Rethinking Social Action Through Music

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

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.
We are a stubborn species: one that is deeply resistant to making profound changes in our behaviour and habits, even when it is clear that we need to do so. But [...] when change is forced upon us we are astonishingly versatile.

James Suzman, *Work*

When I put pen to paper in 2019, I planned to write a book about change in SATM. I felt that this topic deserved more attention. Between the process of reform in Medellín dating back to 2005 and the critical research on SATM since 2014, the case for change was building. Then in 2020, COVID-19 struck. A few months later, George Floyd was murdered, catalysing a resurgence of Black Lives Matter. Issues addressed in this book went from being undercurrents in some parts of the SATM field to major preoccupations in many. As I write these final words at the end of 2020, change is no longer a personal or minority interest: there are few who have not been obliged to confront it over recent months. Consequently, this feels like the right time to focus on change in SATM and pay close attention to a program that has been grappling with it for the last fifteen years.

The tumultuous events of 2020 do not pose new questions for SATM so much as intensify existing ones that have been building slowly across the field for years. Problems in the model had already been identified; change was already called for; but now the need is clearer and more pressing. The crises of 2020 may therefore be seen as a catalyst for a necessary and positive shift. If there was a good case for rethinking SATM when I started writing, that case has only become stronger as I finish.
COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and Music Education

COVID-19 threw into sharp relief two issues from earlier chapters: the centrality of large ensembles, and SATM as a pipeline into the music profession. Suddenly the issue of large ensembles was everywhere, because COVID-19 turned them into a risk and a liability. Collective music-making became a focal point of concern as stories of choir rehearsals as “super-spreader” events were taken up by the media. Large ensembles were rendered unusable in the short term and question marks lingered over their longer-term future. SATM was thus obliged to rethink its central tool and principal selling-point.

The virus also put stress on the classical music profession, making it appear more challenging than ever. It raised further questions about Abreu’s focus on training up large numbers of young people from modest economic circumstances for this career. The idea of orchestral training as route out of poverty has always looked somewhat dubious outside a petrostate classical music bubble economy like Venezuela’s, but in 2020, with desperation rising among even quite successful musicians and talk of an exodus from the profession in some countries as work opportunities evaporated, it seemed particularly far-fetched. For SATM programs to continue to focus on the mass production of orchestral musicians therefore looked highly questionable.

Black Lives Matter (BLM), meanwhile, gave much greater prominence and urgency to existing questions of race, Eurocentrism, and decolonization that had been swirling gently around music education, music studies, and the classical music sector for some years. ISME included decolonization as a priority area in its new six-year strategic plan (2020–2026). Its newsletter on 30 June 2020 committed to self-critique and change, referring to “confronting and challenging the colonising practices that have influenced education in the past and that are still present today and often perpetuated through curriculum, power relations, and institutional structures and systems,” and aspiring to “encourage critical reflection and actions within the Society.” ISME’s Decolonising and Indigenising Music Education Special Interest Group was also launched, and the El Sistema SIG was renamed Music Education for Social Change—a symbolic changing of the guard.
As ISME’s statement illustrates, George Floyd’s killing brought forth a wave of responses and, in some cases, soul-searching from the music education sector, above all in North America. For example, the MayDay Group, like many organizations, made a statement that not only “denounces violence against Black individuals and communities and stands with those who seek justice through political action across the globe,” but also centres on a mea culpa:

The state-sponsored murder of George Floyd represents yet another tragedy in a centuries-long history of white-supremacist violence that permeates all sectors of society, including every aspect of the music education profession (e.g., publications, conferences, social media, curricula, pedagogy, hiring practices). Unless and until White music educators are willing to acknowledge their privilege, take responsibility for their past and the impact it has on the present, and commit to creating a future steeped in justice, the list of names to which George Floyd has been added will never end. For too long Black people—along with Indigenous people and People of Color—have been called upon to work against the tide of systems steeped in white privilege. We commit to joining this work, seek to thoughtfully examine the role of white privilege in our history as an organization, and to dismantle the structures that perpetuate this privilege as the MayDay Group moves forward.¹

El Sistema USA was no exception, putting up a statement on its website, which began: “We mourn with the many families across America who have suffered incredible losses due to over-policing, racial profiling, and systemic oppression.”² It ended:

We are inspired again by the call to action from Maestro Jose Antonio Abreu in his 2009 TED Prize speech:

(El Sistema is) “No longer putting society at the service of art, and much less at the services of monopolies of the elite, but instead art at the service of society, at the service of the weakest, at the service of the children, at the service of the sick, at the service of the vulnerable, and at the service of all those who cry for vindication through the spirit of their human condition and the raising up of their dignity.” (emphasis in original)

Both these organizations responded to current events by expressing empathy and solidarity with those affected, but there is a striking difference between their statements. MayDay’s offered an organizational self-critique and commitment to change; El Sistema USA’s offered neither. El Sistema USA made no mention of what really preoccupied MayDay: the ways that music education itself has historically participated in structural racism and has thus been part of the problem at the heart of BLM. As music education institutions came forth to accept responsibility and commit to reparative action, El Sistema USA offered a vision of continuity and reaffirmed its allegiance to Abreu’s philosophy. Its statement on race ended with the words of a white Europhile, who made no mention of race.

In this sense, Abreu was an inappropriate figure to invoke at the height of BLM. What is more, he and his philosophy are archetypical examples of the problem that MayDay identified. A member of Venezuela’s white elite, Abreu privileged the performance of classical music by white European and European-descended composers. In his mouth, the word “music” was synonymous with classical music, above all European (Baker 2014). Abreu told Lubow (2007): “As a musician, I had the ambition to see a poor child play Mozart.” In a television interview, he claimed: “El Sistema breaks the vicious cycle [of poverty] because a child with a violin starts to become spiritually rich: [...] when he 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 leave it behind and ends up defeating it” (Argimiro Gutiérrez 2010). As Abreu’s words illustrate, El Sistema is a colour-blind institution in the sense that it does not “see” or talk about race; yet colour-blindness is very different from a commitment to racial justice (Cheng 2019), and the Eurocentrism of its approach is in fact far from colour-blind (Crenshaw 2019). Abreu and El Sistema argued that classical music could save children around the world (many of them Black, Brown, or Indigenous) “from an empty, disorientated, and deviant youth.” In a post-George Floyd world, this looks like not just an organization working within a “white racial frame” (Joe Feagin, cited in Ewell 2020) but also a paradigmatic example of white supremacy and colonialist thinking in music education (Kajikawa 2019).
Iconoclasm

Edward Colston was a British politician and philanthropist of the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries who founded alms-houses, schools, and hospitals in Bristol. For his good deeds, he was commemorated in local place, street, and school names, and in 1895 a statue was erected in his memory. On 7 June 2020, the statue was toppled and pulled into the harbour by BLM protesters, in symbolic retribution for Colston’s activities as a slave trader. Years of criticisms and campaigns had had no effect, and eventually protesters took matters into their own hands. The clash between Colston’s values and those of contemporary Bristol society had become too much.

We will not have to wait centuries to see the clash between Abreu’s values and those of progressive music educators. They were out of sync even before his death. The old-school authoritarianism and domination of students; the extreme working practices; the patriarchal dynamics and systemic exclusion of women from the most prestigious roles; the deficit-based theory of poverty; the salvation rhetoric; the clear hierarchization of musics—these are all unsavoury relics of an earlier age. A mission of transforming the lives of BIPOC youths in postcolonial societies through European orchestral music; converting music students into tools of political propaganda for an autocratic regime; bribing journalists and persecuting critics—we do not need to wait until 2120 to see what is wrong here, particularly if social justice is an aspiration. “Problems? We grow, grow, grow,” said Abreu. In a post-George Floyd world, this kind of politician’s whitewash (I use the word advisedly) of serious issues is no longer acceptable to many educators and activists pursuing social change.

In 2005, when the Red was redirected, the images of Ocampo were taken down from the program’s schools. But El Sistema and its affiliates are still putting up statues to their idol, paying homage to Abreu at every turn. In 2020, when Floyd’s murder and BLM led to soul-searching and the figurative tearing down of icons in music education, El Sistema created a Chair of the Thought of Maestro José Antonio Abreu, feeding the cult of personality around its deceased founder and consolidating his conservative vision (“Cátedra” 2020). Programs around the world continued to proclaim that they were seeking social justice or change.
and also “inspired” by Abreu’s approach, either ignoring or oblivious to the contradiction between the two. This sector missed a golden opportunity for self-reflection, to finally see race within SATM, and from there to undertake a broader reassessment of its past and its future.

Colston was once considered sufficiently inspiring to be placed on a pedestal. He was an admirable figure according to the values of another age. He no longer is. Eventually a reckoning came. Bristol’s city authorities ignored the issue for years. They could have taken the decision to move Colston’s statue to a museum: not to erase history but to put it in its place. But they failed to act and the statue ended up in the harbour.

SATM should not wait for others to pull Abreu down and tip him into the harbour. It should act itself, and now, by removing Abreu from his pedestal and putting the man and his philosophy in a metaphorical museum where his achievements and failures may be examined and understood. This is not about disowning history or rewriting it but rather drawing a line under the past and charting a different course for the future.

Reckoning with and learning from history is a mark of a mature and responsible organization. As the chief executive of Oxfam GB wrote recently:

We can all learn lessons from the past. A key part of Oxfam’s journey over the almost 80 years of our history has been a growing understanding of how our attitudes and actions are rooted not just in our desire for a better world, but also our assumptions about it—assumptions that, given our British roots, are inevitably coloured by colonialism. We haven’t always got it right—far from it—but as a result we are more aware than ever of the need to ensure we challenge, rather than reinforce, existing imbalances of power. (Sriskandarajah 2020)

After the events of 2020, surely the time has come for such open self-examination in SATM. What are the lessons that this field has learnt from the past?

**COVID-19, BLM, and Classical Music**

In late July 2020, Marshall Marcus, CEO of the European Union Youth Orchestra, invited another well-known figure in the classical music scene, the journalist Norman Lebrecht, to discuss the future of orchestras
in the light of the coronavirus pandemic.\(^3\) Both speakers had no doubt that COVID and BLM meant change for the orchestral world and that innovation—probably radical—was needed. Lebrecht articulated a number of critiques of orchestral culture, focusing on touring, hyper-specialization, and the routine aspects of the work. Speaking about orchestral music as a career, he stated: “what we’ve created is a boring, two-dimensional life and we have to break free of it.” He pointed the finger at music education and professional orchestras for curbing musicians’ creativity:

the system is set up in such a way as to chop their legs off before they start. Everything that they do as they go through the education system is designed to make them fit to the working system rather than to redesign the working system to how they think it ought to be; [...] they are trained to please rather than to challenge.

“We need to change the whole system of education of musicians,” declared Lebrecht. “Yes!” replied Marcus.

One joint message was that musicians needed to diversify their skills, rather than taking a unitary approach. Marcus responded to Lebrecht: “it seems to me that one of the things you’re saying is that [younger musicians’] future may not be as much in these huge symphony orchestras.” He reimagined the orchestra as “an ensemble of possibilities: so you’re not just a player, you’re a teacher, you’re a composer, you make things happen, you’re an entrepreneur.” Then he directly addressed the topic of change:

it feels to me as if all of these things you’re saying, you’ve been saying for a long time, and what has happened with Coronavirus is it’s like we’re in a stretto, suddenly it’s all happening, you know, twenty years of change is happening in a few months, and I guess that leads onto the need to change even more fast, so let’s get going.

This conversation underlined the obsolescence of SATM’s orthodox model in 2020. El Sistema was built around students learning a single skill: to play orchestral parts. Discipline was its watchword. This narrow, unitary training enabled the program to storm the world’s concert stages for a decade from 2007. Since The System provided for musicians

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and occupied all their time, developing complementary skills or being entrepreneurs was low down the agenda. As an El Sistema conductor told Shieh (2015, 572): “The system buys everything and supports everything.” Playing orchestral parts excellently was the surest route to success. However, this is the precise opposite of the training that Lebrecht and Marcus proposed for the 2020s: broad, diversified, creative, with space to challenge rather than just to please. As these speakers noted, transformations in the orchestral world mean the training will have to change—and that means a big shake-up for SATM after forty-five years of dominance by El Sistema’s model. In future, long hours in the serried ranks of a symphony orchestra will not prepare young people properly even for the music profession, let alone for the wider world. Abreu’s twentieth-century symphonic thinking has been left behind by the times.

As Marcus and Lebrecht’s conversation illustrated, the winds of change blew through the classical music sector in 2020. Race was a particular focus of attention in the US and the UK. A wave of articles appeared in the mainstream media (e.g. Harrison 2020; Poore 2020; Kelly 2020). The New York Times published three articles on racism in classical music on a single day (16 July 2020).

In a widely shared article in The New Yorker, Alex Ross (2020) argued that “the field must acknowledge a history of systemic racism.” He noted: “The wealthy white Americans who underwrote the country’s élite orchestras tended to see their institutions as vehicles of uplift that allowed the lower classes to better themselves through exposure to the sublime airs of the masters,” and he went on to explore the contradictions of such paternalism. His concluding paragraph echoes a theme that has underpinned this book:

> The ultimate mistake is to look to music—or to any art form—as a zone of moral improvement, a refuge of sweetness and light. [...] Because all art is the product of our grandiose, predatory species, it reveals the worst in our natures as well as the best. Like every beautiful thing we have created, music can become a weapon of division and destruction.

Ross is hardly a firebrand—more the liberal voice of classical music in the US. Yet the contrast with Abreu could hardly be clearer. Ross directly criticized the ideologies of music that Abreu and his followers espoused. His critique of seeing orchestras as “vehicles of uplift that allowed the lower classes to better themselves” hit painfully close to
home. Contradicting Abreu’s neo-Romantic idealism, Ross recognized classical music’s complicity with systemic problems. Ross’s article was just one of many in 2020 that left Abreu’s discourse looking distinctly past its sell-by date.

As with music education, critiques did not just come from outside. The League of American Orchestras (LAO) released a statement expressing how it was “coming to grips with its history of racism, reflecting on the impact of racism within the League and the wider community of orchestras, and committing to sustained action.” Its president argued that the time had come for permanent structural change, imagining “a future that is richer and far more embracing than where we’ve come from” (Woods 2020). He critiqued the use of canonic European repertoire of the past as “a recyclable asset, pulled mercilessly off the shelf for marketability and immediate emotional impact.” The climate crisis demanded that the sector “finally start an honest discussion about the more carbon-intensive aspects of our work—like touring, [or] the global market for guest artists and attractions.” In a ringing self-critique, he looked forward to orchestras redefining themselves from a “legacy art form” to “a sector in permanent evolution, responding to and participating in powerful tides of societal change.” The president of the LAO was under no illusions: the orchestral sector had some serious catching up to do.

There is thus increasing recognition from within as well as outside the industry that orchestras have a problem—or even that they are a problem. Amid the growing calls for orchestras to transform themselves, to become more diverse and inclusive, Dudamel’s claim that they are “a model for an ideal global society” (Lee 2012) appears not just dubious but a complete inversion of reality. As Pentreath (2020) asks, in what field other than the orchestral world would it be acceptable to offer a strong defence of the tyrannical male leader in late 2020, in the full knowledge of the harm that such figures have caused? SATM’s foundational idea—that the orchestra provides a model for society to follow—is impossible to sustain today.

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At a time when major upheavals point to the need for radical innovation, the conservative Abreu is no more a figure to turn to for classical music than he is for music education. After forty-five years, the orchestra as an organization looks almost identical in Venezuela as it did before El Sistema. The make-up and quantity of orchestras has changed, though much less than Abreu claimed; behind the discursive gloss about social objectives, though, the ethos and functioning of the ensembles is identical, because Abreu’s founding goal was to train young musicians quickly for the profession. Even when he adopted a social discourse, his claim was about changing who got to play the game, not changing the rules.

When the Simón Bolívar orchestra toured Europe for the fortieth anniversary of El Sistema in 2015, it performed Mahler, Beethoven, and Wagner, with the musicians dressed in sober suits. It seemed intent on matching Europe’s professional ensembles in terms of repertoire, standard, and appearance. The music critic Richard Morrison (2015) lamented: “The Bolívars shook the world by being irresistibly youthful, iconoclastic and Venezuelan. In the process of ‘growing up’ they have become just like everyone else.” The end product of four decades of effort and investment in Venezuela was an ensemble that was indistinguishable from the European norm. The route to a radical rethink of the orchestra does not lie this way.

In sum, when the upheavals of 2020 arrived, the limitations of Abreu’s philosophy were exposed. It provided no answers to pressing questions about large ensembles, Eurocentrism, a shrinking sector, or professional renewal. A model that was conservative in its heyday and had already begun to decline was not the place to look for innovative responses to the crisis. There could hardly be a less appropriate example for the future than the Simón Bolívar orchestra: a huge, expensive, globetrotting ensemble, sitting atop a vast factory of narrowly-trained orchestral musicians.

El Sistema rests on and amplifies an idealization of classical music, so it was seized upon by the international classical music sector and its related media in 2007 and became one of its favourite stories for the following decade. But in the last few years, this idealization has become increasingly hard to sustain, with Venezuela slipping ever deeper in crisis on one side and critiques of classical music culture (particularly
around questions of race, gender, and sexual harassment) becoming more public and insistent on the other. Then 2020 saw SATM’s signature practices called into question by COVID-19 and BLM. By the end of 2020, the ideological foundations of the field’s orthodox model looked shakier than ever, and the need for a rethink clearer than ever.

The Red in 2020

The Red was hit hard by COVID-19; not only did it have to close, but also, since its instruments were housed in the schools, many students were left without. Yet having been on a path of pedagogical reform for some time, it was also well placed to respond. The prior shift to project-based learning (PBL) turned out to have been a felicitous move. The Red’s projects were always imagined as going beyond conventional collective instrumental performance. This meant that many interesting projects could be pursued throughout lockdowns and other restrictions in 2020: students made instruments, danced, painted, researched, made radio programs, and so on. Some investigated the musical history of their neighbourhood. The Benjamin Herrera school, for example, produced a series of documentaries about important families of musicians in the surrounding Barrio Antioquia.

In some ways, the Red seemed to be not just coping but actually thriving. For example, the school of Villa Laura made an online show about its 2020 project “Family, literature, and music,” presented by the school director, a teacher, and two students. The project theme resulted from a survey of students’ families, and the contours of the project (a focus on caring for one’s family and oneself, and on collecting community histories and memories) were suggested by the participants. The director described the Red’s students as reflexive, critical, political subjects who contributed to the construction of the territory. These words were borne out in the show: the students spoke eloquently about their views and their role in shaping the project. Most interestingly of all, one of them welcomed the new opportunities for narrating their everyday realities through music. As the teacher confirmed, the crisis had opened up possibilities that conventional face-to-face instrumental training tended to limit. Less focus on teaching allowed more opportunities for listening to the voices of students and their families, and for activities
normally sidelined due to a lack of time. The crisis appeared to have helped Villa Laura to achieve what the Red’s leadership had sought when it introduced PBL in 2018: a reflexive project in which students participated by thinking, talking, and listening, and not only playing or singing.

BLM had much less impact in Colombia than in countries like the US and UK. Also, as with the pedagogical reforms, the Red had started to engage with this issue several years earlier. Giraldo and Franco had placed diversity and identity at the heart of their reforms from 2017, and their commitment was not tokenistic: they championed and performed Colombian musics and instruments (many of them of African and/or indigenous origin). The program had never had a full reckoning with the issue of race, but its leadership was sensitive to the issue and had laid some groundwork.

However, the Red was obliged to face up to another problem that has grown in prominence in SATM and music education more generally in recent years: sexual abuse and harassment. June 2020 saw the publication of a journalistic investigation in Medellín entitled “Sexual abuse in the orchestra” (Ángel 2020). The report identified the city’s university music departments—including that of the University of Antioquia, to which the Red was attached—as hotbeds of sexual abuse and stated that at least eight cases had come to light in the Red itself. According to one alleged victim, “the Red is a nest of abuse, the teachers see it as completely normal to flirt with their [female] students from 13 onwards.” During my research, I had been given detailed testimony in one interview, but I decided not to write about this issue as it seemed not to be pervasive in the Red. However, the new article implied otherwise, at least in the past.

The Red’s response was substantive. A confidential hotline was opened to allow the reporting of incidents. The leadership met with and provided support to victims, and training on combating sexual abuse and violence was organized for staff and students. Other internal activities sought to highlight the problem rather than sweeping it under the carpet. In short, the Red recognized the seriousness of the issue and its responsibility to do something about it.

5 Ironically, less than a month earlier the city’s arts education networks had been lionized in the media after winning an international prize (Valero 2020).
This is not a new problem for SATM. I have been raising it since 2014. So far, El Sistema has escaped a journalistic investigation like that in Medellín, but it is not through a lack of material to investigate. In 2016, the former El Sistema violinist Luigi Mazzocchi confirmed my concerns, alleging publicly that male teachers having sexual relationships with female students “was the norm. … Some of the guys, some of the teachers, would actually say it out loud: ‘I do this [have sexual relationships] with my students because I think we’re actually helping them become better musicians, better violinists’” (Scripp 2016b, 42). He also alleged that at least one known predator (possibly more) continued to work in El Sistema and that sexual abuses were covered up by a code of silence: “People knew that stuff was happening—[...]—everybody talked about it, but nobody reported it” (ibid.).

This issue demands concerted action from the SATM field. “The opposite of racist isn’t ‘not racist,’ it’s antiracist,” says Ibram X. Kendi.6 The same might be said about sexism and sexual harassment and abuse. It is not enough for institutions not to support racism, sexism, or abuse; they need to actively oppose such attitudes and actions. This means acknowledging their presence and committing to combating them. It means critically reassessing institutional pasts and presents, practices and ideologies. It means looking seriously at issues of power, hierarchy, and oppression. It means asking whether, by modelling itself on professional classical music, SATM has reproduced the vices of that sector, and therefore whether it is time to look to other models, such as CM or music therapy.

A striking aspect of the scandal that hit the Red in 2020 was that, according to one former general director, at least two of the alleged perpetrators were hijos de la Red (sons of the Red): former students who had gone on to become teachers. What does it say about SATM’s social education if students who have spent years passing through its ranks can go on to become suspected sexual predators? What were they learning inside the program? What sort of culture were they imbibing? To its credit, the Red’s response was serious and appropriate. But the field needs to go deeper, ask why the problem occurs, and tackle the issue at its source. SATM should take pre-emptive action, rather than

waiting and responding only when cases come to light and the damage is done. This implies, once again, a deep rethink of the field’s practices and dynamics, taking fully into account the ways that certain kinds of music education may leave students open to abuse (Pace 2015).

**Changing Director, Deepening Reform**

The Red has been undertaking critical reassessment since 2005. Nevertheless, as we have seen, this process has not been universally welcomed within the program. Tensions over change reached boiling point in 2019, and a question mark hovered over the Red at the end of that year. It was widely assumed that when Medellín’s new mayor took office, he would bring in his own culture team and appoint a new director of the Red. There was much discussion of who might be chosen and in which direction they might point the program. As early as 2018, some of the more disgruntled staff had barely disguised that they were waiting out the remainder of Giraldo’s tenure in the hopes that someone more attuned to the Red’s traditions would be installed. Would the program continue down the path of self-critique and change or retrench into a more conventional and less controversial approach?

At the start of 2020, the long-expected transition occurred. Giraldo and Franco left, and Vania Abello arrived. Abello is a classical flautist with a background in cultural management, including work with the Colombian Youth Orchestra and Bogotá Philharmonic Orchestra. No sooner had she begun at the Red than COVID-19 struck, and the resulting upheaval made it harder to sense the broader trajectory of the program. But in September 2020, the annual pedagogy symposium, a major event in the program’s calendar that was held online and open to the public, revealed that the new leadership was not only continuing but also doubling down on change.

The Red invited a number of speakers from Colombia and overseas to give long, in-depth presentations. There were several striking features. Interdisciplinarity was prominent: a number of the invitees came not only from outside SATM but also from other arts. There was a focus on pedagogical renewal: the Red sought to learn from other programs and forms of arts education with different pedagogical thinking and practices. There was considerable overlap and exchange
between research and practice: a number of the invited speakers had one foot in both, and the intellectual level was high. And finally, the criticality of their reflections was pronounced. The five-day event left me with various impressions: a theme of búsqueda (a search or quest); a commitment to experimentation, creation, and change; a willingness to listen to and learn from alternative perspectives; an openness to critique and self-critique; and a sense of humility—a feeling that the Red had much still to learn—that underpinned everything else.

The final panel session was hosted by the culture ministry official responsible for the city’s four arts education networks, Mábel Herrera. She underlined that it was important that such projects reflected deeply and had a component of research. (Indeed, the ministry funded qualitative research activities in all four networks during my fieldwork.) This meant that Medellín’s networks were a changing organism. Alluding to the symposium’s title, Territorios sonoros (resounding territories), Herrera was open about the Red’s failure in the past to connect its schools properly to their communities, something that they were now rectifying. In a rebuke to a salvationist tendency in the field, she declared: “our job isn’t to save anyone.”

Abello, the Red’s new director, not only described the program as engaged in a quest to improve and learn from others, but she also criticized the classical music training that she herself had received and that had historically been the central pillar of the program. “We [classical] musicians are quite rigid in our thinking and in our way of approaching creation,” she said, acknowledging that the process of change was difficult for many from such a background. Yet on the topic of coronavirus, her tone was optimistic. She suggested that it provided the Red with an opportunity to push ahead with pedagogical reform. Rather than clinging onto the idea of a return to the old normality as soon as possible, she depicted the disruption as a stimulus to rethink and transform. The staff could not focus on instrumental teaching, so they had to come up with alternatives. This had led to more focus on the students and their questions and desires. Abello even spoke of “a lovely process.” By publicly acknowledging some of the problems with SATM’s old ways and highlighting the value of new approaches, Abello seemed to be moving reform efforts to a new level.
While it feels unfair to single out one presenter when so many were excellent, the contributions of Eliécer Arenas, a musician, psychologist, and anthropologist with three decades of experience in practice, research, and policy-making in Colombia, were particularly striking.\(^7\) Arenas immediately signalled the ambiguity of music, the gap between utopian discourses and realities, and the complex ethical problems of using music as a tool for social transformation. He thus proposed a more critical, realistic reading of the potential of music for social action. What SATM programs generated above all were questions, he said, but the institutional context rarely allowed for deep, calm, critical analysis: “These programs for social transformation, with their discourse, co-opt the capacity for critique. [...] We start to understand the world through the logic of institutional rhetoric. We begin to think that our obligation is to defend the institution.” He expressed sympathy for SATM’s employees: they were often victims of institutional dynamics, obliged to inflate results rather than enquire more deeply, and dehumanized by the demand to protect official discourses. Honest critique needs to be incorporated by institutions as a virtue.

Arenas underlined the importance of dialoguing with and valorizing community cultural resources—the “resounding territories” of the symposium’s title. Many music projects, he noted, negate the local context, treating it as empty or even dangerous. Consequently, “progress” or a “happy ending” is seen more as students leaving the community behind—advancing their career in the capital or overseas—than giving back. Programs needed to work on persuading students to commit to their territory. He critiqued the export model of spending large sums of money to produce a handful of musicians to go overseas. Why all this focus on the exceptional cases? We need to think more about the vast majority and their everyday lives in the community.

It was important for projects to integrate participants into their territory. Concentrating on foreign musical experiences may lead students to dismiss existing ones, leading to a process of uprooting. There are also implications for sociability. If an institution and its staff transmit the message that the popular culture of the family and community has

\(^7\) Some of these ideas are presented in more condensed form in Arenas (2020).
little value, then some social and cultural bonds may deteriorate. If the goal is to improve human relations, this is a problematic outcome.

Arenas criticized the fact that many Latin American musicians end up moving to Europe or North America in order to study Latin American music at a higher level; meanwhile, Latin America remains obsessed with performing central European repertoire of the past. He imagined a Latin American “system,” based on Latin American musics. We should aspire to bring people to our region to study our musics, he said, rather than sending our musicians overseas to study, creating a diaspora. There is presently a boom in Afro-Latin musics, which have been a major influence around the world. What are we doing with this patrimonial treasure? It needs to be given equal status in Latin America—not just adding a few Latin American pieces to the repertoire, “not a nice little tune at the end [of the concert], as a populist gesture.”

Pedagogy was central to his vision of social transformation through music. Technical training was insufficient to construct critical, creative subjects. Nor was it enough to add psychologists or social workers to standard music education. SATM ought to reinforce the elements of music itself that had potential for social development. There was an urgent need to diversify pedagogies and not just repertoires. Traditional music has much to offer in this respect, he argued. Traditional Latin American pedagogies name and relate to the world through music in different ways—for example, invoking relationships between music and nature. However, his was not simply a traditionalist stance: rather, SATM needed to forge new “mestizo pedagogies” for a heterogeneous world. “We need to construct a new mechanism, one that is more complex and more like us; we need the pedagogies to be more like us, so that the kids feel that we are inviting them to construct a resource that gives more life to life, and not to freeze them in an idealized past.”

The problem was not classical music per se, he said, but rather the approach. SATM’s current pedagogies have little to do with Latin American social realities. “Classical music is far more beautiful than its pedagogies,” he argued. It deserved better. “I think we need to be capable of having a counter-cultural vision of pedagogies.”

The world is changing, stated Arenas; if we do not start from this basic premise, we will keep on using the pedagogies of the past rather than pedagogies for the future. In terms of mentality, repertoire,
and ways of working, we are training musicians for a world that is disappearing. The sustainability of the symphonic world is ever more uncertain, so producing young people with such a limited profile makes little sense. Pedagogies need to change away from hyper-specialization and towards emphasizing creativity. They also need to slow down: the rapid pace of learning and obsession with preparing repertoire for performance looks more like indoctrination than education, and it leaves little time for thinking or embodying. We should be educating students to imagine and invent the music and the society of the future, one that their teachers do not know; the current system of music schools and conservatoires is a long way from that picture. What they offered, he argued, was normalization, a “pedagogy of fear,” and a production line of musicians. Yes, this “works” as a model, it produces results, but at what cost? Is this the kind of world we want to create? He argued that SATM should focus much more on forming amateurs rather than professionals—on the “musicalization of the citizenry” rather than preparing a few participants for conservatoire and the industry.

What form of social development is being pursued in practice, not just discourse, he asked? For a few people to become professional musicians and bring prestige to the program? Arenas critiqued spectacularization in SATM—using huge music ensembles to “demonstrate” social change—and wondered whether the field was more focused on seeking applause than achieving its social objectives. What about social inclusion? Does the program really reach those who most need it? And what sort of inclusion is represented by reproducing a single, closed system of understanding the world? These were uncomfortable questions, he acknowledged, but necessary to deepen the work. Hinting that the time for change was ripe, he argued: “The pandemic has brought a willingness to be more honest. We need policy that is less grandiloquent, but more effective, [...] that contains more of the blessed chaos of diversity.”

The substance of Arenas’s contributions was illuminating, but what was even more remarkable was that this vision of critique and renewal came not in an academic article or at a scholarly conference, but rather from a keynote speaker at a prominent, public SATM event, and that far from sitting awkwardly, it aligned with the central themes of the symposium and the perspectives of other invited presenters. Critical thinking about SATM now had more than a foothold in a major program:
it was seated at the top table. Similarly, the self-critical interventions of Herrera and Abello, the two most senior figures in the Red, were remarkable not because of their content—I had heard such opinions countless times before in meetings and private conversations—but because they were made at a high-profile event, in front of staff, students, the other networks, city government representatives, and hundreds of listeners online. Referring publicly to past errors, present challenges, and a different future felt like a big step.

Arenas was far from the only inspiring speaker. Anthony Trecek-King provided a view from the US, describing his work with the Boston Children’s Chorus. Many of his points posed implicit questions for SATM: the issue of race; a critique of a pyramidal program structure; inverting the leadership model; including children with disabilities within the main ensembles rather than creating separate ones; the program as a place of escape for survivors of sexual abuse; incorporating perspectives from critical research; bringing democracy, participation, and politics to the fore; and holding up values such as forgiveness, vulnerability, and empathy as central to the work.

His critique of an access-focused approach to diversity and inclusion went to the heart of orthodox SATM:

You need to make sure that in every environment and everything that you do you try to create as diverse an environment as possible. In other words, you need to go out and actively seek the type of student that you would like to have in your ensemble, because just opening the doors and saying ‘come join me’ isn’t going to be enough.

He framed diversity and inclusion in terms of repertoire but also pedagogy: “Are we teaching in one specific style that connects to one specific kind of student, or do we have different teaching methods?” He placed great emphasis on learning and practising how to listen and talk: encouraging students to express themselves and their experiences, guiding them through conversations, opening their ears to other people’s stories. He would devote time to such conversations, often spending half of a two-hour rehearsal talking and half singing. He would make sure that conversations included difficult topics such as race, gender, and the inequities of the political system. He described a student-led initiative in which participants raised money to buy computers for a school that
could not afford them—exemplifying the ideal of action for the benefit of others in artistic citizenship.

As ever, the contrast with SATM’s orthodoxy was fascinating. Whereas in 2020 El Sistema turned inwards and backwards to the deceased Abreu and his conservative philosophy of “work and study,” the Red treated the crisis as an opportunity for self-critical reflection and extended its search outwards to other arts, innovative pedagogues, and critical researchers to chart a new way forwards. The Red did not focus its attention on classical conductors or performers, who are usually the staple of such events in orthodox SATM. There was nothing here about making a career in music; the focus was on resounding territories and social transformation. Arenas’s valorization of “the blessed chaos of diversity” and “the disorder of plurality”—the possibility that every community might want to take its own path—contrasted with Abreu’s obsession with order and his recipe of the orchestra as the solution to every problem. Trecek-King highlighted the importance of talking and listening—activities generally seen as a waste of valuable playing time in orthodox SATM. Arenas’s call to realism was a challenge to Abreu’s politically and economically expedient idealism.

The symposium felt like a turning point. I felt inspired at the end. Still, it did not banish all questions by any means, and I do not see the Red’s future as assured. This was a program with many ups and downs across its history. This was not the first time that I had heard excellent ideas in the Red. Would the program manage to translate them into practice? Were enough staff on board this time to enact the reforms? Then there was the issue of COVID. The Red was bravely attempting to see it as an opportunity, but many in the cultural and music education sectors in Colombia were struggling or suffering, so the wider panorama of socially oriented music education was far from encouraging. Undoubtedly such struggles were represented within the ranks of the Red as well. Furthermore, a program like the Red can never be isolated from political developments. A future mayor might decide to reduce the program’s budget or be less interested in reflection and adapting processes than in the quick hit of good publicity that the old, spectacular version of SATM provides.

In terms of the international field, there are places where change is afoot, but the biggest players in SATM—Venezuela and Mexico—remain
stuck in the old model. SATM is a huge field and any impression is necessarily subjective, but my sense is that pursuing a serious overhaul, as the Red is doing, is still a minority interest. There is also the role of the global North to consider. El Sistema was widely embraced as providing hope for a resurrection of classical music, as Simon Rattle put it, and of classical music education. Are the program’s many fans in the global North willing to recognize the deficiencies of El Sistema’s model, let go of it, and encourage SATM to move on?

Ambiguity is not something that can be banished from such work, then, as Boeskov argues. It also hovered over a public meeting shortly afterwards, attended by representatives of several Latin American SATM programs. Abello was invited to present the Red to the other participants and the online audience. She began with a description of the program, and I was struck by how conventional it sounded, even after fifteen years of attempted reforms. The program remained organized largely along its original lines, with twenty-six schools whose character was defined by the needs of the program’s orchestras and bands rather than the desires or traditions of the surrounding communities. Only one school was devoted to Colombian music.

Then Abello began to speak about the Red’s search, and words like evolution and transformation started to appear. The Red was created as a response to the particular circumstances of the late 1990s, she said, and since the city has changed since then, the Red ought to evolve as well. It also needs to adapt to the desires of the community, so it has become more open to other musics, moving away from “Eurocentric training.” Our imaginary cannot be based on the symphony orchestra alone, she said; we also need other musics that allow participants to recognize themselves and tell the stories of their own lives and communities. It is no longer enough to make music just for the sake of making music. Music is the means; the end is forming reflective, critical, but empathetic citizens, who learn through music how to take decisions in their lives. Behind the search lies pedagogical renewal. COVID-19 has brought opportunities in this respect: above all, greater involvement by families in the projects, rather than just taking their child to the music school and sitting outside waiting for them. Abello’s presentation underlined how

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far there was still to go in the Red, but also how far it had come. Her determination to press ahead was unmistakable.

A point that caught my attention in both the symposium and the subsequent meeting was the absence of El Sistema, beyond a couple of mentions that the Red and similar programs were initially inspired by the Venezuelan one. On the one hand, there was no adulation; on the other, no mention that the Red broke with the Venezuelan program in 2005 and had spent the last fifteen years seeking a new model. In the global North, we have become accustomed to seeing SATM as a universe that revolves around El Sistema, and public debate has often been reduced to arguments between advocates and critics of the Venezuelan program. But in these Latin American spaces, El Sistema was reduced to a historical footnote—a sign, perhaps, of its decreasing relevance at the progressive end of the field.

However, the final words of the meeting were offered by Claudio Espector, the godfather of SATM in Argentina. There had been brief mentions of El Sistema, he said, but he wanted to underline a critical point: “If a lot was inspired by the Venezuelan model, let’s not lose sight of the fact that the Venezuelan model, at the height of its development, took as its transcendental moment not that the Venezuelan orchestras should be present in our Latin American barrios, but rather that they should play at the Salzburg Festival.” His point echoed the Red’s territorial critique and Arenas’s interrogation of SATM’s export model; it also came from one of the most senior figures in Latin American SATM. Unusually for a public conversation between SATM programs, the event ended on an ambiguous note.

The symposium and subsequent meeting took place when this book was nearing completion, and I was fascinated to see how the critical perspectives and processes of change that I had witnessed and written about were being consolidated. Many points from the preceding chapters were articulated by multiple voices inside and outside the Red, from Colombia and overseas. After years of slow, incremental change, I had the sensation that the tide was turning. COVID-19 seemed to have served as one catalyst: reducing the program’s frenetic pace, making business as usual an impossibility, and thereby creating both time and the requirement for deeper transformation. The symposium itself was another, moving the critical conversation onto a new level—one that left
El Sistema’s conservative shibboleths far behind. There was a special energy of rethinking and renewal during the symposium that surpassed anything I had seen within SATM during a decade of research. Listening to voices from different programs, arts, and countries, I sensed that a movement for self-critique and change was gathering steam.

Hope

Despite all the challenges of 2020, then, I end the year with a greater sense of optimism and hope with regard to the Red. Having seen it as neither simply an example to follow nor one to avoid during most of my research, I find my ambivalent feelings shifting as my writing draws to a close. I am increasingly convinced that the Red constitutes a valuable case study of SATM, one deserving of greater attention.

What is distinctive about the Red is not the quality of its musical performances; it is the pedagogical rethinking, the longstanding critical reflection on the social objective, and, above all, the centrality of an ethos of búsqueda or search. Arenas argued that SATM programs generated many questions, but the field’s institutions and discourses tended to co-opt employees’ capacity for critique. This is where the Red differs from the norm. The Red has had leaders who have backed self-critique and change. My meetings with the Red’s general directors revolved around critical questions that they themselves raised; they did not “understand the world through the logic of institutional rhetoric,” as Arenas put it, in fact they actively queried that logic. Leaders’ responses to evaluations of the Red were indicative: rather than seizing hold of and trumpeting any positive report, however flimsy, they tended to accord such studies only limited value. There was a commitment to grappling with the complex issues that SATM raises and trying to do better, not telling the world what great work they were doing. There has been a humility at leadership level that contrasts with the self-congratulation of some of SATM’s most famous programs.

In 2020, I wrote to Abello to introduce myself and tell her that I was writing a critical book about the Red. Her response was that she welcomed critical voices as they would help the program to grow. The Red was exploring many fundamental changes, she replied, and my reading would feed into that search. These words were like a breath of
fresh air; Abello’s openness to critical scrutiny was a welcome change from the extreme defensiveness that I had faced after my previous book.

Consequently, I am inclined to hold up the Red as an example after all: not of “best practice” but of striving towards it; not of inspirational rhetoric but of an openness to critical reflection and dialogue; not of a model program, but of one that shows that change is possible in the SATM field. It is not the achievement of perfection or an ideal that I take away from the Red, but rather the search for improvement: the quest to know more and do better. This is something to celebrate.

Varkøy and Rinholm (2020, 180) offer up hope as an alternative to the extremes of hubris and resignation with regard to music education:

This hope is neither naïve optimism, nor something similar to religious faith. Hope in our context is not the conviction that something will end well, but a hunch of meaning. Hope allows for more nuanced discussions and actions (or non-actions) than the attitude of belief. Beliefs may lead to an over-confidence in the effects of music that, in our view, does not benefit music education and philosophy of music education over the long-term. The magic of music does not need help from preachers telling us what music can do. Instead, it needs a humbler attitude characterized by hope rather than belief, giving room for wonder instead of over-confidence in music’s alleged effects on humans.

Leaving Normality Behind

2020 has been a year of precipitous, forced, and often unwelcome changes. Some pine for a return to normality, but others see the disruption as an opportunity to press a reset button and move away from an unsatisfactory status quo. There have been more than a few cries of “we don’t want to go back to normal,” recognizing that the old normality was broken. In the US, this conversation was intensified by the election of Joe Biden and defeat of Donald Trump. Robert Reich (2020) argued that returning to normal would be disastrous for the US:

Normal led to Trump. Normal led to the coronavirus.

Normal is four decades of stagnant wages and widening inequality when almost all economic gains went to the top. Normal is 40 years of shredded safety nets, and the most expensive but least adequate healthcare system in the modern world.
Normal is also growing corruption of politics by big money—an economic system rigged by and for the wealthy.

Normal is worsening police brutality.

Normal is climate change now verging on catastrophe.

Similarly, the Reverend William J. Barber II argued that the US could not afford to go back to normal (Harris 2020), and he recalled that the title of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech was in fact “Normalcy—Never Again.”

Soon afterwards, a major environmental report for the UK Treasury argued that radical changes to production, consumption, and education were urgently needed around the globe (Elliott and Carrington 2021). Going back to normal simply is not an option if we are to avoid a catastrophic breakdown.

2020 has been a year of rethinking around the world. Critical attention has been directed at inequality and redistribution, work, healthcare, education, and other areas of human life. SATM could go either way: it might return to the orthodox model as soon as COVID-19 allows; or it might use this moment of crisis as a catalyst to engage with longstanding questions.

I would argue that this is the right time not just for the latter but also for more radical action in SATM. Each of the 2020 upheavals in the Red and/or SATM (COVID-19, BLM, and sexual harassment) alone would have been sufficient cause for a rethink, because each is connected to the core practices and ideologies of the field. Taken together, they suggest the need for more: not just to rethink but also to transform SATM for the new decade and beyond.

On the educational front, there is a need to face up to technological shifts and their consequences. As we go deeper into an era of automation and artificial intelligence, breadth of perspective, the ability to make connections across areas of knowledge, and distinctively human skills such creativity and empathy will become ever more important. Routine and highly specialized work will be increasingly taken over by machines. Looking ahead to the future, the narrow, repetitive, hyper-specialized approach of El Sistema—learning orchestral parts and downplaying most other facets of music education, let alone the arts and humanities more broadly—is a poor educational choice if serving as a pipeline into
the orchestral profession (El Sistema’s original aim) is not the ultimate goal.

On the social front, the rise and then resurgence of BLM has seen a wave of radical critiques of progressive causes like diversity and inclusion. An increasing number of writers argue that these notions are insufficiently self-critical and that genuine change requires something more (e.g. Stewart 2017; Albayrak 2018; Gopal 2020; Wolff 2020). Brigitte Fielder (2020) contends:

Further racist disgrace will only be prevented by a cultural shift. That shift must be structural, methodological, pedagogical, generational. These organizations must be re-envisioned and rebuilt. New methods and organizational structures are necessary because the existing ones have continued (and will continue) to fail us. Organizations will have to think beyond “inclusion” and come to recognize and understand the very real relations of power that have cultural and material effects on our fields. They cannot simply “diversify” themselves only to rely disproportionately on the labor of their BIPOC members. They cannot simply invite more BIPOC colleagues into an unsustainably racist environment.

It is time for SATM to re-evaluate the idea at its core: a discredited conservative notion of social action as individual social mobility through correcting personal deficits. It is time to wrest SATM away from a colonialist salvation narrative and the stigmatization of the young and the poor as “empty, disorientated, and deviant.” It is time to decentre a model that was not even designed with social action in mind and forge a new one connected to the needs of our times. SATM’s foundational ideas and practices are no longer fit for the purpose of social action—if indeed they ever were. They should be retired, and the field should be re-founded on the best research and practice in social action and arts education.

The problems that beneficiaries face are primarily structural or systemic ones, not personal deficiencies. So rather than pursuing individualized solutions (salvation, social mobility), why not consider how music education could be articulated to organizations or movements that are pursuing systemic change, such as The Democracy Collective or Smart CSOs Lab?\(^9\) How might SATM display “a readiness to participate

in actions against particular or local manifestations of larger systemic problems” (Soper 2020, 155)? Global heating is the biggest social problem of the century, yet it is barely on the radar of SATM’s largest programs. SATM is not going to solve it, but could it at least play its part? If SATM is supposed to offer a model for society, could it not strive to model a sustainable society, focused on quality of life and not quantity of musicians or orchestras?

Transformation does not need to start from scratch. There is an enormous amount of exciting practice and research across music and other arts that ties together culture and development in innovative and productive ways, and I have pointed to a few examples in these pages. In Medellín, the Red took a significant step forwards simply by looking to its neighbour networks of Visual Arts, Theatre, and Dance. The volume Jóvenes: un fuego vital (2015) illustrates that programs driven by progressive visions of youth and development surrounded the Red in Medellín; all that was needed was for the program to lift its head from the norms of orthodox SATM. There is a growing literature on music education, ecology, and the environment on which reformers could draw to fashion a sustainable SATM. Traditional Latin American musics and pedagogies often invoke connections between music and nature, as Arenas noted, so they offer an invaluable resource for using music to rethink coexistence and our relationship to the world.

The challenges are great and numerous, and they feel particularly acute at the end of the tumultuous year of 2020. Nonetheless, this is a historical juncture that calls for action. Furthermore, the Red illustrates that such action is possible within SATM. Lebrecht (2021) argues that, for the classical sector, “2021 presents the best chance for change in living memory.” To quote Marcus again, “it’s like we’re in a stretto, [...] twenty years of change is happening in a few months, [...] so let’s get going.” If ever there were a moment to rethink and transform SATM, it would be now.

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