

The logo for the Scottish Journal of Performance (SJOP) features the letters 'SJOP' in a bold, sans-serif font. The 'S' and 'P' are dark grey, while the 'J' and 'O' are a lighter grey. The logo is set against a solid orange rectangular background.

**Book review: *El Sistema: orchestrating Venezuela's youth*, by Geoffrey Baker**

**KATHRYN JOURDAN**

*The Scottish Journal of Performance*  
Volume 2, Issue 2; June 2015  
ISSN: 2054-1953 (Print) / ISSN: 2054-1961 (Online)

Publication details: <http://www.scottishjournalofperformance.org>

**To cite this article:** Jourdan, K., 2015. Book review: *El Sistema: orchestrating Venezuela's youth*, by Geoffrey Baker. *Scottish Journal of Performance*, 2(2): pp.91–112.

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.14439/sjop.2015.0202.05>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> for details.

## **Book review: *El Sistema: orchestrating Venezuela's youth*, by Geoffrey Baker**

KATHRYN JOURDAN

DOI: 10.14439/sjop.2015.0202.05

Publication date: 26 June 2015

***El Sistema: orchestrating Venezuela's youth*, by Geoffrey Baker. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014; ISBN: 9780199341559 (\$35.00)**

Geoffrey Baker has produced a critical, in-depth study of the Venezuelan music education programme known as El Sistema<sup>1</sup> which has developed over the past forty years, establishing children's and youth orchestras on a huge scale across the country. El Sistema seeks to bring about social transformation through music-making within the context of the orchestra, recently inspiring a large number of Sistema-related organisations around the world. Employing ethnographic techniques such as interviewing, observation and the examination of documentation over the period of a year in Venezuela, he has provided a critique of an organisation he characterises as autocratic, out-dated, corrupt and even abusive. He asks far-reaching questions regarding whether the Sistema model is a healthy one to be emulated internationally, and suggests that the notion of the orchestra as a vehicle for social change is deeply flawed.

So what sort of book is this? Baker writes within traditions of critical ethnography which set individual or local experiences and perspectives within a wider context, seeking to uncover oppressive social structures and practices. The emphasis is on unmasking underlying ideologies, making apparent that which has been hidden,

exposing the unequal power relations between dominant cultural discourses and those marginalised by them. He does not claim to give a balanced account, but seeks to give a 'counter-weight' (p.19) to the extant adulatory accounts of El Sistema in Venezuela. Baker situates his book within the field of 'activist ethnomusicology' and is therefore committed to giving voice to those 'marginalised in the public realm, rather than those who have dominated it' (p.18). His aim, he writes, was not 'a comprehensive or conclusive narrative but rather a critical, informed analysis of some of El Sistema's key actors and core claims' (p.20). The book seeks to 'go beyond an examination of the Venezuelan programme to encompass a broader critical analysis of the youth orchestra as a vehicle for a rounded, inclusive education in music and citizenship' (p.5). The object of his critique, as he states, is 'not classical music per se but institutions, pedagogies and practices that mediate it' (p.12).

In El Sistema and the model of the orchestra central to its programme, Baker finds old-fashioned, authoritarian structures and practices which shape young people to become docile workers rather than politically engaged citizens (p.200), creating 'a microcosm of capitalist society' (p.202). He insists that 'the pursuit of social justice requires the critique of oppressive structures and exclusive forces in conventional music education, not their perpetuation and expansion in new guises'. But Baker judges El Sistema, and particularly the actions of its founder José Antonio Abreu, from the comfortable perspective of someone living in highly-developed social structures within stable, democratic settings, and shows little understanding of or sympathy for the deeply challenging political, economic and social circumstances in Venezuela. There must be, of course, no leeway given as regards abusive practices, but there is a harsh idealism in Baker's uncompromising stance which needs to be acknowledged and unpacked a little if practitioners and policy makers are to benefit from his

research. His insistence on polarising the discussion sometimes leads me to question whether Baker actually wants to engage with practitioners, or simply to reinforce ideological battle lines.

On the one hand, this book addresses a set of difficult issues which it might be easier for the international Sistema community to turn away from. Its unflinching questioning of deeply held assumptions and values is to be welcomed, for there is much to learn from here for practitioners who will shape Sistema-inspired programmes into the future. On the other hand, Baker speaks in a tone which is often lacking in graciousness. When discussing the wider influence of El Sistema, he tends to disregard the relationships which have become established between members of the Venezuelan programme and Sistema practitioners around the world, all of whom he seems eager to dismiss with no more than a cursory glance. But many of these people have set about re-imagining how inclusive, immersive music-making might be established afresh in contexts of social exclusion elsewhere, choosing richer, more progressive, child-centred pedagogies than those narrowly-focused methods Baker critiques in Chapter 6, such as endless repetition and memorisation.

Let me first of all lay my cards on the table. I am a professional viola player, a trained secondary school music teacher, and have recently completed a doctorate in the philosophy of music education. I am also a board member of Sistema Scotland, although the views expressed here are my own and should not be taken as representing those of Sistema Scotland. I am interested in this book in terms of how it might help us reflect on our practices in the Sistema Scotland's Big Noise programmes and shape these for the future. I am committed to finding ways of ethically re-orienting practice within music education, as well as reconceptualising how the orchestra might function.

I am not in a position to assess the validity of Baker's claims as regards unhealthy structures or abuses within the Venezuelan programme. These have been commented on already by Venezuelan author Carlos M. Añes (2014), who notes that Baker rigorously omits all positive voices. I can say that I am grateful for the generosity and support of the El Sistema organisation in the setting up of our programme in Scotland, for their warm hospitality during my recent visit to Venezuela and for the kindness of the Venezuelan musicians who captured the hearts of the children of Big Noise in Raploch when they visited in June 2012.

The wider issues Baker draws out, however, concerning the orchestra as a model for social transformation, his critique of the 'classical' music profession, and of Sistema-inspired programmes around the world, are of huge significance for me, and this response to Baker's book is inevitably to some extent a personal one. The book is sometimes painful reading, but I welcome Baker's intention to open up a critical, reflective space in which to examine Sistema practices. It is important at the outset however that the reader attempts to distinguish those criticisms which Baker lays at the Venezuelans' door both from those directed at the wider 'classical' music profession, and from those directed at Sistema-inspired practitioners. Disentangling these is not always straightforward, as Baker doesn't always make these basic distinctions clear.

The first part of the book examines the Venezuelan organisation, with a critical look at Abreu's life and career, at Gustavo Dudamel and the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra (which has now dropped its 'youth' label). Baker draws out some important issues which fall into two categories: practices characteristic of the Venezuelan Sistema programme, and issues concerning practice in the 'classical' music world internationally. In Venezuela, for instance, there is a blurring of the boundaries between youth

orchestra and professional players, as El Sistema pays young people there to be part of some of its flagship ensembles. According to Baker's research they tend to be paid rather better than other professionals, within or outside of orchestral music. This is a very different notion of the youth orchestra from the one we are familiar with in Britain. Baker is critical of the scholarships or stipends which young people in nucleo [local El Sistema centre] youth orchestras are sometimes given, but Sistema staff explain these as aimed at increasing opportunities for students to attend conservatoire or university whilst remaining involved in orchestral playing.

Baker highlights the dominance of classical music by a handful of organisations and agencies, and the adulation accorded to a few top international artists. He juxtaposes the 'revolutionary' label given by many commentators to Dudamel and his idolising by the 'conservative' musical establishment, one which Baker aligns with corporate, capitalist interests (p.52). In the context of a critical discussion of Dudamel fitting easily into life as a conducting superstar and advertising expensive watches, we read:

Dudamel's trajectory tells us less about him than it does about El Sistema's ideological basis... For all the social rhetoric, El Sistema is a project with a markedly commercial slant, indeed one that fits hand-in-glove with global music capitalism (p.49).

Music as 'commodity' and as 'spectacle' are, Baker claims, inherent in El Sistema's ideology and priorities, revealing the 'conservative thinking that lies behind the revolutionary surface' (p.59). Baker chooses a leftist reading to reinforce his criticisms of Abreu's predilection for large-scale stage events to impress visitors and funding bodies. The Sunday concerts I attended at the Centre for Social Action through Music in Caracas however were joyful celebrations of

communal music-making and achievement, to an audience of parents and friends. Baker puts forward no evidence to support his view that Sistema-inspired initiatives around the world have a 'markedly commercial slant'. My orchestral colleagues in the profession would smile ironically at a criticism of having a 'markedly commercial slant': 'if only', they might say.

The reader must negotiate a middle way through Baker's discourse and remember that this does not claim to be a balanced account. There are other aspects of Baker's style for which the reader must be on their guard. In drawing from an array of sources within and outside of the music education research literature, Baker doesn't always clarify the broader discussion from which he pulls out short extracts. This sometimes has the effect of dizzying the reader—as if the camera pans around too quickly—allowing a certain sleight of hand to creep in where texts are cited to sustain assertions that they do not in fact support. One example comes within a discussion of two early evaluations of the first stages of development of Big Noise in Raploch. First, Baker claims the Scottish Government's 2011 report, *Evaluation of Big Noise*, 'presents a mixed picture' (p.306). Baker doesn't make it clear whether this is his own verdict or his reporting of the evaluation's conclusions. The government report of 2011 is in fact very positive about developments through Big Noise, and doesn't present any evidence of a 'mixed picture'; this positivity presumably being the reason that Baker's colleague Owen Logan is, apparently, so critical of the report in his unpublished work that Baker cites (p.265).

Baker refers to the *Knowledge exchange with Sistema Scotland* paper from 2010 (Allan et al.) which reports on another early evaluative endeavour. He writes:

Allan et al's (2010) research points to [other] continuities between Venezuelan and Scottish projects, such as a faith-based approach that reduces productive ambiguity, reflection, and critique, and a streak of paternalism and exclusion behind the trumpeting of social inclusion. The impressive drive and focused mission that propel the project forward appear to have some problematic undercurrents (p.307).

Baker's use of 'faith-based' here is highly misleading, even mischievous. He has picked up an observation from Allan et al.:

We noticed that in overcoming the huge hurdles associated with the launch of such an ambitious charity—primarily funding and the support of governmental institutions—the individuals driving Sistema Scotland have adopted a professional perspective that prioritises a need for unquestioning faith in the intrinsic value and efficacy of the programme. This bold position provides a tremendous energy to the operation of Sistema Scotland, but—like any agenda-driven professional perspective—it is not without limitations. These could be seen to include a narrow and focused vision of the programme's place within an existing community and services infrastructure, for example, and a 'missionary' stance in relation to the Raploch community, reliant on statements of faith in the process from all involved (2010, p.334).

Yet he doesn't set out the context of the original discussion and explain that this is not suggestive of a religious perspective, but rather of 'faith in the process', in terms of the organisation's strongly coherent vision. Such ambiguity is certainly advantageous for Baker's rhetoric, but undermines the book's claim to academic rigour.

I have yet to trace where Baker found the 'streak of



paternalism and exclusion behind the trumpeting of social inclusion' (p.307) in Sistema Scotland's Big Noise programme. It would seem that, having cast himself as the whistleblower on El Sistema in Venezuela in Part One of the book, it seems impossible for Baker to retain much objectivity (or even interest) when it comes to passing comment on the Sistema-inspired programmes around the world. Instead of coming to visit and engaging in some ethnographic work on Scotland, for instance, Baker is content with producing a strangely biased account of the first two external, published evaluations, where it becomes impossible for the reader to detect which opinions are put forward as citations and which are put forward as his own. It appears that he read these reports quickly, giving the website only a cursory glance in order to detect a 'dismissive attitude toward popular and traditional music' (p.306)<sup>2</sup>.

In the context of this academic book it is jarring to suddenly encounter a more journalistic turn of phrase. For instance, after a discussion of Estelle Jorgensen's work and its influence upon his, Baker observes that the 'miniature civil society' she envisages music educators creating 'is founded upon tackling long-standing problems of oppressive structures, not strengthening tradition'. We then read, '[t]his means grappling with El Sistema's weaknesses, not engaging in bourgeois fantasies about the power of Beethoven to save the poor' (p.14). By introducing the dated Marxist rhetoric of the deluded bourgeoisie, Baker unmasks his own ideological standpoint and undermines his assertion that 'skepticism, critique, and the raising of uncomfortable issues should not then be confused with a desire to weaken El Sistema—quite the opposite' (p.21).

Part Two of the book sets the Sistema model within the wider context of music education, beginning with a discussion of the orchestra as a model for social action.

Baker takes issue with the orchestra on many levels: as autocratic and modelling despotic power relations of bygone European princes; as subjugating musicians in outdated, servile roles; and elevating the show or spectacle above all else, the ends justifying the means, sometimes to a horrifying degree (p.114). From my own professional life, I know that many practices within orchestral management must be transformed through a fresh vision. I tease a young conductor I regularly work with for wearing nineteenth century servants' dress, for instance, and I recall an experience one evening twenty years ago, after a performance in a central European concert hall, of feeling totally alienated as the conductor kept returning to the platform to take the applause long after the orchestra had departed, as was the local custom. Having given our all, the audience response was for him alone.

Baker cites plenty of research which uncovers the stresses orchestral players undergo through poorly thought-out working conditions. I remember walking off the stage during the very first week of my professional career, when suffering a high D trumpet at full volume from a riser behind me. I recall too, back in the 1990s, petitioning for flexible contracts and for rotation within string sections as a means of reshaping the orchestra as an institution. These changes *are* taking place now, however. Orchestras have begun to safeguard players' interests and change contractual and seating arrangements in order to diversify. Players are taking more responsibility for running their ensembles, creating possibilities for a much wider range of playing opportunities in varied contexts, turning outwards to serve their wider communities and welcoming as creative partners musicians from other kinds of musical traditions and those working with new musical processes. Of course this is just the beginning of the re-imagining which needs to take place: but isn't it time now to move on from a critical unmasking, necessary as it has been, to ask what new vision there is for the orchestra, to dream dreams and seek 'the

impossible' for the future, as Lee Higgins describes in the field of community music (2012)?

Baker usefully draws out some significant themes from contemporary music education research literature: the need for a greater plurality of musical expressions in an educational context, for the breaking down of hierarchies where one kind of music is elevated above another, for young people to have more control over their own learning, their voices listened to and to be invited into decision-making and leadership roles. He sets these in opposition to practices he perceives within El Sistema. Yet many of these are qualities which, as Sistema-inspired programmes mature and enter their longer term, are becoming, and will increasingly become, part of their musical and social practices. Already in Sistema Scotland's Big Noise programmes, for instance, the team includes musicians who compose and play regularly in a wide range of bands and experimental ensembles. There are singer songwriters, highly experienced orchestral players, folk musicians, music therapists, community musicians and trained school music teachers. The young people of Big Noise have opportunities through a broad-based curriculum to engage in creative work with a visiting composer, improvise regularly, and are involved in learning skills in playing traditional Scottish music and jazz, attending other local groups as they grow into musical and social relations with the wider community.

Baker does put forward alternatives to an orchestra-based programme, which he says more adequately embody practices identified as 'progressive' through the music education research literature. He suggests (following a citation from Thomas Turino) '[a]n ideal music project would expose children to different kinds of music, ensembles, and the values associated with them, allowing them to experience and reflect on a variety of notions of

citizenship' (p.131). This ideal of engaging with many different musical expressions and values may well be appropriate for a classroom-based music curriculum, but it raises issues of tokenism or even cultural imperialism unless resources are gathered carefully and serious thought is given to how to engage ethically with 'other people's music'. Questions arise too concerning the relationship between what might be appropriate within a school music curriculum and what a Sistema-inspired programme might offer. By giving children opportunities to learn specific instrumental skills, where they acquire musical fluency through sustained engagement, Sistema-inspired programmes provide an entry point which allows young people to play a variety of music with others in the orchestra, and a starting point into an exploration of an infinity of other musical expressions throughout their lives. My early research in Shetland found that a high level of musical fluency (and instrumental proficiency) amongst young people who play within local traditions, brings wide-ranging listening and performing interests in other, less familiar musical styles (Jourdan, 2008).

The third section of Baker's book explores the notion of social action through music, widening the discussion to the notion of 'classical' music's role within programmes of social action. He poses two 'core questions': 'Was El Sistema conceived as a social project in 1975? And does it actually prioritise social action over musical goals today?' (p.163). Baker suggests that a shift in emphasis in how El Sistema presented itself during the 1990s was intended to bring the organisation more into alignment with the social justice priorities of the Chávez government—thereby securing its ongoing funding—and away from its original aims which Baker identifies as having been to populate Venezuelan orchestras with Venezuelan musicians rather than with Europeans or North Americans. He is critical of the suggestion that El Sistema actively seeks out the most disadvantaged children, but acknowledges that this *is* a

priority for Sistema-inspired programmes around the world, such as the 'more nuanced and proactive approach to fostering social inclusion and community relations' of Sistema Scotland (p.306). On my recent visit to several nucleos in Caracas and one in a more rural setting there was a social mix of children, but there didn't seem to be much doubt that the majority in Caracas's centres lived in nearby *barrios*.

But if Abreu didn't set up El Sistema in the first instance as a social intervention, this does not invalidate the developing model, which has motivated others to offer young people in marginalised communities elsewhere the opportunities and potential benefits of learning to play together in an orchestra. Nor is it surprising that, having established an extensive programme of music-making nationally, the founder would seek to ensure its future by adapting to changing political landscapes. As for his accommodation with the government of Hugo Chávez, it is easy to be judgemental from the comfortable vantage point of a mature democracy, but has Baker really thought through the choices available to Abreu? It is hard to argue that instead it would have been better for him to allow El Sistema to have been wiped out.

Beyond being suspicious about Abreu's motives, Baker is wary of the notion of 'social inclusion' which he considers to be 'El Sistema's primary *raison d'être* in the eyes of the Venezuelan state and the cornerstone of the program's fame and funding' (p.179), quoting critics on the left who see it as a 'form of regulating the poor' and 'a top-down programme of social control' (p.180, citing The Cultural Policy Collective's *Beyond social inclusion*, 2004). From this perspective 'the discourse of social inclusion has served to obscure debate about material inequality' (The Cultural Policy Collective, 2004, p.6), masking issues of poverty and social injustice by effacing discourses of class and

exploitation. This outlook criticises the social inclusion agenda for imposing cultural hierarchies of the middle classes onto peripheral communities whose culture is not recognised as being of value, fostering homogeneity rather than diversity. Not all Sistema-inspired programmes use discourses of social inclusion, with Sistema Scotland talking of 'social transformation' and others of 'social action', but the question must be asked of Baker: which measures of health and well-being *are* acceptable within his critical outlook?

Practitioners within Sistema-inspired projects are concerned with helping to improve the lives of children and communities in terms of better health and well-being outcomes, encouraging choices which put young people on different trajectories from the dependency of unemployment or criminal activity which might otherwise have become a reality. Far from imposing a rigid ideological position, the recently published report on the Big Noise programmes in Raploch and Govanhill emphasises the flexibility of the Sistema Scotland approach, which tailors the programme to serve specific communities and particular individuals within them (Glasgow Centre for Population Health, 2015a), a quality we learned from seeing the adaptability of Venezuelan nucleos. Significantly the report's examination of the programme's impact concludes that 'people change lives':

A recurring theme across this evaluation is the emphasis Sistema Scotland places on the quality of the relationship between musician and participant. It is this quality of relationship that is so important to the theorised impact pathways. Indeed many of the strengths of the Big Noise delivery... are designed to enable the opportunity for this relationship to flourish. Consistent with other social regeneration evidence and narrative, Sistema Scotland's vision could be described as 'people change lives' not services or programmes or necessarily even music (GCPH, 2015a, p.12).

It is the long-term relationship of Big Noise musician and participant through which social transformation can happen, through which a 'utopian space' (Jorgensen, 2004, p.8, cited by Baker) can open up. This was the overriding impression from my recent Venezuelan trip: of tender, compassionate practice by additional educational needs teachers, for instance, which calls into question some of the highly professionalised caring familiar to us in the United Kingdom. Perhaps Baker's structural, critical approach doesn't have the tools to examine such practices at the face-to-face level—where it might be argued much of the social benefit of Sistema-inspired projects occurs—where a quasi-improvisatory ethical orientation in the practitioner must respond attentively and responsibly to the child or young person before them. I have written elsewhere of what it might mean if we understand music-making in terms of 'looking into the face of the other' in an act of hospitality and responsibility (Jourdan, 2015). French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1969) exhorts us to 'look into the face of the other' and respond to the ethical call we find there as our primary, pre-ontological responsibility to each other before all other considerations, ideologies or ways of conceptualising the world. Such a re-orientation transforms practices within music education and the music profession.

The final part of the book turns to issues concerning the evaluation of impact. It discusses several Latin American programmes which Baker describes as more 'progressive' than El Sistema in Venezuela, including a project in Medellín, Colombia, which started with the 'classical' musical tradition then changed to broaden its focus, and offers a wider training in music theory, and also a Brazilian scheme which managed to reach the poorest children apparently much more effectively than El Sistema in Venezuela, and where young people had a role in strategic decision-making.

He presents other programmes in Colombia, musical and otherwise, where he identifies an emphasis on agency, creative capacity, plurality and critical reflection in order to resist 'hegemonic forms of power' (p.313) and to change society. Costa Rica's recent curriculum reforms, which sought to overturn 'a pattern of colonialism and exclusion' (*ibid.*) are described as encouraging practices where young people construct their own knowledge through research, engagement and reflection rooted in their communities and the areas in which they live. A wide range of 'musics' are explored alongside history, new technologies, composition, arranging and improvising, with the teacher as a mediator rather than in a position of 'power'. Young people are creating '*their* music' alongside the musics of their communities and past and present musical forms from wider society.

Baker remains blind, however, to ethical practices within the orchestral model he rejects, the moment-by-moment experiences and skills honed within the orchestra: for instance the ability to yield to others, play within the sound of another, to lead gently, to contribute strongly whilst being sensitive and alert to players around you. These aspects require sensitivity and a deep sense of teamwork, but sit better within an ethical rather than the emancipatory discourse favoured by Baker. The role of the conductor is being re-imagined too. I am struck by the practice of the conductor I work alongside, who invites players into the process, to find together the shape of a musical work during the week of rehearsal, and who resists expectations of bringing a hermetically-sealed interpretation to be efficiently imposed from the podium. Many orchestras don't appreciate this approach as their time-worn attitudes are tenacious. Orchestras are too accustomed to the infantilising processes which Baker rightly identifies through the research literature. But for players sometimes bruised by overbearing conductors who keep power on the podium, and who deny them any part in creative decisions



and processes, it can be a healing experience to work with those who are re-imagining the role of *maestro*, inviting in players to co-create, and audiences to journey with them, in ethically-oriented practice. Here perhaps are the beginnings of the 'excellence in terms of the *quality of social bonds* created through music making' which Baker, citing Turino (2008), suggests exist in other musical cultures.

Despite Baker's scathing portrayal of him, there *is* something revolutionary in what Dudamel brings in his ability to inspire and gently lead young musicians, apparent when he rehearsed with the members of the SBO sitting alongside the children of Big Noise in Raploch in June 2012. Players and conductor reached out to the younger musicians in a nurturing manner as they played, physically affirming them by leaning in towards the children to build confidence, and supporting their sound without overpowering it, in order to encourage them to really play out (Jourdan, 2012). Despite Baker's criticism of the Venezuelan Sistema organisation and his insistence that the background structures of classical music are oppressive and exclusive, the practices of the Bolivar players in relating to the young people of Big Noise, and in the sort of leadership shown by Dudamel, reveal a fresh, ethical dimension which points forward to possibilities for a re-envisaging of the role of conductor, player and orchestra.

The model of the orchestra is a useful one within a Sistema-inspired context partly because there are possibilities for all levels of player to join in, with specially-adapted parts for younger players to sit alongside those more experienced others who are playing the complete parts. This is why the 'side-by-side' experience with professional orchestral 'buddies' has become common practice in Sistema-inspired programmes. The notion of apprenticeship, of the 'master' as someone who has 'gone before', of the musician who can draw younger players further into the infinity of music-

making, of learning a set of skills with which to follow fresh paths in the future, is not an oppressive social force when practised ethically, as I've explored elsewhere through the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (Jourdan, 2015). Sistema practitioners such as those in the Big Noise programmes work hard to be attentive to the needs of the young people they teach, establishing ethical musical and social practices in every area of their programme. These practices include positive behaviour management and highly developed, ethical child-protection strategies, progressive pedagogies, and the inclusion of all kinds of musical styles in arrangements for young players to enjoy learning together.

Baker poses the question, 'should music education provide a pragmatic space (training for the real world) or a utopian one (the chance to experience alternatives)?' and asks, '[w]hich side of the binary does Sistema lean towards?' (p.233). He writes that 'pragmatists as well as utopians might... ask how well El Sistema is preparing Venezuelan children for life in the twenty-first century' and 'whether the conventional symphony orchestra is an appropriate tool' (p.237). Such polarities are unhelpful, meaningless in the context of face-to-face ethical encounters between musician and participant, as is Baker's refusal to acknowledge the inclusive usefulness of the orchestral model used in Sistema-inspired programmes.

This is the heart of the debate. Practitioners in Sistema-inspired programmes are engaged in re-imagining their lives together, 'presag[ing] a more civil society' and modelling 'society yet to come', as they draw young people into music-making within the orchestra (p.13, citing Jorgenson, 2003, p.120). They too, through their responsive and reflective relationships with each young person, are 'prefigur[ing] what society might become' (p.233, citing Jorgensen, 2003, p.8) by inviting children who have not previously experienced learning an instrument to share in

musical practices which have often been the preserve of the more privileged, playing in the orchestra which offers an *inclusive* vehicle for playing and learning together, contrary to Baker's accusations of exclusivity (p. 181, p. 307). But this doesn't mean Sistema-inspired programmes shouldn't also be meeting the immediate needs of young participants, helping them to develop skills for healthy choices and positive outcomes in their lives ahead. The recently released report of the evaluation of the Big Noise centres includes in its conclusions that:

Strong evaluation evidence indicates that children who participate in the Big Noise orchestra demonstrate improved language and other skills, as well as higher levels of confidence and pride.

The Big Noise environment offers a sense of security and belonging, which it is anticipated will support the development of mutual support networks and resilience among participants over the medium term.

The impact of Big Noise on participants' emotional wellbeing was regularly cited as a key benefit of the programme. In the short term this develops participants' creativity, adaptability, problem-solving and decision-making skills, team working, collaboration and cooperation skills and their self-discipline and control. It is anticipated that over the long term, employability and employment outcomes (and others) may be enhanced (GCPH, 2015a, p.8).

The Big Noise programmes have been judged to bring short- and projected longer-term transformations amongst participant communities, enhancing well-being and encouraging the development of life skills, whilst the learning and playing of music alongside others opens up new vistas, presents unfettered horizons and encourages

young people to dream dreams, as described by a 14-year old Big Noise participant, quoted in the evaluation report:

The music, how we hear music, how we get involved, build up your communication, build up your confidence. Coming to Big Noise, you've got people you know and people you don't know. You've got music behind your back, pushing you. So it's like somebody pushing you to do something, but it's music, and it's pushing you to make good things like building your confidence. When I started Big Noise I was shy, look at me now. Anyone can achieve any goals they want (GCPH, 2015b, p.46).

Baker aims to open up a critical space as regards Sistema programmes, yet his excoriating responses on his blog to any criticism of his own work hardly encourage the kind of constructive reflection which could flow from some of the issues raised by this book. Baker's insistence that the opportunities offered by Sistema-inspired programmes are structurally inappropriate and his denial of the possibility of re-envisaging the orchestra as a vehicle for social action comes across as an ideologically-motivated position, which closes down the potential for constructive debate that he might have as an academic with professional musicians who have put themselves on the front line of music education. Unfortunately this weakens the usefulness of the book, and means it may well alienate more than it brings about constructive provocation. It is time now to move on from critical unmasking and structural critiques, from binaries and polarities, in order to work together in ethical relationships between researcher and practitioner, mirroring the responsive face-to-face relationship of Sistema musician and participant.

## Notes

1. Previously called FESNOJIV (Venezuelan State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras) and now known as Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar.

2. Quoted from the Big Noise website  
<<http://makeabignoise.org.uk/sistema-scotland/frequent-questions/>>  
[Accessed 24 June 2015]:

*Why classical music and not Scottish traditional or another type of music?*

The social benefits of Sistema come from the structure, challenges and cooperative nature of a symphony orchestra. So it is the symphony orchestra we are built around rather than classical music. The orchestra is big enough and flexible enough to challenge children with a wide range of abilities—and yet allows them to all play together with a common purpose. Within a properly functioning orchestra, children learn that they have an individual responsibility, that they are part of a section, which in turn is part of a much larger group. We believe that there is a unique, inherent inclusiveness in the symphony orchestra.

There is scope within the orchestra to explore many different genres of music, and we do. The Raploch orchestras have enjoyed learning a rich and diverse selection of repertoire from Lady Gaga to Handel. We have had ceilidhs too and Latin American music of course!

We would throw the question back however: 'Why not classical?'

There is no reason the children should be excluded from making and listening to classical music.

*Can Big Noise offer some other kinds of music tuition?*

Big Noise is an orchestral programme. Sistema's social benefits come from the intensity, immersion and scale of a symphony orchestra. We don't have plans for anything else. There are many other worthy musical pursuits but we don't believe they bring the same level of social benefit that our orchestras are set up to achieve. It will be wonderful if the children grow up to get enjoyment from playing and listening to whatever kind of music they develop a taste for. For us though, it is the symphony orchestra that has the capacity to provide the social transformation we hope to achieve.

## References

- Allan, J., Moran, N., Duffy, C. and Loening, G., 2010. Knowledge exchange with Sistema Scotland. *Journal of Education Policy*, 25(3), pp.335–347. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680931003646196>.
- Añes, C.M., 2014. Baker, Geoffrey; 'El Sistema: orchestrating Venezuela's youth'. [review] Available at: <http://www.cmaopinion.com/2014/12/review-of-baker-geoffrey-el-sistema.html> [Accessed 5 May 2015].
- Channing, S., 2003. Training the orchestral musician. In C. Lawson, ed. *The Cambridge companion to the orchestra*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.180–193. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/ccol9780521806589.011>.
- Glasgow Centre for Population Health, Education Scotland and Glasgow Caledonian University, 2015a. *Evaluating Sistema Scotland—initial findings report summary*. Available at: [http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/5059/Evaluating\\_Sistema\\_Scotland\\_Initial\\_Findings\\_Report\\_-\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/5059/Evaluating_Sistema_Scotland_Initial_Findings_Report_-_Summary.pdf) [Accessed 17 May 2015].
- Glasgow Centre for Population Health, Education Scotland and Glasgow Caledonian University, 2015b. *Evaluating Sistema Scotland—initial findings report*. Available at: [http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/5096/Sistema\\_evaluation\\_June\\_2015.pdf](http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/5096/Sistema_evaluation_June_2015.pdf) [Accessed 18 June 2015].
- Higgins, L., 2012. *Community music in theory and in practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s0265051713000296>.
- Jorgensen, E. R., 2004. Pax Americana and the world of music education. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 38(3), pp.1–18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jae.2004.0025>.
- Jourdan, K., 2008. *The view from somewhere: Coming to know the 'other' through the indwelling of a local musical tradition*. MEd, University of Cambridge.
- Jourdan, K., 2013. Musicking Otherwise: Ethical encounters in music-making, in *National Association of Music Educators' magazine*, Issue 1, Spring 2013, pp.34–38. Available at: [http://musicmark.org.uk/sites/default/files/content-assets/research-resources/MUSIC\\_MARK\\_SPRING\\_2013.pdf](http://musicmark.org.uk/sites/default/files/content-assets/research-resources/MUSIC_MARK_SPRING_2013.pdf) [Accessed 25 November 2014].

Jourdan, K., 2015. *Through the lens of Levinas: An ethnographically-informed case study of pupils' 'practices of facing' in music-making*. PhD, University of Cambridge.

Levinas, E., 1969. *Totality and infinity: an essay in exteriority*. Trans. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

Logan, O., 2015. Doing well in the eyes of capital: cultural transformation from Venezuela to Scotland. In O. Logan, J.-A. McNeish, & A. Borchgrevink, eds. *Contested powers: the politics of energy and development in Latin America*. London: Zed Books, n.p.

The Cultural Policy Collective, 2004. *Beyond social inclusion: towards cultural democracy*. Available at: <[www.culturaldemocracy.net](http://www.culturaldemocracy.net)> [Accessed 17 May 2015].

The Scottish Government, 2011. Evaluation of Big Noise, Sistema Scotland. Available at: <[www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch)> [Accessed 8 May 2011].

Turino, T., 2008. *Music as social life: the politics of participation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

## About the review author

KATHRYN JOURDAN is a freelance viola player living in Edinburgh. She teaches academic music, viola and chamber music at St Mary's Music School, and has recently completed a PhD in the philosophy of music education, in the Faculty of Education, Cambridge University. She is a Board member of Sistema Scotland and serves on the editorial board of the *British Journal of Music Education*.