



# In harmony

Richard Hallam outlines the concept of 'In Harmony – Sistema England' and shows many of us where our futures may lie as string educators within the UK

**T**he phenomenon of *El Sistema* that is currently having a huge impact around the world really took off in England when the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra performed at the Proms in 2007. But prior to that, several of us in England were already engaged in many aspects of 'Sistema-like' activity. Or at least, we thought we were. So let's look briefly at our own situation and examine some of the elements that are specific to *El Sistema*.

In 2001, David Blunkett announced that, over time, he wanted every child to be able to learn a musical instrument and between 2008 and 2012, we know that over two million three hundred and thirty thousand young people had this opportunity for at least a term through our Wider Opportunities scheme. More than one million young people are learning now through music services alone and that is not counting all those young people who learn with private teachers, in or out of school. Many readers will be familiar with the work of Sheila Nelson in Tower Hamlets that was being introduced around the same time as *El Sistema* started and, for the first phase of my own career, I became a professional trumpet

player, via the Royal Academy of Music, having started in the Leicestershire Schools Symphony Orchestra in the 1960s. Nationally we have well over 35,000 ensembles. Most Local Authority areas have a music service, often with several area music centres. We have many hundreds of local youth orchestras as well as our own National Youth Orchestra, founded in 1947, which is open to 14 to 19 year olds and the National Children's Orchestra, founded in 1978, which now has five orchestras of varying standards open to 7 to 13 year olds.

Following the Henley Review of Music Education, the National Plan for Music Education was published in November 2011. As the first national plan of its kind, (the Music Manifesto was different, but an important forerunner), we now have protected public funding through to 2015 for music education work that augments and supports the work in schools. The Plan facilitates a musical journey for the child that offers initial access and affordable opportunities for progression through to excellence beyond that which the school can offer. The Plan recognises the importance of music in the lives of young people and sets out to ensure that young people can consistently be given a music

education that is of the highest quality. It recognises that “great music education is a partnership between classroom teachers, specialist teachers, professional performers and a host of other organisations.” The Plan states that “the value of music as an academic subject lies in its contribution to enjoyment and enrichment, for its social benefits, for those who engage in music seriously as well as for fun,” going on to recognise further that “high quality music education enables lifelong participation in, and enjoyment of, music, as well as underpinning excellence and professionalism for those who choose not to pursue a career in music.” This mixture of high musical quality and social benefits are themes we will return to.

So where does In Harmony · Sistema England, our English inspired version of El Sistema, fit in with all of this?

Following the performance of the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra in 2007, a decision was taken to spend one percent (£3 million) of the money that had just been allocated to music education over the period from 2008 to 2011 to find out if the phenomenon would transfer to England. A competitive tendering process resulted in applications from Lambeth, Liverpool and Norwich being successful and pilot projects started working regularly with children in 2009. All three projects used the model of the symphony orchestra and were chosen partly because they were based in some of our most disadvantaged communities. Partnership working and involvement of the community was essential as, primarily, the programme is a social programme, not a music education programme even though these social outcomes are achieved through high quality music. Because these were pilot projects, each was allowed a degree of flexibility to work within their own local context. Nevertheless, by the end of the first year, a number of common elements were already emerging. These led to the creation of fifteen ‘membership criteria’, which embraced, and, in an English context, expanded on the Five Fundamental Principles of El Sistema identified by Abreu Fellow Jonathan Govias:

#### Five Fundamentals of El Sistema

- 1 Social Change: The primary objective is social transformation through the pursuit of musical excellence. One happens through the other, and neither is prioritized at the expense of the other.
- 2 Ensembles: The focus of El Sistema is the orchestra or choral experience.
- 3 Frequency: El Sistema ensembles meet multiple times every week over extended periods.
- 4 Accessibility: El Sistema programs are free, and are not selective in admission.
- 5 Connectivity: Every “núcleo” (project) is linked at the urban, regional and national levels, forming a cohesive



### The primary objective is social transformation through the pursuit of musical excellence

network of services and opportunities for students across the county.

In order to continue to receive funding for 2011/2012, the three English projects had to demonstrate that they were meeting or addressing the membership criteria and, following the publication of the National Plan for Music Education and the involvement of Arts Council England in the funding of the programme, the programme is now due to be expanded.

One very important aspect of El Sistema is that it is dynamic. It is a process. Maestro Abreu says it is ‘ser, no ser todavía – being, but not yet having become’. It is constantly evolving whilst staying true to its fundamental principles. There are clear consistencies across nucleos, (their equivalent of our area music centres), both in assumptions and practice. But it’s also true that these elements are continually being re-imagined in an endless variety of ways, to meet the particular needs of particular children in different places at different times. It is a highly dynamic balance between consistency of purpose and flexibility of means. An example of constantly evaluating where they are and what they need to do is seen in the fact that Marshall Marcus, formerly Head of Music at



The children of In Harmony  
Norwich rehearse at  
Norwich & Norfolk Communicaty Arts

Southbank Centre, has been engaged to establish a Baroque Orchestra in Caracas, and to spread the performance of Baroque music by all age groups throughout the Venezuelan Sistema. They have long since had big bands and jazz, folk and chamber ensembles, choirs, prison orchestras and special ensembles for disabled young musicians.

From our perspective in England, there are several musical and educational dimensions, which, for me, separate this programme from our more traditional music education programmes.

The first of these are the centrality of the ensemble and the way that the students help each other. The following is quoted in Tricia Tunstall's book 'Changing Lives':

"A young girl was handed a violin for the first time and shown to a seat in the back of the violin section of her nucleo orchestra. The kid next to her turned and showed her where to put her hand. Like, Oh, here's how you play this note. And here's how you play that note. Pedagogically, it probably wasn't perfect. But within an hour that girl felt like she was part of an orchestra."

Perhaps not surprisingly there was opposition to this in Venezuela when Abreu started. Most musicians of the older generation did not like what he was doing, mixing less skilled musicians with skilled ones and having them simply learn by doing together. But Abreu has never subscribed to the dichotomy of access versus excellence. He believes in both with equal zeal. The key here is the way specialist teachers support the children. Ofsted reported of the Liverpool programme:

Photo © Alex Hunter

"The consistency of approach, founded on strong principles that draw on a range of pedagogical and musical approaches, is commendable. Every opportunity is taken to immerse the pupils in musical language and not a minute is wasted. The In Harmony teachers are excellent musicians and their expert modelling sets the standard for the technical and musical quality that pupils are expected to match. At the same time, tasks are sequenced thoughtfully and musically so that pupils are able to master new ideas in small steps. Pupils of all ages contribute creatively by suggesting ways to improve their work and by inventing new melodic and rhythmic patterns to perform."

Regular performances are also essential, as often as they can be arranged. But there is not the same externally imposed pressure and intensity that can sometimes be seen in English groups where the approaching concert can be seen as some sort of highly pressured ordeal rather than an opportunity to share one's love of music with an audience. We have all seen how young people will rise to the occasion if they are confident and are asked to play challenging music, but which is at a level at which they know they can succeed. Sadly, some of us may also have experienced those occasions when the music is too difficult, under rehearsed, or simply not engaging for the young people who are being asked to perform it.

Sistema would never be able to imagine that situation arising. The students live for their music and live through their music. They play together for hours on end with the nucleus operating after school from 1pm to 6pm. They are

brought up on the great orchestral repertoire. Again, Tricia Tunstall gives us a unique insight:

“More advanced students are often frustrated that they can only come six days a week, and ask whether they can come on Sunday too.”

And she writes of how Eduardo Mendez spoke to the Abreu Fellows group about the

“sense of responsibility felt by every teacher and teacher’s aide to help guide students towards excellence - it is not the child’s responsibility to correct a mistake...it is our responsibility...so our teachers see and hear each child every single day. Mistakes that happen on Monday will be corrected on Tuesday and Wednesday, and will be gone by Friday.”

These sorts of situations only become possible for us when peer learning is seen as an essential part of the overall process. El Sistema believes that even if you know nothing but A B C, you have the power to teach A B and C to others.

## The project has brought about a cultural change in the school’s wider community

And not only the power – but also the responsibility. And not only that! You yourself will learn by teaching.

Another important element is the way that all of the opportunities link together throughout the network (Sistema is a network, not a system). All the nucleos share an extensive core set of principles, goals and practices. There is a core repertoire of standard works across all nucleos and skill levels. In every state, nucleos are part of a regional network, and each region has a director who reports to the central office of El Sistema.

But the most significant aspect of El Sistema lies in the fact that it is a social programme achieved through music. Dudamel is quoted as saying:

“You know, it’s about connection. In the Sistema everything is connected; the musical and the social aspects of playing music – they are never separated. Playing music together is connected with being a better citizen, with caring about other people, with working together. The orchestra, you know, it’s a community. It’s a little world, where you can create harmony. And of course, when you have this, connected with an artistic sensibility anything is possible. Everything is possible.”

“We never forget that we are a social programme first. The kids work in groups because we want them to learn to work in community. And the parents are always so astounded when they come to the concerts. It’s hard, what we are doing, but it’s not complicated. This is simply what happens when you give attention to kids, five hours a day, six days a week.”

So, for our pilot projects, here was the challenge: will this phenomenon transfer to England? And if so, how and what does it need to look like? How can we give that amount of attention to kids, five hours a day, six days a week?

The first part was (relatively) easy. Here in England we have had orchestras and ensembles for many years. We have developed pedagogical approaches for teaching in small and large groups. We are used to sectional rehearsals as well as playing in full orchestra. And we have been developing Wider Opportunities in which all young people are expected to learn an instrument in a large (whole class) ensemble from the very beginning stages.

Getting young musicians to help each other and to introduce peer teaching alongside support from specialist teachers was also relatively simple. Young people enjoy helping each other.

The principles established through the Music Manifesto, now articulated even more strongly in the National Plan, about ‘joining up’ the child’s musical experiences so that they are coherent and complementary enabled us to bring together the in and out of school aspects of music education.

A minimum of seven hours per week contact, including daily music sessions, became possible, especially when schools such as Faith School, West Everton, one of the pilot schools, put over 4 hours of curriculum time across to music. All of the school staff are involved in the programme and learn instruments. And what about numeracy and literacy targets I hear you asking? Despite less time being spent on these, results have improved significantly. Sister Moira, the head teacher, puts this down to the way the school has become a learning community in which everyone helps each other.

Ofsted reports have endorsed the fact that this can work well:

“Your school is providing you with a good education. Some of the work of the school is outstanding, for example, the way the school works in the local community and how it helps your personal development. Your achievement in playing musical instruments and performing in concerts as the West Everton Children’s Orchestra is astonishing.”

“Through links between the two faiths, its work in the wider community and its partnerships with schools beyond the immediate experience of the pupils, the school promotes community cohesion exceptionally well. By its success in musical performances the school is raising the self-esteem and pride of pupils and their parents and carers.”

“The project has brought about a cultural change in the school’s wider community, with parents and families placing prime value on music education, willingly and proudly

13-year-old Simi, from the Lansdowne Green estate, conducts the children of In Harmony Lambeth's Holst Orchestra during a rehearsal at Wheatheaf Hall in Vauxhall, London. 3 February 2012



supporting their children's musical learning and attending performances."

"Parents and staff speak passionately about the way that involvement in music has changed children's attitudes and expectations. As one parent said, 'music has given our children respect for themselves, respect for each other, and respect for education.'"

El Sistema is not a music education programme; it is much more than that. In Harmony · Sistema England is also much more than a music education programme. But our music education programmes can learn much from the approach and values of El Sistema if the full power of music to transform lives is to be realised.

The final word should go to Maestro Abreu, Sistema's founder:

"To me, an orchestra is first and foremost a way to encourage better human development within children. That is why I always said, and I say today, that this is not an artistic programme but a human development programme through music. It is very important to be clear about this. Because everything that happened then, and everything that has happened since then, has been a direct consequence of this concept."

"Our success, and the fact that the government supported us, allowed me to show the remainder of the country that an orchestra could be an instrument for social change."

Ofsted reports, statistical evidence and articles such as this may help to spread the message. But what we really need to do is to see it in action – to trust the children and see the sheer joy of making music together that they

communicate so infectiously. If you are interested, come and see one of our projects in action. It worked in 2007 when the Simon Bolivar Orchestra came to the Proms and it is working now when our children perform. As Abreu said:

"Just come to the concert, then decide if you want to support it." ■

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*During his part-time secondment as Government adviser he chaired the Music Manifesto steering committee. From 2008 to 2011 he was the National Music Participation Director and was a member of the core team of the Henley Review of the Funding and Delivery of Music Education in England. He is now continuing much of that work as the National Music Education Grant Director. As consultant to the Department for Education in 2011/2012 he assisted in the development of the National Plan for Music Education in England. Richard is also a member of the national steering group for In Harmony Sistema England and a director of In Harmony Ltd., the charitable company that works closely with the Government to develop the programme in England.*