in the Red: it ran through much of what I observed yet was rarely a subject of direct discussion outside the social team. This is also the case in SATM more broadly, so it is well worth bringing this topic out into the open for further discussion. In the case of the Red, there was little open debate because politics is something of a dirty word for many people in Colombia. It is frequently associated with *politiquiería* [politicking, or the “dark arts”] and corruption. Some confuse being a political subject with politicking (“Informe” 2017a).
Within the context of arts education, politics can therefore be a sensitive issue. Nevertheless, the efforts of the new leadership from 2017 might be understood as profoundly political.

The social team tackled the issue of politics head on in urging the Red to focus more on “the political subjectification of students via music.” In a presentation to all the directors in 2018, Parra included a slide entitled: “Music education is political.” In fact, constituting and empowering students and their families as political subjects had been a concern for leaders since the time of Arango, and it had been the principal goal of Jiménez, Parra’s predecessor as head of the social team, who had regarded the value of SATM as lying primarily in the socio-political processes that it could catalyze. Such views were underpinned by the city’s cultural plan, which portrayed culture as “rooted in political ethics” (“Plan” 2011, 31). For successive leaders and social teams, then, the Red was at heart a political project, and its success or failure ought to be evaluated in terms of political notions such as agency and voice.

Giraldo, too, engaged with politics in an explicit way, for example during his opening words to the new student representatives in 2019. But his and Franco’s re-envisioning of the Red through lenses of diversity and identity also constituted a form of cultural politics. Their frequent evocation of terms such as horizontality, agency, and diálogo de saberes [exchange of knowledge] underlined that their new initiatives were driven by political and not simply aesthetic considerations. Their promotion of creation in addition to performance was about representation as well as innovation. The adoption of PBL was explained as a route away from autocratic dynamics towards participatory construction, illustrating a concern with the Red as an embodiment of a political ideal. But Giraldo also invoked art as counterculture and a tool for questioning society. These musicians pursued somewhat different routes to the social scientists and used different language, but their diagnoses and their political goals were quite similar. In their own way, they were equally concerned with constituting students as political subjects.

An important strand of their cultural politics was their embrace of interculturality and their critical response to colonialist dynamics in Colombian music education. The Red is not an academic space, so words like “colonial” and “decolonial” were not a regular part of
everyday discourse, but these terms came up frequently enough in smaller meetings and private conversations that it became clear that they informed the leaders’ thinking. The leadership did not dismiss classical music or suggest that it should not form part of the Red, but rather they criticized the colonized mindset that foreign is better than local and focused their efforts on bolstering the (historically weaker) popular and traditional side of the program. From 2018, they increasingly used the traditional music school, Pedregal, to showcase the program at external events. By championing Colombian music and embracing terms like interculturality and horizontality, they made it clear that they intended to move the Red away from a colonialist hierarchization of culture that placed European classical music on a pedestal. Giraldo stated explicitly that the new emphasis on diversity, identity, and horizontality had a “powerful political backdrop.” Mignolo and Walsh (2018, 57) provide more detail on that backdrop, describing interculturality as “both a complimentary political, epistemic, and existence-based project and an instrument and tool of decoloniality’s praxis,” which they distinguish from “a politics of inclusion that, more often than not, is tied to the interests of the dominant order.”

In contrast, El Sistema—which has operated under the banner of inclusion since the early 2000s—has always disavowed politics and presented itself as apolitical. Following the lead of his mentor Abreu, Dudamel steadfastly refused to discuss politics for his first decade in the global limelight; his public relations handlers made it clear to journalists that he did not wish to talk about this topic, and when pressed, he responded: “El Sistema is far too important to subject to everyday political discourse and battles. It must remain above the fray” (cited in Baker 2016a). Politics is another area in which the Red broke away from El Sistema in 2005, to the point of offering a profoundly distinct vision of SATM.

In reality, all music education is political, as Parra’s slide declared; what vary are the kinds of politics and the degree of openness. Both El Sistema and the Red are state-funded and directly overseen by politicians. El Sistema operates out of the Office of the President and has leading politicians on its board of directors. The Red’s director answers directly to the Minister of Civic Culture. Their imbrication with formal politics has been a source of their success but also of criticism, whether
from inside or outside the organization, since their position has made them subject to political dictates.

El Sistema’s claims to be apolitical are simply a strategic discourse. Abreu was a politician before he created the program, he became a government minister while directing El Sistema, and he was widely known as a master of politiquería. The program has always worked closely with Venezuela’s governments, and this relationship became even closer under Presidents Chávez and Maduro. In recent years, El Sistema has openly danced to the government’s tune, clearly contradicting its continued claims of political neutrality. This overt political alignment has made the program an object of increasingly strident criticism from Venezuelans in recent years (e.g. Esté 2018; Kozak Rovero 2018), though the apolitical fiction still has a considerable hold over the public imagination in the global North.

In the case of the Red, the criticism has been more internal and more muted, and has come particularly from the first generation. Some musical staff saw a long process of formal politicization of the Red, starting with the shift from a private company (Amadeus) to the city government, and accentuated with the mayor’s appointment of the general directors from Zuluaga onwards. Zuluaga and her successors were tasked with aligning the Red more closely with the priorities of the culture ministry and the city administration. These changes were viewed askance by some staff, who remembered a “golden age” when the Red was more independent and who resented the idea of being at the whim of politicians.

Both programs are also political at a more micro level. As Ansdell et al. (2020, 138) note about CM, “the intimate and personal work of musicking with people in a variety of ways and settings is also necessarily micro-political.” El Sistema’s strict limitation of the agency of students, to the point of even telling them whom to vote for in elections, and its openly autocratic approach, built around discipline and male figures of authority, are just as political as the Red’s concern with empowerment and political subjectification. A denial of politics and ideology is often

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5 A 2015 Venezuelan newspaper report alleged that music school directors were ordered by top figures in El Sistema to take their employees to vote for the government in the national elections (“Denuncian hostigamiento” 2015). Luigi
a sign of an implicit conservative agenda, and this is the case with El Sistema, as numerous scholars have attested.6

While the Red’s progressive politics contrasted with El Sistema’s conservatism, in practice the distinction between the two programs was somewhat less clear. The fact that the social team was still struggling with the same issues a decade after its creation was indicative: the Red evolved as a satellite of El Sistema, and it did not change overnight with the arrival of new management. Parra’s overriding concern in 2017 with the political subjectification of students reveals the extent to which Jiménez’s earlier intentions, dating back a decade, had been frustrated or subsequently reversed. Hence the Red’s more political approach, focused on empowerment and voice, might best be understood as a management vision, one that was constantly curbed to a greater or lesser degree by the deep-rooted philosophy of discipline and correction that ran through the heart of the program (and indeed of classical music education more broadly). The Red thus appears in reality as a space where different approaches to SATM coexisted in tension, rather than a pure example of a different model of SATM. Nevertheless, however partial the advances in practice, the leadership’s critiques of Eurocentric, colonialist ideology and their embrace of goals such as horizontality and interculturality began to destabilize some of SATM’s more conservative political foundations.

Holding up El Sistema and the Red together allows us to question the dominant notion that SATM is or ought to be independent from politics, and to understand how a more openly political approach is tied to a more progressive agenda and is therefore more promising if social change is the goal. El Sistema’s “apolitical” SATM, beneath the rhetorical carapace, is more focused on strengthening existing values than generating new ones, as will be discussed in the next chapter. El Sistema is something of an outlier among socially oriented music programs in its negation of politics; in fields such as CM or social justice in music education, individuals are commonly driven by political beliefs and organizations

6 See the special issue of Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education 15:1 (2016). One of the many paradoxes of El Sistema is its top-level and discursive alignment with the socialist government and its perpetuation of Abreu’s conservative leanings further down the organization and in its actual workings.
frequently frame their activity in political terms. Politics are also more prominent in some other parts of the Latin American SATM field.\(^7\)

It is also interesting to compare the Red to SATM programs in the global North. Of course, there is considerable variation across the latter. Nevertheless, the “power of music” ideology is widespread in advocacy and public discourse there, whereas it was entirely absent among the Red’s management during my fieldwork. I never heard the leadership explain music’s impact in terms of cognitive or psychological effects, or IQ or test scores. Instead, they were interested in encouraging young people to find a voice, to connect to their cultural heritage, and to act on issues in their barrios. For Parra, music’s value was as a means for students to reflect on and express who they were and what they experienced. Social change would emerge from cultural creation and political participation, not invisible changes in students’ heads. There was no talk of miracles or salvation; benefits were seen as depending on the program’s pedagogical and political stance and the ways that it did or did not allow students to develop as social and political subjects.

These kinds of issues are sidelined not just by the dominant model of El Sistema but also by the evaluative culture prevalent in the global North. The Red was funded by the city government as a program for peaceful coexistence. In this sense, its overarching objective was both political and virtually unmeasurable, and indeed, one of the few challenges that the program did not face was an obligation to prove its value via regular impact assessments. It might seem that a lack of evaluation would be a recipe for poor quality, but another perspective is that it allowed the program’s management to focus on the issues that really mattered to them rather than those that could be measured by others. In the case of the Red, this meant that the cultural and political aspects of SATM moved to the centre of the debate, and measurable indicators such as cognitive effects and academic achievement were relegated to the margins.

In this vein, I was struck by how indifferent Giraldo’s team seemed to studies that did not address cultural or political questions. They showed little interest in quantitative or psychological evaluations, but not for the

\(^7\) For example, politics were central to the presentations and debates at a one-day conference on youth orchestras in Latin America that I co-organized with Ana Lucía Frega in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in November 2018.
reasons sometimes found elsewhere (an unshakeable belief in the value of the program). On the contrary, they clearly believed that a SATM program that failed to foster a musical and political voice in students was deficient, and no amount of studies on other topics was going to change this assessment.

In sum, politics is a topic to be embraced if we are to understand SATM more deeply, yet it has often been avoided, even in much research. If we start from Parra’s idea that “music education is political,” and assume there is no such thing as apolitical music education, we are more likely to understand the macro- and micro-political forces that structure programs and run through them. Every program is enmeshed to some degree in national, regional, or local politics, and aligning seamlessly with dominant individuals and ideologies is not the same as neutrality. Every program embodies a form of cultural politics through its choice of curriculum and pedagogy, and such politics is no less real for being implicit. Every program is involved to some degree in constituting political subjects; the question is, what kind of subject?

The Bubble

One director described his school as a kind of oasis: a place where everyone left their troubles at the door and breathed a different atmosphere. Nora, a member of the social team, had a different take. She viewed the program as creating a separation between the school and the barrio, and constructing dichotomies of “good kids” versus “bad kids,” culto versus inculto: those who are educated and cultured versus those who are not. She characterized the attitude of some Red students to their peers as “you, so simpleminded, just listening to reggaetón and me, so sophisticated, listening to Beethoven.” This was not the fault of the students or teachers, she said, but rather inherent in the Red. She argued that such binaries could have been productive if they had been taken as topics for discussion; instead, they just generated prejudice. “This is the most dangerous dynamic that the Red produces—because it shouldn’t be about pointing a finger at some people and putting others on a pedestal.” She saw this as the opposite of what the program should really be doing, which was promoting empathy and acting for the benefit of others. Rather than tarring youths caught up in the urban
conflict as “bad kids,” rather than fostering a binary of “I’m a musician and you’re a criminal,” the Red should be trying to humanize others and understand them.

Nora went on: “what we’re doing, or what is generated here, is that those kids don’t have a critical vision of those realities and those barrios but rather simply want to distance themselves.” If I’m a music student within a violent context, she said, but I stay in my music bubble, I’m not doing anything to improve that context; I’m not doing anything to transform the reality of other people who live alongside me. She described the dynamic as *huir pero no devolver*: to escape but not give anything back. Students treated the music school as a refuge, but a counter-movement or return to the community had been much more partial. “So at the end of the day, the impact that the Red has is limited to the music school and doesn’t go beyond it.” Her conclusion? “If we’re creating that bubble, we should burst that bubble.”

Nora’s explanation was particularly detailed, but the underlying view was not unique to her. Parra alluded regularly to the Red’s historical imaginary of good kids and bad kids, those who were saved and those who were left behind. The social team’s 2017 report critiques the construction of a self-enclosed world:

> Another aspect found in interviews and the collection of information in the field (school visits and meetings) is the limited attention of the communities to the program’s performances, in other words, how little impact there is for people who are not connected to the Red; and the resistance of teachers and directors to open up to other possibilities that would broaden the perspective of the work and allow students to explore other spaces. (“Informe” 2017a, 99)

It continued that the pedagogical model and performance focus limited students’ comprehension of the social realities of other young people in the city. In a meeting with directors, Parra pointed to the contradiction between the Red’s supposed employment of critical pedagogy, according to official documents, and what he described as “a total negation” of the question of violence in many schools. He asked: is the Red forming political subjects or people who take refuge in music and isolate themselves from society?

Lucía, one of Nora’s predecessors, stated that the “bubble issue” had been a major topic of discussion during her time. She described
the Red as an “elite” program that took children out of their everyday surroundings, gave them new knowledge, and opened their eyes to other realities; but it also opened up gaps between them and their contexts, their families, and their communities. This meant a constant risk of tension or conflict with their everyday lives, one that the Red had never really dealt with. Echoing Nora, she claimed that the students became distanced from reality and no longer lived fully in their territories. They “levitate” as they walk through the barrio, she said (an image that evokes the opposite of “down to earth”); they believe they are on a higher plane than their peers.

María, one of Nora’s colleagues, criticized the Red’s original intensity (long hours, seven days a week) for disrupting students’ relationships and activities with their families and friends. She also looked askance at the widespread discourse of the Red as a family: no, she said, it’s not a family, it’s a public program and it shouldn’t supplant the family. Most of the participants already have a family and should spend some time at home.

Evidence of such visions dated back more than a decade. The first social team report noted that among student motivations for joining the Red was “to be different from others (better)” (“Informe” 2008, 5), and that “the students in the schools feel proud and different, even within the context of the barrio itself” (23). The 2005 evaluation was clearer still:

the beneficiaries have a sense of belonging to the group of musicians, which they see as something positive, attractive, but which makes them different. Different because they have a talent that they should put at the service of others, because they are more sensitive to the world and to those around them, because they learn tolerance and recognition, and because they are an example to the rest of the children of their age or family. (“Medición” 2005, 13)

It also notes: “the teachers try to foster a lot of confidence so that [students] can assume the role of being different” (4). The repetition of the word “different” is striking. Furthermore, under the category of social inclusion, the report highlights the affection of the participants for each other, with whom they spend much of their time.

What emerges from these reports and testimonies is a clear sense of the Red as cultivating bonds among an in-group (music students)
and distinction or separation from an out-group (other peers). There are parallels with studies of SATM programs in other countries. Wald (2009; 2011; 2017) found that young SATM musicians in Buenos Aires had a strong “us versus them” worldview—a clear sense of difference and distance from their non-musical peers, whom they regarded as problematic and less worthy. She argues that the programs were not so much transforming the most vulnerable youths as providing an outlet for young people from popular neighbourhoods whose families were economically stable, already shared the middle-class value system of SATM, and were committed to their children’s participation. Hence the programs exacerbated the imagined distance between the two groups. In their study of Portugal’s Orquestra Geração, Teixeira Lopes et al. (2017, 207) note that “this strong environment of unity also ends up having a negative side given that sometimes the orchestra functions somewhat like a little world isolated from everything else, ‘a very closed sphere.’”

Sarrouy (2018) paints a detailed portrait of a group of mothers who spend every afternoon waiting for their children outside a Venezuelan El Sistema school. He notes a contrast between children inside the school, who are smartly dressed, and those outside in the streets of the barrio, shoeless and dirty. He asks the mothers about this. They reply that those outside come from families who show less concern for their children. One says: “they are above all single mothers who suffer from alcoholism and gambling; they prefer to spend the afternoons watching soap operas and they’re not concerned about their children, who spend their days in the street and become delinquents” (50). In this account, El Sistema appears not as a program of social inclusion aimed at the most excluded but rather as a motor of social separation, drawing a line between children from more and less supportive families.

Boundary drawing is a major theme of Bull’s (2019) study of youth classical music in the UK. Its appearance in SATM programs in South America thus seems not coincidental but rather a consequence of the shared building-block of classical music education. Bull opens her book with a self-critical account of her own experience as a young classical

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8 Teixeira Lopes and Mota’s (2017) recommendation that the program adopt a territorial approach, moving beyond students and their families to engage with local groups, associations, institutions, and movements, has many resonances with the Red’s policy in 2018.
musician, which has unmistakable echoes of the social team reports on
the Red: she describes “a sense of being somehow apart from the rest of
the world—everyday concerns didn’t touch my fellow musicians and I
because we were doing something much more important than everyone
else” (xi). Together with her argument that being a classical musician
was a powerful social identity for the young people in her study, this
brings us to a little-understood point about SATM: the characteristic
dynamic of the collective in SATM is not the much-touted teamwork—of
which the conductor-led orchestra is in fact a strikingly poor example
(see Baker 2014)—but rather tribalism.

In its first phase, the Red had a motto, *Siempre juntos* [always
together], and a hymn of the same name. The sense of in-group
bonding is obvious in the words themselves and was underlined by the
fact that members of the first generation still used this motto twenty
years later. Some employees echoed Bull’s characterization of young
classical musicians as “being somehow apart from the rest of the
world,” describing Red students as “going along with their heads in the
clouds” because they played classical instruments, or as disconnected
from other youth cultures. Coexistence, the central objective of the Red,
was generally imagined as among music students, rather than between
music students and the rest of society. Such tribalism is particularly
marked in El Sistema. In its publicity discourse, the notion of “one
big family” is constantly reinforced, but the other side of this coin is a
striking insularity and exclusivity. Mora-Brito (2011, 60) describes “a
closed and inhospitable system for outsiders,” while an experienced
orchestral administrator quipped: “it’s one big family... like the Sicilian
mafia” (see Baker 2014, 223).

Developing friendship, bonding, and belonging among likeminded
people is a recognized characteristic of music education and it may
be seen as a positive process (Hallam 2010). Shieh (2016) notes some
positive aspects of El Sistema’s “bubble” philosophy, though he also
raises numerous critical questions. Collective activities potentially offer
considerable benefits to societies fragmented by neoliberalism, political
polarization, and new technologies. One Red director stated: “The kind
of friendship that is generated in music schools is not the same as in
[ordinary] schools.” He argued that students became more like siblings
or soul mates, as they were there out of choice and shared interest rather than obligation.

But what has emerged from analyses of the Red and other programs is the other side of the coin: in-group bonding at the cost of solidarity or empathy with others, and thus the construction and maintenance of social divisions. As Bowman (2009b, 122) writes: “The other sides of music’s inspiring capacity to forge unity amidst diversity are its erasure of at least certain dimensions of individual difference and its creation and reinforcement of boundaries that separate and distinguish insiders from outsiders.” Similarly, Daykin et al. (2020), in their study of the role of social capital in participatory arts for wellbeing, argue: “The data suggest some negative aspects of social capital. For example, bonding can create in-group identities and, by definition, can reinforce exclusion of out-groups.” SATM appears to fortify rather than contest an evolutionary dynamic of in-group solidarity and out-group hostility, raising doubts about its contribution to peaceful coexistence and social harmony. Moreover, the discourse of “one big family” has served to normalize and cover up troubling dynamics in music education institutions, including sexual abuse, in the UK (Newey 2020) as well as Venezuela (Baker 2014).

Central to El Sistema’s philosophy is the notion of the symphony orchestra as a training ground for life. Yet a conventional orchestra is a bounded unit that fosters insularity and limits exchange with wider society in various ways (such as entry requirements and the design and use of space). In an educational context, it trains students to bond with those who have similar skills and interests and separates them from others. In the case of orthodox SATM, with its intensive time commitment, students often describe the curtailment of their wider social connections as their life revolves increasingly around the music school and other music students. A miniature world that limits inhabitants’ dealings with strangers with different tastes and ideas is hardly “a model for an ideal global society,” as Dudamel claims (Lee 2012).

One kind of tribalism, then, is SATM versus the rest. Nora’s pithy summary—“you, so simpleminded, just listening to reggaetón and me, so sophisticated, listening to Beethoven”—indicates how this tribalism is mediated by musical genre as well as activity. While SATM may be analyzed positively as participants’ acquisition of cultural capital, Daykin
et al. (2020) note: “Cultural capital is sometimes observed to reinforce hierarchies through aesthetic judgements and distinctions based on taste, repertoire, creative skills, accomplishments and experiences.” Wald (2017, 72) makes a similar point with particular reference to SATM: “The aesthetic experience of classical music contributes to constructing the identity of the collective, that ‘us,’ the different ones.” The dismissive attitude of SATM musicians towards reggaetón is something that I too have observed repeatedly. Reggaetón is a style of popular music that is very widely consumed across Latin America, and while it has cross-class appeal, it is particularly associated with the popular classes. It is distinctly ironic that programs that are supposedly focused on social harmony and aimed at popular barrios in fact breed disdain for the music most widely consumed there. SATM programs could approach the issue differently: for example, challenging students who complained about the genre’s musical and lyrical impoverishment to write a good reggaetón song; or teaching them about all the popular musical genres going back to the sixteenth century that have been initially despised by social elites and have then gone on to become hallowed national symbols in Latin America (like tango, samba, and rumba) or staples of classical music (like the chaconne and the sarabande). Instead, SATM often fosters a division between supposedly high-minded classical musicians and low-minded reggaetón fans.

Cheng (2019, 59–60) writes: “What’s actually in short supply—what lies at the root of so much injury and injustice—is people’s limited capacity or willingness to understand, tolerate, and dignify the different things that other people find beautiful. Think of all the strife that erupts when society’s inhabitants fail to empathize or put up with one another’s tastes and interests.” Should programs that claim to focus on inclusion or peaceful coexistence through music not aspire to build bridges between consumers of different genres rather than using music to divide them?

Another kind of tribalism is a feature of the orchestral world, found most obviously in the attribution of distinct characteristics to string, woodwind, and brass players, or the jibes at the viola section. Its presence in the Red can be seen in the internal reports discussed in Chapter 1, with their references such as “a lot of rivalry and jealousy between the woodwind/brass and strings and between instruments,” and “real or imaginary hierarchies that may be at work and being reproduced in the
ensembles, generating discontent, discrimination, and exclusion.” One of the viola teachers reacted angrily after a colleague made a viola joke in a staff training activity that I attended. We’re supposed to be trying to move away from the dynamic of the symphony orchestra here, she snapped; we’re supposed to be equal. I have to put up with viola jokes all the time in orchestras; I shouldn’t have to put up with them here. This brief incident illustrated how the tribalism of orchestral music infiltrated even a supposedly social program, and how its jibes and stereotypes can foster separation and tension rather than the official goal of coexistence. The evidence from the Red raises questions about the suitability of a musical collective traditionally marked by internal and external divides, hierarchies, and competition as a model of and motor for social harmony.

I understood the Red’s new territorial approach in 2018 as, in part, an attempt to counteract the construction of social dichotomies and distinctions, which contradicted the program’s central objective of promoting peaceful coexistence. In the 1990s, the music schools were founded as refuges from the city’s problems and as bastions of musical difference. However, the 2005 evaluation of the Red revealed that 88.2% of students surveyed felt safe in the barrio where they lived. In other words, within a few years the idea of the music school as a refuge from violence had become of lesser relevance to the vast majority of students, yet it continued to define the Red. Twelve years later, the social team noted that “the Red is often seen as a refuge that protects students or keeps them away from coming into contact with or thinking about the problems that affect the community or immediate surroundings of the school” (“Informe” 2017a, 199). One team member held up an example: the narrative in one school is that there is a drugs dispensary nearby but the students walk past it without even looking because they are “good kids.” There is a clear dichotomy in the school’s imaginary: good kids in here, bad society out there. What had been lacking in the history of the Red, she said, were strategies to bridge the two. The notion of safe spaces was fundamental to the Red’s thinking. As such, it had separation, both social and cultural, in its genes.

Over time, the Red began to ask how its students might act as agents of positive change in the city and not just within the music schools. From 2017, the new vision was for the program to open its eyes, ears, and doors; “to get to know the territories and communities, and devise strategies
so that the students dialogue much more with their surroundings, in pursuit of a social transformation that impacts at the level of the city and nation” ("Informe" 2017a, 106). Connection and exchange, rather than escape, were now the order of the day.

This entailed a different vision of SATM, not one based on a narrative of individual salvation but rather asking, what is the responsibility of music students towards the rest of society? Parra criticized an imaginary of the Red as a group of escapees from the problems of the barrio. What was it doing for those who remained, he asked? Here we find a political conception of SATM allied to a spatial one: a concern with “those out there” as well as “us in here,” with wider social relations as well as individual transformation and in-group bonding, with the community at large and not just students and their families.

In one management meeting, there was a discussion about how the Red might contribute to constructing the social fabric, rather than simply going out to perform concerts. How might the music schools serve to foster the community and solidarity that were lacking in the neoliberal city? The program began to ask: if the spaces around the school are dangerous, what could the school do to make them safer? If they are ugly, how could the school make them more beautiful? The social team’s cartography exercises were a concrete example of this shift away from conceiving of the wider social context as a problem to be avoided and towards recognizing, engaging with, and even repairing the outside world. Laverde, the director of San Javier school, spoke often of the importance of breaking down the idea of the Red as an exclusive island for a privileged few and reconnecting it to the barrio; the school’s project was dedicated to this end. Its improvisajes were imagined as a form of territorial healing.

Such a conception of SATM treats young people less as potential delinquents to be rescued and transformed by the power of music, and more as political subjects in formation and prospective agents of social change. Rejecting older ideas about distancing and “saving” children from their social realities, it places more emphasis on their capacity and responsibility for acting on the city’s problems. It recognizes that music students are often in a position to serve others who are more disadvantaged or isolated. The social team conceived of music as a tool for naming and working on social realities, not avoiding them, urging
the program to go beyond constructing safe spaces from violence to fostering critical reflection on violence “and in this way transform society through the formation of reflective subjects with their own judgment” (“Informe” 2017a, 116). It asked how safe spaces might be created not just within music schools but also across the barrio. The team highlighted Nussbaum’s contention that citizenship education entails fostering the capacity to think about the common good and not just a local group (198).

The dominant conception of orthodox SATM has been that students receiving music education equates to social action. There is a vague notion that values spread outwards from the children to their families and wider society—though there is little explanation or evidence of this process, and Sarrouy’s (2018) data suggests the opposite (see Chapter 4). What is largely lacking from this osmotic model is the idea that social action entails students giving—in other words, a conception of social action built on service to others. “Social impact” was normally shorthand for benefits for students. Now the Red was paying more attention to the potential benefits for wider society, not just for the 5000 participants in the program but also for the city’s three million inhabitants.

Hess (2019) explores music’s potential in this regard. She elaborates a “pedagogy of community,” which emphasizes connection on three levels:

First, youth engage with each other in the local classroom community, fostering a mutually-supportive environment in which they learn to value their own contributions and those of other community members. Second, youth connect music to its sociopolitical and sociohistorical context in a way that allows them to understand their own lives and the lives of Others in a wider matrix of social relations. Finally, youth encounter unfamiliar Others through examining different musical traditions that provide a window into both the local community and the wider global community. (152)

Hess thus expands the one-dimensional bubble philosophy of orthodox SATM into a three-dimensional model that looks outwards as well as inwards, across time and space as well as at those present in the here and now. As Sachs Olsen (2019) argues, the challenge for socially engaged art is not to promote solidarity between likeminded people but rather between groups that are quite different. Similarly, Silverman
and Elliott’s (2018) vision of artistic citizenship is concerned with many “others” and not just participants and their immediate circle:

an ‘ethic of care’ should not be limited to one-on-one pairings, small groups, or local circumstances alone. Part of moving beyond ‘the self,’ beyond the one-to-one relationship that is common with local community music programmes, is a purposeful ‘seeking out’ of much larger community needs. Therefore, what is ‘good-for’ multiple ‘others’? What does it take to understand and serve the larger needs of those we don’t necessarily engage with on a local or daily basis? Part of the answer rests in the nature of self-other responsibility that is, or should be, at the heart of artistic citizenship. (369)

The fourth element of the model of artistic citizenship presented above—action—attempts to capture this alternative approach to SATM: treating students as agents of social action, as citizens and not just beneficiaries. In the context of a social program, music should be considered as political and ethical action and an exercise in civic responsibility (Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016), which implies an outward movement towards society, rather than an inward one towards disciplining a few young people. Artistic citizenship revolves around putting music to work for the betterment of others; it entails an ethic of care directed towards society and not only the individual. This model rejects the deficit thinking that lies at the heart of El Sistema, articulated in its official mission as “rescuing children and young people from an empty, disorientated, and deviant youth,” and the pathologizing of individuals that takes place when large ensemble music education is imagined as correction or cure (Mantie 2012). Spruce (2017, 725) summarizes the deficit model in music education: “Young people are characterised here in terms of [...] what they do not have—rather than in terms of what they might bring to the sites of music education as sentient musical beings often embodying rich musical and cultural heritages.” Artistic citizenship follows the latter route; its focus is not on what young people lack but rather what they could contribute to culture and society. In Mantie’s terms, it “lean[s] more in the direction of education as ethical enterprise rather than training based on presumed lack and necessary acquiescence” (120).

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Eun Lee, clarinettist and founder of the activist orchestra The Dream Unfinished, uses the analogy of a car to represent different levels of musical engagement with social justice (Robin 2020). Level 1 is the hood ornament: superficial, focused mainly on stances and displays. Level 2 is the engine: everything is in place, it is all set up properly, but the car is still parked. Level 3 is when the car actually moves. In the case of The Dream Unfinished, their 2020 theme was civic engagement and voting rights. Level 3 meant, for example, performing concerts in communities that historically had low voter turnout and having voter registration available: “So that it’s not just a concert about something, but you can actually do the something at the concert.” The Dream Unfinished offers a suggestive example for SATM: treating music education as opening up opportunities for social action rather than as a form of social action in its own right.

In regarding young people less as a problem to be solved than as a potential solution, the Red also moved away from the deficit ideology of Medellín in the late twentieth century and towards contemporary progressive thinking about youth, culture, and politics. In Medellín in the 1980s and 1990s, youth were widely perceived as either dangerous or vulnerable, and therefore to be contained or protected. The Red was formed under the dual influence of this ideology and El Sistema, hence its practice of shutting young people away for long hours playing music and its discourse of “a child who takes up an instrument will not take up a weapon.” But in the early 2000s, youth increasingly became political protagonists in the city, assuming positions of responsibility (for example, within the city government). By 2007, there were nearly 300 youth groups in Medellín, many of which had a cultural or artistic focus (Brough 2014).

There was a shift towards perceiving youth as political agents and resourceful producers of culture. This shift is amply documented in a recent volume in which researchers of youth in Medellín roundly rejected a deficit model in favour of positive youth development. Its title speaks volumes—“Young people: a vital flame” (Jóvenes 2015). Yet the Red lagged behind, despite efforts at management level. It remained rooted in a twentieth-century vision of youth focused on lack and risk rather than a twenty-first-century vision centred on potential. Its bubble approach protected young people from social problems and provided
them with a safe alternative, but it also fostered disconnection with positive new youth dynamics and movements in the city. The Red’s changes from 2017 might be seen as a renewed attempt to catch up with recent developments in urban youth culture and politics and with social and cultural organizations now found all across the city.

Fig. 22. Archive of Red de Escuelas de Música. CC BY.

Comparing the Red to such organizations would be a revealing exercise, if one that goes beyond the scope of this book. A member of the social team expressed her ambivalence about the Red to me: on the one hand, the program had clear limitations and there was much room for improvement on the social front; on the other hand, some schools operated in challenging circumstances, and just doing their basic job of teaching music was already an achievement. Perhaps it was wrong to expect the Red to do more than keep children off the streets and out of trouble, she mused. Then, answering her own argument, she continued: but there were many other organizations that were working in more challenging circumstances, higher up the hillsides, with fewer resources, yet they managed to keep social and political questions at the heart of what they did. This is something that the city’s famed hip-hop schools were able to do. They managed to look outwards as well as inwards. So why not the Red?
The Pipeline

During the first years of the Red, there was a musical “pipeline” that worked well. The program began in an era when Medellín’s professional training and orchestral scenes were significantly depleted. As such, there was a relatively clear route for the most serious students, which ran from the Red to university music departments (particularly at the University of Antioquia) to the city’s two professional orchestras, the Medellín Philharmonic Orchestra and the EAFIT Symphony Orchestra (EAFIT is a prestigious private university). I was told repeatedly that a significant proportion of these orchestras in 2018 were Red graduates.

Over time, however, this pipeline became more constricted. As the Red expanded, the competition for university places grew as well, and as the city’s orchestras filled up with young Red graduates, the number of professional opportunities declined. Two bottlenecks thus emerged. This issue was raised as early as 2005, when the evaluation of the Red noted that whatever its stated social goals, the program was producing a considerable number of musicians with professional aspirations and supply had quickly outstripped the city’s demand.\footnote{Howell (2017) reveals a similar disjuncture at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM) between the musical training and the limited subsequent options available to those who had been trained.}

Initially, then, the orthodox SATM approach served to foster a more vibrant orchestral scene in Medellín (as it was designed to do in Venezuela). But as the Red grew, the capacity of the city to absorb so many musicians did not. Medellín moved steadily towards saturation point. Yet the production line of musicians continued, posing the question ever more insistently: where would they all go? What were they all going to do for a living? The emergence of Iberacademy and the Antioquia Symphony (another youth orchestra) only contributed to the problem. In 2018, Medellín had three orchestral training schemes yet only two professional orchestras, an imbalance of supply and demand that exacerbated concerns about the future prospects for students. The Red’s second decade also saw greater priority accorded to the program’s social objective. This led to increasing questions over the extent to which the Red ought to serve as an orchestral pipeline or whether it ought to focus more on other kinds of processes and outcomes.
Franco argued that there were a wide range of musical paths and careers in Medellín, yet the Red prepared students for just one of them, the orchestral profession—and it was one that only a tiny proportion would end up in, given the competition. Another manager agreed. The musical world is changing, he said, so the Red needs to change with it; our students need to be versatile and have broad skills if they want to make a living out of music in the future. Such views were not limited to management. One school director was blunt: it makes little sense for the Red to be a production line of symphonic musicians when there is so little work for them. Another discussed inviting speakers to give talks to students about different careers, arguing that it was important to show them that there were other possible professional routes. A third director told the social team: “In focusing on the formation of musicians and not citizens, the program has produced many musicians for the city over twenty years, but there isn’t the capacity to provide all these professionals with musical work” (“Informe” 2017a, 75).

Even one of the program’s best-known teachers, one of the first generation, told me that classical music had become a saturated professional field in Medellín and he generally steered his students away from it. His career advice was to carry on playing but to study something else at university. He was critical of higher music education that taught students a large amount of classical repertoire that they would never play in public outside the institution’s walls. If they were to make any money from music, he said, it would be from playing salsa not a classical concerto.

Nora from the social team stated: “We should ask whether we’re actually harming them by putting music as a life goal, if this is a market that is already over-supplied with musicians.” Popular music was a bigger field with more opportunities, but the Red only provided limited preparation in this area. She argued that matters would be different if the Red were using classical music as a means to provide a rounded humanistic education to young people in the barrios, because then professional saturation would be less of a concern. But “we’re not giving them tools so that they can reflect on their context;” instead, the program provided a narrow, technical training, preparing students for a small and shrinking profession, and devoted only minimal resources
to the kind of social education that justified its funding and would be much more widely applicable.

The result was a growing clash of expectations. As competition increased and opportunities narrowed, musically ambitious Red students became more concerned about the quality of the preparation that the program provided. As we saw in Chapter 2, they often saw the Red’s social character as lowering the level of the program and thus counter-productive to their professional aspirations. Meanwhile, the pressure from management and the social team was in the other direction—towards musical diversification, broadening the educational offering in order to prepare students better for other musical opportunities; and/or providing a rounded social education.

In theory, the latter positions gained the upper hand, since they were supported by the culture ministry as well as the most senior figures in the program. In practice, though, they were not favoured by advanced students or staff, and the Red did not have sufficient employees with suitable training to enact them fully. The Red was somewhat locked into a pattern that was hard to break, precisely because it was one part of a pipeline and a wider educational and professional ecosystem that was still quite wedded to the norms of conservatoires, and it had little control over the other parts. The Red was the first link in a chain that included higher education and the profession, both of which fed back into the program by supplying its teachers and shaping the aspirations of its students. The Red was thus caught between three stools: no longer willing or able to serve predominantly as an orchestral pipeline, yet struggling to shift decisively towards either musical diversification or social action.

In 2018, Medellín offered an ambiguous example. On the one hand, its Network of Cultural and Artistic Practices was the envy of other cities; on the other hand, opportunities for their graduates were not plentiful and, in the case of music, were shrinking.\(^{11}\) A city cultural official reflected on this ambiguity. She admitted that it hurt her to see artists of different kinds (musicians, mimes, circus performers) busking at traffic lights across the city for a few coins. Public social-artistic programs are very complicated in a country like Colombia, she said; if those coming

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\(^{11}\) In 2020, the Network was awarded the 4\(^{th}\) International Prize, CGLU (Ciudades y Gobiernos Locales Unidos)—Ciudad de México—Cultura 21.
out of them end up scraping a living at traffic lights, then something is not working.

El Sistema’s current travails illustrate that such dilemmas and struggles are a part of SATM more broadly. El Sistema was designed to train professional orchestral musicians quickly, and particularly after its rapid expansion in the 2000s under Chávez, it produced a large and ever-growing number of young musicians who set their hearts on an orchestral career. Yet outside Venezuela, the orchestral profession is extremely competitive, and in most countries, opportunities were stagnant or shrinking even before the global upheaval of 2020. Until around 2014, this tension remained hidden, as high oil prices and Abreu’s political power created a classical music bubble economy in Venezuela. Abreu had sufficient influence and resources to take dramatic measures, such as professionalizing all the regional youth orchestras and creating semi-professional orchestras in Caracas at will. But that bubble burst with the national crisis, and the collision between El Sistema and reality could be observed over the following years as an exodus of the program’s musicians took place and they could be found busking on trains and street corners across Latin America and Spain. All- or majority-Venezuelan orchestras were created in several big cities outside Venezuela, not as a source of paid work but rather as a social focus for the immigrant musicians and, in some cases, an attempt to gain a first, if largely symbolic, foothold within the local cultural industry (see e.g. Fowks 2019). Such sights generated pride among many Venezuelans, yet they also pointed poignantly to the superfluity of musicians that El Sistema had produced, an overproduction that had been sustained for many years and presented as a glowing success story only because it had been underpinned by the world’s largest oil reserves and a political and economic genius adept at channelling them into music. But now reality had bitten.

Today, the question—not only in Medellín but also across orthodox SATM—is: can it really be considered “social action” to train up large numbers of young people from popular barrios for such a challenging and shrinking career path? If orchestral training provided the best social education available, that question would be largely answered. But the Red’s social team was unconvincing, and it was not alone.
Franco once joked to me that the program should really be called the Network of Symphonic Music Performance (rather than the Network of Music Schools). This was one of the myriad ways that he expressed to me his critique of the orchestral focus of the Red. He regarded the centrality of large ensembles as constraining possibilities for acquiring skills other than performing notated music. Imagining a more independent musician with a fuller toolkit, he urged less emphasis on melodic instrumental performance in large ensembles and more on learning rhythm, harmony, composition, and improvisation. He urged the Red to create more space for smaller ensembles of eight to ten students, arguing for less focus on quantity and more on the quality of the social dynamics and relationships. In his eyes, the Red cultivated dependence on the ensemble and its conductor. What happens when students step out into the world and neither the conductor nor the ensemble is there, he asked? While he appreciated the symphony orchestra from an aesthetic point of view, he was more critical of its organizational dynamics. He spoke of “principal chair syndrome”: how the hierarchization within orchestras can generate arrogance. More broadly, he was concerned that the Red inducted students into what he saw as a rather unhealthy culture and infected them with the bad habits of some professional orchestral musicians while they were still young. In fetishizing the orchestra, the Red imitated the orchestral profession, warts and all.

It was striking to hear such a view from the pedagogical coordinator of a prominent SATM program, and his perspective was not unique. Other managers made remarks about the Red turning students into “automatons” or “robots,” and they also critiqued the figure of the conductor and the atmosphere of orchestral rehearsals. The leadership sought to migrate away from the conventional SATM model of the director/conductor as an authoritarian stick-waver towards a more horizontal, participatory dynamic, with more power granted to students and the director/conductor replaced by a mixture of educator, manager, and communicator. During my year in Medellín, several of the program’s conductors with the most conventional professional profiles were dismissed and replaced by individuals with a wider range of musical
skills and a less vertical way of working. The contrast with El Sistema, a program created by an authoritarian stick-waver and operating as a production line of conventional orchestral conductors (Govias 2020), was striking.

The social team held a similarly critical view of orchestral culture. As seen above, its 2017 report is permeated by a critique of the symphonic format, which is seen as impeding the development of citizenly capacities (“Informe” 2017a). The previous team elaborated conceptual foundations for the program from the perspective of rights, based on the notions of dignity, autonomy, and freedom (Fundamentos 2016). Autonomy was defined as the capacity to define one’s own course and find one’s own solutions, with help and support from others; freedom as the possibility to take decisions to realize one’s own ambitions. It is not hard to see a tension here with the functioning of a conventional large ensemble.

It was even more striking to hear critical perspectives from teachers who had been students in the first phase of the Red. In the middle of telling me his life story, Pepe confessed:

orchestras bored me, orchestras stressed me out, because it was always the same story, and because I started in a system at eleven years old playing in orchestras, at twenty-four I was fed up with being in an orchestra, of the rigidity of an orchestra, the monotony of an orchestra, that nothing happens in an orchestra... as a human being, I got bored.

Daniel described his mixed feelings about his education in the Red:

I felt that negative part—the experiences I had in an orchestra were that people gave you dirty looks, or that you were nervous about what the others would say about how you were playing, or what you were playing, or how you measured up to others... the atmosphere was very heavy... even the conductors, they were tyrants, they would arrive and shout at you, and I would think, “oh, if this is music, I don’t like this part.”

Both teachers now led large ensembles themselves, illustrating how individual reservations about SATM may be swept away by necessity in institutions such as the Red. Pepe, in particular, was an embodiment of SATM’s ambiguities: he expressed a profoundly negative view of the orchestra as a mode of musical organization, yet he was also a passionate enthusiast about SATM and perpetuated with gusto that
same mode that had left him “bored” and “stressed out” as a student. They were not the only ambivalent conductors in the Red. One school director questioned “the one-way relationship and authoritarianism of the conductor with respect to the orchestra: do this, play, stop!” (“Informe” 2017a, 142). Another director reflected on the hierarchy and competition that the orchestra inculcated in students, with its system of principal chairs and rules about who has the right to speak up. Having recently changed schools, she saw a mixed bag of social behaviours in her new orchestra, with some students reluctant to help each other and resistant to new ideas. She described leading the orchestral rehearsals as “a punishment” and “the most annoying thing in the school.”

These were not isolated findings. Social team reports from 2008 onwards homed in on negative dynamics generated within and between the Red’s large ensembles. Similarly, many of the criticisms articulated by El Sistema’s musicians in Estrada’s 1997 evaluation related to the program’s symphonic focus, which was seen as producing social problems and limiting educational possibilities (see Baker and Frega 2018). These findings should cause little surprise. There is now half a century of academic studies exploring the complexities and tensions of symphony orchestras (see Baker 2014). In the last few years, critical scrutiny of orchestral culture has intensified with the rise of #MeToo, the breaking of numerous scandals concerning famous conductors and orchestral musicians, and more openness in mainstream and social media about the darker sides of the profession (see e.g. Johnston 2017; Miller 2017; Ferriday 2018). Attitudes are thus changing, and in this sense the Red’s management, with its critical perspective on the orchestra, was moving with the times. But large ensembles were so central to the Red’s history and imaginary, to the expectations of staff and students, and to the demands that the city placed on the program, that spaces for debate were limited and progress slow. It is indicative that the biggest reversal of Giraldo’s leadership was the forced abandonment of its attempt to reform the integrated ensembles.

In short, much research and journalism present a deep challenge to SATM’s foundational notion that the orchestra serves as “a model for an ideal global society.” On the contrary, they reveal the orchestra as at the heart of negative dynamics that are found in some of the
best-known SATM programs: authoritarianism, hierarchies, cliques, imaginary divides, pedagogical narrowness and rigidity, and lack of student agency. The evidence from Medellín supports that from Venezuela in pointing to the orchestra as a problem rather than a solution. In Medellín, this model necessitated the creation of a social team in order to counteract the problematic dynamics that it generated. One of the issues that preoccupied the social team has also been at the heart of recent critiques of orchestral culture more broadly: gender relations.

Gender

Members of the social team sometimes made comments about the Red as a system of “mums and dads.” A proper exploration of the theme of gender would require a separate study, so my intention here is simply to flag it up as one deserving further attention. Even though four of the Red’s six general directors (as of late 2020) have been women, the program has largely reproduced the patriarchal dynamics of both paisa culture and classical music. During my fieldwork, the three top figures and most of the management group were men; the exceptions were the communications director and the three rank-and-file members of the social team. All the instrumental integrated ensembles (orchestras and bands) were conducted by men; only the choir had a female leader. Three-quarters of the school directors were men. The twenty-seven school administrators, however, were all women.

These figures point not only to a predominance of men in the upper echelons of the program, but also to a distinct gendering of different kinds of labour. When the social team muttered about “mums and dads,” they were in part making an empirical point. The figure of the school administrator had in fact emerged from an informal system of parental helpers in the early days of the program, and a number of mothers of Red students were given jobs as administrators when the role was formalized. There were still some of these mothers occupying this role in 2018. But the social team was also pointing to a division of labour according to conventional gender norms. The majority of schools were run by a duo of male director and female administrator. Musical leadership was generally the province of
men; the more “social” roles—the social team, administration, and communications—usually fell to women. (The gendering of the musical and the social sides sheds further light on the priority given to the former in practice.)

Once again, the Red is not an isolated example. Both the Red and El Sistema may be seen as patriarchal systems created by charismatic male leaders. Abreu liked to surround himself with men, leading the Venezuelan author Gisela Kozak Rovero (2018) to describe El Sistema as “a sort of masculine brotherhood of Knights Templar of classical music, with Abreu as the focus of the cult.” When Abreu eventually embraced the idea of social inclusion, he interpreted it solely in class terms, meaning that other systemic exclusions have been perpetuated rather than challenged. The result is a glass ceiling for women that is much more glaring than the Red’s (see Baker 2014; 2015) and makes a mockery of rhetoric of social inclusion or justice.

As such, programs like El Sistema and the Red embrace progressive discourses such as social inclusion and social change, but in practice they often show more signs of reproducing the conventional, conservative gender dynamics of their surrounding societies and perpetuating the historical gender inequalities of orchestral culture. The Red is the more ambiguous of the two, with its four female leaders, and the female-dominated social team made continual efforts to tackle gender issues through workshops and discussions. Parra had a longstanding academic interest in gender and masculinities. Nevertheless, the effects on the higher echelons were limited, and several women told me privately of their dissatisfaction with the gender dynamics of the Red, pointing to a historical resistance to female leaders and a tendency of male staff to give female colleagues instructions rather than treating them as equals. Looking at outcomes rather than intentions, the organization as a whole still leaned more towards reproducing the status quo. Perhaps this should come as no surprise, given that this is a pattern found in the classical music sector elsewhere (see e.g. Scharff 2017; Bull 2019).
Music and Other Arts Education

Music was by far the largest and best funded of the city’s four arts education programs, but Parra remarked to me several times that the others were interesting and that it would be well worth observing the Visual Arts Network in particular. As a result, I spent some time in that program, participating in their teacher training, attending a two-day workshop, visiting a school, speaking at length to some of its senior figures, and reading many materials that it had published. I also made several visits to the dance program. These experiences gave me a clearer picture about the extent to which the Red’s issues had to do with context (Medellín, its government, arts education, and so on) or with music.

When I sat down in the director’s office on my first visit to Visual Arts, I saw that the walls were lined with critical and theoretical books on the arts and architecture. In the teacher-training sessions, the discussions were much more socially, politically, and conceptually oriented than I was used to in staff professional development activities in the Red (which did not even have a teacher-training program). Whereas the Red was shaped by the staff’s own musical training and the goal of putting on concerts for the city, I observed the theory and pedagogy of Visual Arts being built up from scratch by the new teachers, starting from the foundation of social goals (such as peace and citizenship). I understood why the other programs did not have a social team: the social side was woven into the teachers’ work. A valorization of critical thinking and a willingness to ask hard questions were constantly apparent. Such questioning was not absent in the Red, as I have detailed; nevertheless, there had always been a struggle to integrate this process of reflection into the practice. In Visual Arts, though, critical theory and practice went hand in hand. Conversely, I heard minimal reference to key concerns of formal education such as technique or curriculum, which were prominent in the Red. In Visual Arts, they were considered to have little to do with social impact. In fact, very little that I saw related to visual arts in the everyday sense of the term (drawing, painting, and so on); the focus was squarely on conceptual art. Classes were therefore freer and more creative than in the Red, with its focus on acquiring technique in order to perform existing repertoire.
3. The Red through a Social Lens

Fig. 23. Constructing theory and pedagogy, Network of Visual Arts. Photo by the author (2018). CC BY.

Fig. 24. Constructing theory and pedagogy, Network of Visual Arts. Photo by the author (2018). CC BY.
The Visual Arts Network described the work that it had undertaken during 2016 in a book whose title, “A living, mutating organism,” underlined that organizational change was central to its identity (Organismo vivo 2016). Its director, Tony Evanko, wrote about an earlier shift of focus from technical training to “forming citizens with the consciousness, capacities, and confidence to generate changes in their lives and their surroundings” (9). The network saw itself as a pedagogical laboratory and “an adventure in transformation” (23), focused on creation, critical thinking, and key issues in the construction of society, such as human rights, identity, citizenship, and peace. Participants formulated projects or activities that stemmed from their own interests, realities, and needs. The program sought to strengthen a range of citizenly skills: respect for and trust in oneself; learning through creating; gaining a voice; recognizing and respecting difference; developing a critical position and the capacity to take decisions based on reflection and arguments; undertaking concrete actions directed at transformation; and constructing collectively and collaboratively.
Pedagogical principles included care, questioning, allowing mistakes, prioritizing process over results, and seeing problems as opportunities. The importance of connecting research and pedagogical practice was underlined. And lest this all sound entirely theoretical, much of the book was devoted to analysing the artistic work carried out in the Communal Creation Laboratories and explaining how it exemplified the program’s aims.

The following year’s work focused on fostering critical thinking, creation, autonomy, agency, empathy, and cooperation (La ciudad 2017). The network positioned itself clearly as non-formal arts education, centred not on learning techniques or training artists but on generating reflection. By organizing “unlearning laboratories” to move staff out of their comfort zone and encourage them to deconstruct and reconstruct their professional selves, and by valorizing participants’ existing knowledge, they questioned a vertical teacher-student relationship in which the former is the one who knows, and the latter, one who does not. In a self-critique of their previous work, they moved away from a focus on artistic projects to one on urban and social interventions—on transforming the city. These interventions included actions on themes such as public spaces, animals, and waste, and activities such as writing a song, making a video clip, painting murals, and gardening. In these interventions, they also experimented with different methods of social organization and encouraged participants to exercise responsibility and share leadership. The self-critical spirit is evident near the end: “As we close this volume, we return to the questions: how much have we changed? How far are we willing to change, personally and institutionally, to achieve that society that we imagine?” (105).

I now understood why Parra had been so keen for me to see Visual Arts. In the Red, such ideas arose sometimes in meetings or internal documents as theories or aspirations for the future, but in its sister network, they were well established in practice: these books were reflections on work already done, and in my visits I saw such work in progress. The gap between the programs was glaringly apparent. It turned out that there had been a revolution in the city government’s arts education networks several years earlier—with the exception of Music. Consequently, the Red was widely recognized to be the most conservative of the programs. Indeed, it was revealing that between
2017 and 2019, Giraldo’s administration was attempting to align the Red with the city’s cultural plan for 2011–20, even as that plan was about to expire.

Pérez, the former culture ministry official, explained the evolution of the networks to me. The administration of Mayor Aníbal Gaviria (2012–15) catalyzed the process of transformation, seeking to shift the focus from fine arts and the acquisition of technique to more contemporary artistic developments and a more experiential approach to education. The programs broke with traditional methods and shifted to a more horizontal, experimental “laboratory pedagogy.” Visual Arts was the first to make the about-turn, and Dance and Theatre followed soon afterwards—but Music did not, “because it was captured by traditional symphonic musical training.” In the other artistic fields, there were small civil society organizations that were agile and flexible and thus ready to take on the challenge of transformation, but Music was run by a huge, slow-moving entity (the University of Antioquia) and had a large budget. There was no other cultural organization in Medellin that was willing and able to take on such a sizeable contract, plus taking the Red away from the university would have come at considerable political cost to the mayor. As a result, Music stayed put and continued as before. It was not until 2018 that the Red began to experiment with laboratories, several years after the other networks, and then only as small pilot projects alongside the traditional offering of orchestras and bands. Ironically, then, the Red’s power was the source of its weakness. Its size gave it much more prominence in the city than the other networks, and its staff (despite their complaints) had better contracts than their counterparts; however, its size was also an impediment to evolution, leading it to become the least innovative of the programs over time.

This gap was evident in the Intermediaries of Civic Culture events (Mediadores), in which some programs took an experimental approach. Visual Arts had participants plan, prepare, and cook a communal meal. Theatre took attendees out into the streets. In contrast, it took considerable debate and rethinking for Music to go beyond simply teaching participants to play instruments. If Music struggled to come up with something suitable for Mediadores, the other programs adapted more easily, since their regular activities had already been through a
process of redesign to bring the social goals to the fore. As a city official who oversaw the process observed, the other programs had already digested the issue of culture and citizenship, whereas Music had remained focused on playing—and it showed in the preparations for Mediadores.

While practical considerations clearly played a large part in the different trajectories of the sister networks, there are also wider artistic trends to consider. One of the social team members spoke of how theatre and visual arts had gone through major ruptures in Latin America, breaking away from classical traditions. He argued that such a shift had been more limited in the art music sphere, and so he was unsurprised that among the varieties of arts education offered in Medellín, music was the one that most resembled a form of social control. The social team’s report underlined the conservatism of music education in comparison to other arts education, which had been revolutionized by avant-garde movements (“Informe” 2017a).

Music thus appeared as the odd one out in terms of public arts education in Medellín: simultaneously the most favoured in terms of budget, facilities, and exposure, and the most conservative in its approach. This does not appear to be simply a Medellín issue, however. A comparison between orthodox SATM and the volume Art as Social Action (Sholette et al. 2018) points to a similar divide and to fundamentally distinct understandings of the words “social action” in SATM and other arts education.

The approach to social action in SATM was encapsulated by Rodrigo Guerrero, the director of El Sistema’s Office of International Relations: “the students are so excited by and dedicated to the musical fun and creation, they don’t realize until they leave El Sistema that it is really a social development program more than a musical one” (cited in Booth 2008, 11). In El Sistema, social action supposedly happened automatically or by osmosis, so there was no need to actually do anything. Paradoxically, social action was supposedly so subtle that students were unaware of it yet so dramatic that the program deserved hundreds of millions of dollars in social funds. The available evidence suggests that SATM was invented as a discursive ploy in the mid-1990s, and involved simply describing what El Sistema had always done (orchestral training) as social action; as such, there was no need
to change anything. In short, there is a striking lack of social action in orthodox SATM. Indeed, given that a “social action approach” to social change through the arts is associated with political action and radical Latin American figures such as Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal (Dunphy 2018), SATM could be seen simply as a misnomer for Abreu’s influential approach.

*Art as Social Action* (ASA) presents a very different conception of action to orthodox SATM. It showcases a variety of arts projects with what might be loosely called social justice aims. If SATM is largely inward-looking, acting primarily on participants, ASA is outward-looking, acting on society. In SATM, learning to play music is considered itself to be a form of social action; in this sense, there is no difference between means and ends. ASA positions art as a means to the end of acting in and on society. SATM tends to reinforce the existing social order, while ASA or socially engaged art tends to question it. We may find a concrete example in the attitudes to citizenship in the Music and Visual Arts Networks, as discussed above. The dominant conception of citizenship in the Red revolved around social order and resembled Westheimer and Kahne’s Personally Responsible Citizen. In Visual Arts, the focus was on social change and the aspiration more akin to the Justice Oriented Citizen.

The discrepancies between SATM and other types of socially oriented arts education are illuminating. The global success of El Sistema illustrates that many classically-trained musicians and elite institutions do not see anything particularly strange in pursuing social change through conventional artistic practices, but key figures in Medellín’s culture ministry and cultural sector were more sceptical, and the other arts abandoned this approach. The Red may have been the biggest, most visible, and most famous of the city’s arts education networks, but having been “captured by traditional symphonic musical training,” it was the least innovative, and it was shown up by the more diverse, flexible, experimental, emancipatory approaches of its sister programs. As Parra suggested, there is much that SATM could learn from other approaches to arts education.
Conclusion

The issues explored in this chapter may have been “second-order debates” in the Red but they related to fundamental objectives and characteristics of the program. Unsurprisingly, then, we find many parallels with El Sistema, and the debates therefore resonate for the wider SATM field. The bubble issue is quite characteristic of SATM, since it relates to the field’s distinctive ideology of rescuing, saving, and distancing. Questions over citizenship, politics, and gender are found more widely across music and arts education, but they may be more insistent in SATM, where the stated prioritization of social goals means that they are thrown into sharp relief. Large ensembles and music education as a pipeline to the profession are far from unique to SATM, but idealization of the orchestra is a fundamental characteristic of this field, and there can be few places in the world where such a high proportion of professional orchestral musicians come from a single training program as Venezuela and Medellín.

While the Red had taken important steps with regard to the bubble issue, on other fronts it had not gone much beyond identifying the problem and so it lagged behind other forms of arts education in Medellín. The comparison between SATM and Art as Social Action suggests that this lag was not just a local feature. However, by bringing in comparison with other arts education programs and linking the Red’s debates with research on topics such as artistic citizenship, bursting the bubble, and music education for change, I have also highlighted advances in adjacent fields and thus pointed to ways forward for SATM. There is a lot that can be learnt from broadening the lens beyond SATM in this way to include a wider range of practices and studies. It may be sobering for some readers to learn that music has moved slowly and ended up behind the curve of other arts education in such contexts, but this information should provide an added impetus to reform.

It would clearly be a mistake, then, for SATM to isolate itself from research on music and other arts education, but this is historically what it has done, particularly in Venezuela. In its heyday, El Sistema showed little interest in contemporary currents in research or pedagogy; despite having ample resources to do so, it did not hold conferences or send staff to overseas events such as the ISME World Conferences,
even though the latter had an El Sistema Special Interest Group. It paid little attention to alternative approaches, let alone critical perspectives. Its special invitees were usually conductors or performers, rather than pedagogues or researchers. This belief that El Sistema already had the answers to music education’s questions stunted the program’s evolution and rubbed off on some parts of the SATM field, which have organized Sistema-only events and sought inspiration from Venezuela or sister programs more than from the much larger and more developed fields of arts education and music education research. Many, in Medellín and internationally, have grappled with the kinds of issues raised in this chapter. If the problems are not unique, nor are the solutions; there is no need for SATM to reinvent the wheel.