

El Sistema: A conference to explore and critique what it means for music education

The Venezuelan youth orchestra program known as El Sistema, founded in 1975, has attracted considerable international publicity and funding in recent years. Said to be an effective means of resolving a wide range of social problems and now operating under the banner of 'social action through music', it has inspired attempts to adopt and adapt it in dozens of countries around the world.

However, there are very few critical analyses of the program's aims and no rigorous studies which demonstrate that it achieves them. Furthermore, its methods are poorly understood and obscured by idealistic rhetoric. Efforts to transplant El Sistema overseas have taken place without reliable written sources about its history and its pedagogical and philosophical program.

Despite (or perhaps because of) this intellectual vacuum, there is currently a global wave of enthusiasm for the Sistema model, and there have been many public events devoted to promoting it in Europe and North America. Overwhelmingly shaped by advocacy, their discussions have largely ignored a number of contradictions – for example, the fact that the program's fastest expansion has coincided with rising crime rates in Venezuela. Similarly, there has been a failure to interrogate how an orchestral training scheme became rebranded as a project of social inclusion, or whether an expensive program underwritten by a petro-state is suitable as a global educational paradigm. The consequence is a paradox: El Sistema is both the best-known and the least-understood music education program in the world today.

This one-day conference will be the first event dedicated to critical thinking about *El Sistema*, its derivatives around the world, and programs that provide alternative models. We aim to stimulate deeper reflection on a shift in the function of the orchestra towards social inclusion and discipline. The combination of European art music, a rhetoric of salvation, and a proselytising approach invites comparison with older, colonialist conceptions of music education, yet the enthusiastic embrace of the program by business and financial organizations suggests a need to investigate its relationship with neoliberal ideology.

The keynote speaker is Professor Robert Fink (UCLA).

The conference will be held on the 24th & 25th April at Senate House, University of London.

Convenors

Geoff Baker, Reader at Royal Holloway, University of London, author of *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuelan Youth* (OUP, 2014)

Gustavo Borchert, doctoral candidate at the University of Turku, Finland, researching the renegotiation of the symphony orchestra as a tool for social inclusion and post-Fordist corporate management model

Owen Logan, Research Fellow at the University of Aberdeen, co-editor of *Contested Powers: The Politics of Energy and Development in Latin America* (Zed Books, forthcoming)

Further details and registration details are available [here](#).