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

Rethinking Social Action Through Music

Geoffrey Baker
4. The New Image of Medellín to the World

In August 2018, the Red received a delegation from Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. The visit was organized by Medellín’s Agency for Cooperation and Investment (ACI). The delegation was in Medellín to find out more about the city’s social and cultural transformation—to see the Medellín Miracle first hand. Representatives of the Red gave a presentation about the program, and the Colombian music ensemble from Pedregal school followed up with a performance. Judging from their delighted faces and admiring comments, the visitors were impressed.

Ironically, this event to demonstrate the city’s success in overcoming its history of violence took place on a day of major student demonstrations, which had their focal point at the university, just across the road. In fact, the Harvard delegation had to be smuggled in and out through the back entrance, because at that precise moment there were blockades, protests, and missiles being thrown in the surrounding streets. Inside the building, the Red and the ACI presented a harmonious vision of Medellín to the foreign visitors; outside, just out of earshot, the discordant realities of urban life continued.

Since its early days, the Red has served as an image of the city transformed. It was awarded the title of “The New Image of Medellín to the World” by UNESCO, and this slogan became part of its publicity. More recently, the Red has partnered with the ACI to sell an appealing image of urban renewal for international consumption. But the Harvard event brought into focus several major questions. What are the implications of music education serving as a form of urban marketing? And looking past the image to the messy reality outside, how effective is SATM as a social program? Did the Red really (help to) transform the
city? SATM and social urbanism have been described in identical terms (“the Venezuelan musical miracle,” “the Medellín Miracle”). Should we believe in miracles?

In this chapter I move away from the debates that I observed in the Red and focus on my own questions, ones that have interested me since I started studying SATM in 2007 and particularly since I first visited Medellín in 2012. The relationship between SATM and social urbanism is specific to Medellín, but examining the connection between music education and urban society resonates much more widely. The questions about the effectiveness and philosophy of SATM—does it work? Is it a program of social change?—relate in one way or another to the entire international field.

Does SATM Work?

One might expect this to be a burning question for the field, but it is not. Rather, it is widely assumed that SATM does work, and effort has been focused largely on generating evidence and arguments to support that belief. There was very little critical scrutiny of the claims of the largest SATM programs before the mid-2010s, decades after the field’s emergence. As Belfiore and Bennett (2008) argue, the ideology that the arts are inherently beneficial for society has become dominant since the 1980s, and nowhere is this truer than SATM. To question this ideology publicly is to arouse great suspicion, and to hold a contrary view, despite its two and a half millennia of precedents, is to be treated as a heretic and burnt at the metaphorical stake by prominent supporters. Yet an important role for academic research is to test out supposedly common-sense ideas and see whether they stand up, and the more dominant and influential the ideas, the more important it is to inspect them. Answering such a simple question as “does SATM work?” may in fact be impossible (see Ramalingam 2013), but we may learn much by trying.

Evaluations

On the surface, existing studies of the Red present a positive picture. A 2005 external evaluation concluded that the program had a significant impact on reshaping the values of participants (“Medición” 2005). A
more recent economic study also drew positive conclusions, arguing that the program reduced the probability of participants becoming involved in conflict and brought academic and cultural benefits (Gómez-Zapata et al. 2020). However, closer examination muddies the picture.

The lack of baseline data or randomized assignment to treatment and control groups means that the 2005 study shows only correlation, not causation, and since aspiring participants were both auditioned and interviewed, and only around 30% were accepted, pre-existing differences between the music students and the others are a likely cause of the findings. Furthermore, the numerous internal studies discussed in previous chapters provide extensive counter-evidence that contradicts the external evaluation: the Red’s own social scientists repeatedly found pervasive problems that the evaluators had either missed or ignored. The categories analysed by the evaluators were confidence, inclusion/exclusion, skills for conflict resolution, attitudes to the body, perseverance, and discipline. The Red’s social team found problems within some of these categories (particularly inclusion/exclusion), but it was also primarily interested in issues such as participation and empowerment, which were not measured. This difference in focus further explains the discrepancy between the positive account of the external evaluators and the critical accounts of the internal team.

I asked Arango whether the evaluation had impacted on her own diagnostic study the following year. A little, she replied, but it was only one of a range of sources that she used. Her report was based mainly on her own “ethnographic” reading of the Red, which resulted from spending a lot of time visiting the schools and talking to everyone that she could. The text of her report is even clearer. Arango cited the positive conclusion of the external evaluation, and then continued immediately: “However, in the everyday workings of the program one can observe a certain deviation from this social achievement and/or goal” (2006, 17), and she went on to drop the bombshell about the contradiction between the objective of peaceful coexistence and the problematic behaviours of advanced students, as detailed in Chapter 1. At the time, then, the Red’s general director directly contrasted the evaluation with her own findings. It is striking to see a SATM program secure a positive external evaluation only to then question its value and repeat the process internally. Arango’s greater trust in ethnography than evaluation, and
the gulf between the 2005 study and the raft of subsequent internal reports, raises important questions not just about this specific case but also about the reliability of evaluations of SATM programs more generally (see Baker, Bull, and Taylor 2018; Logan 2015b).

The 2020 study, meanwhile, made no mention of the now-extensive critical literature and debates on SATM and cited only two questionable evaluations of El Sistema, revealing limited knowledge of this topic and a one-sided approach. Still, one might have expected the Red to be thrilled with the outcome, but during my last visit to Medellín, senior figures privately expressed doubts over the value of an economic lens and the robustness of the methodology, and they did not take the findings very seriously. The study did not address the kinds of social, political, and cultural questions that, for them, determined the quality of a program: for example, the degree of diversity, creativity, and participation. In general, I found senior figures somewhat sceptical of researchers who had little knowledge of the day-to-day workings of the program, engaged only minimally with the Red’s social scientists, and seemed determined to draw only positive conclusions. Managers spent their days dealing with an array of complex issues, and they had limited patience for researchers who were unable or unwilling to grasp the Red’s challenges.

El Sistema presents an even more ambiguous picture. Assessing El Sistema’s effectiveness is complicated by the lack of clarity and consistency over its goals. The program is widely presented as a seamless whole, yet comparing sources from the 1970s with those from the 2000s reveals a major shift in stated objectives.¹ It started out simply as a program for training orchestral musicians, yet since 2000 it has been widely described as a social inclusion program. The program’s current official mission and vision emphasize personal transformation on moral, spiritual, and behavioural planes (see Baker 2016c). Abreu also presented El Sistema as a remedy to poverty: “when [a child] has three years of musical education behind him, he is playing Mozart, Haydn, he watches an opera: this child no longer accepts his poverty, he aspires to

¹ See my blog post “Professionalization or rescuing the poor? The origins of El Sistema (in Abreu’s own words)”, https://geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com/el-sistema-older-posts/professionalization-or-rescuing-the-poor-the-origins-of-el-sistema-in-abreus-own-words/.
leave it behind and ends up defeating it” (cited in Argimiro Gutiérrez 2010). The UN’s multimillion-dollar contributions to El Sistema have been made in the name of “social inclusion and the eradication of poverty through music education” (“FundaMusical” 2017). The IDB’s loan in 2007, however, was justified by a prediction that it would be effective in reducing crime, and Abreu has stated: “Orchestras and choirs are incredibly effective instruments against violence” (Wakin 2012). El Sistema’s goals are thus shifting, highly ambitious, and extraordinarily diffuse.

Here, the conclusions of evaluations are even more questionable (Baker and Frega 2018; Baker, Bull, and Taylor 2018). The first two evaluations, in 1996, were roundly contradicted by two more the following year. An IDB report produced a decade later was used to justify a loan of $150 million, but the bank subsequently distanced itself from this study. The report’s central plank was a speculative calculation that every dollar invested would reap the equivalent of $1.68 in returns. However, El Sistema never carried out the major element of the proposal—to construct seven regional music centres. In reality, then, the loan only produced a fraction of its expected return, and the report’s speculation about the likely effects turned out to be misguided.

For many years after the IDB started supporting El Sistema, it hypothesized SATM’s benefits rather than demonstrating its efficacy in practice. It eventually decided to evaluate the program’s theory of change via a one-million-dollar experimental study (Alemán et al. 2017). Reflecting El Sistema’s expansive claims, the study measured twenty-six primary outcome variables. Only two significant outcomes were found, and they depended on using an unusually low threshold for statistical significance (90%). Mark Taylor, an expert in quantitative analysis, scrutinized the IDB’s data and methods and raised four separate question marks over the two supposedly positive results, concluding that they were almost impossible to take seriously (Baker, Bull, and Taylor 2018). There were no significant outcomes in twenty-four areas, even at the low threshold of 90%, and the researchers “did not find any full-sample effects on cognitive skills [. . .] or on prosocial skills and connections.” In an added twist, the original evaluation proposal had stated: “The data will be used to evaluate rigorously the impacts of El Sistema on school dropout, risky behaviours, incidence of
crime, and prevalence of unplanned pregnancies” (“Evaluación” 2011, 3). However, the published study made no mention of these issues, nor did it give a reason for dropping them. It is therefore unclear whether the researchers intuited that they would not find evidence of such social effects or sought them without success.²

Had this report uncovered robust evidence that El Sistema reduced poverty, crime, and violence by effecting personal transformation on moral, spiritual, and behavioural planes, the program would truly have merited the label of “the Venezuelan musical miracle.” As it was, this study by El Sistema’s own funder found no social impact of genuine significance, revealing its theory of change to be more of a fantasy story. Coming in the wake of a wave of independent critical academic studies, it would have taken the shine off the miracle narrative had it not been almost entirely ignored by the SATM field, the media, and even most researchers.

Orthodox SATM’s hypotheses have been undermined by events as well as research. The evidence for social change in Venezuela, home of by far the largest and longest SATM experiment, is thin bordering on non-existent. The Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Montero writes of “the bitter irony that South America’s musically and mineraly richest nation is also the continent’s most corrupt, most violent, most economically imperilled, and most morally disembodied.”³ Venezuela was the wealthiest country in Latin America when El Sistema was founded; it is now the poorest, and one of the most dangerous places in the world. This shift has complex causes, and it does not prove El Sistema’s inefficacy; it does, however, raise further questions about the claims of transformative social effects. El Sistema has raised and spent impressive amounts of money, but much of it has gone not so much on social action as on monumental buildings in central Caracas and top-of-the-range instruments, salaries, and international tours for its showcase orchestras. Many ordinary music schools operate in poor conditions, and solid evidence of reducing poverty and crime is lacking. The exodus

² It may be relevant here that a meta-analysis of twelve studies of after-school programs in the United States suggested that such programs had a small and nonsignificant effect on delinquency (Taheri and Welsh 2015).

³ “PUTIN POWER: musicians sound their outrage (a statement of support)”, Facebook, 11 February 2021.
of El Sistema musicians since Venezuela’s crisis began to bite in the mid-2010s sheds further doubt on the idea of SATM as a remedy to major social problems.

The Theory of SATM

El Sistema and programs inspired by it in Latin America tend to have similar broad features: a focus on large ensembles; an emphasis on the middle to lower end of the socio-economic spectrum (in the Red, Medellín’s popular barrios; in El Sistema’s mission statement, “the most vulnerable groups in the country”); and an argument that putting these two together provides benefits for individuals and society. These benefits supposedly result from changing the attitudes and behaviour of participants (in the Red, instilling civic values; in El Sistema’s mission, “rescuing children and young people from an empty, disorientated, and deviant youth”), and thereby reducing the incidence of negative phenomena such as poverty, violence, and crime. There are myriad problems with this picture as a theory of social development.

Firstly, it rests on a conservative and largely discredited ideology that links social problems with individual deficits. In Abreu’s vision, poverty rests on a lack of individual aspiration and can thus be surmounted by raising ambitions. He also claimed that “a child’s physical poverty is overcome by the spiritual richness that music provides” (“El Sistema” 2008). Yet expert opinion is much more likely to attribute serious social problems like poverty and violence to structural causes and to treat material deprivation in a less glib fashion.⁴ For example, in outlining the core of social justice social work, Baines (2017) writes: “Key to this practice is the understanding that the problems faced by an individual are rooted in the inequalities and oppression of the socio-political structure of society rather than in personal characteristics or individual choices.”⁵ Maclean (2015) identifies Medellín’s urban violence as rooted in the city’s extreme inequality, and thus as a perpetuation of social and political norms rather than a breakdown in the social fabric. Such problems are therefore unlikely to diminish noticeably by disciplining

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⁴ See Bates 2016 and Baker 2016b for discussion.
individual behaviour or raising individual aspirations. It is likely that a few individuals will alter their social position (social mobility) but improbable that such an approach will shift the problems or structures beneath them or the numbers affected (social change). Abreu’s deficit vision—the foundation stone of orthodox SATM—is thus contradicted by a wealth of social science. Cheng (2019, 43) is rightly scornful of claims that poverty is a “state of mind” or a lack of “richness in spirit,” and his tracing of such a view to (among others) Donald Trump’s minister and acolyte Ben Carson speaks volumes about the politics behind Abreu’s philosophy.

Secondly, it is questionable whether music education can have a significant influence on knottier social problems. The evidence that arts and culture have a significant impact on material poverty, as opposed to the effects of poverty, is slim (Mamattah et al. 2020). It is worth recalling that even many of the Red’s staff had doubts about their capacity to address serious social issues and regarded the program’s objective as overly utopian. In Chapter 1, we saw that social team investigations found teachers frustrated and overwhelmed because they were expected to respond to complex social or family problems, yet lacked suitable training or skills.

Thirdly, it is highly debatable whether the most vulnerable or marginalized groups in society are a major source of social problems such as violence and crime—a position that is implicit in Abreu’s framing of orchestras and choirs for poor and vulnerable children as “incredibly effective instruments against violence.” Such groups are by definition relatively powerless. If social change were genuinely the aim, a more rational approach to SATM would be to target social elites—the small segment of the population that has disproportionate control over the structural forces that produce violence and crime (see Chapter 5). Even Medellín’s ex-mayor Alonso Salazar (2018) has argued that the city’s elites have the greatest responsibility for its “moral ruin.”

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6 As Folkes (2021) notes, there is a vast amount of evidence contradicting the position that equal opportunities and social mobility have the capacity to alleviate structural inequalities.

7 Similarly, the attribution of poverty to personal deficiencies (or character or personality traits) in the UK in recent times has been a feature of the conservative Coalition government (Folkes 2021).
Similarly, since promoting coexistence and civic values is the principal goal of the Red, it bears asking whether young people from popular neighbourhoods are really the right target. As Bates (2016, 3) states, “evidence shows that the poor already possess strong personal and social skills.” He draws on several studies to argue that compared to the wealthy, the poor tend to be more ethical, compassionate, and altruistic, are no more likely to abuse alcohol or drugs, and are just as hard-working and communicative. Solidarity is a characteristic feature of the working class and its organizations such as trade unions, whereas individualism is more marked among higher social classes. Why, then, is the supposed remedy for a lack of coexistence in Medellín aimed at the popular classes in the city’s barrios rather than the rich who live in gated compounds in their own urban enclaves? Why is it assumed that the poor need lessons in collectivity, solidarity, and listening, rather than the rich? As Holston (1999) and Caldeira (1999) note, the segregation of the wealthy has a deleterious effect on sociability and public life, and by underlining inequalities and a lack of commonalities, it may promote rather than prevent conflict. “Cities of walls do not strengthen citizenship but rather contribute to its corrosion” (136). Who, then, really needs lessons in civic values and citizenship?

Demographics: Whom Does SATM Serve?

A final but major weakness in SATM’s theory is that programs often fail to reach the most vulnerable or marginalized groups when offered as a voluntary, extra-curricular activity. The 2005 evaluation of the Red found that students came from better-off, more stable, and more educated households than a control group; for example, they spent more time out of school accompanied by their parents. Wald’s (2017) research on similar programs in Buenos Aires revealed that students who thrived came from more economically stable families. The programs generally included the most includible young people (Escribal 2017): those who lived in popular neighbourhoods but were closest to the middle class in terms of both family employment and values. Picaud (2018) found that students in the French SATM project Démos generally came from families with higher-than-average levels of education and employment; their parents lived in poorer zones but were relatively well-off in terms
of cultural capital. Godwin (2020) presented analogous findings in her study of an Australian SATM program: children with traditional forms of disadvantage constituted only around 15% of the program, and half of them dropped out within a year. Many participants had aspirational parents with a middle-class outlook who saw the program as a source of free music lessons. The emergence of similar results from such widely dispersed programs points to a struggle to reach the most vulnerable or marginalized groups as a feature of the orthodox SATM model.

Most strikingly of all, El Sistema’s 2017 evaluation estimated the poverty rate among entrants at 16.7%, whereas the rate for the states in which they lived was 46.5%. In other words, the children entering El Sistema in the study were three times less likely to be poor than all six- to fourteen-year-olds residing in the same states. Consequently, the researchers concluded that their study “highlights the challenges of targeting interventions towards vulnerable groups of children in the context of a voluntary social program.” El Sistema’s own funder recognized this flaw in the model. While striking in its demolition of the El Sistema myth at a stroke, this finding is hardly a surprise from the perspective of research on education and youth, in which it is widely recognized that less privileged families are less likely to support extracurricular activities for their children, whether for reasons of money, time, logistics, or values (e.g. Lareau 2011).

Over time, the social makeup of the Red has been further affected by two contrary movements. On the one hand, Medellín’s expansion has meant that the areas of greatest poverty—the urban margins—have moved steadily up the hillsides of the valley and away from the centre of the city. On the other hand, several of the Red’s outlying schools (such as Independencias, Villatina, and 12 de Octubre) have been obliged to move in the opposite direction—down the hillsides—for security reasons. One, La Loma, simply had to close. There are major practical impediments to the Red working in the poorest barrios. Safe access for staff and students is one; another is a lack of suitable buildings. Some of the Red’s schools operate out of rented premises, and the poorest areas simply do not have buildings for hire that could accommodate all the instruments, an orchestra or band rehearsal, and several lessons taking place simultaneously. Whatever the desires of its leaders and staff, such
a project is not designed in such a way as to be easily accessible to the most disadvantaged in society in the 2020s.

Nevertheless, one consequence of a salvationist streak in SATM (and the “poverty porn” approach of some reporting on it) is a tendency to exaggerate the level of disadvantage and thus stigmatize participants. This is clearly the case with El Sistema, where there is a gulf between the IDB’s demographic findings in 2017 (which echoed those in my 2014 book) and media accounts and public perceptions of slum-dwellers rescued from a life of crime. The challenges of Medellín’s barrios are undeniable, but as a recent volume by an array of local youth experts argues, most young people are not significantly at risk, nor are they a risk to society (Jóvenes 2015). Of those that are, few find their way to the Red.

At the first board meeting I attended, a member of the social team stated that the Red’s students did not generally see themselves as poor, vulnerable, or in need, and they rejected this kind of categorization. Similarly, Wald (2011) argues that the public narrative around SATM in Buenos Aires both stereotyped and stigmatized its social contexts (as places of crime, drugs, violence, and unemployment) in order to play up the transformative effects of music. Not only did most participants not fit this bill, but they also dissented from such portrayals and were explicitly critical of the melodramatic media narrative woven around them: “they talk about us as though we were savages who have a violin instead of a bow and arrow,” said one. Wald emphasizes the heterogeneity of popular neighbourhoods in Buenos Aires—an important point for understanding SATM, since it underlines that not all inhabitants of such zones in Latin America (and much less, all participants in SATM programs) are “at-risk kids,” as is commonly stated in the global North.

Managers and directors gave plenty of clues about their perceptions of the social composition of the program. One of the general directors told me that the Red had become “gentrified” and asked why the program was not working in the city’s most disadvantaged contexts. Is the Red transforming Medellín, they asked? Or is it subsidizing the music education of a certain sector of the city’s population?

Reflecting the findings of studies elsewhere, it appeared that this “certain sector” generally represented not so much the most vulnerable or marginalized groups but rather an aspirational, educationally
committed fraction of the popular class. While there were exceptions, most students in the Red did not fit with the commonplace SATM narrative of social rescue. Many were from socio-economic strata 1–3 (Medellín has six official strata, with 1 the lowest), but as one school director put it, the majority of his students came from a good family environment. They might not live with both parents, but there was a family head who took care of them, and the vast majority of parents were concerned about their children.

Some staff shed light on the character and behaviour of students. One director changed schools during my fieldwork, and he compared the two contexts. There were more difficulties in his new school, he said, citing issues such as drug use and disrespectful behaviour; he estimated that there were around ten critical cases, out of a population of nearly 200 students. At his previous school, he did not have a single difficult case to hand over to his successor. Another director described the children in his school as nice and polite, with few personal or social problems. A third painted his students as “humble, they don’t have much money,” but also “very wholesome people.” Their parents had financial difficulties but made a big effort to push their children, making for exemplary students. He saw the social work of the school not as transforming children but rather encouraging and supporting their positive traits and showing them off to the community as an example. A member of the social team expressed her exasperation with the commonplace idea that the Red was saving 5000 children from Medellín’s urban war. I asked her how many she thought would have become delinquents without the program: “two or three,” she replied.

Other staff pointed to the socio-economic profile of students. One day, a manager described a visit to a neighbourhood cultural program for children who, as he put it, had nothing (such as street children). In contrast to the Red, the program was run on a shoestring. His immediate response was: “this is what we should be doing. We have so much! Why aren’t we working with these people? This is what the Red is supposed to be about.” A school director argued that the Red was fighting for the same students as other public leisure programs rather than striving to reach underserved parts of the city.

Another director stated that the Red had begun with the aim of removing youth from the reach of the urban conflict, but that the
situation had changed over time; the risks, while still real, were much reduced, and the school had become simply a destination for children who wanted to learn music. He continued: it’s generally the children from strata 3–4 who do best in the Red. They tend to have parents who are committed to their children’s education. Children from strata 1–2 are more likely to drop out, he said; they may be sent off to work by their family, have problems at home, or move barrios.

Sarrouy’s (2018) portrait of the El Sistema núcleo of Santa Rosa de Agua is again illuminating. The group of mothers who spend their afternoons waiting for their children outside are generally educated (the majority have a university degree), devout, and concerned with values and morals. Their mere presence outside the núcleo speaks volumes about their concern for their children’s education and well-being. Sarrouy portrays them as playing a vital role: keeping the children off the street, making them presentable, and encouraging home study. The families may be poor, but they are also organized and supportive. This picture chimes with the Red, but it bears little resemblance to El Sistema’s official mission to “rescue the most vulnerable groups in the country.” Rather, what we see are children from conscientious families that would like their children to change from one set of leisure activities that they consider unwholesome (hanging out on the street, playing with the computer, watching TV) to another activity that they consider more wholesome (playing music).

An obvious question immediately arises: what happens to children without supportive families—ones who might genuinely be described as vulnerable or even in need of rescuing? In Sarrouy’s account, they appear to be outside, “playing in the streets of the barrio, shoeless and dirty.” They rarely make it to the music school—or perhaps they are among the large numbers of students who drop out early on—because their families cannot or do not want to take them every day, sit outside all afternoon supervising their study, and encourage them to practise at home. The visual contrast between the smartly dressed El Sistema students and their shoeless and dirty non-musician peers is neither coincidental nor a consequence of the former having been “saved” by music; it is indicative of the pre-existing social differences between

8 Strata 3–4 correspond to a local lower-middle to middle class—the same constituency that historically predominated in El Sistema.
El Sistema and non-El Sistema children discovered by the IDB’s 2017 evaluation.

The implications for understanding SATM are profound. El Sistema appears here not as a means of social inclusion, but rather of social differentiation and stratification. Recall the “bubble” from Chapter 3, and Wald’s finding that SATM students who thrived in Buenos Aires not only came from more economically stable families but also developed a distinct “us versus them” worldview. Similarly, research on Sistema Scotland found that its immersive learning approach might make program engagement difficult for students with additional needs or difficult home circumstances, and that children from an ethnic minority, with English as a second language, or with additional support needs dropped out more frequently—pointing to systemic exclusion of the most disadvantaged (see Baker 2017a). Godwin (2020) paints a picture of a SATM program in which the most disadvantaged or challenging students often dropped out or were excluded, since the program was ill-equipped to support them. Such findings suggest that systemically speaking, SATM tends to separate out relatively advantaged children—those from more stable, aspirational families with a higher level of educational commitment—from relatively disadvantaged ones, and to support predominantly the former. In other words, SATM appears as a process of social hierarchization that exacerbates a micro-class division within popular neighbourhoods.

To use the terms that my collaborators in Medellín used, which were already in big quotation marks, the students of such programs are generally speaking “good kids”; and they are also constructed as “good kids” through participation in SATM programs. They are imagined as different from and superior to the “bad kids” hanging out on the streets and provided with an educational boost. In the eyes of the social team, the Red was not so much transforming “bad kids” as giving a leg-up to “good” ones, exacerbating the distance between the two.

These programs thus benefit primarily an aspirational, educationally committed fraction of the popular class, and while they broaden the constituency for classical music, their effect on unequal and divided societies is more questionable. It is not just that, in contrast to claims about “rescuing the most vulnerable groups in the country,” few of the most vulnerable are included; it is also that a boundary is drawn,
widening this social divide rather than narrowing it and thus excluding the marginalized even further in relative terms. This finding ought to be of considerable concern to programs that pursue goals such as social inclusion or peaceful coexistence between disparate groups, since it suggests that SATM may actually deepen the inequality that is at the root of many of Latin America’s gravest social problems. But it should not be a surprise to scholars of music education: it coincides with Bourdieu’s well-known argument that education reproduces inequality by allowing benefits to accrue primarily to those who already have them, which has been influential in the sociology of music education (see e.g. Wright 2010).

Family Values

Sarrouy’s data raises another important question over the functioning of El Sistema and, by extension, SATM more broadly. The official narrative is that the program “rescues” vulnerable children by instilling in them values such as discipline and responsibility. Furthermore, the theory is that these values then spread outwards to their families and wider society. As Abreu put it in his TED prize speech, “the child becomes a role model for both his parents.” Yet Sarrouy’s data tells a different story. He writes: “it is the mothers and grandparents who insist on their children and grandchildren being dedicated, hardworking, and responsible” (50). Furthermore, he relates that the group of mothers constituted an unofficial “union,” one of the roles of which was to put pressure on the teachers who tend to miss lessons. The women meet and talk with the teacher, insisting on valid reasons. There are teachers who miss classes with unsatisfactory excuses, but the pressure that is put on them obliges them to turn up regularly, otherwise they will have to face the group of mothers, the director, and even the students, because they too become demanding. (51)

In other words, rather than values radiating outwards from El Sistema to children and then their families, the dynamic that Sarrouy describes is the precise opposite: the mothers are the point of origin of key SATM values such as discipline and responsibility, and their influence converges via their children on El Sistema, culminating in the striking image of parents and students policing the music teachers. Here, it is
El Sistema’s adult musicians—not their pupils—who are undisciplined and the families who discipline them.

Support for this picture comes from many other sources. In my own research in Venezuela and in Medellín, it became clear that successful music students were often socialized in the value system of the program by their families before joining it. A Red teacher from the first generation told me a typical story: “a lot comes from the home... in my house, at least, hanging out on the corner was never an option, never... they always drilled into me that I had to be someone, that I was going to study.” His father had not finished school but always said: “you can’t be like me, you’ve got to get a university degree.” Several directors suggested that the Red was more likely to work for a child if their family was interested, committed, reliable, and responsible—in other words, if there was a fair degree of prior alignment with the values of the program.

Wald (2009, 61) drew similar conclusions in Buenos Aires: students reject the official discourse of SATM programs and “affirm that the frame of reference that shapes their values and the majority of their practices comes from elsewhere: from family guidance and, to a lesser extent, their religious beliefs.” The students examined in depth in Mota and Teixeira Lopes’s (2017) portrait of Portugal’s Orquestra Geração (OG) were poor but supported by an extended family. Only two out of thirty-five identified dissonance between family and program values. The researchers found “a tendency for the strengthening of dispositions that had previously been created within the young participant’s families,” “flows of consonance and interdependence between family, home and the OG,” and “inter-generational transmission of the family’s educational resources” (Teixeira Lopes et al. 2017, 224–25). Rimmer (2018; 2020) found that students’ enjoyment of In Harmony Sistema England depended to a large degree on an aspirational outlook, parental support, and commitment to schooling. El Sistema has been sold as an approach for disadvantaged children, but Rimmer found that those from less supportive, interested families were more likely to find it boring or oppressive and/or be put off by the challenge of music education guided by ideals of discipline and hard work. Consistent dynamics can thus be identified in SATM across several countries, with music education appearing regularly as a conduit and beneficiary of family values rather than a source.
Successful students frequently received and depended on considerable family support during their studies. SATM is very time-intensive: in the Red, students might be expected to attend three to four times a week by their second year; in El Sistema, this could quickly rise to five or more. Such a schedule would pose a great challenge to a child without a supportive family, unless they lived very close to the school. “Without the support of the families, we would be absolutely nothing,” said one school director in Medellín. “There are people who manage to do it without a father or mother, but really the parents are the cornerstone.” Another director stated: “the collaboration of the parents is fundamental in the school [...] if the parents don’t commit themselves, we cannot function.” Here, we see clearly the program’s dependence on existing family values.

The Red appeared to be set up in practice to favour those who were already socialized into its norms, suited to its requirements, and backed up by more stable and supportive families. The Red operated an explicit selection process in the form of interviews and meetings to filter out children and parents who seemed a poor fit with the program. As Mosse (2004, 652) notes in his research on overseas aid: “There is always an incentive for staff to select those people who already possess the characteristics that a project aims to create.” The result, as Wald found in Buenos Aires, is that the primary dynamic of SATM is a reinforcement of values shared by families and programs rather than a transformation.

Exclusion

For all the talk of inclusion, SATM can have exclusive aspects. One is the time pressure placed on families. In Medellín, one mother said: “There’s a problem that I see, and it’s that if he’s going to practise, I have to bring him [to the school] to practise, and I can’t because I have to look after his little brother and do my chores.” Wald (2017) notes the intense demands placed on students and their families: frequent rehearsals and activities, often conflicting with domestic routines and requiring family support. There may also be associated economic pressures. A 2013 sociology thesis about Montalbán, El Sistema’s showcase núcleo in Caracas, included a report on a focus group of students’ families:
All the mothers agreed that a poor family cannot remain in El Sistema. [...] They all agreed that in El Sistema there are no poor people because they would not be able to keep up with the routine expenditure that it requires, and that on the contrary, those who spend their time there have a basic level of economic resources that allows them to pay for travel, food, instrument maintenance and repairs, uniforms, etc. [...] The mothers agree that many children drop out along the way because their families don’t have the resources to keep them there. “Many children don’t continue here for that reason, because seriously, it’s a sacrifice, you need to have parents who can help you.” (Pérez and Rojas 2013, 126–27; emphasis in original)

Here we see clearly the problem of constructing SATM as a (supposedly) meritocratic system, in which those who work hardest and have most ability in theory rise to the top. It is widely recognized by scholars that meritocratic systems tend to privilege those with more resources. Society is not a level playing field: some children enjoy better supporting conditions for hard work than others. Conversely, if their families lack key resources like time or money, children may face insurmountable barriers irrespective of their application or ability. However, the survivorship bias of most SATM writing and research has seen little attention paid to exclusion.

Similarly, the issue of student retention is rarely raised in public discourse, but as we saw in Chapter 1, it was high enough in the Red to cause concern among the leadership, and evidence from several SATM projects suggests that up to half of new students may drop out in the first year or two. One Red director’s suggestion that children from the lowest social strata were the most likely to drop out is particularly noteworthy, since it points to a fundamental problem at the level of social inclusion. The program appears to filter out the most disadvantaged, who may not even be able to access it and may be disproportionately likely to leave if they can.

“The Red is a closed system,” said a city official in one meeting. Its policy was that students had to be in school and achieving reasonable grades. If students dropped out of school, they could be expelled from the Red. But this is supposed to be a social inclusion program, exclaimed

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9 In actual practice, El Sistema is far from meritocratic, since influence and string-pulling play a significant role (Baker 2014).
4. The New Image of Medellín to the World

the official; why does it exclude precisely the kind of young people that it should be helping? The focus of the Red should be the children with problems, not los niños más juiciosos [the best-behaved children].

Ironically, then, SATM may be least accessible to those at whom it is supposedly most targeted. It is hard for children to join the program and remain in it for any length of time without a modicum of family stability, support, and solvency. There are also geographical constraints: students in the higher parts of the barrio live further from the music school and are more likely to be cut off by a deterioration in the security situation. Such programs appear relatively exclusive from the perspective of the most vulnerable children in the most marginalized zones.

SATM may also be a struggle for all parties without a fair degree of prior alignment in values. One director described the difficulties of SATM work when families are not on the same page as the school:

In his work with the children he struggles with the accompaniment of the families. There is a lack of understanding of the need for a minimum of daily practice. He shares a study guide with them but they do not accompany their children. They have a conception of the school as a day-care centre. They do not bring what they need for the lessons [...]. This can be seen in the rehearsals, where the individual affects the collective. So, in the face of this lack of joint responsibility by the families, he has ended up getting cross with them, though not with their children, since the students cry and get frustrated by their failure to fulfil their commitment when they find themselves in the ensemble. (“Informe” 2017d, 43)

This director elaborated further that students from less committed families tended to hold the others back, because they ended up practising in rehearsals rather than beforehand. He described having to make the more committed students sit and wait for up to fifteen minutes while he went through the basics with the others. He did not attempt to hide his frustration. As his account reveals, symphonic training can be a challenge without the prior socialization of children into educational norms such as discipline, obedience, and commitment.

The social team also noted that its interviews with directors raised questions about the program’s ability to deal with students from more conflictive backgrounds, those with drug problems, or “those who don’t manage to settle into the dynamic of music education because they are not disciplined or do not have the musical level that characterizes the
program” (“Informe” 2017a, 117). A member of the team told me bluntly: the Red is not music therapy; it is very hard for the schools to deal with young people with serious problems. SATM is poorly equipped to serve those who do not already fit the SATM template of a “good kid” and might benefit most from a social program.

These findings suggest that SATM depends on the prior existence of the key values that it supposedly produces in order to function properly. The real dynamic appears to be in direct contrast to the official one: family values are the prime force shaping the child, and music schools rely on children arriving with such values already instilled in them and families who are willing to support students through the intensive program. As such, these programs depend on and reinforce the values, dispositions, and resources of an aspirational, committed fraction within popular neighbourhoods. Rescuing the most vulnerable and transforming lives may be the headline story but it is only a small part of the real work. There may be a widespread belief that music education serves to put children on a straight path, but the evidence suggests that the aspiration and commitment are often already there in the home, rather than being handed down from the musical gods. Contradicting the deficit ideology that underpins El Sistema, it is community social assets that keep SATM’s wheels in motion.

My argument here relates to large, iconic, high-profile programs in Latin America. There may well be parallels elsewhere: for example, Howell (2017) explores the disjuncture between narratives of hope within and around the internationally celebrated Afghanistan National Institute of Music and the despair and downward trajectory of the country outside its walls. As with El Sistema, discourses of social transformation jar with inescapable realities and limited likelihood of change, and many musicians have left. The leaders of such programs have become international celebrities on the back of their inspirational storytelling, but it is highly questionable whether their aspirations have been converted into outcomes. However, I am not claiming that SATM cannot or does not work anywhere. Rather, the evidence from El Sistema and some of its largest and oldest offshoots in Latin America suggests that we would do best to start from a position of ambivalence or skepticism rather than overly optimistic assumptions. There is no question that such programs provide many participants with opportunities for socializing
and enjoyment, and particularly when goals are framed in vague, multiple or changing ways and numbers of students are high, some aims will inevitably be achieved some of the time in some cases. But a realist account of SATM also needs to consider the many holes in the official narratives and the many students for whom such programs do not work, and to distinguish between official objectives, real dynamics, and demonstrable results.

My argument also relates specifically to El Sistema and similar versions of SATM: voluntary, non-targeted, and extra-curricular. The evidence suggests that SATM designed in this way, while bringing with it the positives of conventional music education, is unlikely to lead to the kinds of impressive social outcomes that are widely claimed. It might be that a SATM program designed and run in a different way could have a larger impact.

Ultimately, any attempt to answer the question of SATM’s efficacy will need to grapple with the looseness of the term “social” and the scale and duration of possible effects. If social action is considered quite narrowly in terms of short-term, small-scale effects on successful individuals (i.e. survivors) and their families, then a more positive evaluation might be justified. If, however, the excluded and the dropouts are considered too and longer-term effects on communities and society are sought—and it is precisely such effects that official narratives tend to claim or imply—then the picture becomes muddier. Accounts of SATM and similar programs tend to focus on individualized effects, particularly individual stories of redemption, because they are easy to capture and convey. Documentaries, in particular, usually home in on extreme cases because they make for better television, and such an approach serves programs as well, making it easier to convince politicians, funders, the media, and the general public of their value. Societal impacts, though, are much harder to measure and so are often the subject of vague, hypothetical claims. Olcese and Savage (2015, 724) strike a balance on the social potential of art: they regard “aesthetics as empowering subjectivities and identities,” allowing “innovations and the prospect of change, where change is not seen in epochal terms as an external condition of social life, but as imbricated in the everyday and routine.” This perspective suggests a more modest vision of SATM than the norm:
it keeps open the possibility of small-scale change in individual lives, but points away from grandiose discourses of social transformation.

As more research appears, the weakness of some of the more extravagant hypotheses becomes clearer, but gaps in logic may be apparent even without such research. Is it really likely that a few thousand “good kids” retreating into a bubble of classical music is going to reduce poverty, crime or violence in a city of millions? Is it really likely that an institution that does not require staff to have even pedagogical training, let alone social training, will be an educational standard-bearer and motor of social change? A glass-half-empty perspective would be that at the level of policy, such programs are really a sticking-plaster over major problems rather than a solution. A glass-half-full vision might focus more on success stories, good intentions, and efforts to do something positive for a city or community, but it would still struggle to produce convincing evidence that SATM works either for the most marginalized or for society as a whole.

**Does Music Work?**

A subsidiary question is what the role of music might be in SATM. Is it a special ingredient that brings benefits or effects that other activities do not? Or could it actually be social action through anything? The “power of music” literature provides many reasons to believe the former; but a contradictory picture may emerge from ethnographic and sociological research. It is not just a matter of doubts over the scale of the effects of SATM, but also over their source.

A striking aspect of the Red was that there were more signs of social action *around* music than *through* music. It was non-musical figures that were widely signalled as the key sources of social action: most obviously the social team, but also the teachers of corporal expression and the school administrators. The corporal expression teachers came from theatre or dance backgrounds, and they were identified by the musical staff in the 2008 internal study as responsible for delivering the program’s social component. Several interviewees, including musicians, described corporal expression as where the Red’s most interesting work took place—quite a telling remark about a music program. One corporal expression teacher reported:
You see a lot of things. The child hasn’t got their instrument but rather their body. Sometimes you see some marks that aren’t normal, that aren’t just “I fell over and scraped myself,” and they tell you: “oh Miss, my father hit me.” “Does he do it often?” “Yes!” And when we’re in these classes with the body like an open canvas, these things come out.

She was also gently critical of the Red’s music education per se: “I feel like learning music is like putting them in a little box… very rigid, very stiff.” As the students get older, “they slowly lose that capacity to play and create. They lose the ability to surprise. […] Maybe the very process in the [music] school squeezes them or boxes them in a bit.” She portrayed corporal expression as in a losing battle with the musical training: “I see them playing [music] and I don’t see any corporal expression.” She put this down to fear of being judged and of making mistakes. “Everything has to come out perfectly. Making a mistake isn’t acceptable.” She asked: “if this is a social program, why is it so important that the musical part be perfect?”

The administrators, meanwhile, played a pivotal role in the schools. They were the main intermediary between the program and the students and their families, particularly at the elementary levels. They were usually located near the entrance of the school and their roles included that of receptionist, so they greeted or said goodbye to everyone who came and went. They often engaged in long conversations with parents who were waiting or had a problem, so they tended to know everything that was
going on. Many of the schools’ social interactions pivoted around these figures. Although there were variations across schools and over time, the female administrators were often figuratively as well as literally more accessible to families (usually represented by women) than the directors, who were figures of authority, usually men, and more likely to be shut away in an office or a rehearsal. A social team report summarized the main interests of the Red’s different constituencies, and it portrayed only the administrators as focused on the social element; management, directors, teachers, and the integrated ensembles were depicted as concerned above all with musical and operational issues (*Síntesis* 2014).

A school director described the administrator as akin to the students’ therapist. She was a person to whom they could talk about their personal problems. A manager described the directors as the Red’s musical leaders and the administrators as “the social intermediaries of the program.” An administrator confirmed this view: the director takes care of the musical side, she said, and I take care of the social side. Such findings raise questions about the notion of social action as flowing through music and musicians.

When teachers reflected on their time as students in the first phase of the Red, they often identified positive experiences with socializing in the times and spaces around music-making, while the most negative comments generally focused on music-making itself (endless rehearsals, overbearing teachers, boredom or stress in the orchestra, and so on). For example, Juan, one of the program’s iconic figures, described the social aspect entirely in terms of non-musical activities: sharing food with friends, hanging out in the park after rehearsing, going on tour, even mundane activities like cleaning the school. In his account, the social equated to socializing, sharing experiences and stories, hanging out and laughing with his friends. Not once did he mention the experience of playing music together as socially formative. Music appeared as the excuse for socializing, rather than the channel through which social action flowed.

In general, musical staff had clear ideas about the values and behaviours that the Red ought to instil, but fewer about how they might be inculcated through music itself. Values such as discipline, order, responsibility, punctuality, and respect could just as well emanate from martial arts training, for example (which would also be cheaper and
simpler to teach than classical music). As the social team noted, “any discipline, practice, or study that involves a teacher-student relationship could claim the same achievements” (“Informe” 2017a, 187). There is nothing specifically musical about learning to ask permission, not interrupt, and say hello, please, and thank you. Some staff portrayed the Red as an alternative space to home and school and as fostering social relationships with a special quality, but their accounts suggested that this special atmosphere derived from having a shared and freely chosen interest more than from music itself.

This evidence from the Red complicates the popular idea of SATM’s social action as revolving around the power of music. It leaves two questions hanging: is music actually a trivial part of SATM and one that could easily be replaced by another activity? Alternatively, could music-making be reconfigured so that it boosted the social aspect of SATM—so that social action flowed through music as well as around it? Music itself seems to do relatively little work in orthodox SATM. How could it do more? This question will be picked up in Part II.

Social Change or Social Reproduction?

So far, this chapter has raised questions not about whether SATM has social effects, but rather about what those effects might be and who might be affected. While such programs have positive impacts on individual lives, there is much less evidence to support the more grandiose rhetoric that often accompanies them—in particular, discourses of social change or transformation. It is questionable how much music education can really do in the face of major social problems. But beyond this, it is worth asking whether, beneath the discursive surface, social change is even the goal of SATM, and whether music education may actually, in some instances, reinforce those problems rather than resolve them.

We return here to the ambiguity of music. Denning (2015) argues that music may serve as a force for social ordering or reordering. For Hess (2019, 50), “while musicking can potentially generate change that challenges the status quo, it can also reinscribe it.” Music education, too, may support social reproduction or transformation (Bates 2018), and in CM, “depending on the amount and type of ‘intervention’, a music teacher/practitioner could be viewed as an agent of social change or
an agent of social control” (Ansdell et al. 2020, 144). Boeskov (2019) argues that social reproduction may be as much in evidence as social transformation even in musical-social work directed explicitly at change. Which side of these binaries does SATM fall on?

Some interviewees in the Red articulated the idea that the program reproduced salient features and dynamics of the city. Medellín is known for its Cs: commerce, Catholicism, and conservatism. It became the industrial and commercial heart of Colombia in the early twentieth century. Franz (2017) traces the emergence at this time of an industrialist elite from the traditional oligarchy, which had historically embraced a paternalistic religious vision, authoritarian, hierarchical rule, and a rigorous work ethic. Hylton’s (2007) account of Medellín’s industrial culture emphasizes personalized authority, modes of domination characteristic of domestic servitude, demands for loyalty and obedience, vertical ties to *patrones* (bosses), expectations of prompt and efficient execution of orders, and an ideology of good works (the obligations of social elites to perceived inferiors). Maclean (2015) identifies traditions of clientelism and caudillo-style leadership, with authority often focused on a single (often militaristic) leader; “the patronage for which the region is famed affirms vertical power relations” (36). The parallels with orthodox SATM are not hard to spot. Both El Sistema and the Red had religious overtones in their heyday, revolved around a charismatic, patriarchal founder, and implemented a hierarchical system centered on male figures of authority and a culture of unrelentingly hard work. Culturally, classical music might be marked as different in Medellín’s barrios, but this model of music education reproduced the city’s traditional social dynamics—something that did not go unnoticed. One of the Red’s senior managers described the program as *Medellín en chiquito* (Medellín writ small), holding up as examples its conservatism, resistance to change, and tendency to formalize. Another senior figure claimed that the Red’s historical elision of the indigenous and African populations and cultures of the department of Antioquia was typical of *paisa* culture, which he described as white, Catholic, and conservative. María, a member of the social team, described Medellín as a city with a progressive surface (evident in the iconic policy of social urbanism) but ruled by conservative cultural structures at a deeper level. For her, the Red was the same. She viewed the program as part of Medellín’s
progressive façade, but, at heart, an archaic model for the modern city, particularly in relation to its gender dynamics. Daniel, one of the most critical school directors, analysed the Red’s tensions, manoeuvres, power games, and political pressures and influences, and he concluded: “it’s like Colombia in miniature.”

Such perspectives from within the Red clearly trouble a discourse of social transformation. In Medellín (as in El Sistema), we may see music education not so much transforming as mediating and reinforcing certain existing values of local society. In building El Sistema as a cult of personality around a charismatic but authoritarian leader, Abreu mirrored the dynamics of the Venezuelan political culture in which he was steeped and which has caused the country such problems in the twenty-first century. He and his approach were archetypical representatives of Venezuela’s “magical state” (Coronil 1997). That is not to say that SATM does not bring benefits and pleasures, but rather that they are accompanied by significant strains of social reproduction, and the social features that are reinforced, such as male-dominated hierarchy, often jar with the progressive image of such programs.

To break the cycle of reproduction and pursue social change would require a clear and concerted effort to critique and unlearn problematic social and cultural values and relearn new ones in their place. As Matthews (2015) argues, good intentions are not enough to prevent complicity with systemic problems; self-critical examination of beliefs and prejudices is required. Unlearning and relearning has to begin at the top, but this is not something that SATM has managed in any consistent way. The godfather of SATM, Abreu, was famously unbending, and he allowed no one to question his vision or actions. As Bull (2019, xxiii) argues, orthodox SATM draws on “the most conservative and authoritarian aspects of classical music culture” rather than “music’s potential as a form of radical critique.” One of El Sistema’s core mottos speaks volumes: “teach as you were taught.” The Red, in contrast, has made efforts to grapple with such issues. Nonetheless, critique has tended to focus on behaviours (trying to reduce negative ones like shouting and promote positive ones like listening and respect) rather than power dynamics and social structures. Without a deeper process of self-critique and change, without more profound unlearning and relearning, such programs may be destined, despite good intentions
and efforts by staff, to be limited in their transformative effects and even to perpetuate injustices.

Gender is a good example. If it is not raised as a critical issue in music education, then the gender oppression of wider society tends to be repeated (Matthews 2015), and this is what has happened in programs such as the Red and El Sistema. No amount of proclamations of social inclusion will disrupt gender inequity if patriarchy goes unmentioned and gender is not considered a relevant topic for discussion. Changing society requires challenging its rules, whether explicitly or implicitly or both. Instead, SATM has largely avoided discussing many big issues and focused on technique and performance—an approach that works well for producing skilled musicians, but that does little to alter societal dynamics. However, the Pedregal school project, mentioned in Chapter 1, provides a valuable counter-example. Students and staff at this school reflected on how perpetuating gender inequities countered the Red’s social aims, and thus took steps towards rebalancing. The seeds of unlearning and relearning had been sown.

It is instructive to return to Sarrouy’s (2018) account of an El Sistema school here:

A certain responsibility to act as a masculine figure falls on the male teachers. “With my students I try to be authoritarian and demanding, but only after establishing a relationship of trust,” explains the double bass teacher. The teachers say they feel a certain weight of parental responsibility, as an exemplary figure. They try to transmit notions of “commitment,” of “responsibility,” setting out “objectives to fulfil” for their students. (48)

This vignette sheds further doubt on attempts to link El Sistema with progressive notions such as social change and social justice. Progressivism rests—to put it in very simple terms—on the idea that society is flawed, hence the need for change. For example, progressives often regard social structures of gender and race as unfair and thus in need of transformation. This is not what we see in Sarrouy’s description. There is no questioning of parental or gender roles or hierarchical relationships. The underpinning ideology is not that social norms are problematic, but rather that they are weakened and need to be reinforced. This is classic conservatism. The mothers in Sarrouy’s study believe in
values such as discipline and responsibility, and they take their children to the music school to have such values reinforced.

Above, we saw evidence that a number of SATM programs that have been subjected to critical scrutiny cater primarily to children whose families already share its values. Social reproduction is thus the primary dynamic. SATM’s role here seems to be to channel and put on display the existing values of a particular social sector. A similar point emerges from the social team’s report on its interviews with school directors. Noting that symphonic training upholds values like discipline, commitment, and obedience, it continues: “These values appeal to some families, like the possibility of ensuring that their children fit in more easily with social norms” (“Informe” 2017a, 112). Music education appears here as a normalizing force, adapting young people to society rather than vice versa. Ironically for a program that has become a symbol of the socialist Bolivarian Revolution, conservatism runs through El Sistema, from the politics and ideology of its founder to its derivative pedagogy and limited, repetitive curriculum. As such, it makes little sense to regard orthodox SATM as a form of music education for social change.

The role of classical music once again comes into question. Conventional classical music education is designed to educate classical musicians, not to transform society, and if unchecked, it often reproduces problematic social dynamics rather than challenging them (Bull 2019). It is naïve to think that the attractive strains of classical music necessarily counter discordant social dynamics in the outside world, and there is abundant evidence to the contrary.

Another way in which classical music culture mirrors Medellín’s structural problems concerns division and violence. We have already seen ample evidence from the Red and other SATM programs of the creation of social divisions between individuals and groups as well as in-group bonding. Behind comforting discourses such as coexistence and “a big family,” we have witnessed the reproduction of standard divisions and rivalries between instrumental groups within orchestras and the mockery of standard targets. Here too, then, we can see the mixture of change and reproduction that Boeskov highlights. On the one hand, in its first phase the Red moved young people out of harm’s way and into a protective bubble, and the recollections of those involved at that time point to a focus on forging strong affective connections.
On the other hand, there is also evidence that the program fostered an “us and them” mentality and shielded children from the most extreme manifestations of violence, rather than questioning or transforming the dynamics that lay behind it.

Music is in no sense inherently counterposed to violence. Indeed, Alex Ross (2016) has examined a variety of ways in which “music is violence.” Quadros (2015, 502) notes: “Power in a choir, as in an orchestra, band, and other conducted ensembles, is constituted by a quality of authority that is almost unrivaled in any other aspect of civic life, resembling the absolute authority in the armed forces and other areas of uniformed life.” This issue is certainly not alien to music education, as Quadros makes clear. If the film Whiplash brought it to public attention in a dramatized (and rather over-dramatic) form, there is plenty of evidence and research to suggest that it is a genuine problem. Indeed, it has long been something of an open secret in classical music education, and in recent years it has become the focus of more concerted attention. Fernández-Morante (2018) has studied psychological violence in music conservatoires, while Pace (2015) has written about the increasingly visible phenomenon of sexual harassment and abuse in music education. Estrada’s (1997) external evaluation identified domination, humiliation, and bullying as features of El Sistema’s pedagogical practice. In Scripp’s (2016b) report on El Sistema, the word “fear” appears twenty-two times—surely a record for a music education article on any topic other than performance anxiety. He notes that one of Abreu’s several unflattering nicknames was the Führer—hardly a sign of a pacific approach to leadership.

Recall also members of the Red’s first generation from Chapter 2. Estefanía half-joked about “the Nazi-Venezuelan System” imported to Medellín, while Norberto claimed that staff sometimes shouted, swore, and humiliated children in front of their peers, and even “practically got the belt out.” Daniel argued that by training students in competition, the Red indirectly trained them for conflict, even though its official objective was coexistence. Competition and violence are a big problem in Colombian society, he said; we don’t need more of them, we need to foster cooperation and a peaceful society. He rejected the notion of healthy competition in music, arguing that this was a matter for sport. In short, there may have been some reflection on violence at a macro level
(in the sense of a desire to offer an alternative to the dangerous streets of the city), but at a micro level there were signs of continuity between a violent society and the Red.

The variety and geographical and temporal spread of these examples implies that violence is not an aberration in music and music education but in fact, in some cases, a constitutive element. Recall Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2013, 214) argument from the Introduction: “the orchestra sounds magnificent not despite but because of the militaristic regimes that rule how many musicians are trained.” Fernández-Morante (2018) identifies violence as almost in the genes of conservatories, with their hierarchies and imbalances of power and the veneration accorded to top teachers. He finds a fine line between the pursuit of excellence and violence, and a similarly fine line exists between violence and the discipline that is so central to such pursuit. Again, it requires more than good intentions and individual efforts to produce transformation; a thorough critique of the imbrication of violence with music, and a reflection on its permeation of the values and practices of conventional music education, would be necessary.

José spoke about suffering a crisis after eight years as a school director, when he realized that he was an archetypical “tyrannical conductor.” This crisis was triggered by a student complaint, sessions with a psychologist, and the Red’s new emphasis on the socio-affective aspect of music education. In other words, it took the confluence of three developments, all of them provoking critical reflection, to shake him out of reproducing violence rather than transforming it. José could hardly be blamed for his earlier behaviour; the tyrannical conductor is a historical norm in orchestral culture, and one that some continue to defend (Hewett 2020).

The solution to violence is not simply to flee to the opposite extreme. Harmony has often had a coercive streak throughout history (Baker 2008; 2010; 2014). Violence and conflict require resolution, not suppression or denial. Cobo’s (2015) study of group music pedagogy underlines the importance of carefully managed conflict and constructive controversy for cognitive development. Indeed, she argues that teachers should promote particular kinds of conflict in order to problematize knowledge and foster collaboration between peers. Similarly, Henley’s (2019) work with the prison program Good Vibrations is founded on the view that
conflict plays an important part in pedagogy; the facilitators thus strive to create a safe environment, allow conflict to play out, and reflect on it afterwards. Vicenç Villatoro, speaking at a public event in Medellín, put it memorably: culture is not an instrument to win a battle or a hammer to hit a nail; it is a battleground where ideas come into contact and conflict and play out. Paradoxically, then, responding to societal violence by avoiding conflict and enforcing harmony may be counter-productive, as it does not allow participants to reimagine conflict as a productive force and to learn how to deal with it constructively. The unreflecting use of music under the banner of social harmony is thus unlikely to impact significantly on violence even when it avoids reproducing it.

Violence does not just take physical form. Fernández-Morante’s study of conservatoires covers psychological and academic violence as well as physical and sexual. Matthews (2015, 240) argues: “Music educators are just as implicated in structural violence as anyone else, for it resides in their prejudices, in the way in which they see the world, and in the classifications that they impose on their students.” Some decolonial music education researchers see Eurocentric music education in Latin America as a kind of epistemic violence—a continuation of historical forms of oppression dating back to the Spanish Conquest (e.g. Rosabal-Coto 2019). Conventional approaches to music education have been critiqued through the frame of symbolic violence (Powell, Smith, and D’Amore 2017). Joabe Cavalcanti writes of “the cultural violence committed against communities in the name of development” (cited in Ramalingam 2013, 91). Music educators do not need to be tyrannical conductors or “practically get the belt out” to participate in the reproduction of violence.

Even in this realm, then, where one might expect SATM’s impact to be least ambiguous, there is evidence of complexity and contradictory effects. The 2005 evaluation found that Red students were more likely to be victims of violent crime than their peers (the authors’ hypothesis revolved around the musicians’ nocturnal movements). El Sistema’s rapid expansion in the 2000s coincided with the worsening of Venezuela’s security situation. The Venezuelan program exemplifies how violent dynamics may be perpetuated beneath discourses of peace and a utopian view of music education. There is much to reflect on here
for those interested in the employment of SATM and of music education more generally in combatting violence.

A more subtle way in which SATM participates in social reproduction is in the definition of problems. In framing the issues that it is supposed to resolve in terms of individual deficits, SATM helps to distract from structural causes such as inequality and thus serves to perpetuate them (see Baker 2016b). El Sistema’s formulation of its central problem as a lack of discipline or aspiration and “an empty, disorientated, and deviant youth” is particularly stark, but the Red’s official description, while more subtle, still points to behaviour and correction rather than the structural causes of social problems: its fundamental aim is “to generate and strengthen processes of coexistence and civic culture through the education of children and young people via the enjoyment and learning of music.”

As Boeskov (2019, 191) writes, such analyses “contribute to concealing and naturalizing the power relations upholding the status quo.” He goes on: “musical practices promote or conceal specific conceptions of the social and political reality, with consequences for how musical agents can come to understand themselves and their possibilities for action” (221). When SATM states that values education is the solution, it implies that young people’s values, rather than social structures, are the problem, and therefore limits the imagination of a different world. When SATM opts for discipline, it constrains the possibilities for action to challenge and change those structures.

In short, SATM has the potential to generate social reproduction or change or, as Boeskov argues, both at once. Greater awareness of this ambiguity can only serve those who look to SATM with hopes of social transformation.

Beliefs versus Evidence

In their study of Orquestra Geração (OG), Cruz, Mota, and Costa (2017, 78) noted: “the research team encountered fairly assertive affirmations on various occasions by OG members (nucleus coordinators and teachers) about the improvements made to the academic performances

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10 This text appeared on the Red’s homepage on 6 September 2017 (http://www.redmusicamedellin.org/).
of students when compared with other students." The researchers thus carried out a quasi-experimental study, the results of which led them to conclude: "we cannot consider that OG students turn in better academic results in comparison with other students in the same school that do not attend the orchestra" (84). The employees’ beliefs about the effects of SATM turned out to be overly optimistic.

This study, placed alongside the questions raised about social impact and social change so far in this chapter, points to a further issue in critical research on this topic. On the one hand, the evidence of significant social impact is limited and questionable, and there is considerable evidence to the contrary. On the other hand, many who work in this field believe SATM to be effective. (This is not universally the case by any means; we have seen plenty of examples of ambivalence and scepticism in the preceding chapters.) Researchers have a duty to take such views seriously, whether or not we ultimately agree with them. Yet how can we take both the research and the beliefs seriously at the same time when they are in contradiction?

The way to square this circle is to understand such beliefs as logical and common-sense. The fact that research questions these beliefs does not make them illogical or foolish. There are good reasons why SATM employees might hold them. In cases such as the Red and El Sistema, many teachers were once themselves students in the same program, and so they may regard themselves as living proof that SATM works. Their beliefs are fuelled by personal experience; but personal experience is not always a reliable guide to general truths.

In Medellín and Venezuela, I repeatedly heard musicians claim that SATM was effective on the grounds that many of their neighbourhood friends who did not enter these programs ended up getting into trouble, going to prison, or even dying. This may be true, but it does not mean that these musicians were destined for such fates before they discovered music. Personality or family influence may have determined that these individuals chose music while their friends took other paths. Music may thus be an effect rather than a cause of a different life trajectory. The problem with any individual story of redemption is that there is no accounting for pre-existing differences and no control; such stories are based on what the individual imagines they might have become without music, and they are therefore susceptible to being skewed by ideologies
of various kinds—including the commonplace notion of SATM as salvation. When a randomly-assigned control group is introduced, as in the IDB’s 2017 study, matters look quite different—and even more so if the data is re-analyzed by an independent researcher (Baker, Bull, and Taylor 2018).

The effectiveness of SATM is also right before teachers’ eyes, in the sense that they see successful students on a regular basis. The problem here (as above) is survivorship bias. In a voluntary program with a high dropout rate like the Red or El Sistema, failures tend to disappear rapidly from view while successes remain visible and become more prominent over time. It is perfectly understandable that a student who thrived in the program over a period of fifteen years would loom much larger in the mind of a teacher or a researcher than a student who struggled for a few months and left. When they consider SATM, it is perfectly logical that a teacher should think primarily of themselves and their peers who became professional musicians, rather than those (probably many more) who were less attached to the program and passed through it more fleetingly. Survivorship bias is not a personal failing, then, but it can easily lead participants to regard SATM as more successful than it is.

Survivorship bias is also a major issue in SATM research. Whatever a voluntary program of this size does, however good or bad its practices, some students will like it and others will not—and most of those who do not will leave, removing evidence of failure. Talking predominantly or entirely to survivors is likely to skew the researcher’s impression of the program. It is very hard for researchers to avoid focusing on those who are present rather than those who are not, yet dropout statistics and accounts of failure are just as important as success stories in understanding SATM. The high rates of desertion in many such programs speak volumes; but such information is ignored even by many researchers, let alone in official narratives.11

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11 Fairbanks (2019) is an exception: he notes that in the high school he studied, only a fraction of students even had the opportunity to enter the Sistema program, and an initial cohort of sixty diminished over the years to ten or fewer. In other words, “there are upwards of 50 ‘ghosts’—which incidentally amounts to five times the number of ‘successful’ high school orchestra musicians—who ultimately discontinued their participation in the orchestra programme” (177). Nevertheless, as the author acknowledges, his study focuses on the minority of survivors, not the majority of “ghosts.”
Out on the streets of Medellín, extremes of violence and the murder rate declined notably over the two decades of the Red’s existence. As a result, many people in Medellín claimed that the Red had transformed the city. However, the reality of urban renewal is more complex than this story (as we will see below). Also, the Red flourished at the same time as a wide range of other urban policies aimed at similar goals (van der Borgh and Abello Colak 2018). Without an experimental study, it would be impossible to isolate the effects of the Red from those of all the other policies, and to credit music education with any changes. Research on the arts and urban renewal in other countries gives plenty of reasons for caution over expansive claims (e.g. Belfiore 2002; Miller 2013; Lees and Melhuish 2015). Nevertheless, the Red was born with a discourse about coexistence, and the barrios have become considerably less violent since then; linking these two developments is thus a logical step.

El Sistema presents a much more contradictory picture. The program’s explosive growth and international boom were followed shortly afterwards by a decline in social conditions in Venezuela and then a full-blown national crisis. Here, the persistence of positive beliefs about SATM in the face of mounting counter-evidence points to the central role of ideology.

Beliefs in the power of music go far beyond SATM. In Latin America, idealistic views about European music and salvation date back to evangelization campaigns during the earliest days of the Spanish Conquest. They have been taken up again in recent decades by cultural institutions, the music industry, governments, and the media around the world, becoming a dominant ideology of our age. Optimistic visions of the social impact of the arts are found everywhere today, forming a central plank of funding justifications and institutional marketing. Few are aware of the negative tradition, so comprehensively has it been displaced (Belfiore and Bennett 2008).

Nor is research immune. In both hard and social sciences, the publication process is biased towards positive findings and inflates effects (Lortie-Forgues and Inglis 2019; Clift 2020). Alemán et al.’s (2017) study of El Sistema is a case in point, as discussed above. Furthermore, some scientists working on music and cognition (e.g. Schellenberg 2019; Sala and Gobet 2020) suggest that their field is prey to confirmation bias.
Despite such inflation, research studies themselves do not generally articulate grandiose statements about miracles and social transformation; rather, some point to small cognitive or psychological differences and benefits, while others do not. The two largest randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in this field found no effect of music training on cognitive or academic skills (Haywood et al. 2015; Alemán et al. 2017). But in the translation into the public realm, many caveats and limitations are ironed out, and null or negative findings are generally overlooked, since there are no organizations in whose interest it is to promote them. As Sala and Gobet (2020) note, the two major RCTs above have been paid little attention by the media or even by other researchers, even though RCT is the gold-standard methodology. More positive studies are more likely to be picked up by advocacy organizations and to lead to a report in the media, in which small-scale and specific findings often become an expansive and generalized story about the power of music (Mehr 2015; Odendaal et al. 2019). Many musicians encounter headlines, summaries, and animations of such stories on social media. As a result, there is a significant gap between the mixed findings and caution of some researchers concerning the transfer effects of music education, and the more uniformly optimistic opinion that prevails among musicians and the general public (Mehr 2014; D’Souza and Wiseheart 2018).

There is virtually no appetite for questioning the dominant narrative in the public sphere, meaning that counter-arguments are rarely heard. The classical music industry and profession have lined up behind a story that benefits and flatters them, and many classical music journalists have followed suit. Few are willing to risk arousing the wrath of music lovers by presenting less positive research conclusions to a wider public.\footnote{12 Sala and Gobet (2017) is an exception—but see also the comments below their article, which illustrate the resistance to null or negative findings on this topic.}

The ambiguous picture presented in these pages will not be a surprise to many researchers in fields such as the sociology of music education or development studies, who are used to confronting counter-effects, unintended consequences, and gaps between aims and outcomes. In the public sphere, though, ambivalence about the power of music education is a rare bird.

In sum, positive—often glowing—accounts of music’s effects are the norm and come from multiple angles. It is perfectly logical, then,
for many within SATM to hold optimistic views. However, there is a growing amount of research to suggest that such views, for all that they reflect the dominant narrative, may not be accurate as an account of the field’s social impact.

The social team makes for an interesting contrast. Its members worked full-time inside the Red, in some cases for years, so they knew the program very well. But they were not influenced by survivorship bias or dominant ideologies of music to nearly the same extent as the musicians, and as social scientists, they were trained to think critically about such questions. They reflected frequently on what many of them perceived as rose-tinted and poorly founded beliefs about music and social impact, and they often expressed scepticism over the Red’s expansive claims. Where is the evidence, they asked?

**Half a Miracle**

The event for the Harvard delegation with which this chapter began illustrated the Red’s partnership with Medellín’s Agency for Cooperation and Investment (ACI) to convey an appealing image of urban renewal for international consumption. In some ways this might appear as a logical and unproblematic quid pro quo: in return for receiving considerable funds from the city, the Red supports the municipal government and its policies. However, senior Red staff who were present at the ACI event for Harvard confided to me afterwards that they were uneasy about the way the Red was being used to “sell” Medellín and the students were required to play the role of city ambassadors. Their critical comments encouraged me to look more deeply at this arrangement.

The obligation to play a marketing role clearly demanded that the Red transmit a positive image. Consequently, the Powerpoint presentation to the visiting delegation elided the nuanced, ambivalent views of the staff who were present and the complex issues that were discussed daily, and painted an entirely rosy picture. It exemplified the simplification that goes on in the self-presentation of SATM to the outside world.

Observers should not take this kind of institutional self-publicity too seriously, since it obscures as much as it reveals about the real dynamics of the project and the surrounding society. But all too often, this is precisely what has happened with SATM: marketing discourses have been taken
up and repeated by the media, researchers, and other institutions as though they represented the whole truth. The story of El Sistema in the years around 2010 was one of a constant flow of delegations to Venezuela, where they were given a polished, carefully stage-managed, red-carpet tour (see Baker 2014) and went away convinced that the program was transforming the country and represented the future of classical music (neither of which, as subsequent events revealed, was true).

The Harvard event was thus a microcosm of the production and reception of the SATM story around the globe in recent years. It allowed me to observe the international reproduction of an idealized vision of SATM taking place in real time. A publicity narrative was conveyed to an enthusiastic audience with no easy way of assessing its accuracy and no reason or incentive to doubt it; this narrative became the truth, doubtless to be repeated back home (as happened after similar official visits to El Sistema). Meanwhile, outside in the streets, the student protests rumbled on, and in the schools, ensembles, and meeting-rooms of the Red, messy, complex reality continued unabated.

There was nothing untoward in any of this: it would make no sense to expect anything else from an event like this. No one was at fault; everyone was simply doing their job or gratefully receiving what they were offered. I would have done the same in their shoes. The story here is not about failure; it is about the idealization of SATM as part of its subservience to political and economic agendas. I knew all the adult representatives of the Red at the event quite well, and from long conversations with them I knew that they held complex and insightful views on their own work. Yet the institutional and political dynamics of the event obliged them to idealize SATM, and, through no fault of their own, to place music education in the role of promoting somewhat simplistic, utopian thinking rather than nuanced, critical reflection.

There are echoes here of Logan’s (2016) characterization of El Sistema as a cultural veil draped over the inconvenient facts of everyday life. For music educators interested in critically reflective musicianship (Johnson 2009) or critical theory more broadly, it may be somewhat disconcerting to see music education drawn into this ambiguous role, obfuscating some inconvenient social realities as it highlights more palatable ones, and serving as an ornament on urban policy rather than a provocation to think and act. Given that this was not down to individual or collective
failures, the question arises of whether music education can play both marketing and critical roles at the same time, or whether SATM in Latin America—because of its size and dependence on political patronage—is designed and destined to promote rather than question the status quo.

The issue of instrumentalization came up in my private conversations with staff after the event. This word usually appeared in the context of critiques of the utilization of students in pursuit of musical goals, but here the issue was rather the harnessing of young musicians for political and economic ends. At the Harvard event, they were used to market the Medellín Miracle to foreign visitors. Such a dynamic may seem relatively unproblematic to those who agree with the ends—in this case, presenting Medellín’s government, policies, and record of urban transformation in a positive light. But as we shall see below, there have been many informed critiques of the miracle narrative, and more importantly, there is a principle at stake here about whether music students should be treated as means or ends.

The potential dangers of such instrumentalization have become painfully apparent in Venezuela in recent years. When the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra burst onto the international scene in 2007, its populist, nationalist display was seen as a relatively harmless bit of soft power on the part of a government that had considerable international support from the Left. For the next few years, El Sistema’s showcase schools and ensembles were regularly wheeled out in polished displays for local and foreign delegations, in pursuit of funding, celebrity endorsements, political support, and positive media coverage. A decade later, such an approach looked much more problematic, as students were pressed into bolstering the Venezuelan government’s dubious human rights record, celebrating its questionable political alliances, and decorating its propaganda campaigns. El Sistema had clearly descended to the bottom rung of Hart’s ladder of participation (discussed in Chapter 3): manipulation. There are ethical questions around treating music students as pawns in an adult game, even if the pawns seem to be having fun. Venezuela illustrates that a laissez-faire attitude to such instrumentalization can lead to serious consequences.

The adult game in question in Medellín was urban renewal. Like many foreigners, I had been attracted to the city by the visible signs and effusive accounts of its urban renaissance, and particularly its
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The iconic policy of social urbanism. But shortly after my arrival, I attended a public event entitled “Medellín pa’ donde vamos” [Medellín, where are we heading?]. I was struck by the lack of complacency and indeed outright concern of the speakers and audience, who clearly believed that Medellín had a lot of work still to do. The opening keynote was given by Francisco de Roux, a Jesuit priest and leading figure in Colombia’s peace process. The “Medellín model” had been acclaimed around the world, he said, yet inequity, sexism, and racism had continued, limiting life chances for a large segment of the population. He underlined inequality as a key problem in Medellín. The city was historically Colombia’s centre of industry, trade, and capitalism, but also of paramilitaries, guerrillas, and drug bosses. Medellín had not overcome the historical trauma underpinning the city, he claimed, preferring to look away and forget rather than face up to the pain generated by violence. The result was an absence of reconciliation and solidarity and a divided society. A month later, the famous novelist and Medellín resident Pablo Montoya published a coruscating critique of the city’s supposedly miraculous transformation, also under the title of “Medellín, where are we heading?” (2017). The author portrayed the miracle narrative as little more than an illusory spell cast by hubristic city leaders, covering up a reality in which corruption, criminality, poverty, inequality, racism, paramilitary activity, child prostitution, and environmental degradation were alarmingly prevalent.

These were not exceptional views. The shine has come off the Medellín Miracle somewhat in recent years. In a Foreign Policy article entitled “Half a Miracle,” Francis Fukuyama and Seth Colby (2011) provided a more sober assessment, acknowledging the city’s recent achievements but also attributing the decline in violence to the dominance of a single crime boss, known as Don Berna. When Medellín won the Innovative City of the Year award in 2013, the mayor was obliged to admit straight away that all was not rosy, and the archbishop issued a press release that further dampened the self-congratulation by denouncing a catalogue of serious urban problems (Brand 2013). As Hylton (2007, 89) notes, “Medellín’s makeover rests on the graves of tens of thousands of its citizens.”

Researchers, too, have poured cold water on miracle stories, arguing that while the murder rate has declined dramatically over the last
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twenty years, the cause was not so much social urbanism as increased paramilitary control and shifting priorities and alliances on the part of criminal organizations, which saw economic benefit in a more pacified city (Hylton 2007; Maclean 2015). Politicians and crime bosses agreed on the need to prioritize the requirements of foreign capital and thus security. There has been a mutation and diversification in violence and criminality more than a diminution: less homicide, but more extortion and other forms of criminal activity, meaning that the declining murder rate is somewhat deceptive (van der Borgh and Abello Colak 2018). According to Tubb (2013), the city government may have implemented an array of attractive social programs (like the Red), but most have had little effect on violence or criminality. He portrays the two as simply sitting side by side, like Medellín’s stark poverty and immense wealth.

Meanwhile, social urbanism has been critiqued as a policy in the service of the local business elite, and an attractive way of avoiding the issue of inequality and income redistribution. According to Franz (2018), “the main beneficiary of [Mayor] Fajardo’s governance formula was big capital.” Maclean (2015, 3) notes that while there have been successes, “many of the policies associated with social urbanism reaffirm as much as challenge elite power and dominance.”

Social urbanism has also been portrayed as a policy to change the city’s image rather than attack underlying problems, in order to attract foreign investment and tourism. This policy was successful in some senses: it brought economic dividends (for some), and a recent survey found that one-third of visitors to Medellín came to see its urban transformation (Zambrano Benavides 2019). However, it did little to alter the sky-high levels of inequality in the city. In 2013, shortly after the eight years when social urbanism was dominant (2004–12), Colombia was reported to have the most unequal cities in Latin America, with Medellín the worst offender (Téllez Oliveros 2013). Inequality dipped a little and then rose again over the following years, and it was still rated as “very high” in 2017 (“La desigualdad” 2020). Since inequality is widely regarded as a significant cause of violence, researchers have blamed social urbanism and its successor policies for perpetuating many of the city’s troubles.

A study of the famous outdoor escalator in Comuna 13 concluded that it boosted civic pride and Medellín’s international image, but also that it addressed an ill-defined problem and had little impact on mobility
or inequalities, and so it was ineffective as a motor of social development (Reimerink 2018). Similarly, Brand (2013) argues that social urbanism appealed to Medellín’s residents, but in practice it did little to resolve the city’s problems. Localized benefits did not translate across the city as a whole. Social urbanism produced a widespread sensation of social inclusion, but very meagre material improvements. For Brand, social urbanism was primarily about image, spectacle, and marketing, and the political benefits that they brought. Franz (2017, 143) concurs: “Socioeconomic conditions in the city are far from miraculous.”

In a particularly illuminating study, Montoya Restrepo (2014) analyses the “social” in social urbanism, and she concludes that in concrete terms, behind all the hype, the policies simply enacted standard practices and basic obligations of the state. She argues that the word “social” was thus a justificatory, ideological prefix, and a strategy to bolster urban marketing (aimed internationally) and normalization and control (aimed at the local population). Behind this label, it was business as usual—in both senses of the word “business.”

The Red was part of the Medellín Strategic Plan of 1997 that sowed the seeds of social urbanism, and it was taken over by the city government early in Fajardo’s administration, when social urbanism flourished. Some of the Red’s schools found a home in the iconic new library parks, one of the policy’s signature features, and its ensembles performed in the stations of the metro, another emblem of Medellín renewed. Not only did musical and architectural change happen at the same time, but the Red also helped to populate and animate the new buildings and spaces, forming part of the symbolic transformation of the city.

The Red might be seen, then, as a microcosm of social urbanism: a half-miracle within a half-miracle. Like social urbanism, the Red is attractive, a new image of Medellín to the world, and a source of local pride and international acclaim; but as with social urbanism, there are also question marks. If Reimerink (2018, 201) argues that social urbanism created “islands of exception” within the city, there are clear echoes of the Red’s “bubbles.” Brand (2013, 14) could be describing the Red when he writes: “Vast areas remain untouched and a huge concerted and continuous effort would be required for social urbanism to extend effectively over the whole city. This only accentuates the symbolic importance of social urbanism, whose aesthetics are much
stronger than its material impacts.” Both programs are widely believed to have had a beneficial effect on the city, yet detailed research points more to positive images, beliefs, and feelings than to tangible social change for the city’s poorer inhabitants. If Medellín’s mayors have favoured “media-friendly visible interventions that convey an image of modernity” (Reimerink 2018, 192), the Red might be seen as the audible counterpart. The narratives of both the Medellín Miracle and SATM have been co-constructed and significantly boosted by ample media attention. City re-imaging, like SATM, depends on media willing to brand it a success and return to the story repeatedly, implanting a positive image in the minds of the public.

In both cases, miraculous appearances and attractive spectacles can be deceptive: behind progressive exteriors lie internal workings that are more ambiguous. Effects are mixed; positive results may not match those claimed in official discourse; causes are a matter of debate. The Red is one example of a broader phenomenon in Medellín: feel-good social policies that became world-famous despite showing modest results. They are symbolically important to the city, but it is harder to argue that they have had a significant material impact. As Maclean (2015, 123) writes in relation to Medellín’s iconic urban policies, “it is unclear that they have represented a real challenge to the shape that the city would have taken were it simply to have obeyed the needs of capital.” The effects of the Red on the city’s destiny are similarly unclear.

Did social urbanism make Medellín a better place to live? Most would agree that it did. But I found far fewer residents inclined to self-congratulation. As Maclean notes, the image makeover was more believable to foreigners than locals. Love for their city did not preclude widespread criticism by its inhabitants; Medellín continued to be more complicated than the miracle story would suggest. Much the same could be said about the Red.

Performing the Medellín Miracle

The event for the Harvard delegation illustrated how the Red serves, among many other things, as a tool of urban marketing, aimed both inwards and outwards. With its frequent conciertos de ciudad [city concerts] and performances in urban spaces such as parks and the metro, the Red
is part of Medellín’s ceremonial apparatus: a presentation of a particular image of the city, to the city, funded by the city. Urban development inspired by the Barcelona model has an important component of spectacle (Brand 2013), and music may be seen as playing a part in Medellín’s performance of urban renewal. How better to present the city reborn than displaying a large group of young people playing in harmony? What better spectacle of development?

As its slogan “The New Image of Medellín to the World” suggests, the Red has also taken pride of place in a wider program of city reimaging for external consumption. Juan Guillermo Bedoya, the mayor’s director of communications from 2008–09, said: “any society that transforms itself needs symbols,” and he spoke of visitors to Medellín “taking away the image of a city renewed” (“Medellín” n.d., 210). Since its early days, the Red has been pressed into service as a symbol to support this image. It is not just lives that the program is intended to transform.

The theme of narrating the city—of telling a new story or constructing a new imaginary—was ubiquitous during my time in Medellín, particularly in public debates and discussions at cultural events. It was a central pillar of the Red’s tour to the US in 2018, with its city portrait composed by the students. At government level, the main aim of this reimaging has been to boost foreign investment and tourism; it is thus significant that the organizer of the Harvard event was the ACI—the Agency for Cooperation and Investment. The connection between the arts and tourism was made clear in 2018 with the creation of the municipal program Ciudad de artistas [City of Artists], which was aimed explicitly at using the arts to make the city more attractive to foreign visitors. Thompson (2009, 26) suggests that applied arts practitioners should always ask: “Which show are we part of?” The Red’s musicians were part of the Medellín Miracle show.

However, as noted above, Medellín’s urban policies have attracted sustained criticism from researchers for perpetuating urban problems. “Selling” Medellín’s urban renewal internationally is not therefore a neutral or uncontroversial activity from a political or economic perspective. In playing a symbolic supporting role in relation to urban policies with mixed effects, the Red might be seen as occupying an ambiguous position. If the “new image” that Medellín has projected to
the world in recent years is at least partly deceptive, where does that leave the Red?

Then there is the thorny question of the Red’s imbrication with promoting investment. Franz (2017) provides an illuminating analysis of the ACI. This agency promotes Medellín not only as a destination for foreign direct investment but also as a flexibilized labour market, offering investors a city where workers have low wages, long hours, and few benefits. Yet flexibilization can have negative impacts on labour productivity (not to mention quality of life). The agenda that the ACI pushes is focused on “economic activities in the service sectors that either remain at the low-productivity end of the value chain or are skill-intensive tradable services that cannot generate much employment for the vast majority of Medellín’s unskilled labor force” (139). This agenda serves mainly the interest of the city’s capitalist class, and it has contradictory effects on economic development. The city’s overall economy has grown, but because this growth is concentrated in service industries, it contrasts sharply with high unemployment and underemployment rates and increased precariousness of working conditions. For a music education program to partner with the ACI and support such an agenda raises obvious concerns—all the more so a program with a social objective and aimed primarily at the popular classes, who generally experience the most negative effects of such policies.

There are various ways to view the Red in the context of wider urban policy. One might regard it as one facet of an externally-directed policy of urban re-imaging. Or one might see the Red as just one of a vast array of public policies and programs in Medellín, and note that cultural policies often contrast with the wider economic and security program of the state in Colombia. Ochoa Gautier (2001, 379) describes “an exacerbation of extremes—implementation of democratization processes through cultural policy or other administrative and legal procedures, coupled with neoliberalization and escalation of armed conflict.” During the year that I spent in Medellín, the government of Mayor Federico Gutiérrez placed a higher emphasis on security than his predecessors, and rising levels and perceptions of violence suggested that this policy was not working well. There was something of a contradiction between the Red, which sought peaceful coexistence through education and culture, and the more reactive, hard-line approach to security of the government
that funded it. How to understand the role of the Red in this picture? Was it supposed to help mitigate the effects of tougher urban policies, giving back with the left hand what the right had taken? Or was it an attractive smokescreen for those policies—a cultural veil, in Logan’s terms? If the city’s security situation was worsening, then should the Red be seen as compensating for this decline, masking the problem, or simply ineffective?

The role of the arts in urban renewal is contested, and behind the positive official rhetoric, many scholars have critiqued their use as a handmaiden of neoliberal capitalist development (e.g. Berry, Slater and Iles 2009; Lees and Melhuish 2015; Mould 2015). Music education as marketing for urban renewal is thus an ethically and politically complex phenomenon, as ambiguous as the policies that it supports. Sachs Olsen (2019, 175) offers an alternative vision: one of socially engaged art that questions and fosters debate rather than “decorat[ing] urban space as part of a wider city-branding strategy.” The comparison with the Red is illuminating.

Critical scholarship on social urbanism and the role of the arts in urban renewal illustrates the importance of a sceptical attitude towards supposed miracles, and, in encouraging caution about grandiose claims, it provides a valuable pointer to observers and researchers of SATM. It underlines that attractive-sounding policies and programs may not have the effects that are claimed for them, and that even when positive effects are observed, their causes may be quite different. This literature points up the weaknesses in the commonplace argument that the Red was created, the murder rate went down, ergo music education is an effective social solution. The causes of pacification identified by scholars have little to do with uplifting areas like culture and education, which feature prominently in official narratives of social urbanism, and more with obscure negotiations in the city’s dark underbelly. The wealth of ambivalent scholarship on the Medellin Miracle supports a similar take on the Red.

Montoya Restrepo’s analysis of social urbanism, in particular, is highly pertinent to SATM. Both phenomena have developed idealistic discourses and been heavily boosted by the national and international media, but up close, SATM, too, looks rather like the state fulfilling a basic obligation: in this case, to make artistic education available to
young people. In Venezuela, the social discourse emerged long after the creation of El Sistema, also as a justificatory, ideological prefix; and Montoya Restrepo’s argument that in Medellín’s social urbanism it signalled marketing (aimed internationally) and normalization and control (aimed at the local population) is an uncannily accurate description of the Venezuelan music program. Behind the social label, El Sistema too was business as usual: the program continued to deliver the same conventional music education that it had always done, based on models dating back centuries; and Abreu secured a starring role for El Sistema in the international classical music industry, vigorously commercializing SATM with the help of agents, promoters, festivals, concert halls, and a leading record label. Montoya Restrepo (2014, 218) critiques the view that “the only way to include those who have been traditionally marginalized is one thought up from outside, a vision that reproduces the way of inhabiting the city imposed by foreign models.” Much the same point could be made about a vision of social inclusion based on the European symphony orchestra.

The warm, fuzzy word “social” served, in El Sistema as in social urbanism, as an ornament on neoliberal thinking. In both cases, grandiose claims were made about the efficacy of the measures before any attempt to evaluate them. When such research eventually appeared, it poured cold water on many of the claims—yet it did little to loosen the hold of the well-established miracle story on the public imagination.

Medellín: Creative City

A final illustration of the ambiguity of the Red concerns the issue of creativity. This was a central focus of the new proposals under Giraldo’s leadership and was championed by the pedagogical coordinator, Franco. While we have seen the practical obstacles in the Red, the logic behind making music education (and SATM in particular) more creative is strong, and there is a wealth of research to support such a move. Whether one looks from a musical, social or cognitive perspective, the benefits of creativity at an individual level are compelling.

The invitation to the Red to perform at the launch event for “Medellín: Creative City” in 2019 thus made perfect sense. Yet this event had only a tenuous relationship to creativity in the sense that Franco invoked it
(musical composition and improvisation). It was a business meeting, organized by the chamber of commerce and launching a creative economy strategy for the city. The focus was squarely on culture as an economic resource. Music and other scenic arts found themselves grouped under the heading of a “business tourism cluster.”

The use of the Red to adorn the launch of a creative city policy raises similar questions to the Harvard-ACI event. There is a wealth of scholarship critiquing the concepts of the creative city and the creative economy (e.g. Berry Slater and Iles 2009; Pratt 2011; Mould 2015; Stevenson 2017), on both ideological grounds (as an expression of neoliberal urban development) and practical ones (as producing mixed or downright pernicious effects on cities). So there are good reasons to think that this strategy might not be a magic bullet for Medellín. On one level, the Red’s concert was simply another performance at another city event—a bread-and-butter activity; but on another level, the Red was drawn in as a support act for a much-questioned neoliberal ideology. In adopting creativity as a central discourse, then, the Red had sailed inadvertently into murky waters.

Ironically, the Red has little to do in its everyday practices with the creative economy. Indeed, one of the internal criticisms was precisely that it was too disconnected from the local music industry, and there was actually little effort in the program to promote entrepreneurialism or skills for the music business. Yet the Red was easily co-opted for marketing purposes and used to provide an attractive face for a complex, questionable policy, putting an auditory gloss on neoliberal urban development.

The convergence of music education and urban policy on the issue of creativity might be seen as another example, alongside citizenship, of what Dagnino (2007) calls a “perverse confluence.” It further illustrates that SATM is not a neutral bystander, nor does it operate in a separate, autonomous realm; it is closely bound to the dominant social, economic, and political order, whatever the beliefs and localized actions of individuals within it. Thinking about SATM in this way helps to explain why it has received such support from governments in a number of Latin American countries. As ever, this is clearest in Venezuela, but in Medellín, too, the Red has propped up the dominant urban narrative: co-opted into international marketing, promoting government policy,
and appearing in a local publicity campaign for the mayor’s office in 2018. The Red’s external effects are thus as ambiguous as its internal dynamics: it has been utilized to symbolize and perform a debatable conception of the city (the Medellín Miracle) and a debatable urban policy (the creative city).

Creativity encapsulates both the potential and the risks of SATM (and of culture more generally) in the neoliberal city. Creativity may be admirable in an individual musician or an ensemble, yet also more questionable when placed at the heart of urban policy. What works well at a micro level may be more dubious when it becomes a structuring principle at a macro level. Furthermore, as Kanellopoulos and Barahanou (2021, 150) argue, the radical potential of creative arts education is easily neutralized when it is instrumentalized within an ideological and political framework that views creativity as fostering an entrepreneurial attitude to work and life and “as a survival strategy in an uncertain neoliberal world.”

Creativity holds out the possibility of freedom and the new; yet it is also a core ideology of contemporary capitalism, and it has become a cover for poorly paid and increasingly precarious labour. Creative music education could form critical citizens who imagine alternatives to the status quo; but it could also prepare young people for an uncertain existence as workers of the creative economy. Creativity could become a tool of subtle subversion (Mould 2015); but it could also become a support act for the dominant urban agenda. What is clear is that creativity, like citizenship, is a double-edged sword.

Conclusion

The fundamental question of whether SATM works looks even harder to answer now that we have zoomed out from the micro-social and community levels to effects at a larger scale. Boeskov (2018) draws on Georgina Born’s theory of four planes of sociality to explain how musical-social work may have multiple and contradictory effects simultaneously: “social music making that at one level allows for a transgression of some confining aspects of the social experience of its participants may at the

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13 See also Kanellopoulos 2015.
same time also potentially reinforce other parts of the social formation in ways that may not serve the interest of the people involved” (94). Bull (2019) identifies a similar contradiction within youth classical music in the UK: those she studied often found enjoyment, a sense of identity, and a social scene, yet within a cultural and institutional context that reproduced gendered and classed structures of domination. Arts-led urban regeneration shows a comparable disjuncture: the arts may have positive local effects, yet “those effects may be peripheral to the underlying structural facts of economic restructuring and deployed simply to mask the realities of social displacement” (Lees and Melhuish 2015, 252). Critics of “artwashing” point out that artistic projects may generate pleasure while also contributing to gentrification. There is a clear pattern here: the arts may produce positive effects on one plane while concealing and reinforcing structures of inequality on another. Furthermore, the very pleasure that participation induces may enable that concealment.

There is no question that the Red has many positive aspects. Plenty of children derive enjoyment and benefit from studying within the program. However, serious analysis cannot stop here (and not only because of the problem of survivorship bias). The Red is also connected to urban reimaging in pursuit of foreign investment and tourism and to a creative city strategy, and such policies produce more questionable results on a different plane to students socializing and enjoying themselves. The program is implicated at the macro level in the reproduction of the problems that it is meant to resolve at the micro level.

Boeskov’s adoption of Born’s model helps us to understand that SATM may generate both positive and negative effects, both change and reproduction, at the same time. It is not just that there is little evidence of micro-level benefits rippling out to the macro level; it is also that the levels may actually be in contradiction. SATM may produce localized benefits for some participants while also supporting dynamics and policies that have more dubious impacts at urban and societal levels. The question then arises, to what degree should micro-level benefits for individuals be offset by macro-level drawbacks? How to weigh up a group of happy students in a classroom against urban policies that maintain inequality? How do socializing and pleasure stack up against coloniality, conservative gender norms, or hierarchical conceptions of
culture and society? It may be tempting to focus on the more obvious and immediate benefits rather than the longer-term, more diffuse structural downsides. But El Sistema’s most vociferous critics, like the pianist Gabriela Montero, have argued that it has helped to whitewash a government that has had a disastrous effect on Venezuela. In this view, the benefits that some individuals within the program may have accrued are outweighed by its collaboration in the downward trajectory of the country as a whole. One of the many complicating issues in SATM is that what serves one small portion of society (participants and their families) may not serve society as a whole.

Considering SATM as operating on multiple levels simultaneously is something that many observers and researchers have failed to do sufficiently. Focusing on immediate impressions and ignoring or downplaying the structural and political planes has led to a proliferation of overly optimistic assessments, though there is now also a body of more critical studies that focus on those levels and offer a counterweight. Still, writing on SATM lags behind research on Medellín’s urban renewal, in which the gap between a miraculous social narrative and more complex reality is now well recognized. With regard to SATM, many are still entranced by one part of the story. To be properly understood, SATM needs to be both observed closely and studied from a structural or political angle. That is not to say that every analysis needs both; however, the field needs both if interested readers are to gain a balanced picture of SATM, in all its complexity and ambiguity. Understanding the role of culture in urban renewal requires this kind of two-pronged or multi-planed approach.

Where Medellín differs from other places that have co-opted culture into urban reimaging is that its dominant, official narrative is not simply that culture makes the city a more vibrant or attractive place, but rather that it has overcome violence and renewed the city. The arts are presented as a transformative agent. Music has a particularly prominent role in stories of urban renewal in Medellín. Alongside the Red, there are innumerable media reports that have taken the hip-hop collectives Kolacho and 4ESkuela as drivers of the Medellín Miracle. Yet numerous scholars argue that social urbanism was espoused by the city’s elites

14 Kozak Rovero (2018) and Esté’s (2018) criticisms of Abreu as complicit in Venezuela’s decline are somewhat analogous.
primarily for economic reasons and has served to perpetuate their
dominance over and distance from the majority of their fellow citizens.
Young musicians’ participation in this narrative of culture overcoming
violence is therefore not without its ambiguities. Those who benefit
most from the image of a harmonious, culturally vibrant city are not
necessarily those who participate in community arts programs, but
rather those involved in the worlds of business and tourism. If this
image has contributed to the maintenance of high levels of inequality,
if it promotes Medellín as a flexibilized labour market and destination
for foreign investment, it may actually constrain the very communities
whose youth participate in its construction. Nevertheless, it is a narrative
that appeals to all parties. Many people in Medellín believe that the Red
has worked wonders, and it suits many people to believe so. Still, there
are good reasons to believe only in half-miracles.