



El Sistema Discovery Day
Saturday, December 8, 2012
Carnegie Hall
Keynote Lecture

I want this event to be useful to you. We are celebrating not only now months of activity by the groups of El Sistema here (a celebration here in New York), but also, in a way, nearly 40 years of accomplishment of El Sistema in Venezuela and its consequences worldwide. So I want to begin by saying that we need to acknowledge the incredible achievement of Maestro Abreu over nearly 40 years of making music and music making a central dimension of social policy for his nation. This is an incredible achievement. There are no comparable examples of the use of music as a social activity, which at the same time renders the music persuasive. The division between aesthetic judgment (our notion that we're interested in great music and great performance and very high standards and conversations about art and judgment) that seems divorced from issues of politics and issues of societal inspiration. He managed to merge the two by creating a very effective instrument, over hundreds of thousands of people all over the nation, and using music with children and young people as a transformative instrument. It vindicates, as well, something which we in the United States (and, to some extent, in Europe) have always worried about, and that certainly given the cultural wars in the United States in the '70s and '80s: the idea that classical music, which is a misnomer to begin with (there's nothing classical about it), but the traditions of orchestral music and choral music, that they are somehow the result of a privileged, aristocratic, white, European, male community, which didn't make them particularly endearing to many communities. The notion that they were a thing of the past, a historical artifact that would atrophy, turns out to be wrong.

For whatever reason, complex as it may be, the traditions of notated Western music, the traditions from the 16th century to today that are associated with concert music, are transferrable culturally. They are reinvented by new communities in new places that have nothing to do with the dead white males that had a hand in creating them. That has to do with the Far East (with China, with Korea, Japan, Malaysia), with South America (with Mexico and Venezuela). So this music gets reinvented by new people in new generations and new cultural contexts. That said, it has a potential transferability (translatability) comparable to matters of science and mathematics, which know no particular cultural boundaries.

So in a way, Maestro Abreu's achievement is not only for the country of Venezuela and for his citizens but also on behalf of the nation's power of music making. And, of course, the most

well-known product or result of this in the concert world is Maestro Dudamel, and his continuing commitment to do this, particularly the creation in LA of YOLA (the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles) and the programs which really create in Los Angeles the largest nucleo, in a way, in the United States. So we're very grateful to both of them. I start out with this brief praise because what I would like to talk about is less about El Sistema as a model than as an inspiration. It would be a mistake to look at what has happened in Venezuela and say, "We can do this in the United States." There is a certain amount of a tendency, given the power of the accomplishment, to run the imitative route, to think that El Sistema is to music what Weight Watchers is to weight loss, that it's a product you can package, wrap, and just carry anywhere you go. It's not so simple. The problems of Venezuela are not the problems of the United States. There are certain things in common, but there are many things that are different. There are things about El Sistema that we can learn from, that allow us to say that this is inspired by El Sistema but not an imitative system. The honor done to the achievement of Maestro Abreu is not to imitate it but to think the same way about our own circumstances in the United States and find a way to reach some of the same objectives, but probably doing things in many ways differently.

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So let me concentrate first on what do we take from the Venezuelan experience that looks transferable. Translation can be either literal (that is to say, very specific), which makes it ugly, or it can be poetic, which means you're trying to get to the underlying meaning of a poet in another language and translate it into your own language in a way that it's its moral equivalent. It may not even resemble the literal meaning.

Number one from El Sistema we have to see that could work in the United States is to define music education and the function of music not in terms of some notion of talent with quality of music making, but rather the activity itself. In the United States, we have a tendency to look at music as a function of something we call talent. Parents, wherever they are (but particularly in poor and underserved communities), think that being musical is exceptional. And we love child prodigies, and we exploit child prodigies. This is a profound error. Music is an inbred, human activity, which every individual possesses, and the level of rapidity or child ability is not connected to the profundity of its meaning, either to the individual or to the society. Prodigies are not the model of what is musical, and in our educational system we should not segregate by ability. The ability to make music should be spread democratically to every child without a prior prejudice of their so-called ability, because we do not know enough either about human psychology or human learning to make a predictive hypothesis of who will be a good musician, who will not be a good musician. Music making is not about the exceptional child. It's about every child. So once you take that position, your whole attitude to music education is different, and that's what El Sistema has done.

The second thing El Sistema has done is to view this as a group activity and not as a divisive, individual activity, that the learning of music is not only (or primarily) a solo activity of the person all by himself or herself, and that it is separate from the community. In American

popular culture you have the bespectacled person who is a nerd being laughed out by all the other kids on the baseball field, carrying his violin case, and perhaps being beat up. (This is an autobiographical statement.) So the centrality of the group experience had everything to do with not making music. Later, rock music functioned. Our concept of femininity or masculinity had no connection to the social act of making music. So what has to change is that making music is a solo, exceptional activity. It's a group activity where everyone is a participant.

The third important thing is that learning music should be done at the same moment you teach it, that the moment the young person begins to play they have an opportunity to pass the gift on. What El Sistema does terrifically is, in fact, integrate the mentoring activity.

The fourth very important thing about El Sistema is how you simplify. Now, in our music teaching, which is the individual lesson (even Suzuki, which has had great success) is the simplification of music almost to the point of robbing it of its interest. So if I give a child a simplified version of a complex piece, it may actually not be very interesting, which is why composers (Bartok, for example, Schumann) tried to write music for children that was actually intrinsically interesting and not watered down. It wasn't as if you went to a child and said, "Listen, I want you to learn Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and I'm going to simplify it. It's simply an unhappy guy who dies at the end." Now, the child says, "What's so interesting about an unhappy adolescent? I'm just looking at my older brother. Why should I spend the time worrying about Hamlet?" So you have to find a way to make what's powerful and mysterious and wonderful about Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler, or whatever it is to the child, and one way is through repertoire that's specifically written for children, and that's where Bartok and Schumann have great examples of that. But, in the El Sistema is the ability to simplify without losing the complexity by having the beginner participate in something that's complex without having to do everything, and then gradually get more and more of the complexity as they grow older and more accomplished.

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So these are, we would say, pedagogical achievements that we can look at and try to transfer to the American circumstance. The other thing, of course, is that the way to evaluate this is not to separate it from communities, that the orchestras, the chorus, the musical activity from the beginning has to be public, collective, and that the primary objective is not relatively to badger an orchestra to play in tune but actually for an orchestra to learn how to play together and find its own way to finding its intonation by collaboration, by learning things that we would associate with discipline, social cohesion, and a sense of community.

Can you build, through music, a sense of self worth and a sense of solidarity and a sense of investment in wellbeing. If you do it publicly with children, you bring both the parents and the adults in as spectators, so they are integral parts of the experience of what happens to children. And that the process of education, of intervention into children's lives, cannot be limited to the school time. It has to be done with school and, as well, after school. It has to be integrated into the full life, seven days a week, of a child and community. And the final,

perhaps most important thing is that El Sistema shows that music does not have to be a function of privilege and wealth, that this is a deeply successful intervention in a community that is largely excluded from many privileges (economic and social). So these are the ideals of the achievement that we have to find a way to transfer to the United States. We at the Longy School of Music and the LA Philharmonic, in a program called Take a Stand, is in the beginning stages of trying to figure out what is it that we can learn. So let me turn now to the question of the American circumstance and how it relates to El Sistema. The good news is that the idea that music is a democratic social activity and crucial for children, particularly, in creating a sense of community and belonging, has an independent American philosophical heritage, and that heritage rests in the Transcendentalists in New England of the 19th century. And the most articulate heir of that tradition is the American composer Charles Ives. His father was a band leader, and Charles Ives was fond of saying that in a church choir, the most enthusiastic singer who couldn't sing in tune was the most musical person, that to correct that person in a way that dampened his or her enthusiasm for singing was to disappoint their music making, that in fact the group activities (the marching bands or choruses or church choirs), that these social activities were essential to developing a sense of American citizenship, of democratic respect for your neighbor, and a sense of being part of the community. So we don't have to reach outside of our own intellectual heritage to find inspiration to adapt what El Sistema has achieved. The difference, of course, in the United States is that the United States has the problem of genuine scale (the size of the nation, the pluralism of the nation). The fact is that we are a nation of immigrants, a huge, disparate population with entirely different circumstances. We are, without question, a more affluent nation, and the nature of our poverty and the nature of our exclusion is peculiar in both its physical locations. It exists in rural America and also in urban America. It does overlap with race, but not entirely. Second, we have a highly developed and internationally competitive popular culture of our own that has, over the last 50 to 75 years, marginalized classical music. So classical music has been ruined by its defenders. Classical music has been appropriated by snobs, by connoisseurs who have made it look like fine wine the average person can't afford. It has taken the worst of the impression that learning it is only about trying to make yourself look better and more elite. It has been wiped out by the American enthusiasm for sports and popular culture, and the consumption of that popular culture. It does not have the prestige that it once carried.

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So the Venezuela in which Abreu invented El Sistema is comparable to America before the First World War, when the dominant German and Italian and Eastern European immigrants to New York and to America brought with them a high sense of the value of classical music, and created schools and choral societies. All the settlement houses in this city have music programs: Henry Street, Third Street, Greenwich House. They were a crucial part of the settlement house movement in America (in Pittsburgh and in New York), because music education then was viewed as it is now in Venezuela, as a social instrument of real value. That movement died out. Partially the death of immigration to America between 1920 and 1965. When America closed its immigration in the '20s, you can actually track the decline of

audience interest with the aging of the human population. So we have a little bit of catch up to redeem the significance of classical music.

The last president of the United States that loved classical music was probably Jimmy Carter, and he was less of an enthusiast than was Richard Nixon. Now, this doesn't recommend classical music to us. But Mrs. Roosevelt loved classical music, and Harry Truman liked classical music. I don't want to speak about the Bush family. I'll leave them out for the moment. Again, I don't want to comment on Bill Clinton's saxophone playing, and I'll fall silent about our current president. But classical music is not high on their agenda, and in the culture in general the instrument of the orchestra and the choral society (except, perhaps, in the Midwest) is an instrument that needs some revival in the United States.

So the good news is that America is in the throes of a tremendous sense of crisis about its educational system, particularly to the underserved population. We have an embarrassing high school completion rate. Of the people who complete high school, what they can do is an embarrassment for the number of years they've spent in school. Our funding of the school system is completely antiquated, and if there's any movement that has reached a peak it is for the dismantling of public education through privatization, not that we invest in public education, which is considered constitutional in the United States, not a federal obligation. Completely different from the Venezuelan situation, where in fact Abreu's achievement is to have convinced the state, despite regime change, to invest in this as an actual program. I defy any of you, looking at the so-called fiscal cliff, to persuade anybody (right, left, or center) to invest in music education. You would be considered a candidate for a psychiatric evaluation. And it's not only because the right wing doesn't want government, but the very left consider culture a decoration.

The fourth problem we have which does not exist in Spanish-speaking America (does not exist in Mexico, does not exist in any of the Latin American countries) is a peculiar American egalitarian suspicion that the arts are not vital to democracy. Most Americans will not distinguish between art and entertainment. They think that freedom of expression is absolutely satisfactorily answered by what you can see in the movie theaters and on television. If people want to hear Beethoven and Mahler, or John Cage, or John Adams, let them pay for it. And, as we all know, the tickets to our concerts in this hall and our concerts in the Metropolitan Opera or any American orchestra are hardly cheap. The reason is because you cannot pass on the cost of this activity to the average consumer. If you actually took an orchestra concert by the New York Philharmonic and made all 2,000 seats pay for it, the average price would be over a thousand dollars a seat. Even I wouldn't pay that, and I wouldn't expect anybody else to do so. So these have to be subsidized activities. So the American public says, "Why should I subsidize what you like? I'm perfectly happy listening to the music I like. Why should I learn your music?" This, in a pluralist democracy, is an extremely hard argument to make.

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So when we actually try to transfer the insights of El Sistema to the United States, we have to address those issues: the issues of funding, the prestige of the activity, the nature of the American educational system (which is not national but local), the intermittent and very complex structure of American poverty, and the essential diversity of the population.

So what do we do? Number one, it seems to me we have a tremendous advantage given the educational crisis. There is no doubt that the biological and neurological evidence seems increasingly the case that musical activity, especially collective musical activity that inspires individual discipline, is a correlative (not a cause, but a correlative) to educational achievement, if you can get a child to play and participate using music, because music in our system is a notated system that has logic and meaning without being a language. What's peculiar about music is that it is coherent, it implies meaning, it transforms the experience of time, by which it requires you to have memory and to identify and manipulate comparisons, relationships, similarities, variations. So it has a cognitive function.

Also the ability to locate and negotiate multiple activities in the same time frame. (A simple example, of course, would be harmony and counterpoint.) There is no doubt that being able to train people to do so and to listen, to observe, has correlative benefits, and that's an argument in the United States that people are willing to listen to. We are concerned about the competitiveness about the future, and there is no doubt that one could argue that creating a real widespread system of music education among young people, you would improve the schooling and the achievement and the cognitive ability of young people. You could make some headway.

The second issue, of course, is the concern for special among the poor, the unemployment rates by class and race in the United States are an embarrassment, especially in urban centers. This activity, which occupies and gives meaning to people's lives, is something that fills a real hole, and that hole is one of loneliness. The interesting thing is, in America you have to make El Sistema-style programs serve not only the underserved but the entire range of economic and social class. The good news is our problems are shared: loneliness, a sense of loss of value, one's life. One of the big problems in the States is any of us, essentially, the one exit from the sense of superfluousness is in religion, where we believe for some reason that we are the child of god and therefore we are unique in some way that we don't fully grasp. But apart from that religious belief, what else reminds us of our own sensuality? What keeps us going? And that sense of meaning is very hard to find, especially as we have a more advanced society than all of where we live. There are no more toll collectors. There are no more elevator operators. There seem to be fewer and fewer people in a factory as robots. We have only come to the beginning of the technological revolution of work. Most of us doing things that are physical are going to be put out of business. We don't even have a bank teller to talk to anymore. We don't have a token taker. All the things that we once had human beings do have been mechanized in the name of efficiency. All the people in the world no longer are useful. They're not needed to make food. They're not needed to make drugs. What are they needed for? So in the search for value, the role of the arts becomes that much more important. What is it that we can do that isn't just work and economic activity, that's not just

mere labor? It is the capacity for unpredictable activity of the imagination. I can get somebody to make another table more effectively than I could have done it as a table maker, but no one can predict what expressive capacity I have in the use of language, the use of my visual imagination, and in my capacity to make music.

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So our language is hard-wired. So is music. So it is the work of the imagination and our ability to appreciate the other person's work of imagination that we begin to develop a sense of value in life that's not about economics, that's not about our pay check, that's not about our social function at work. It's about our social function as members of a community. And that's where El Sistema comes in to provide a huge ambition for the young person, a real joy of life. The people who fear or are intolerant or are willing to take the lives of others in the names of causes are people often who do not actually sense the sanctity of their own life, are motivated by envy and boredom. How do you dissipate that? It comes from the sense of either loneliness or superfluity.

And that's where the arts come in. Not as spectators. It does not do to turn classical music into Hollywood, in which we are looking and waiting on line to get Rodolfo Valentino's signature. We're in a dark space, and the only thing that a movie does is remind us of how drab our life is. Going to most movies (except for horror movies, which is why such movie are popular, and movies where a lot of people get killed, which is also a relief that we're just watching a movie), but romance movies are a terrifying experience. The reason *Romeo and Juliet* is a great play is because they both die. It gives the audience a sense of comfort that they haven't missed anything, because the kind of love that's in *Romeo and Juliet* is not sustainable for life, which we as middle-aged people are thrilled to discover. The same thing is true looking at Wagnerian heroes. We'd like to be Lohengrin, and maybe it influences in a bad way our sense of what we might be able to do (it develops a delusional sensibility), but we're purely spectators. This mythologizing acts as a screen. We compare everyone we meet to the movie stars, through whom we live vicariously, so you have the same problem that Flaubert described in *Madame Bovary*, which is that Madame Bovary looked at her life through the lens of a cheap romantic novel and reached unhappiness. How do you avoid that? You do not make the arts an act of spectatorship but of activity. That activity is play: playing in a group, in a community, and getting the feedback of the audience. This is no longer a major league stage show, but actually a participant activity of an entire community. That is what El Sistema has proved.

Can we do this in the United States? The answer is yes. But it has to be done, A, without the government on the national level, and only done indirectly with the government on the local level. It has to be done in a truly grass roots manner. It has to be developed from within the community, and the community has to be part of its definition, so the nucleus in different parts of the country will do different kinds of things. There has to be some national interchangeability. As in El Sistema, there has to be some coordination.

Finally, we have to (in this circumstance) be very mindful of the catholicity of taste, so in what we do with the groups (what we might call the crossover, the improvisatory) has to range from the standard classical repertoire to the improvisatory to the genres that are not necessarily within everyone's training. And for that, we have to retrain all our classical musicians to be teachers not of individuals but of groups, to be group leaders. We have to also train them to do transcription and arrangement. One of our first nucleos, for example, in the Central Valley of California, we have a mariachi group. And that's a beginning point to develop outward. There's a lot of gradual building of different kinds of ensembles and different kinds of repertoire.

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We have to look at repertoire other than the standard European classic repertoire. There's a lot to draw from, where these groups can make a contribution in bringing music alive in sounding form, that is not there. So it's not only getting a youth orchestra or an orchestra to come through the system to play Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler, Brahms, but also things that other orchestras might not touch that are from the same heritage, whether it's in Mexico doing the music of Chavez, or whether it is in Argentina doing Ginastera, or in the United States the long, rich repository of repertory that is by American composers or even about America. So there's a lot to do in the organization of musicians.

So the first step in every community is to create an alliance between the school system, the local government, the specific leadership of the region, and the performing arts organizations (whether they be orchestras or choral societies), to involve the varying churches (both Protestant and Catholic) and the non-Christian religious communities. It has to be done in a way that is collaborative and reinforcing of a sense of a democratic pluralism. It also has to be defined not in a segregated way, so we have to find ways in which the actual constituent kids are not even all of one neighborhood, and that's quite easy to do in the bigger cities (it's a little more complicated in rural areas).

So to close, what we learn from the success of Abreu and of El Sistema is that this can be done. Music can be placed at the center of a nation's social and political agenda. It can be placed at the center of a nation's desire to recreate a fabric of patriotism and community, to give a chance to people who are excluded from proper education and opportunity, through music, to develop the skills that will make them competitive. It also shows that really honoring musical expression is a way of redeeming a sense of personal value and has huge benefits in the success of a generation and of a community. And it's a priority and not a declaration, and the emphasis has to be on participation. So that is an enormous encouragement, and therefore it is absolutely proper that we take a very good look at how they do it and what they do as we attempt to create in the United States our own versions of what they've achieved and then build a national network, which is what we have tried to do at Longy and at Bard. Take a Stand and the LA Phil play a role in that. It is not the ownership of a franchise or a product, and it is about doing the greatest compliment we can pay to El Sistema, which is to

imitate and to honor replicating their principles rather than the specific practices. Thank you very much.