



How the El Sistema-Inspired Programs, Miami Music Project and the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles, Directly Impact the Underserved Youth of Miami and LA

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Abstract

This research is in the form of a collective case study focused on the Miami Music Project (MMP) and the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (YOLA). This study explores the various functions and goals of these El Sistema-inspired programs, and how they directly serve and impact under-represented communities. It also highlights the impact on the youth's future and what these experiences tangibly and indiscriminately provide for their futures, be it beneficial or detrimental. This will also briefly touch on how MMP and YOLA's approach to training young musicians subverts the idea of instrumental training typically being perceived as an activity only for those with few social and financial restrictions. Through virtual, individual interviews with various people that were either current alumni of these programs, recent graduates of college age, or adults in the field, their responses were recorded. This allowed for a holistic view of how these programs serve their students, thus resulting in answers that are representative of a larger population. Results showed commonalities between responses that trended towards highly positive results from being students in MMP/YOLA. In conclusion, this study clearly demonstrates that these programs have left positive, tangible impacts on their current and former students.

Keywords: El Sistema, Underrepresented Youth, Music Education

Introduction

In recent decades, classical music has undergone massive cultural and structural overhauls that have left vast impacts on the field. As classical music searches for stability in a modern and ever-changing world, organizations at the forefront of the industry have started exploring various approaches to bring these established traditions to individuals who historically have not had access to them. For the first time in the field, important ideas such as inclusion and equity are the foundational motives at the spearhead of efforts being made to bring about forward-thinking change in the landscape of classical music.

El Sistema is a Venezuelan initiative that began in 1975 with the goal of making musical training and ensemble participation available to youth from underserved communities. Compared to more traditional model music education programs, El Sistema was the first of its kind in offering instrumental instruction at all levels for all students, while allowing them to be members of the program for free. Financial barriers have long been the greatest limiting factor for those seeking out a rigorous education in music, and El Sistema was able to break this barrier.

At the core of the program's ideologies, El Sistema does not seek to train children to be professional musicians. Rather, their goal is to use music as a tool for social change and give underserved children many opportunities to succeed with music as the vehicle. In defining social change, El Sistema refers to this as impacting the youth in various constructive ways. It seeks to serve in a positive manner by instilling discipline, providing unique opportunities, and involving program members in their communities. Through imparting these ideals in students, El Sistema hopes that the students will, in turn, serve their own communities in the future as professionals.

Many critics have voiced their skepticism as to the validity of these claims. Those who oppose the program cite its teaching doctrines as outmoded and comparable to standard conservatory-style training of old, which contradicts the program's supposed ideals of a modern and comprehensive approach while enacting no meaningful social change. In Geoff Baker's article, *El Sistema: A Model of Tyranny*, He writes: "El Sistema in fact echoes well-worn and, in some cases, distinctly tarnished thinking about music education and social development. It's a traditional 'drills and skills' program: hierarchical, teacher-centered, focused on repetitive learning and performance" (2014). As a result, quantifying "social change" to prove or disprove El Sistema's effectiveness has been a subject of debate among those on either side. Since that is the foundational philosophy that the program stands for, these results seek to demonstrate fundamental failures or successes in the execution of that philosophy. Therefore, this research sets out to tangibly quantify and understand current and past students' experiences and determine how impactful two prominent El Sistema programs are on the youth they seek to serve.

Background

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Now known as El Sistema, the program was originally named Fundación del Estado para El Sistema Nacional de Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela (The Venezuelan State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras). José Antonio Abreu, the founder of El Sistema, was a musician, economist, and former cabinet minister. His goal was to enrich the lives of impoverished Venezuelan youth by providing them with musical instruction and ensemble experience (Ellis-Petersen, 2014). The late 1970s was a time of steady economic growth for Venezuela buoyed by an abundance of oil exportation. Venezuela, a democracy at the time, spent more money between 1974 and 1979 than it had in its entire history as an independent state (Polga-Hecimovich, 2017). Abreu was able to secure funding for the program, which began with eleven students in a garage. Since then, the program has produced world-famous entities, such as the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra, a touring orchestra comprised of graduated alumni of the program. Most notably, it also produced Gustavo Dudamel, the conducting wunderkind who leads the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Paris Opera. As the rest of the world looked on at the success of El Sistema in a country ridden with crime, corruption, and poverty, this model began to spread across the globe. Leaders in the industry came to realize the importance that the younger generations held for the future of this art form, and many youth-centered institutions inspired by El Sistema Venezuela began cropping up around the globe.

Globalization of Ideas

When looking at the expansion of the ideals and philosophies that Abreu set forth, El-Sistema USA is the largest and most successful organization. Serving as a membership organization containing over 140 programs across the United States and Canada, it has attempted to propagate the core idea of music as a tool for social change since the early 2000s. Two of the largest programs in North America are the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles and Miami Music Project, the pools from which subjects were gathered for this study. Other El Sistema-inspired organizations are present across South America and Europe, expanding the network even further.

Commonly referred to as the most prominent and successful El Sistema-Inspired program, the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (YOLA) has seen vast growth since its inception in 2007. The program is the result of a fruitful partnership between the Los Angeles Philharmonic former

CEO Deborah Borda, El Sistema alum Gustavo Dudamel, and the city of Los Angeles. In Thomas May’s article *Shaping Tomorrow’s Voices Today: Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles Invests in Music Education as a Powerful Change Agent*, he writes “Not merely an orchestra, YOLA is a comprehensive education and support program that comprises multiple initiatives...Its primary mission is to provide musical access to socioeconomically underprivileged young people” (2020). Currently working with close to 1,700 underserved youth across five sites in Los Angeles, Dudamel drew directly from his experiences in Venezuela when leading the creation of YOLA. The program offers free instruments to those who cannot afford them, music instruction, and academically-oriented support.

While maintaining a smaller student body than YOLA, Miami Music Project (MMP) has also risen to be one of the preeminent El Sistema-inspired programs in North America and currently serves approximately 700 participants. Founded in Doral, Florida in 2008 by British conductor James Judd, the program has grown to maintain six permanent chapters across South Florida in Liberty City, Little Haiti, Little Havana, Miami Beach, Miami Gardens, and Miami Springs. In their respective areas, both programs serve similar demographics, as shown below.

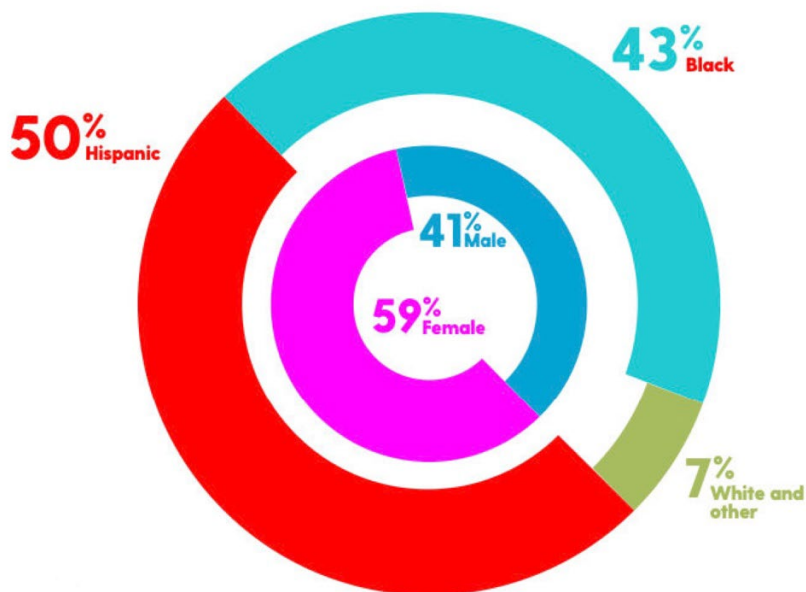


Figure 1. Student demographics of Miami Music Project (Miami Music Project Report, 2021)

Methodology

This section will detail the challenges of objectively defining and describing impact within the context of this research. It will also delve into the selection process for subjects and the approach taken to acquire data.

Measuring Impact

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), impact is defined as: “A strong effect or influence on a situation or person”. This brings clarity to a term that is commonly used as a blanket word. However, there is still ambiguity when trying to identify impartial measurables to determine a subjective level of impact. To alleviate this issue, this study sets out to specifically describe tangible metrics. These are quantifiable and perceptible items that are directly applicable to real-world situations and can be objectively described as positive or negative.

Selection Process

To acknowledge the growth and change that YOLA and MMP have undergone in the past several decades and to get a more holistic perspective of program impact, individuals of different ages were chosen as participants. Subject classification is as shown below in Figure 1.

Table 1. *Subject Selections*

	<u>Group 1</u>	<u>Group 2</u>	<u>Group 3</u>
<u>Age range</u>	13-17	18-20	23-32
<u>Number of subjects</u>	8	8	6

Questions were prepared to focus on various facets of their program experiences and how program members were affected. The questions were presented to subjects through individual interviews, and their answers were recorded. A different set of questions was prepared for Group

1 than for 2 or 3. Students in Group 1 are the only participants that are current members of their respective programs, therefore, they provide a fresh and dynamic perspective of their El-Sistema experiences. Their questions were catered more towards their progress as young learners in their programs, their perspectives of El-Sistema as active participants, and how they have been impacted so far through tangible services provided by the program.

The sets of questions for Groups 2 and 3 were designed to have the study subjects think retrospectively about their experiences. This provides a different but equally important perspective for measuring impact. These questions seek to prove or disprove a connection between the tangible services that the alums' programs provided for them and their professional paths. The questions for Group 2 specifically target their transition into the professional world, and those for Group 3 target how the program has affected their established careers. All questions are presented below.

Results

Results are presented on a per-question basis as summaries highlighting key words and phrases given by subjects, beginning with the questions posed to Group 1.

- 1. How did you get involved in El Sistema?

Several subjects stated that they got involved via the program by reaching out to their school. This was the most common answer to this question. Several others felt encouraged by the inclusivity and diversity of the program within the classical music space, which has not typically put diversity at the forefront of its ideals.

- 2. What do you believe the goal of your El Sistema program is, as a whole? Does that goal affect your future career aspirations? If so, positively or negatively, and why?

The majority of responses tied El Sistema to using music as a tool to facilitate positive change in surrounding communities, as is the main philosophy. Several students stated that the goal was to inspire younger generations to do more and be involved in their communities. Other responses were more individualized and focused on achieving academic success through El Sistema. Teaching students about motivation and consistency was mentioned by several subjects as goals of the program, as well as finding the best version of oneself through the instilled discipline.

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Many subjects answered that their future career aspirations were not meaningfully impacted since they were still deciding which path to take. The remaining subjects said they were leaning toward going into some facet of music. No subjects answered that El Sistema impacted them negatively, although two answered that they felt indifferent about how El Sistema affected their career outlook. The rest stated that they were affected positively.

- 3. What services has your program provided you (free instruments, free lessons, etc.)?

One subject mentioned getting the opportunity to have a masterclass with a world-class clarinetist, an opportunity that is quite rare for young musicians. Almost every subject stated that they received lessons on their instruments free of charge, as well as experience participating in orchestras and chamber ensembles. One subject stated that they received an instrument from MMP since they could not afford one.

- 4. Have you acquired any skills during your time in your program? Could you name some of the most important ones to you, musical or otherwise?

Although there were many different answers to this question, teamwork, communication, and technical skill on their instrument were the three most presented responses by subjects. Every subject referenced these skills being built through participation in their program orchestra. Other answers were leadership and social skills. One subject stated they developed the ability to improvise, a skill that is rarely found in classically trained musicians.

- 5. How do the skills that you have acquired at your program, musical or otherwise, apply to your development as a young professional, if at all?

Two subjects gave a very similar answer: Learning these skills made them want to finish what they started. They found this applicable to their current academic work that they believe will transfer to the professional world. Several other subjects also stated that they started understanding the value of teamwork in collaborative settings. Another answer included developing interpersonal skills in pre-professional settings, such as a youth chamber music group, and using that space as a training ground.

- 6. Are there any things about your program that you believe have been detrimental to your growth? If so, what are they and why?

Two subjects stated that there were a few other students in their program that did not demonstrate the same level of commitment as they did, and they found it off-putting. At times, this prevented them from fully engaging in programming, essentially acting as a detriment. Otherwise, all other subjects stated that they believed nothing about the program was detrimental to them.

- 7. How do you think studying music in your El Sistema program impacted your life?

The most common answer was that they felt YOLA provided a space for growth away from a troubled familial situation. One subject stated that they learned to develop prolonged concentration that helped them academically, and another stated that they learned about determination in difficult circumstances that came up in daily life with music being the gateway to understanding perseverance. Another subject said that MMP gave her reassurance that she wanted to be around music, and the program provided her hope that she could be successful in the field.

- 8. Has your program affected how you see classical music in our current society? How has your participation in your El Sistema program evolved your view of classical music, if at all?

Several subjects stated that they thought it held no importance within a wider societal context and saw it as archaic, but El Sistema allowed them to identify with certain aspects of the music that they had not before. One subject stated that YOLA opened her up to various opportunities within classical music that she had not explored beyond the stereotypical “men in white wigs” portrayed on film, such as Latin contemporary classical music, and that encouraged her to start attending classical music concerts.

Below are the questions posed to Groups 2 and 3, and their collective responses.

- 1. What are some skills you took with you from your El Sistema program and were able to implement into your field, if any? How have they applied to your career?

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The most common answer was how to excel in collaborative situations in academic, musical, and professional settings. One subject currently working with several cello students stated that learning how to develop a sense of community and good communication skills directly translated into teaching his students. Another subject working with younger musicians said she learned how to develop curiosity through musical engagement, and that was pivotal for her in teaching. One subject mentioned that understanding the more abstract processes of professional engagements and being forced to think outside the box has been vital for her, and that skill was cultivated during her time at YOLA. One subject currently studying computer science stated that teamwork skills learned through orchestral settings have been helpful in his field since so much of it is team driven. It has allowed him to help develop a common goal for his team, and to see it through to the end.

- 2. When at your program, did you connect with professionals or mentors in the field that you eventually went into, musical or otherwise?

Since YOLA is so closely tied to the Los Angeles Philharmonic, all subjects from YOLA mentioned having the opportunity to work with members of the orchestra. Many subjects also mentioned meeting program directors and administrators. Some subjects expressed dissatisfaction with only having met with experts in the field of music and said they would have preferred if their program could have connected them to mentors in other fields.

- 3. If so, what takeaways (if any) did you leave with? How did they impact your transition into this phase of life?

Many subjects mentioned having received support in their decision-making process for higher education, and two mentioned getting scholarship offers as a result of program participation and meeting mentors. Several subjects also mentioned that they came away with knowledge on how to handle the frustrations of audition failure, a common occurrence for musicians entering the collegiate circuit. One subject in the music education space mentioned that she built a network over time based on the mentors she met while being a student of YOLA, and she finds herself often tapping into it for support.

- 4. Thinking back to when you were a current student in your program, how was El Sistema's main goal (music for social change) implemented in your community, if at all?

Do you think that this was ultimately a positive or negative experience for you? Why?

One subject mentioned how MMP served as a second home for him and other underserved youth around him and provided a unique space for learning. Several subjects from YOLA mentioned that they served as outreach tools for their communities around Los Angeles and encouraged youth around them to join the program. One mentioned the wide diversity of advocates there were and how that spurred people of all backgrounds to connect with her in communities across all of Los Angeles. Several subjects from MMP mentioned that the program provided a financial bridge for those in underserved communities to connect with classical music.

- 5. How do the core values of your program influence you in your career, if at all?

One subject stated that as a burgeoning music educator, MMP directly influenced his manner of learning and teaching others. He uses the philosophies of El Sistema in his teaching, therefore enacting change in his own way. Several subjects mentioned the value of teamwork and establishing a bond while working on a project to facilitate optimized progress. Another subject mentioned that supporting communities in Los Angeles are at the core of her career goals and she wants to give back the support that she received when she was younger. One subject is attempting to bring the importance of connecting with a local community into his business administration career. He believes that establishing a bond between a business and its community is essential for both parties, a principle he took away from El Sistema.

Conclusion

When analyzing subject responses to the questions posed, evidence shows that the Miami Music Project and the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles have had a plethora of tangible, positive impacts on program participants. For current students of the programs, it can be determined that these programs are adequately supporting them in many ways through instilling transferable skills both within music and their academic pursuits. Although many of the younger subjects are uncertain of what their field of study will be, which is to be expected, they did present an overall confidence about the participation in the program and how that will translate to positive steps in their future. For recent graduates and established professionals, there seemed to be a divergence

in career choice. Several continued on to study within the field of music using their training from the program as the basis for technical skills. Others found themselves in fields that had no connection to music, such as computer science, law, and business administration. However, all subjects reported that their programs left them with applicable skills that have been used in their own field. This follows the idea that the purpose of El Sistema is not to train students to be professional musicians but rather to imbue them with foundational values and skills that will support them in whichever professional path they choose.

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