José Antonio Abreu on Venezuela's El Sistema miracle

In a rare interview, El Sistema founder José Antonio Abreu talks about his passion for Venezuela's extraordinary musical programme that gives children a route out of poverty

By Clemency Burton-Hill 14 June 2012

Maestro [José Antonio Abreu](http://www.ted.com/speakers/jose_antonio_abreu.html) works in an office situated in an unremarkable shopping mall in central Caracas, a few steps from one of the city's major thoroughfares. On the afternoon we meet, the sun is shining and the streets are bustling. Nevertheless, to make the short journey by foot from a nearby car park, we are accompanied by three conspicuously armed guards.

This is [Caracas](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/10/venezuela-caracas-gang-warfare-murder), one of the most violent cities in the world. Venezuela's murder rate is three times that of Iraq and four times that of Mexico. On average, 53 people are murdered here every day.

This grisly statistic is on my mind as I am ushered in to meet Abreu, the 73-year-old former economist and conductor whose visionary philosophy has, since 1975, been based on the notion that a free, immersive classical music education for the poorest of the poor might positively influence the social problems plaguing the country.

Abreu's hypothesis has been overwhelmingly vindicated, with more than 380,000 children engaged in national music programmes, more than 80% of whom come from low- or middle-income areas. Of the two million graduates of the programme since its inception, many have gone on to become not just musicians, but lawyers, teachers, doctors and civil servants. Yet it remains one of the great paradoxes of "El Sistema", as Abreu's [Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar](http://www.fesnojiv.gob.ve/en/el-sistema.html) has come to be known, that no matter how successful it is, how many [Gustavo Dudamels](http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/sep/16/gustavo-dudamel-simon-bolivar-orchestra) it creates, how many [wealthier nations](http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/oct/03/britain-children-orchestra-sistema) seek to emulate it, the Venezuelan crime rate still climbs.

Abreu agrees that the statistics are "extremely grave". But he points to evidence that also seems to prove that without El Sistema's extensive network of *nucleos* (community music schools), orchestras and choirs, they would be considerably grimmer. "The Inter-American Development Bank, the Venezuelan State and the Andean Development Corporation are continually supervising the foundation's projects," he says, "because they have invested so many resources. Wherever there is an impact evaluation study, the results are unanimous. Children engaged in the programme attain above-average results in school and show a tremendous capacity for collective community action. The orchestra and the choirs, the heart of the programme, help create a sense of solidarity. Involvement becomes a weapon against poverty and inequality, violence and drug abuse."

Abre himself is a humble and ascetic figure who has dedicated his life to what he describes categorically as a "human development" project. "The idea came to me because I saw that in [Venezuela](https://www.theguardian.com/world/venezuela), music education did not include orchestras for young people," he explains, "but I also could see, in the few existing music schools at that time, that the children who were participating in orchestras developed with a much more humane perception of their role within society. They had a completely different set of values."

The scheme was launched, famously, with just 11 kids in a local garage – a far cry from [scenes at](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEMIX-N3B5Q), say, the [Royal Albert Hall 30-odd years later](http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2007/aug/21/proms2007.proms), but his conviction of the possibility of social transformation through music was absolute even then. "At our first rehearsal, I was certain of it," he says, beady brown eyes glittering. "I told those first 11 members of the orchestra that we were creating the beginning of a network that would eventually turn Venezuela into a musical power by rescuing children from low-income families."

A few days later, I ask Frank di Polo, the violinist and original leader of the orchestra, if he remembers the moment. "Of course," he laughs. "Maestro Abreu knew all along what he was creating and what it could achieve."

El Sistema, despite the nickname, is not actually a "system" of music education, but, as Abreu insists, "a conception regarding the function of music within society". It is a vast network of schools, orchestras and choirs that now extends to all 23 provinces in Venezuela, and touches an estimated three adults for every child engaged in the programme. Whether Hugo Chávez or Henrique Capriles triumphs in October's forthcoming presidential elections, it is inconceivable that they should withdraw support for the programme. Seven successive Venezuelan administrations from across the political spectrum have supported El Sistema – to the tune of around 90% of its operating budget. The funds, tellingly, have always been disbursed by the social services rather than culture departments. This is surely down to the laser political vision of Abreu, whose tiny form and Mother Theresa-esque manner belie a formidable, strategic intelligence. "The fundamental element that has determined support has been the results [El Sistema](https://www.theguardian.com/music/el-sistema) has proved in the social field," he says. "For Venezuelans, music education is now a constitutional and legal right."

Next week, the most visible and thrilling exponent of that principle returns to the UK, when Dudamel, 31-year-old music director of [Los Angeles Philharmonic](http://www.laphil.com/), brings his "other" orchestra, the Simón Bolívar Symphony, to [Raploch, Scotland](http://festival.london2012.com/events/9000961369), for a concert alongside the El-Sistema-inspired initiative [Big Noise](http://makeabignoise.org.uk/big-noise-raploch/). The gig launches the [London 2012 Festival](http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2012/apr/26/jeremy-hunt-london-2012-festival) and, along with the orchestras' subsequent residency at the Southbank Centre, which will be live-streamed on the Guardian website, is likely to unleash a new wave of Dudamania in Britain.

Did Abreu always realise what he had on his hands with Gustavo? "Of course," he says; he knew "from the very beginning" that his was a "superlative" talent. Yet Dudamel is far from unique. Take [Christian Vasquez](http://www.askonasholt.co.uk/artists/conductors/christian-vsquez), 28-year-old music director designate of Stavanger Symphony Orchestra; or [Diego Matheuz](http://www.askonasholt.co.uk/artists/conductors/diego-matheuz), who has taken over at La Fenice, Venice's legendary opera house, aged 27. It is not at all fanciful to propose that in coming years, many more European, American and Asian music institutions will have a spirited young Venezuelan at their helm, usually with terrifically emotive hair.

This represents something of a dilemma for Abreu, mentor and father figure to all these wildly gifted young maestri. One reason why El Sistema works so well is its familial mechanism: as soon as a child is accomplished enough, they begin to help teach younger generations. If the most talented teenagers leave as soon as the big musical agencies – including the Berlin Philharmonic, in the case of Sistema double bassist [Edicson Ruiz](http://edicsonruiz.com/index.php) – come calling, the system may falter.

Abreu admits it can be difficult to reconcile the need to allow his brightest proteges to spread their wings internationally with the need to keep them in Venezuela as all-important role models, but he repeats that this is a "human development project". El Sistema exists, he maintains, "to strengthen the moral and spiritual development of the country" in whichever form that takes.

There are many who believe this quietly charismatic man should be in line for the Nobel peace prize. Sir Simon Rattle, who describes El Sistema as "nothing less than a miracle", [has been advocating it](http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/oct/03/jose-antonio-abreu-sistema-rattle) since 2008. But Abreu shakes his head. "The biggest reward is the opportunity to keep doing our work," he says. The international attention his system receives "creates a great sense of reward and responsibility". He indicates a poster on the wall emblazoned with the phrase "*Tocar y Luchar*", the official motto of the programme ever since that afternoon in the garage. "To play and to struggle: that came from our earliest experience when we had so many obstacles for undertaking the project – lack of spaces, instruments, financial resources," he explains. "To play – it's a form of striving, so we can show the validity of the efforts we are committing ourselves to. The struggle is against the obstacles that present themselves. So there was always this double meaning within the kids, to be both artists and social fighters."

The slogan is more applicable today than ever. "We are still facing the gravest social problems, and we have a challenge to incorporate as many excluded children as possible," Abreu admits. "We need more teachers, instruments, space, funding." The number of kids engaged in El Sistema programmes is estimated to hit the half-million mark by 2015, which seems mind-boggling; but Abreu points out that 33% of Venezuela's 30m population is under 14. I get the sense that he will not rest until every one of those children has access to a local nucleo.

"We know that the efforts we put into it are not enough, given the size of the challenge ahead. But this is our dream. And we will keep fighting for it, every day."

*Dudamel and the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra open London 2012 Festival in Raploch on 21 June, then perform at the Royal Festival Hall on 23 and 26 June as part of Southbank Centre's Festival of the World. Both RFH concerts will be live-streamed at* [*guardian.co.uk/bolivarlive*](http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/series/dudamel-and-simon-bolivar-symphony-orchestra-live)*. More about the Southbank Centre's Sounds Venezuela festival* [*here*](http://ticketing.southbankcentre.co.uk/find/festivals-series/sounds-venezuela-2012)*.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/jun/14/abreu-el-sistema-venezuela-interview-clemency-burton-hill>