Geoffrey Baker’s new book, *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela’s Youth*, is a stinging critique of the Venezuelan instrumental and social music education programme. Baker’s research is far reaching, drawing on observations of the programme throughout Venezuela and interviews with key participants in the programme and students themselves. As a piece of qualitative and ethnographic research, it is beautifully constructed. Throughout his book, Baker is at pains to justify his assertions about the programme and, when necessary, points to the limitations of his research and the conclusions therein.

Following a general introduction, the book is divided into four main parts. Part One introduces the institutions of *El Sistema* and the various people involved, notably ‘el maestro’ – José Antonio Abreu, the conductor Gustavo Dudamel and the Simón Bolivar Youth Orchestra. Part Two addresses the issue of music education and pedagogy within the programme before Part Three considers the issues of whether or not the programme has made a positive social impact. Finally, Part Four considers the wider impact of *El Sistema*, including the political, economic and cultural impacts both claimed by proponents of the programme and evidenced through Baker’s research. The book closes with a fascinating set of alternative proposals for music education in the twenty-first century that might, Baker suggests, provide a broader, more inclusive and pedagogically rich experience for children than those found in *El Sistema*. 
As someone with a broad interest in music education and an active researcher, but nothing more than a general knowledge about *El Sistema* drawn from listening to fellow educators and researchers talking about the movement within education conferences, reading publicity about the programme and commenting on evaluations of ‘spin-off’ programmes here within the United Kingdom, I was thoroughly engaged with Baker’s critique of *El Sistema* throughout all four parts. Baker’s carefully worded and eloquent prose is evidence indeed that all that glitters is not gold (and the elite Simón Bolivar Youth Orchestra can certainly glitter!).

I note in other reviews of Baker’s book that his critics have argued against his research methodology and methods. I have no complaints on this front. Baker adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach throughout and is entirely aware of the limitations of such a methodology. His methods too – formal and informal interviews, observations of the day-to-day business of *El Sistema* (including rehearsals, lessons and administrative activities in different regional centres, the study of documents and written evidence) – have their limitations but, again, Baker is completely candid about this. Throughout the book, you will find statements like this:

*The scope of my research is limited. ... This book is not a comprehensive or conclusive narrative but rather a critical, informed analysis of some of El Sistema’s key actors and core claims. ... I can only open a window onto these complex realities; there is much more to explore, many other research methods to be applied, and a vast number of stories still to be told.* (p20)

Whilst this opens up Baker’s approach to criticism, I take this as a major strength of the book, its author and its critique of *El Sistema*. Baker has very challenging things to say about the *El Sistema* model. For him, and many other cultural observers, *El Sistema* is testimony to Abreu’s mastery of the dark arts of politics and economics, driven by his
autocratic management style, his intolerance of competing visions and a relentless pursuit of power (p47). Its benefits for participants are musically, socially and culturally compromised by this.

For example, as a social development programme, Baker argues, El Sistema is conceived as a cultural and educational continuation of mid twentieth century modernist theory. Its large, centralised and top-down development structures are characterised as paternalistic, authoritarian and exclusive. In all aspects, Baker argues, it swims against the tide of progressive thinking in arts education (p107).

In terms of music education, too, Baker is highly critical of the model adopted by El Sistema. He questions the legitimacy of the orchestra as a positive social, educational or professional environment for the development of young people’s musical skills. His research reveals that large numbers of classical ensembles are permeated by social dysfunction, questionable ideologies and pedagogical flaws (p132). All of these, and many more, are evidenced through the El Sistema and reach their pinnacle in the Simón Bolivar Youth Orchestra, which, he claims, exploits children mercilessly in pursuit of ‘excellence’ in its grand scale, staged, performances across the world.

Despite the significant and worrying nature of these assertions, for a music educator such as myself, Chapter 6 and its focus on learning and teaching in El Sistema is perhaps the most troublesome. Here, Baker exposes numerous aspects of El Sistema’s pedagogical approach and critiques them rigorously. Amongst other things, he explores:

- The intense and exploitative work schedules of the young musicians that has resulted in a ‘work-centred’ rather than a ‘child-centred’ approach to learning (p134 & p139)
- The sequential and repetitious nature of the lessons and
rehearsals (p135)

- Hierarchical and teacher-centred pedagogical approaches that underpin an old-fashioned view of teaching as ‘transmission’ and fundamentally undermines children’s own sense of musical creativity (p136)

- The limited musical repertoire and the consequent effects this has on children’s ability to play more fluently across musical styles or engage with their own folk musics (p140)

- Limitations in pedagogical approaches adopted by established teachers and through peer teaching, with an emphasis on ‘teach as you were taught’ rather than an openness to more contemporary approaches to teaching and teacher education (p142)

- The lack of critical thinking, or any divergent thinking really, in *El Sistema*, which fails to give children the opportunity to stop and think for themselves and certainly does not allow for any dissent from students or teachers about the pedagogical approach that is inherent within the programme (p144)

- The mono-dimensional nature of music education within *El Sistema*, which prioritises musical performance to the exclusion of everything else and leads to students having major gaps in their musical knowledge when they move onto other musical studies (p147)

- The devaluing of Venezuelan traditional and folk music as legitimate alternatives for music education.

To sum up this important chapter, Baker states clearly, and I would agree with him on this, that *El Sistema’s* ideology and practices ‘lie far from much recent research on music education, equity, and social justice’ (p150). Furthermore:

*El Sistema* argues that learning to play orchestral music will make you a better person; critical educational theory suggests that focusing on orchestral music may curtail genuine education and lead to social oppression rather than
justice. (ibid)

One of the most worrisome sections of Baker’s book comes in Chapter 10, Realities, Dreams and Revolutions. Here, Baker discusses issues relating to allegations of sexual abuse within El Sistema. Baker describes the ‘relative normality of sexual relationships between teachers and pupils’ (p227), reporting one ex-Sistema musician as describing the programme as ‘like a chain of secrets and favours – like a secret society’ (p228). Baker has found no concrete evidence that these allegations or suspicions are true. Here, particularly, he is open and transparent about the limitations of his study as a foreign ethnographer and musicologist. However, the regularity with which allegations surfaced across the data he collected through interviews, conversations and via document analysis of Internet forums was striking. Following on from numerous criminal prosecutions for sexual abuse of young children, from institutions such as Chetham’s School of Music and the Royal Northern College of Music, and with further criminal prosecutions to follow this year within court rooms across the United Kingdom, it seems that the issues associated with sex and music education are, sadly, only just beginning to be uncovered both here and abroad.

Given the scale of the ‘success’ of El Sistema, it is not surprising that there have been copycat models developed throughout the world. By late 2012, Baker cites models in around fifty countries on six continents (with over 70 projects inspired by El Sistema in North America alone). Whilst many of these projects are built upon El Sistema’s illusions as much as its realities, Baker is careful not to tar all these projects with the same brush. Rather, he claims that many have improved on the traditional El Sistema model in many ways, notably through a more rigorous and productive use of educational evaluation and public transparency. However, the traces of El Sistema are only too evident in movements such as Sistema Scotland which, he argues, is still in ‘thrall
to the orchestra and classical music, and shows a dismissive attitude toward popular and traditional music (p306).

Baker’s book closes with examples of how the El Sistema has been genuinely superseded by other, more productive in his opinion, models of music education across the globe. Citing examples such as Sheila Nelson’s string project in Tower Hamlets, Peter Cope’s Scottish fiddle project and the Musical Futures initiative, he argues that more progressive models of music education such as these have significantly more value that the state-sponsored, modernistic, bureaucratic and tyrannical model found in El Sistema. Whist El Sistema has undoubtedly opened up ‘extraordinary space for music education’ (p322), it is suited to a bygone age, the nineteenth rather than the twenty-first century. Whilst its ‘elite’ performers stun audiences around the world:

... problems lie just beneath the surface; skeletons are rattling in the closet; and experts cannot continue forever to confuse propaganda and fact, or to ignore the gulf between progressive theory and conservative practices. (ibid)

Baker’s book is a bold and insightful exploration of El Sistema. The El Sistema lobby is powerful throughout the world and will not take kindly to his thesis. However, his words need to be heard and acted on seriously and conscientiously by policy makers. Baker’s book is essential reading for anyone with an interest in arts and music education, policy and practice. It is uncomfortable reading. But the clarity of his historical, political, cultural and pedagogical analysis is insightful throughout. I highly recommend it to you.