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

Rethinking Social Action Through Music

Following on from his groundbreaking study of Venezuela’s El Sistema, Baker offers a courageous and unsettling exploration of Social Action Through Music. It is a profound and lively examination of this important as well as complex issue. Wide-ranging in its analysis, honest, and wise, it is indispensable reading for all those interested in the discussion around the social impact of making music.

Baker deftly unravels the complex and sometimes contradictory strands in the 25-year history of this flagship project. He then uses his analysis as a springboard for grounded reflection on what truly socially effective music programmes could look like. This book will be an important resource for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

This ground-breaking book examines the development of the Red de Escuelas de Música de Medellín (the Network of Music Schools of Medellín), founded in Colombia’s second city in 1996 as a response to its reputation as the most dangerous city on Earth. Inspired by the Venezuelan program El Sistema, the Red is nonetheless markedly different: its history is one of multiple reinventions and a continual search to improve its music education and better realise its social goals. Based on a year of intensive fieldwork in Colombia and written by the author of El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela’s Youth (2014), this volume offers fresh insights on the past, present, and future of Social Action Through Music and its evolution in both scholarship and practice.

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The third step of social justice-oriented research is “to understand the obstacles, possibilities and dilemmas of transformation” (cited in Wright 2019, 217). A central theme of this book is complexity, and, indeed, the path of change is not straightforward. If the previous chapter focused on potential areas for growth, here I pay attention to some obstacles to transformation. There are also more conceptual or philosophical dilemmas that complicate an optimistic view of reforming SATM.

Obstacles to Change

2006 saw the release of the influential El Sistema documentary *Tocar y Luchar* and the first of a wave of glowing reports on the Venezuelan program in the UK press (e.g. Higgins 2006). In 2007, the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra (SBYO) burst onto the international scene with its Proms debut in London, and in 2008, CBS News broadcast the landmark 60 Minutes film “El Sistema: Changing Lives through Music.” This was the watershed period when SATM became a global phenomenon.

Yet in these same years, the Red produced substantial internal reports revealing significant problems with this model. Over the subsequent decade, as influential supporters proclaimed El Sistema to be a miracle and SATM spread across the globe, the Red grappled with the challenge of putting those problems right. The Red thus generated a counter-narrative that might have checked the euphoria sweeping the global North, but it was never made public. As I researched El Sistema in 2010–11 and discovered the gulf between image and reality, I had no idea that such problems had been known about for five years across the border in Colombia and that efforts were already underway to address them. Similarly, I had no idea that Estrada and Frega had produced
critical reports on El Sistema as far back as 1997, since this research, too, had remained unpublished (see Baker and Frega 2018). When I began my fieldwork in Medellín in 2017, I did not know that my research had been preceded by a decade of internal reports about the flaws in SATM. My understanding—like that of so many others around the world—was hamstrung because significant information that already existed did not circulate at all. This book is in large part an attempt to bring this history of (self-)critique and change out into the open so that we do not have to keep reinventing the wheel.

Public Debate and the Circulation of Knowledge

Abreu’s power over the music sector, zero tolerance for criticism, and vindictive streak meant that frank public discussion of El Sistema’s issues was severely constrained in Venezuela (Baker 2014), and his attitude—“we don’t have problems”—set the tone for SATM’s public face. Furthermore, the predominance of positive narratives about the social impact of the arts today means that external pressure for change is weak. There are few influential voices pushing for critical re-evaluation of the field. Even where changes are afoot, problems are barely mentioned. There is much talk of great new work, much less of what was wrong with the old work. There are increasing signs of distancing from El Sistema’s model, as noted in the previous chapter; but the value of the brand to the field, the power of the Venezuelan program internationally, and a sense of allegiance and historical debt are such that there is real reluctance to discuss this process publicly.

Pledging allegiance to the El Sistema brand while shifting to more progressive approaches may be a sensible strategic and educational decision, but it has the downside of sending a public message of continuity rather than change. The framing of such work as “El Sistema-inspired” and the public avoidance of critical issues perpetuate the dominance and reproduction of the old model, even as it is being reformed or replaced in some places. Most ESI websites paint an excessively optimistic picture of El Sistema and some also disseminate inaccurate information about the Venezuelan program, serving in effect to market a problematic model rather than encourage critical reflection about it.
Consequently, those at greater distance who are not already on board with self-critique and change may get little sense that it is an important and necessary process. Whatever moves may have occurred in thinking and practice in some places, the lack of a clear, explicit critique of orthodox SATM means that many others continue down lines that have changed little for decades, even centuries. Public discourse has remained largely the same, and institutional publicity, press reports, and social media commentary on SATM continue much as before. Any changes have not been widely grasped, much less what has been left behind or why. This lack of clarity over continuity and change constrains the development of the field.

The degree of awareness of critical reassessment and change is low in many places. In Colombia, I came across few people who knew in detail what was going on in other SATM programs within the same country, let alone in Buenos Aires, Los Angeles, or Toronto. El Sistema continues to be influential across Latin America in part because its brand name and narrative continue to circulate far more widely than critiques or transformations. To some researchers, critiquing El Sistema in 2021 might seem like flogging a dead horse, but the horse is still alive and kicking in many parts of the world, particularly in the spheres of government, institutions, industry, and the media.

At the heart of the matter is the contrast between private and public debate. I have met a number of SATM leaders and employees around the world who are willing to engage in private critical conversations, but whether as a result of institutional pressure to toe the line or the advantages of adopting SATM’s idealistic rhetoric, such critique rarely makes its way into the public realm. The ecosystem of SATM incentivizes public allegiance to the field’s orthodoxy rather than open questioning, and this serves as an obstacle to change. More public debate over critical issues therefore is vital. If reformers make more noise about their work and foster more public awareness of shifts that are underway, the pace of change in SATM will inevitably pick up.

Open exchange between SATM and progressive music education research has also been the exception rather than the norm. In recent years, representatives of SATM programs have been thin on the ground at fora such as the International Society for Music Education’s (ISME) El Sistema Special Interest Group or the Social Impact of
Making Music (SIMM) conferences, and critical researchers an even rarer sighting at El Sistema advocacy events. The main publication of the ESI field, *The Ensemble*, focuses on music education and social action, but it has ignored most peer-reviewed research on SATM and overlooked swaths of relevant work on CM, social justice in music education, and the sociology and philosophy of music education. Change would be considerably aided by more knowledge of and communication with such fields, where ideas and practices that are central to SATM have been under discussion for many years. André Gomes Felipe, the director of Liberdade school and architect of the NEOJIBA concert described in Chapter 5, is also a researcher who has presented his work at ISME and SIMM conferences; it is no coincidence that a musician who keeps abreast of research in these fields is doing such interesting work within SATM.

Similar problems are also found within the research sphere, however, where a disturbing number of SATM studies fail to take much (if any) account of peer-reviewed critical scholarship. Some qualitative researchers have looked carefully at quantitative studies of El Sistema (e.g. Logan 2015b; Scruggs 2015; Baker 2017a; Baker, Bull, and Taylor 2018), but the reverse has not occurred. Other qualitative scholars, meanwhile, appear barely aware of the field of music education research. This tendency to ignore or dismiss rather than engage critically with existing studies has marred the sub-field of SATM research. Here, too, more open debate is called for: researchers have a professional duty to respond to each other’s evidence and arguments, rather than acting as ships passing in the night.

It is not just that information fails to circulate; in some cases, its circulation is actively impeded. Research with ambiguous findings or critical conclusions is systematically ignored. Govias (2015b) has even written about censorship in the ESI sector.1 In several countries, major stakeholders—institutions, governments, prominent figures in classical music, journalists, and even some researchers—have combined forces to cherry-pick findings, repeat unfounded claims, and overlook counter-evidence (Baker 2018). As such, they have colluded in promoting a

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6. Challenges

deceptive narrative of success. Rimmer (2020) describes In Harmony Sistema England as “too big to fail,” and he notes that the national press repeatedly presented the program as a success on the flimsiest of grounds but then ignored an independent, three-year evaluation report that found no positive effects on participating children’s attainment, attendance or wider wellbeing. Rimmer suggests that vehement advocacy for In Harmony, particularly by the media, marginalized reasoned reflection on its mixed outcomes.

In short, change and knowledge of change have been constrained by a lack of commitment to the circulation of ideas by the SATM sector and its supporters. Recall a point from Chapter 4: culture is a battleground where ideas come into contact and conflict and play out. If SATM continues to avoid this process, its development will continue to be hampered. Suppression of critique and debate may have provided short-term gains in terms of public image, but over the longer term this is a dangerous game for any organization or field to play, let alone one that proclaims guiding principles such as inclusion, equity, and a spirit of inquiry.

Higher Music Education

Alongside this impediment to transformation lies the problem of musicians’ professional training, which was a central issue in Medellín. How were new pedagogies to be put into practice if the training of teachers in universities remained largely the same? How were teachers to impart creative skills when many had been through a conservatoire-style education that Peerbaye and Attariwala (2019, 44) call “training out of creativity” (see also Waldron et al. 2018)? How were teachers to promote social justice and avoid perpetuating injustices if they had not been trained to reflect on the social and political aspects of music learning and teaching (Rusinek and Aróstegui 2015)? How were they to take decolonizing steps when they came from a higher education profoundly structured by coloniality (Silva Souza 2019)? This was a huge challenge for the Red. Identifying productive directions was one thing; working out how to pursue them, and who would enact them, was another. It was not just that the program now had an accumulated history, a momentum, and a musical track record; there was also the challenge of
finding teachers with more relevant training, capable of implementing new pedagogies. The Red offered professional development activities, but this was a slow route to reform.

Change in SATM cannot progress far as an independent process; it needs to go hand in hand with reforms in higher music education. As Peerbaye and Attariwala (2019, 42) argue in relation to orchestral culture: “Music faculties and conservatories hold a key to change.” There is increasing recognition of the importance of a shift in higher music education (e.g. Gaunt and Westerlund 2013), but actual movement has been slower. In Latin America, higher music education has been profoundly shaped by the European conservatoire model, and in many places it remains that way; unless there is a greater shift in emphasis away from preparation for classical performing careers and towards training teachers for musical-social work, efforts to reshape SATM will be hamstrung. In Medellín, if music degrees were more connected to the musical realities of the city, and if local universities introduced a SATM stream (an entirely logical step, given how many of their graduates go on to work in the Red), then music graduates would be better placed to prepare the next generation for social life and musical work.

Countries such as the UK, Canada, and Finland offer undergraduate degrees in community music, but there is no equivalent for SATM. Nevertheless, such degree programs may point to what focused SATM teacher training might look like. Also suggestive is Zamorano Valenzuela’s (2020) study of the training of activism-oriented music teachers in a public Chilean university. It depicts the formation of critical, reflexive subjects, with a view to social transformation and not just technical training. Lessons include citizenship education, practices of democratic coexistence, and conflict resolution. Student teachers are encouraged to connect with social movements and mobilizations, which are seen as spaces of learning. In short, the music teacher’s role is understood as a political one, and trainee teachers are pushed to question and if necessary invert the norms of their own earlier music education. Graduates of such a program would be well prepared for SATM work.
Resistance to change was another significant brake in Medellín. It was linked to the dual spectre of the past and musical excellence. El Sistema and the Red in its Venezuelan phase set the bar high in musical terms: the SBYO became the gold standard for SATM programs, and excellence became equated with high-quality performances of canonic orchestral repertoire. El Sistema also propagated the notion of a “miracle,” the musical equivalent of “having it all”: that single-minded pursuit of musical excellence also produced astonishing social results. Research has revealed this miracle to be a myth, but it still exerts a significant pull on the field. Many teachers were educated within this ideology, and it is one that suits the keenest and most talented students—the ones who are most likely to remain over the long term. Consequently, these large, Latin American “social programs” are judged primarily according to conventionally-defined standards of musical excellence, and no alternative form of assessment—based on criteria such as inclusivity, creativity, or student voice—has gained wide acceptance.

However, such excellence depended on an extraordinary level of time commitment, a limited vision of social action as widening access, and a militaristic disciplinary regime sometimes characterized as bordering on the abusive, and as such, it set a problematic precedent. Softening those aspects is an obvious step for a program that wishes to take the social side more seriously, but as the Red has discovered over the years, it has musical repercussions. Shifting the balance between the musical and the social means shifting from more to less obvious results—ones that cannot necessarily be presented as a quasi-professional performance on stage. Change might mean improvements in a variety of areas (such as students enjoying better treatment and a more balanced life), but with decreased intensity goes decline in the performance level of the showcase orchestra. A transforming SATM cannot compete with El Sistema on the terrain of conventional measures of excellence. Although there have been some interesting innovations, there is nothing that can be compared with the SBYO in terms of performance level, and considering the peculiarity of that orchestra—its politician-conductor, its huge resources, its unmatched work rhythm—perhaps there never will be.
According to the field’s conventional standards, then, change leads to decline. Numerous musicians in the Red, particularly the old guard, believed that more social action meant lower musical standards, as discussed in Chapter 2. It is hardly surprising that a shift towards a more socially-focused SATM might be resisted or at least not embraced by musicians if it came in such a guise. As long as the SBYO and similar orchestras are held up as the gold standard for SATM, it is hard to see the field moving as quickly or comprehensively as it might. As long as barnstorming, high-quality performances of great orchestral works continue to be seen as an exemplar of social action and the principal measure of success, attempts to generate more inclusive, diverse, creative, and participatory music education are liable to be seen by many as failures—or, at least, as less appealing.

In Medellín, I found a number of the first generation caught in limbo between nostalgia for the Red’s earlier achievements and recognition that they were gone. They knew that the conditions that supported the first phase no longer existed, but they still lamented a decline in passion, dedication, and sense of belonging. El Sistema was the model of the past for the Red and everyone knew it, whether or not they were happy about it; but romanticization of that past by some staff meant that it still acted as a brake on change. The notion of a “golden age” in the past, of a historical essence tied up with a conventional conception of musical excellence, was one obstacle to envisioning a different future.

Desire for continuity with the orthodoxy of SATM, or resistance to new approaches, may be found at all levels of programs, including students, staff, and management. But there are also systemic and external forces to take into consideration. Institutions have a habit of creating their own momentum or inertia, which goes beyond the interests or desires of individuals within them. In large, longstanding programs, the practical and bureaucratic obstacles to change can be significant, and if a program is perceived to have worked—as is the case with many of the large SATM programs mentioned in this book—then the pressure and motivation to innovate may be limited, even when individuals understand that there are issues that ought to be addressed.

It is also important to consider the level above the leadership—the funders, politicians, parent institutions, and so on. The Red’s trajectory is closely related to its funding by the city government. If the program
embraced critical reflection and change from 2005, it was because the
government did the same. During my fieldwork, the culture ministry
funded critical, qualitative research in all the city’s arts education
networks. Also, the Red is not attached to an organization like a
symphony orchestra or concert hall, and it does not have a direct publicity
or strategic role for the professional music sector. Rather, it is one facet of
the cultural policy of Medellín, and the city’s cultural plan for 2011–20
focused on democratic cultural citizenship, emphasizing participation,
inclusion, diversity, creativity, and critical reflection. There was nothing
coming down from the funder about defending classical music or the
symphony orchestra; in fact, the policy pointed towards a very different
approach to music education than the model that the Red had inherited
from El Sistema. Change therefore made sense in Medellín; it was
supported by the political and institutional context. But if the funder’s
top priority is an attractive “success story”—if the program is intended
to support a professional symphony orchestra or burnish the image of a
powerful figure—then the space to reflect critically and pursue change
may be significantly reduced.

Resistance to reform in SATM may therefore take several forms and
operate on several levels—individual, institutional, ideological, and
systemic. The poor circulation of information is certainly a contributory
factor, but stasis and a lack of public critical reflection are not simply a
matter of individual choice; they are also structural features of the field.
What keeps the wheels of many organizations and of the whole sector
turning is an idealistic narrative about the power of music and, more
specifically, a mythical tale of its foundational program, El Sistema.
Reputations and funding are tied to such stories. How much room for
manoeuvre do individuals or even organizations really have, unless
those holding the purse strings, like Medellín’s culture ministry, grasp
the need for change?

El Sistema

Another drag on reform is El Sistema itself, which has always taken an
expansionist approach but has also consistently been sought out by other,
more recently founded programs. It may have lost its direct influence
over the Red, but it has played an important role in the development of
the Red’s competitor program, Iberacademy. Many SATM programs in Latin America retain close ties with the Venezuelan progenitor, and since El Sistema is a program characterized by continuity, such ties are hardly conducive to self-critique and change. Some SATM programs have grasped the importance of adapting with the times, yet they are tethered to a slow-moving mothership that has barely changed its thinking since the 1970s. The SATM field has thus been caught between the shifting currents of music education and the stasis of its original inspiration and most influential representative, meaning that its movement has been halting and uneven.

Dudamel’s YOLA program in Los Angeles is a case in point. Its recent symposia have seen invitees discussing favoured progressive themes such as power, voice, social justice, and race. At the 2020 edition, YOLA invited some speakers from outside SATM to address contemporary topics including equity, culturally responsive programming, and youth development. Lecolion Washington of the Community Music Center of Boston spoke of amplifying youth voice, criticized the approach of teaching as you were taught, and questioned the notion that one could change the system without changing one’s own mindset. Echoing a central theme of this book, he stated: “You can’t just change your tactics, you need to change your thinking.” He also argued for rethinking Eurocentrism, using terms such as “cultural suicide” (what “young BIPOC often feel when entering music learning spaces that have long been dominated by White culture”) and a “white saviourist frame.” He named systemic exclusion within music education, and suggested that changing only one’s tactics may lead to maintaining an exclusive space, just one with more women and people of colour in it. Two other invitees, Eryn Johnson (Community Art Center) and Laurie Jo Wallace (Health Resources in Action), focused on Creative Youth Development and emphasized young people’s capacities and strengths and the importance of creativity and criticality in learning. They presented a slide on levels of youth participation that was very similar to Hart’s ladder of participation, discussed in Chapter 3.

What was remarkable here was not so much the presenters’ arguments (which were excellent but also quite standard for

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progressive arts education) as the elephant in the room: El Sistema—the program behind YOLA—embodies all of the problems that the speakers pinpointed and none of the solutions. Creative Youth Development is not simply an interesting addition to the SATM toolkit; it is the polar opposite of El Sistema’s vision of “rescuing children and young people from an empty, disorientated, and deviant youth.” Washington’s focus on equity contrasts starkly with a program that is colour-blind, Eurocentric, and gives pride of place to men.\footnote{In addition to the evidence presented in Baker (2014), El Sistema’s website in late 2020 included a section entitled “Pioneers”, which listed thirteen men and three women—two of the latter being members of Abreu’s family (https://elsistema.org.ve/historia/).} Yet not only were such tensions obviously never mentioned, since this was an El Sistema-inspired event, but the Venezuelan program itself was invited to present its philosophy, an opportunity that it used to replay clips from old documentaries and Abreu’s TED-prize talk from 2009.\footnote{“The philosophy of El Sistema”, 30 July 2020.} Alongside the progressive sessions addressing contemporary issues, then, YOLA also provided a platform for El Sistema to continue purveying Abreu’s conservative vision via old and much repeated footage. Where some speakers urged a change of mindset, this session was devoted entirely to revering the old model. The result was an image of a program with one foot pointing towards the future and the other stuck in a problematic past.

This divided loyalty and hedging of bets led to a lack of cohesion, consistency, and rigour. YOLA continued to hold up El Sistema as an example, yet also invited speakers who flatly contradicted El Sistema’s philosophy. Glaring disjunctures between old and new visions begged to be discussed, but they were never mentioned. Speakers talked about change, but there was no critical analysis of the aspects of SATM that needed changing. They held up critical thinking as an important feature of music education, but they did not apply it to SATM itself. El Sistema’s continued dominance led to mixed messages about reverence and critique, continuity and change.

El Sistema’s top-level influence has been complemented in recent years by the massive exodus of El Sistema’s musicians from Venezuela as the country’s crisis bit in earnest. Many are now installed as performers
and educators across the globe, including in SATM programs. It would take extensive research to determine the influence of these Venezuelan musicians on the development of SATM in other countries, and it should not be taken as given that they would strengthen the orthodoxy as opposed to supporting efforts at change. One of El Sistema’s most successful graduates to move to the US, the violinist Luigi Mazzocchi, has argued strongly for the necessity of reform (Scripp 2016a, 2016b). In my research in Venezuela, I encountered similar criticism of El Sistema’s methods from its own students, graduates, and teachers, so one should not assume that they would favour reproducing those methods elsewhere. Years earlier, Estrada (1997) made comparable findings: several of her interviewees, all current or former El Sistema members, defined themselves against the program rather than identifying with it. One stated: “now that I teach, I try not to make the same mistakes that they made with us” (25). Another said: “each day I copy less the way that they taught me, I’ve achieved a relationship with my students in which communication is a real exchange of feelings, emotions, knowledge, concerns, and not a weapon of power for humiliating and dominating them” (17). A third claimed that El Sistema “served me as a model of what not to do pedagogically speaking” (34).

That said, the proliferation of orchestras of former El Sistema musicians across the Americas, and the cachet that the program continues to hold in the classical music and music education worlds, suggests that overt affiliation with the Venezuelan program brings much greater advantages for immigrant musicians than critical distance. It remains a potent calling card. Also, the limited teacher training or spaces for critical reflection offered by El Sistema mean that opportunities to develop alternatives to the program’s philosophy of “teach as you were taught” are similarly constrained. In newspaper articles and short films on this topic, immigrant Venezuelan musicians in several countries have talked about El Sistema as a success story that they want to share with the world. In Chile, they have even set up an El Sistema-inspired foundation, Música para la Integración, and with its starter orchestra named after Abreu and support from El Sistema advocacy organizations, it looks to be retaining the Venezuelan recipe. All- or majority-Venezuelan

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7 https://musicaparalaintegracion.org/.
programs are less likely to move away from El Sistema’s approach than ones where an individual Venezuelan joins a local workforce. After all, unlike the much slower and more limited exodus of earlier years exemplified by Mazzocchi, most of these musicians left out of necessity rather than dissatisfaction with the institution or a search for a better education. On balance, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the recent, rapid El Sistema exodus will have strengthened convention more than innovation in the international SATM field, even if only by reinforcing the El Sistema brand. Nevertheless, there will clearly be exceptions, and such a hypothesis should be tested by future research.

International Support

Thinking again about the level above programs, a number of international and multinational organizations have lined up behind El Sistema and orthodox versions of SATM and have thus acted as a force for continuity rather than change, though there are exceptions, such as Jeunesses Musicales, mentioned in Chapter 5. The Hilti Foundation, for example, supports El Sistema and several ESI programs. In Latin America, its funding is channelled to more conservative orchestral programs—in Medellín, to Iberacademy rather than the Red. The United Nations and the Inter-American Development Bank are also prominent supporters of El Sistema, and they have paid little attention to critical questions arising from research—even their own. In 2018, they participated in an event at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna billed as “El Sistema: A model of social inclusion for the world” (see Baker 2018). Yet the IDB’s own evaluation had suggested that El Sistema had a low level of participation by the poor and actually illustrated “the challenges of targeting interventions towards vulnerable groups of children in the context of a voluntary social program.” As Clift (2020) concludes about the IDB study: “As poorer children were under-represented, far from addressing social inequalities, the work of the [music] centres served to reinforce them—entirely contrary to the idea of an intervention designed to reduce social and health inequalities.” The exclusion of women from positions of authority also makes very obvious El Sistema’s failure as a model of social inclusion. Nonetheless, these sponsors not only looked the other way but even claimed the opposite.
Such major organizations have disbursed hundreds of millions of dollars into El Sistema and similar SATM programs. They have played an important role in shaping SATM developments around the world, conferring prestige as well as funds. To date, most of their support has gone into reinforcing the status quo, even if that means repeating unproven and dubious claims and ignoring relevant studies. Change in SATM would undoubtedly be spurred on significantly if major funders took proper account of the problems with the orthodox model revealed by published academic research and gave more support to innovation.

The El Sistema event in Austria took place almost simultaneously with the Guri/Jeunesses Musicales conference in Brazil. The European event saw El Sistema trumpeted as a model for the world; the Latin American one did not even mention the Venezuelan program, focusing instead on new directions in SATM. This dichotomy encapsulates what I perceive as a struggle for the soul of SATM. This struggle is centred in Latin America, though it plays out in countries around the world. Latin America is where the oldest and largest SATM programs are found, where the orthodox model is most persistent, and where El Sistema’s direct influence is most notable. In one corner stand the Venezuelan program and others that follow or admire its model. In the other are found the reformers: the Red, Chazarreta, Guri, and so on. Contrasting programs are found in the same countries and even the same cities, like Medellín (the Red and Iberacademy). The battle lines are drawn around educational and cultural ideologies, and also, to a significant extent, musical genres. Most programs in the former camp are aligned with classical music organizations, like symphony orchestras, or led by prominent classical musicians, and they may be seen as extensions of or support acts for the professional orchestral world—El Sistema’s original purpose. Programs in the latter camp may have begun that way but shifted their emphasis, like the Red, or been founded along contrasting lines, like Chazarreta.

Like any broad-brush account, this is certainly a simplification. The reality is more of a continuum than a polarity, and the two dynamics may even be found simultaneously at different levels of the same program. The Red is a good example, as is NEOJIBA; in both cases, schools and showcase ensembles lie at different points along the continuum. André Gomes Felipe describes the Liberdade school as a CM initiative
within an ESI program. Nevertheless, the notion of a struggle for the soul reflects rather closely my experience of a year’s immersion in the Red, and private communications from reformers in other programs also point towards tensions, conflicts, and ruptures more than polite disagreements and differences of opinion. These are not simply two different approaches; one is a reform—and therefore a critique—of the other. Chazarreta in Argentina directly opposed the Eurocentrism of El Sistema. The Red slowly distanced itself from the kind of elite orchestral training represented by Iberacademy, but the two programs still competed over advanced students and relations were tense. The contrast between the Vienna and São Paulo events was stark; one exalted the old model, the other had no place for it. The announcement of a national ESI program in Mexico in 2019 was met with critical responses by many music education specialists (e.g. Estrada Rodríguez et al. 2019). However one labels this scenario, currents of continuity and change within SATM in Latin America are in competition, and the dominant forces are largely behind the orthodoxy, making for an unequal struggle. Change is therefore far from assured.

Dilemmas of Transformation

Thus far, the discussion has revolved around efforts at reform and forces that constrain them. At this point, it is also necessary to consider challenges and dilemmas of a more conceptual or philosophical kind that imply a need for a more revolutionary approach. Echoing Ramalingam’s call to the aid sector and Lecolion Washington’s words to YOLA, new ways of thinking, rather than tinkering with conventional practices, may be required. Some challenges are so profound that they question the very existence of SATM.

There are essentially two categories of critique of SATM: practical and ideological. The former focuses on gaps between theory and practice, the latter on the theory itself. For ideological critics of SATM

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9 This was also a major topic of concern at a music education conference that I attended in Xalapa (Veracruz, Mexico) in January 2020.
and similar enterprises, making programs work better does not resolve the problem, because the problem is the thinking behind them. In this light, reforming practices is not the solution. But practical critiques, too, may raise profound questions.

Is Music Education Really the Answer?

One practical critique is very simple: SATM has existed for more than four decades in Latin America, yet where is the social change? Even after forty-five years of operation on an increasingly massive scale, it is impossible to point to evidence that El Sistema produces the kinds of social transformation claimed by the program’s leaders. Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil, which all have large SATM projects, are plagued with violence, and the problem has worsened in Venezuela over SATM’s history. In 2018, these four countries accounted for a quarter of all murders on Earth (Erickson 2018). Such high levels of violence do not prove that SATM does not work, of course, but they do suggest that robust evidence is needed if claims such as “orchestras and choirs are incredibly effective instruments against violence” are to be taken seriously. Without such evidence, there must be doubts over justifying music education from this perspective.

John Sloboda (2015) poses a series of questions that is of great relevance to SATM. If social goals are really paramount, Sloboda asks, can it be said for certain that music education is the best way to achieve them? Is it possible that, at least in some cases, significant social change requires a different activity altogether and the most responsible action would be to put aside music and pursue those goals through other means? Does putting music first, making it a non-negotiable part of action, put limits on what can be achieved socially?

At present, there is no research that makes a convincing case that music education is the most effective and efficient tool for the kinds of social action that are sought by SATM programs (such as poverty and crime reduction or promoting peaceful coexistence) and therefore the most deserving recipient of funds. This would be less important if social action were a desirable side-effect of music instruction, but in SATM, as the label indicates, it is the primary aim—so then, as Sloboda suggests, a case for “why music?” needs to be made. In fact, as we have seen
previously, there are major studies that have concluded that El Sistema has no significant effect on prosociality (Aleman et al. 2017; Ilari, Fesjian, and Habibi 2018). The evidence to support the IDB’s theory of change and claims of orchestral training’s transformative social effects is decidedly weak, yet the huge investment continues: the cost of El Sistema’s new headquarters was originally estimated at $437.5 million USD (CAF 2010). If social action is genuinely the primary goal, as the program often states, is building a massive, deluxe classical music centre really the best way to get there? Could those hundreds of millions of dollars of development bank loans not have been spent better in a country that has suffered from severe shortages of food, medicines, and basic medical equipment and has seen an exodus of refugees to rival Syria’s?

Sloboda’s argument points to an important question mark over the justification for public spending on large, expensive SATM programs. Major investment in an unproven strategy demands serious examination through the lens of opportunity cost. It may be tempting to think that any argument that persuades funders to support music education is one worth making, but considering the social work not undertaken as a result may suggest otherwise.

The question of what money should be spent on exercises some socially engaged researchers and artists. For example, Godwin (2020) asks whether SATM budgets might not be better spent on organizations with expertise in social action. Sachs Olsen (2019, 186) writes:

Wouldn’t we better approach change by using our artistic skills and efforts in campaigns, demonstrations, and actions against policies and development schemes that are based on private property and exchange value? Wouldn’t it be more effective to set up a community garden or local neighbourhood activity group if we wanted to enhance participation and social relations among urban inhabitants?

Scholarship in economics helps to bring this issue into focus. In her article “Welfare works: redistribution is the way to create less violent, less unequal societies,” Justino (2020) argues that economic inequality is the major problem in Latin American society and the principal source of violence, and that government redistributive measures are required to resolve it. Similarly, Veltmeyer and Petras (2011, 1–2) draw on a 2010 report by the UN’s Economic Commission for Latin America and the
Caribbean (ECLAC/CEPAL) to argue that when it comes to poverty in the region,

“exclusion” is not the problem [...] Nor is inclusion the solution. The problem rather is a system which is designed to benefit the few who have the power to advance their own interests at the expense of the many, who have suffered and continue to suffer precisely from their inclusion and participation in this system, under conditions of what CEPAL ... terms “the structure of inequality.”

If structural economic inequality is the root of the problem, are arts education programs in the name of social inclusion or coexistence really an effective solution?

There are many doubters. Adorno was blunt: “it is impossible to solve problems that are caused by society’s economic situation through the aesthetic power of music” (cited in Kertz-Welzel 2011, 12). Rincón (2015) issues a coruscating critique of Medellín’s elites for focusing on cultural and educational charity, which he sees as ineffective and self-serving. Ineffective because it springs from the centre of power, where young people are poorly understood, rather than from the margins and youth’s needs and desires; and because “the problem is inequity and inclusion: and that is not resolved by a culture of charity” (133). Maclean (2015, 68) sheds light on the self-serving part of the equation: she suggests that art has been an important part of urban policy in the city because “[f]or the policies in Medellín to be acceptable to and supported by the elites, they had to appeal to elite sensibilities.”

Hanauer (2019) makes a similar argument in a different context (the US). He regards “educationism”—a belief in the power of education to fix inequality—as profoundly misguided, confusing a symptom with a cause. Education may help some individuals but it does nothing to shift the fundamental problem. He identifies it as a self-serving narrative of the wealthy and powerful, “because it tells us what we want to hear: that we can help restore shared prosperity without sharing our wealth or power.” It also distracts from the true causes of economic inequality and defends an indefensible status quo. Hanauer thus presents educationism as a support act for inequality rather than a solution.

Public art has been the target of similar critical scrutiny. There is no shortage of artists and researchers who have critiqued public art for drawing a veil over the real causes of injustice and decorating the
development policies of the neoliberal city. As Vujanović (2016, 116) argues: “socially useful art in support of the advancement of broader civic agendas [...] often serves to heal social antagonisms or give an impression that they are healed, while never dealing seriously with the material bases of antagonisms or disturbing the capitalist system of production and distribution of surplus value.” For Merli (2002, 113), the concern for addressing social cohesion and inclusion through a “soft” approach, such as the use of cultural projects, might be seen as a convenient means to divert attention from the real causes of today’s social problems and the tough solutions that might be needed to solve them. According to this line of reasoning, the whole discourse of social inclusion is a lot more appealing to the political elite than the old fashioned rhetoric of poverty and the call for economic redistribution.

Sachs Olsen (2019, 29) describes participatory art “as a way to provide homeopathic solutions to problems that are systemic,” while Anthony Schrag argues that artists should be concerned with asking “deep and probing questions” rather than serving as “the state’s cheaper option to proper and appropriate social work” (cited in Deane 2018, 329).

For such artists and writers, not only is public art not an effective solution to major social issues, but it is also frequently part of the problem. Practical and ideological critiques thus merge. For example, Berry Slater and Iles (2009) analyze public art in the UK as a smoke screen and marketing device, funded in place of social infrastructures and welfare: “a cosmetic solution for problems produced by failing infrastructures, at root by other areas of government policy” (Malcolm Miles, cited in ibid.). “Community is killed off only to be ‘regenerated’ in zombie-like form, a living dead state of social (non)reproduction and officially orchestrated sham spectacles of being together.” Public artists are “soft cops working on the front line of social inclusion” and “employed to fabricate totemic symbols of integrated communities.” Culture-led regeneration has “now fully developed into a mode of governance—of soft control and increasingly subtle coercion.”

Looking through the lens of scholarship on economics and public art, orchestral training under the banner of social inclusion looks like an unlikely candidate for combatting inequality and poverty, however attractive it might appear and sound. SATM misidentifies the root of the problems; it is therefore unsurprising that it has failed to provide
demonstrable solutions. A realist perspective might be that promoting music as a way of addressing major social problems is to dance to the tune of, and provide an attractive fig leaf for, governments that are unwilling to devote sufficient resources to effective solutions, above all redistribution. A more critical formulation still would be that music programs and musicians contribute to and collaborate with a false narrative about social problems in order to gain funding for their musical work, distracting from a lack of substantive action to address those problems and, as analysed in Chapter 4, exacerbating social divides.

Berry Slater and Iles’s analysis of public art is a shoe that fits orthodox SATM: orchestral training, too, extends models of governance, and the ensemble serves as the ultimate symbol or spectacle of community, a simulacrum that conveys a positive message whether the community itself is in rude health, experiencing little material change (as in Medellín), or steadily disintegrating (as in Venezuela). Indeed, this may be precisely the appeal of youth orchestras to governments: an idealized performance of communities that may be neglected or actually under assault by other policies.

SATM may therefore serve, as Logan (2016) suggests, as a “veil of culture,” obscuring the real workings of the state, including reductions in social services, and thus help with one hand while harming with the other. It may also cover up reductions in music education provision for the majority of the population, as has happened in the UK. For Logan, programs like El Sistema serve as a support act for educational inequality. He is skeptical of arts programs that promote simplistic ideas about social change at the expense of in-depth discussions about education and society, and that distract from the urgency of transforming the whole education system by focusing instead on social mobility for a few fortunate individuals.

There are good reasons, then, to argue that social change requires political and economic action to reduce inequity and inequality, and that SATM constitutes an attractive but ineffective distraction—a performance of social change that is much more appealing to social elites than the real thing (higher taxes and redistribution). It is one example of a wider phenomenon: artists are portrayed as a solution to social problems, but they often serve instead to shore up the existing system, providing a “veil of culture” that lets governments off the hook. The arts
are frequently co-opted to provide an illusion of social action and an alibi for dominant actors, lessening the pressure to provide substantive solutions at a structural level.

As an illuminating contrast, Bregman (2018) argues that giving people money is an effective solution to poverty (see also Orkin 2020). Cash handouts particularly benefit children and are also cheaper than the alternatives. Bregman’s argument that “poverty is not a lack of character. It’s a lack of cash” (69) raises interesting questions for SATM, since it roundly contradicts Abreu’s foundational claims about poverty as a deficit of aspiration, identity, or spiritual resources (see Baker 2016b). Another quotation also hits close to the bone: “Anywhere you find poor people, you also find non-poor people theorizing their cultural inferiority and dysfunction” (cited in Bregman 2018, 92); there are distinct echoes of El Sistema imagining youth as “empty, disorientated, and deviant.” Bregman asks: “Why send over expensive white folks in SUVs when we can simply hand over their salaries to the poor?” (31). Why send over musicians, we might also ask, if the aim is to combat poverty?

There are questions of ethics as well as efficacy hanging over SATM. Should musicians serve as “soft cops” for the state? Should they play along with the fantastical story that an orchestra can do the job of welfare? Should they comply with an ideology that puts the values and behaviour of disadvantaged youth under the spotlight rather than the grossly unfair system and the elites who perpetuate it? Is buying into this dubious narrative a price worth paying for funding music education? If SATM is primarily concerned with combatting violence and promoting peace, what does it mean for it to propose activities that make no reference to the principal cause of violence (economic inequality) or the best solution (redistribution)? What does it mean to advocate for public expenditure on a program that has not been proven to reduce inequality (SATM) rather than one that has (welfare)?

Justino is a development economist, but the two photos in her article both depict sonic scenes. Not youth orchestras, though, but the “cacerolazo”: the distinctive banging of pots and pans that often accompanies political protests in Latin America. Here, sound is tied to direct political action on inequality. It is mobilized against the real cause of violence rather than in support of conservative myths that blame
societal ills on the emptiness and deviancy of youth with too much time on their hands. The images of discordant cacerolazos raise the questions of whether harmonious music-making is really the best way to tackle the biggest social problems of our time, and whether SATM might one day play a role in combating rather than obscuring the causes of poverty and violence.

A Colonialist Conception of Music Education?

If Sloboda encourages us to think harder about the nature of societal problems and the adequacy of music as a response, Guillermo Rosabal-Coto (2019) homes in on the conceptualization of the individual subject. He raises the concern that Eurocentric music education in Latin America is inescapably tainted by its foundation on a colonialist conception of the subject as deficient or flawed and in need of correction and redemption. Rosabal-Coto argues that such music education has operated under the rationale to convert individuals into Euro-American, White artists or citizens. For education to succeed in this goal, it is necessary that the music learner is negated in their ways to be in and engage with music, and constructed by family, teachers, peers, and themselves as inferior subalterns. Their traits, memories, sensations, histories, and cognitive make-up are insufficient or in need of accommodation or modification in order to comply with the standards of an ideal individual. (15)

For Rosabal-Coto, the ideological basis of Eurocentric music education is deeply questionable in a Latin American context, since it reproduces the way that, after the Spanish Conquest, “the Indigenous of what became Latin America were instilled with a self-concept of inferior subaltern though conversion to Catholicism and the encomienda” (ibid.). Music education perpetuates colonialist dynamics such as assumptions of the superiority of European culture and those who bear it, and attempts by social elites to reform Others rather than understand and learn from them. If constructing the native population as inferior was fundamental to colonization, then for Latin American elites to take the same ideals and repeat the process is a form of recolonization from within.

El Sistema, with its salvationist vision and its clear echoes of colonial missionary campaigns to “civilize” Latin America’s indigenous
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population through music instruction (Baker 2014), is the epitome of the approach that Rosabal-Coto critiques. It, too, rests on a colonialist notion of young people and their families as socially and culturally deficient, and the path that it prescribes (betterment through absorbing European musical norms) is a colonialist one. As a director of one of El Sistema’s largest núcleos [music schools] told Shieh (2015, 573), “it is not his núcleo’s place to address larger social issues. The system, he says, is about ‘reforming individuals.’” The Red is couched in more progressive language, but its goals of inculcating values and transforming individual lives are built on the same ideological foundations. Yet what are the grounds for depicting young people en masse as in need of reform? And what, as Rosabal-Coto asks, would support the concomitant notion that possessing musical skills gives some individuals the moral and social authority to place themselves on a pedestal and attempt to reform others? In his critique of discourses of salvationism in music education, Spruce (2017, 725) notes the frequent absence of “reflection by those occupying ‘hegemonic positions’ on their right to judge particular lives and communities as requiring transformation” and a failure to ask “why they should be the agents of such transformations.”

Decolonial critiques by Latin American educator-researchers like Rosabal-Coto posit the continent’s Eurocentric music education as a social problem rather than a solution. As such, they shed doubt on the validity of SATM as a concept.¹⁰ To borrow the terms of decolonial theorists Mignolo and Walsh, they are as concerned with the principles, frame of reference, and logic of coloniality of Eurocentric music education in Latin America as with its practices. As these authors argue: “It is not enough to change the content of the conversation (the domains, the enunciated); on the contrary, it is of the essence to change the terms (regulations, assumptions, principles managed at the level of the enunciation) of the conversation” (2018, 149). Indeed, Rosabal-Coto and other decolonial music scholars go deeper than the surface level of diversifying content and question the very terms and aims of Eurocentric music education. (There are clear parallels here with the discussion of reforming pedagogy in the previous chapter.) Their

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¹⁰ Rosabal-Coto (2016) addresses SATM more directly.
critiques point beyond instruments and repertoire to understandings of what music is, what it does, and what it is for.

The root of the problem is a Eurocentric conception of music and music education as social control or ordering (Gouk 2013). The emblematic institution of European music education, the conservatoire, has its origins in the orphanages (or conservatorios) of Renaissance Italy. In Venice, for example, young female orphans were trained in music at the *ospedali grandi*, the primary purpose of which was to regulate the city’s social environment (Tonelli 2013). The musical opportunities provided to impoverished girls came with strict control over their day-to-day lives. The young musicians had to submit to an inflexible monastic routine: silence, lots of work, and little leisure time. Musical training was an extension of the orphanages’ imposition of social control. This notion of music and music education was transplanted to the Americas in the sixteenth century, and it continues to this day, with SATM as its clearest manifestation.

If SATM is bound up with problematic notions of control, deficit, and development, then what is required is a philosophical revolution—an abandonment of an “ethic of correction,” of an urge to “save” others, of a presumption that they lack culture—rather than just practical modifications. *Pace* El Sistema, it is not individuals that need reforming but rather SATM’s ideological foundation.

Is SATM Politically Dangerous?

A third existential challenge comes from Alexandra Kertz-Welzel’s (2005; 2011) reading of Adorno’s writing on music education. Adorno argued that idealistic music education with utilitarian goals and without critical thinking was inherently dangerous, since it was susceptible to appropriation by authoritarian regimes, and it should therefore be avoided. Kertz-Welzel (2011, 12) focuses on Adorno’s critique of intense musical experiences in joint music making, where being part of community fosters a sense of well-being and escape from the problems of real life. The overemphasis on community nurtures “the liquidation of the individual (which) is the real signature of the new musical situation.” The individual disappears and only exists as part of a group. Being part of a community, whether in music or in society, can be dangerous if
individuals completely lose their ability for critical reflection and free will.

Adorno held up music education’s assimilation into the Third Reich. At that time, the age-old dream of transforming the world through music education ended up as a support act for Hitler.

This argument is all too relevant to SATM, since El Sistema in the twenty-first century perfectly exemplified Adorno’s point. The creation of an archetypical Venezuelan “cultural caudillo” or strongman (Silva-Ferrer 2014), El Sistema revolved around autocratic leadership, unquestioning submission to authority, and a focus on community, and it shunned critical reflection and self-determination. It articulated the kind of pseudo-religious vision of music education—as a mission, as healing and redemption—that was also heard in the Third Reich and provoked such suspicion from Adorno. In Venezuela, the idealistic rhetoric about transforming individuals and building community, and the lack of accompanying criticality, saw young musicians easily reduced to collective political inertia and swept up into de facto support for the government, illustrating Kertz-Welzel’s (2011, 16) central point: “Music has the power to transform human beings, but it also has the power to manipulate people.” She notes that many German music educators played along because they were granted a more important role in society: “Music education as a means of transforming human beings and society is a compelling and seductive idea for music educators” (Kertz-Welzel 2005, 4–5). In Venezuela, too, many musicians embraced their newfound prominence and prestige and turned a blind eye to the political implications.

The idealistic rhetoric also appealed to the government’s ears, and the program became a blatant propaganda tool, providing the soundtrack to the Venezuelan government’s self-presentation at home and abroad. Music education and authoritarian politics merged as El Sistema orchestras performed at government ceremonies, accompanied senior politicians on overseas missions, and played a starring role in a government propaganda video.11 As Gabriela Montero writes, “Venezuelan musicians have cooperated in a state-funded endeavour.

11 Examples can be found on my blog: https://geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com/el-sistema-the-system/el-sistema-blog/.
to whitewash Venezuela’s grave failures with the singular detergent of
music. [...] Venezuelan musicians allowed themselves to become the
embodiment of Venezuela’s state apparatus.”¹² Venezuelan politicians
have made extensive use of the emotional power of a youth orchestra.
When Michelle Bachelet visited Venezuela to research her UN Human
Rights report in 2019, she was met by the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra
“as a sign of fraternity and Bolivarian peaceful diplomacy” (“Canciller”
2019).¹³ Given, too, El Sistema’s central focus on discipline and obedience,
Venezuela illustrates the twin danger that concerned Adorno: music
education as propaganda for a specific authoritarian regime, and music
education as producing the kinds of subjects desired by authoritarian
regimes.

In a similar analysis of the shadow of fascism hanging over idealistic,
arising from being included in a collective ‘we’ are so powerful [...],
feel so good and so unconditional, that we seek to replicate those
experiences without thought to their potential outcomes.” She continues:
“The imagined community formed within such moments creates a
powerfully seductive sense of oneness that can easily be manipulated
with disastrous consequences” (70). El Sistema strove to generate this
“powerfully seductive sense of oneness” with its “big family” discourse
and monopolization of students’ time, and the consequences can be
seen in how little resistance there has been to the intensification of the
program’s politicization from 2007 to the present day. The combination
of a powerful ethos of collectivity, strong discipline, the banishment
of critical thinking, and magical music-making saw many musicians
turn a blind eye to the darker aspects of the program and perform a
public propaganda role on behalf of a government that many of them
disdained in private.

SATM was thus a compliant and often willing handmaiden in
the transition to authoritarianism in Venezuela (Esté 2018; Kozak
Rovero 2018). Adorno’s concerns over “socially transformative” music

¹² “PUTIN POWER: musicians sound their outrage (a statement of support)”,
Facebook, 11 February 2021.
¹³ This attempt at musical whitewash was unsuccessful, as Bachelet’s report was
highly critical, underlining “grave violations of economic, social, civil, political and
cultural rights” (https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.
education were amply borne out. Nor is the Venezuelan program unique. A journalistic investigation of Bruno Campo, the director of an ESI program funded by the municipal government of Guatemala City, alleged that he and his backers exploited his orchestra for political ends:

In exchange for absolute power in the Municipal Music School and the System of Orchestras, Bruno Campo repaid the Unionist Municipality with concerts by children and young people. And there was an element of exploitation. For the elections of 2007 and 2011, they would do up to three “barrio” concerts a week during months of campaigning. Without compensation. 75 children and young people from impoverished areas of Guatemala City, playing in white and green Municipality sweaters every two or three days. The cellist Rossana Paz, an adolescent at the time, recalls that the concerts took place with the banners of the Unionist Party and fireworks at the end. (Flores 2019)

The reporter concluded: “To the outside world, the Municipality and Unionism shone, thanks to the social project of music for youth.” Interestingly, the Unionist Party is conservative, at the opposite end of the political spectrum from Venezuela’s socialist government. The appropriation of SATM and music students appears to know no political or ideological boundaries. El Sistema may have become an emblem of the Bolivarian Revolution, but it has also promoted and been promoted by banks, corporations, and other sharp-eyed organizations (Fink 2016). Its largest replica in Latin America, the Mexican program Esperanza Azteca, used public funds to boost the image and business empire of Ricardo Salinas Pliego, the country’s third richest man (García Bermejo 2018). Politicians are not the only powerful figures who find SATM to be an attractive accomplice. Indeed, we might extend Adorno’s critique and suggest that SATM shows idealistic music education as susceptible to appropriation by commercial as well as political interests, and therefore as doubly ambiguous or risky. El Sistema in its heyday managed the impressive feat of serving as both a tool of soft power for the Venezuelan government and a golden goose for the classical music industry, harnessing the idea of SATM to both political and economic agendas, both socialism and capitalism.

However, it might instead be argued that rather than being appropriated by the Venezuelan government, SATM was actually designed for it. Esté (2018) identifies Abreu’s claims of overcoming
poverty through musical training as a form of musical populism that was carefully crafted for the “populist ears of Venezuelan presidents” in order to persuade them to fund his project. This is a crucial distinction. It suggests that SATM was not *politcized* in Venezuela so much as *designed as a political strategy* by Abreu, himself a senior politician and economist who knew exactly how the levers of power worked. In 2011, a former top-level figure in El Sistema claimed that the idea of SATM emerged in the mid-1990s when populism was on the rise in Venezuela and Abreu grasped that “there’s nothing that a populist politician likes more than the word ‘social’” (Baker 2014, 165). Attempts to portray El Sistema’s twenty-first-century history in terms of a power grab by the Bolivarian Revolution ignore the various ways in which, “when Chávez came to power, [Abreu] handed El Sistema to him on a silver platter,” in the words of Eduardo Casanova.14 In other words, political ideology is not something that was added to SATM in an act of appropriation; it is foundational and inherent to a concept that was created in order to attract political support.

Adorno, Kertz-Welzel, and the case studies from Germany and Venezuela thus raise a third existential question for SATM. Rather than debating whether it works or not, or how it could be improved, they shed doubt on the very enterprise. SATM was born in 1990s Venezuela as a funding strategy, and this is where it has been an undisputed and dramatic success: in persuading governments and funders to support music education via the argument that it is actually a social program. Yet in an Adornian light, the secret of SATM’s success is also its fatal flaw. The social framing appeals to politicians more than an artistic one, but this appeal can lead not only to funding but also to political collaboration or appropriation. El Sistema resolved the funding problem but simultaneously created an ideological one. The question then arises: if this style of music education is inherently dangerous, as Adorno suggests, can it ever be made safe? If SATM’s origins are as a political ploy, can it ever be sheltered from political collaboration or

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14 “La juvenil”, Facebook, 24 January 2021. Casanova is a prominent Venezuelan author and former cultural official who worked closely with Abreu. See also my blog post “Writing El Sistema’s history”, https://geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com/el-sistema-the-system/el-sistema-blog/writing-el-sistemas-history/.
appropriation? Is it possible to reform SATM, or would true reform mean dismantling the very idea of SATM?

Reform or Revolution?

The work of such scholars leads us towards an uncertain, ambiguous conclusion. All, from different perspectives, raise existential questions about SATM. Looking ahead, the main options appear to be: unsatisfactory and indefensible stasis, ignoring all the problems and dilemmas; reform, of the kind that the Red has undertaken, which may at times be painful; or a revolution in the very foundations of the field.

I believe revolutionary thinking to be absolutely necessary: the questions raised by these scholars could not be more important, and a paradigm shift, rather than tweaks and fixes, will ultimately be required if the field is to generate social change. Looking at how the older, larger fields of development and aid have changed in recent decades, it is hard to imagine the 1970s model of orthodox SATM, built on mid-twentieth-century modernist developmentalism, lasting long into the future, at least with any degree of validity. The disjunctures are obvious even today. A Red leader mused privately about the difficulties of reforming a longstanding symphonic program—a process they compared to twisting fingers—and the attraction of tearing it up and starting again. Why go through the painful process of unlearning and relearning with the current staff, they asked? Why not start again with musicians who already get the point and have the tools? This may have been a thought experiment rather than a proposal, but it might be an appropriate course of action in some contexts, particularly where the orthodox model is not yet well established. This kind of revolution had taken place in Medellín’s other three arts education networks, so it is not an idle thought.

The example of the Red raises the question of just how reformable SATM may be. Music was the only one of the four municipal networks to resist a revolution during the tenure of Mayor Gaviria (2012–15); progress was tortuous even when the program’s funder was behind reform. The city government then proposed to create a parallel, more progressive institution alongside the Red, called Medellín Vive la Música (MVLM), giving young people a choice between the two. But
funding was withdrawn with the change of government in 2016. One interpretation of the next phase of the Red was that the new government attempted to merge the two projects by bringing in Giraldo and Franco from MVLM to head up the Red, leading to the struggles between progressive thinking and conventional habits described in these pages. Yet it might also be argued that the last fifteen years (two-thirds of the Red’s history) have been spent in various states of disruption, trying to fix one problem only to create another. One possible conclusion is that it might be better to create an alternative to SATM—a new institution with a different philosophy and faculty, along the lines of MVLM—rather than attempt to transform an existing program with a long history, an established image, philosophy, and staff, and a complex array of traditions, routines, and expectations.

Nevertheless, there are many barriers to revolution that make it improbable on a mass scale at present. MVLM’s collapse highlights the economic hurdle. A more likely path for SATM in the short term is to attempt reform, bringing the field more in line with progressive social goals and critical thinking in music education.

Still, there is no denying that attempting to bridge this gap has caused pain in Medellín. Introducing progressive educational thinking into a conventional model is not easy, and a challenge for reform of SATM is that this gap can be so large. But given the flaws in the original version of SATM and the necessity of growth, pain is arguably a good sign. Its absence is more worrying: complacent utopianism is the biggest obstacle to SATM’s evolution.

The path of reform is not straightforward, then. The IDB’s 2017 report on El Sistema revealed a gulf between grandiose claims and barely perceptible effects, implying that either the claims needed toning down or the work needed a serious overhaul. (Neither occurred.) From an educational and intellectual standpoint, less rhetorical grandiosity and more pedagogical ambition would be a big step forward. Sloboda (2019) urges modesty with respect to long-term impacts, which are hard or impossible to measure. But from a pragmatic perspective, it is rhetorical grandiosity, rather than pedagogical innovation, which attracts funding.

Adorno urged music educators to abandon the social ideology and just teach music in a way that fosters critical thinking and self-determination. Accordingly, Kertz-Welzel (2011, 16) rejects idealism
Challenges

in favour of realism: “A teaching philosophy should not be based on pseudo-religious ideals such as healing the world or transforming human beings through music, but rather be more realistic and focused on students’ actual needs. Subscribing to abstract ideals can mean refusing to acknowledge the reality and to continue using education as a tranquillizer for students.” In words that resonate with SATM, she argues: “Pied Pipers are still playing their tunes in many places and trying to entrance people through the transforming power of music. Perhaps Adorno’s most powerful advice is: To resist the myth of the entrancing power of music is to make the world a better place” (2005, 10).

Yet what would SATM be without this entrancing story? Could such an expensive model sustain itself without its idealism?

This looks like a difficult balancing act. Grandiose myths help music education to thrive or at least survive, and so they might be seen as a necessary means to an end that is under funding pressure in many parts of the world. The urge to seize on and amplify every bit of positive evidence, and to ignore or dismiss the negative, is understandable. This may be the price to pay for keeping music education on politicians’ radar. But such an approach comes with costs as well: even if it escapes political appropriation, it can work against critical reflection and educational progress, and can lead to questionable policy decisions, construction on shaky foundations, and a pernicious organizational culture.15 Belfiore (2009, 345) argues that a “consequentialist position”—the argument that any rhetoric is justified by a positive funding outcome—is a form of disregard for truth that undermines the “ethics of accuracy and conscientiousness on which a healthy public sphere thrives.” A decade later, in an era of “post-truth” and “alternative facts,” this is no minor detail.

Behind the simple and attractive public story, SATM may be destined to be a messy compromise. Boeskov (2019) suggests that ambiguity is inevitable in musical-social work: not something to be overcome but rather understood. Images of Abreu and Dudamel glad-handing with Chávez and Maduro, or Ocampo deep in conversation with Álvaro Uribe, illustrate the kinds of Faustian bargains on which SATM may rely.

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15 See Spruce (2017) on the drawbacks of music education advocacy.
One of the Red’s first generation mused that SATM leaders “selling their soul to the devil” might be an inevitable consequence of running such expensive programs. Perhaps a publicly funded SATM program like the Red is likely to rest on this kind of pact: generous funding (in comparison to other programs), in return for serving as a tool of political publicity and social control. It seems that instrumentalization of students—their use for adult ends—may be part of the deal. Such programs may be destined to promote a vision of social action that is attractive to powerful actors—more social reproduction than transformation—and to remain suspended awkwardly between progressive rhetoric and conservative ideologies.

Turino (2008) argues that music’s social benefits lie primarily in its participatory manifestations. Yet in both Medellín and Venezuela, the requirement to serve as an attractive image (of the city, of the Bolivarian Revolution), along with close alignment with the conventions of classical music performance, has pushed SATM programs down a presentational path. They are caught between participatory discourse and presentational expectations, between the pursuit of social goals and the need to demonstrate results through polished musical performances. In socially oriented music programs, student development and the educational process may be compromised by an emphasis on external performances and putting on a good face at all times (Howell 2017).

The performance for the Harvard delegation described in Chapter 4 provides a good example. The Pedregal ensemble arrived in good time and was set up and ready to start at the appointed hour, but at the last minute came an announcement that the delegation would arrive late due to the disturbances in the surrounding area. Without any leading or planning, the students began messing around on their instruments, and soon the messing around had become a fully-fledged, chaotic, but effervescent jam, with the musicians playing, singing, and rapping. It was an entirely spontaneous and joyful eruption of sound, and the Red’s leaders watched from the sidelines with broad smiles on their faces. Franco turned to me and said: kids can learn a lot of music very quickly this way. (It was a good example of the kind of spontaneity and creativity in spaces between formal activities that he sought.) When the delegation arrived, there was sudden shushing for the musicians to be quiet and get back to their places. “Why are they stopping?”, muttered
Giraldo under his breath. “That’s the best part.” But being “the new image of Medellín to the world” meant curtailing this creatively and pedagogically rich participatory activity and giving priority to a presentational one.

This kind of compromise is a central theme of Thompson’s (2009) exploration of “performance affects” in applied theatre. He recognizes that “the comings and goings of applied theatre will always be embedded in wider discursive, political and cultural processes” (24), that cultural policies may be emblematic and designed primarily to generate political capital, and that applied artists are always, ultimately, part of someone else’s show. In one of his case studies he explores how the arts were pressed into service in a problematic rewriting of Rwandan history after the country’s genocide, staging visions of the nation that chimed with official policy. His concern is that the arts can be used to clear up or clean up social reality for public consumption. His response is to ask: “is there any potential for the arts to open up history as a problem to be explored rather than a story to be accepted?” (86), and he sets out to look for “ways to disentangle performance practices from the strategies of the powerful” and maintain “the difficultness of the past in the present” (79). He does so by focusing on affect rather than effect.

Thompson’s arguments are relevant to SATM, and the Harvard performance exemplifies some of his points. The Red performed a cleaned-up vision of the city for public consumption while university students were busy messing it up outside. Thompson is wary of simplistic, strategic narratives of effect, shaped by the desires of policy makers, preferring to valorize spontaneous moments of affective movement that escape from such narratives: “It was outside the formal structure of the workshop, was outside the narrative format of the theatre developed up to that point and, instead, it was appreciated as a joyous, small-scale performance” (110). He could have been describing the jam before the Red’s presentation. Like Giraldo, Thompson thinks that this spontaneity—rather than idealistic narratives of transformation—is the best part. Rejecting simplistic, utilitarian readings, he “validates the singing of the redemption song as a vital, affective moment, over which meanings are kept deliberately murky” (111). His final anecdote concerns youths doing the “wrong” things at a performance workshop: eating the wrong food in the wrong places, laughing at the wrong moments,
using the stage in the wrong way. Yet his point is that there is something
tremendously right about this “wrongness.” If there are clear echoes of
the Harvard performance here, there is also a stark contrast with the
official face of SATM, focused on discipline, order, and playing right.
Thompson’s arguments also mesh well with Kertz-Welzel’s: together
they point towards a retreat from grand, idealistic narratives towards
finding value in the aesthetic, the affective, and the reflective. They imply
that SATM’s real value may be found not in the illusory order of good
intentions and inspirational rhetoric that dominates official narratives,
but rather in the messiness that the discipline-obsessed Abreu abhorred.

Shifting the lens from effect to affect may be productive for SATM.
There are doubts over whether SATM is effective, but much fewer over
whether it is affective. Those affects are not necessarily positive, as
we have seen; SATM can produce negative responses as well—bitter
as well as joyful tears—and plenty of ambivalence. But there is real
affective work going on, and the affective dimension of SATM is more
present than its ambiguous and often imperceptible social effects. The
leadership of Abreu and Ocampo was underpinned by their charisma
and oratory—their affective power. This power was amplified by the
intensity of their approach to music education. They constructed all-
encompassing processes that enveloped participants. We might learn
more about SATM if we paid less attention to their strategic discourses
of effects and more to the ambiguous affective worlds that they created.

Embracing social utility and the language of impact and effect
has led to increased funding, but also “to a certain atrophying of the
practice” (117)—words that resonate with SATM. Thompson also notes
that concentration on utility has had a draining effect on research. Affect
tends to be at the centre of artistic work yet the periphery of research,
perhaps because affect is complex: it is hard to predict or control what
will happen; it is not necessarily reproducible; it does not travel a linear
route. Measuring certain kinds of impact is easier, but it can lead to
downplaying the complexity of such work. Thompson thus argues for
an affective turn for research—one that would sit well with scholarship
that engages with complexity in art and development, cited throughout
this book. Perhaps the future of SATM research should be to move on
from a focus on working or not working—research driven by official,
strategic claims—towards exploring the affective dimension, which is much closer to participants’ experiences.

I am left with many questions. Is there a version of SATM that is progressive in goals and methods, safe from political appropriation, yet also attractive to funders? Is there a version of SATM that will appeal equally to students, teachers, social workers, researchers, and institutions? The Red’s travails in 2017–19 were in part due to the competing demands of different constituencies. Is it possible for one program to keep everyone happy? Is a middle path an acceptable if messy compromise or the worst of both worlds?

From the perspective of music education for social change, it is hard not to be inspired by Vujanović’s (2016, 115) vision of “art as a bad public good”: “a politically engaged art that criticizes actual society and intelligibly promotes particular, new, and better social orders”; one that “involves chaotic experiments, failures, irrational proposals, alien messes, queer masquerades, and heterotopic cabinets of wonders where there is no illegitimate question and no one is sure of the right answers. The answers here lie only in experiences of artistic situations that temporarily open new possible worlds.” Yet as Vujanović notes: “The concept of ‘art as a bad public good’ implies that art has the potential to be ‘bad for’ and ‘bad from’ the perspective of neoliberal capitalist states and their public morals” (118). Artivism, meanwhile, “confronts, interrogates, or even shrugs off the status quo” and “threatens the conventional wisdom” (Artivism network, cited in Diverlus 2016, 191–92). Are such radical visions possible in an expensive field that depends so heavily on political support and the patronage of powerful representatives of conventional wisdom and the status quo?

As Lees and Melhuish (2015, 251) note, in the context of arts-led regeneration, there is “an unspoken expectation for arts and culture to be uncritical or ‘minimum risk’ and certainly not to question or undermine the motivations of funders and social policy-makers.” For Yúdice (2003, 16), the rise of the expediency of culture—of which SATM is a prime example—has greatly reduced the space for critical or playful approaches:

the “bottom line” is that cultural institutions and funders are increasingly turning to the measurement of utility because there is no other accepted legitimation for social investment. In this context, the idea that the
experience of jouissance, the unconcealment of truth, or deconstructive critique might be admissible criteria for investment in culture comes off as a conceit perhaps worthy of a Kafkaesque performance skit.

SATM exemplifies how the arts have secured their place at the table by becoming a technique of government and thus a vehicle for constrained visions of social action. The implication is a troubling one: that there may be limited room for artistic citizenship or social change when culture is harnessed to utilitarian ends and governmental goals such as social inclusion, peaceful coexistence, or urban renewal.

And yet, Medellín's visual arts program provides a ray of hope, illustrating that institutionalized arts education can allow for pushing boundaries. In SATM, so too do figures such as Andrés Felipe Laverde (the Red) and André Gomes Felipe (NEOJIBA). Progressive individuals can carve out spaces like the San Javier and Liberdade schools within more conventional institutions. More optimistic snapshots may emerge if we zoom in from the institutional picture to observe details. How the two sides weigh up against each other—macro-level limitations versus micro-level possibilities—is a complex and probably unresolvable question.

It is not just practitioners, then, who may be left with ambiguities and messy compromises. I am well aware that I have more questions than answers, and that I have held up concepts or positions that may not sit comfortably together (such as artistic citizenship and decolonizing music education) or appear somewhat contradictory (such as music education for social change and Adorno/Kertz-Welzel's critique). I make no apology for this. I agree with Boeskov that ambiguity is a feature of this field, something to be grappled with and understood better, not overcome and resolved. I hope to stimulate further reflection on these questions, not bring them to a neat conclusion.