

# **Orchestrating Social Change**

## **An Inquiry Into The Role Of Western Classical Music Within El Sistema**

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<b>Abstract</b>	
<p>In this study I will examine the role of Western classical music within the global music education movement El Sistema. I will research the claims of El Sistema advancing social change and the implications of Western classical music in that context.</p> <p>My research question is: What are the implications of focusing on Western classical music as a vehicle for social change within the global music education movement El Sistema?</p> <p>In the conceptual framework, I will present critical pedagogy and postcolonial theory. I will also detail the history and current operation of the music education movement El Sistema. I will use this framework to evaluate the results.</p> <p>This thesis is a qualitative inquiry, which I have conducted as a systematical literature review. I have searched for and reviewed research and literature regarding my topic, which I will synthesize and gather into results. I will consider the claims of social change made by El Sistema through reviewing scholarly research. I will then explore the relationship between Western classical music and social change and how it is conceptualized within El Sistema. I will discuss the relationship between El Sistema and the field of Western classical music, contemplating the future of the cultural practice. Finally, I will reflect on the research process, evaluate the reliability of my research and consider topics for further research.</p> <p>The results of my research exhibit that Western classical music is considered as a vehicle for social change by misrepresenting behavioral change as social change. Gaining cultural capital through the influence of Western art is assumed to be morally uplifting to such a degree that social change is inevitable. The music education programme fails to engage with the histories and contexts of Western classical music, thus reproducing the inequality it wishes to address.</p>	
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# 1 Introduction

This study focuses on the relationship between social change and Western classical music within the global music education movement El Sistema. El Sistema was founded by Jose Antonio Abreu in Venezuela in 1975 with an aim to provide free music education for impoverished children. The musical focus of El Sistema consists of a repertoire of Western classical music, the main artistic mediums being symphony orchestras and choirs (Bergman, Lindgren & Saether, 2016). This study will examine the implications of using Western classical music as means to create social change.

El Sistema is held in wide critical acclaim for its ability to engage underprivileged youth with orchestral music, leading towards potential “rescue” from poverty (Shieh 2015, 7). The educational programme has been heralded by the media as evidence of the power of music. Imagery of Venezuelan children playing classical instruments with smiles on their faces and stars in their eyes is widespread. In the recent years scholars and researchers have questioned the dominant narrative surrounding El Sistema (Baker 2018, Bull 2016, Logan 2016, Shieh 2015). Studies have not supported claims of social change. The poverty rate among the musicians has proven remarkably low considering the narrative of radical upward social mobility through orchestral training (Baker 2018, 11). This study seeks to examine these rather opposing accounts of this multifaceted music education project.

As a violinist, I am interested in increasing accessibility to Western classical music. I believe everyone has the right to great music education. However, it is painstakingly obvious that classical music has a problematic position from a global perspective. The elitist reputation of the cultural practice stems from a history that is yet to be confronted. Through the companion lenses of critical pedagogy and postcolonial theory, El Sistema cannot be seen as an unquestionably wondrous affair of musical transformation. I perceive El Sistema as a music education project where many of the difficult questions surrounding Western classical music arise. While voicing criticism and concern, I wish not to discredit or undermine the work El Sistema has done to provide accessible instrumental training.

Music, albeit an abstract form of art, is never without context. It is always interpreted within the assemblages of history, geography and other concrete realities (Small 1998, 31). A youth orchestra performing *Andante Festivo* composed by Sibelius simply means something different in Finland and in Venezuela. In Finland, the performance might elude to tradition, independence, even a sense of nationalism. While performing a piece of Western classical music in Venezuela, the imperial trajectory of the nation should be noted. The origin of El Sistema, Venezuela, is located at the northern end of South America and was colonized by Spain between 1523 and 1811. The first European known to set foot on the shores of what is now Venezuela was Christopher Columbus in 1498. In conclusion, the social meanings of a piece depend on the frame of reference (Small 1998, 31).

Western classical music has the privilege of being promoted as the height of human spirituality and intellect. Paradoxically it is also an increasingly marginal form of art, celebrated by a minority of the Western industrialized society (Small 1998, 3). The idea that classical music is something complex and difficult to understand, distances it from its nature as a means of communication. This narrative of complexity promotes the problematic position of classical music as cultural capital (Bull 2016, 130). In this thesis, I will consider how Western classical music is framed as a vehicle for social change within the global music education movement El Sistema. I will examine the significance of employing an artform associated with elitism within a music education programme that seeks to lessen poverty and crime. The implication that orchestral training can affect the social mobility and economic progression of an individual is central to the narrative of El Sistema (Shieh 2015, 1).

This bachelor's thesis will be conducted as a systematical literature review. In the second chapter I will present my conceptual framework built on critical pedagogy and postcolonial theory. I will also introduce the global music education project El Sistema and provide an overview of its history and fundamental principles. In the third chapter, I will present the research question and methods. The research process and ethical issues will also be addressed. In the fourth chapter, I will exhibit my results. In the fifth chapter I will present a summary of the results and draw my conclusions. Finally, I will discuss possible further research and evaluate the reliability of this bachelor's thesis.

## 2 Conceptual framework

In this chapter I will present the key concepts through which I view the global music education movement El Sistema and the implications of focusing on Western classical music as a vehicle for social change within the movement.

### 2.1 Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy offers El Sistema an inquisitive frame regarding the use of Western classical music as the main body of repertoire within a project striving for social change. Critical pedagogy was developed by the Brazilian educational thinker and philosopher Paulo Freire, 1921-1997. He was devoted to advancing literacy and education in Brazil. His work and ethics have globally influenced scholars of various disciplines, including music education (McLaren 2000, 147). Critical pedagogy is, at its core, resistance to oppression and exploitation through education. It seeks to disturb the verticalization of power and interrupt the exclusion of human value (McLaren 2000, 156). Researcher Anna Bull argues that El Sistema offers reproduction of privilege rather than resistance to exploitation (Bull 2016, 125). Freire suggests that democracy is failing its commitment to education by surrendering to neoliberalism (Freire 1998, 22). The involvement of the Venezuelan government in the funding of El Sistema might compromise its ability to evoke radical social change through music education (Logan 2016, 59). Mainstream educational scholars regard critical pedagogy as a rather marginal, hopelessly utopian movement. The discourse of radical structural change intimidates those who prosper from the dominant culture (McLaren 2000, 148). A paradox of critical pedagogy is that it can be practiced in a free manner by those who are less oppressed. For example, anti-racist work is safer if you are white. Manic focus on identifying positionality can box people, reinforcing the very systems of oppressions being resisted (Hess 2017, 184-185).

According to researcher Peter McLaren, social change is developed through an educational praxis where students are encouraged to become critical (McLaren 2000, 147). In the context of El Sistema, this would mean learning to question the global structures that enable poverty and crime (Logan 2016, 67). Critical thinking regarding for example Western classical music would be welcomed, not avoided. The process of gaining

agency, gathering the courage to speak and act in society, is created through critical literacy (McLaren 2000, 147). Critical literacy, for Freire, is developed through the process of conscientization. It involves understanding one's position within the ensembles of class, race, capital, gender and other systems of differences. Through critical pedagogy, educators can strive to introduce disenfranchised and marginalized segments of society to the practice of "reading the world" (McLaren 2000, 156). According to Freire, through studying the conditions of their existence the oppressed can learn to name their circumstances and change them. McLaren asserts, that if the current state of affairs is not being interrupted, it is by default being reinforced. If El Sistema fails to address the exploitative history of Western classical music, it is reproducing it (Bull 2016, 125). Interruption is possible through developing critical literacy and empowering agency.

Agency is gained through becoming the subject. In music education, a student should be less a passive receiver and more an active agent (Hess 2017, 174). Freire emphasized the significance of resisting the constraints of objectification. Autonomy and agency are developed by encouraging curiosity and self-reflection (Freire 1998, 38). The aim of critical education is that people may learn to collectively liberate themselves. However, liberation through forced education is merely another form of oppression (McLaren 2000, 175). Education in and of itself is not emancipatory, there are always questions of positionality and partiality involved. Freire acknowledged these fundamental connections between education, politics, imperialism and liberation. His legacy, critical pedagogy, has sparked a global interest in the ways in which education can act as a means for social change (McLaren 2000, 141).

Critical pedagogy has influenced music education since the early 1990s (Hess 2017, 172). Freire understood that education is never a neutral enterprise. The intrinsic connection of knowledge and power forges education into an unsurpassable tool of construction or destruction (McLaren 2000, 158). Critical pedagogy speaks to the contextual nature of music (Hess 2017, 176). Identifying both the origin of the piece of music and the context in which it is heard is of value. In this light, it is not inconsequential i.e. what the repertoire of an orchestra is. Choice of repertoire is never neutral, even if it masquerades as such. In music education, critical pedagogy can be practiced by identifying positionality and involving a polyphony of voices in assembling the curriculum (Hess 2017, 174). A polycentric, multi-vocal repertoire would be ideal in a music education project seeking social change (Clammer 2015, 15). Music education has histori-

cally reproduced the hegemony of Western classical music (Small 1998, 3). Critical pedagogy may lead to eschewing the canon and thus disagreeing with dominant discourse. The problematic dichotomy between Western music and “other” is encouraged by Hess to be replaced by an ideal of co-existence. Critical pedagogy views music as a medium to resist oppression both by listening and creating (Hess 2017, 174). In conclusion, critical pedagogy encourages developing critical literacy, which is the process of identifying positionality and context.

## **2.2 Postcolonial theory**

It is impossible to define post-colonial theory without reflecting on the past. The past irrevocably informs the present, it cannot be extracted or removed (Said 1993, 2). Edward Said asserts that the past and the present exist simultaneously, whether we dare to be aware of it or not. We may reformulate the past, agreeing and disagreeing on i.e. the relevance or the details of certain historical facts. This process of rewriting history might obscure but will not diminish the impact the past has on cultural contexts (Said 1993, 2). Post-colonial theory discusses the ongoing cultural and societal significance of colonization (Shieh 2015, 11). Imperialism is the generally European attempt to expand, to control often distant land, inhabited by others who will inevitably suffer from this equation (Said 1993, 5). In simple terms, it is wanting land that is out of reach and reaching for it anyway. Colonialism, the practice of occupying and exploiting another country, is the consequence of imperialism. Imperialism as a geographical pursuit arguably ended when the colonial structures came undone after WWII. However, the implications on culture remain (Said 1993, 4). The ramifications of systemic harassment of land and people linger long after the historical events have occurred. Like time, the significance of place cannot be excluded. Said maintains that culture is always attached to geography, it is not outside or beyond it. The reification of music in Western philosophy attempts to detach the meaning of classical music from the reality of context (Spruce 2017, 3). El Sistema representatives employ a universalist, non-contextual discourse while justifying the repertoire of Western classical music (Shieh 2015, 10).

In order to legitimize the rampant exploitation of new lands, it was commonplace to deem non-European cultures as other, lacking, uncivilized and therefore in need of domination (Said 1993, 9). Said asserts that subordination became acceptable through imagining an empire. For the political acquisition of lands to sustain itself, the culture of the

foreign land had to be diminished and disrespected (Said 1993, 11). Separative discourse, condemning something as “other”, was the seed of cultural imperialism. In an interview conducted by Jonathan Rutherford, Homi Bhabha argues that a distinctive feature of the Western concept of civilization is the notion that these “other” cultures are objects to be experienced or collected (Rutherford 1990, 208). Cultural diversity may be celebrated but it is simultaneously being constrained to the existing Western grid. An alternative would be aesthetic democracy, which calls for impartial evaluation between all forms of art (Clammer 2015, 14). Polycentric aesthetics can counter the binary of Western and “Other” (Clammer 2015, 15).

Universalist discourse, where significance of cultural difference is minimized, can be equally harmful. Bhabha maintains that it is challenging and even impossible for cultures to coexist in the same space (Rutherford 1990, 209). To presume that all cultures have underlying universalist similarities confines the ways in which cultural practice influences our understanding of the world. In a postcolonial setting, universalist discourse may excuse the influence of Western hegemony, arguing that the differences of culture were not that great to begin with. On the other hand, Bhabha denies essentialism, the separation of fixed identities, emphasizing that all forms of culture are in an ongoing process of hybridity (Rutherford 1990, 211). Hybridity is the creation of culture impacted by colonialist structures and influences.

In research on El Sistema, Homi Bhabha’s concept “the Third Space” has been employed as conceptual framework (Lui 2012). This concept is not to be understood as a result of two cultures colliding and emerging into a third one, but rather as hybridity in and of itself (Rutherford 1990, 211). The Third Space disturbs the history that formed it, without forming a new sovereign cultural identity. Bhabha created this concept after recognizing the need for language with which to speak of the postcolonial world. Bhabha was influenced by literary theory in creating parallels between linguistic and cultural translation (Rutherford 1990, 210). The Third Space recognizes the existence of cultural difference without attempting to create a new, independent identity. The concept does not bow to pressure of assimilation. It simultaneously offers a way to avoid the strict binary of the colonialist and the colonized, acknowledging the cultural relationship and communication between the two (Rutherford 1990, 212).

Cultural practices, such as music, communicate values and therefore should be critically contextualized (Logan 2016, 59). Postcolonial theory illustrates the relationship the global West has with itself. Bhabha argues that we are yet to come to terms with the contradiction between the ideal of Western democracy and the historical despotic abuse of power (Rutherford 1990, 219). This contradiction is counter-history, disruptive and disturbing to traditional narratives of enlightenment and civilization. The enthusiasm surrounding El Sistema can be interpreted as a sigh of relief for there is something good resulting from Western cultural practices (Bull 2016, 126). It is important to note that applying postcolonial theory is no criticism towards Western Art in and of itself. Art simply should be held against both the context in which it has originally been created and the context in which it is currently presented (Spruce 2017, 3). All other “readings” of art are partial and limited (Said 1993, 14). By Western classical music this study refers to liturgical and secular music composed between 500-1900 in Europe. Although contemporary classical music may embrace other music cultures and instruments, that is not within the scope of my research.

### **2.3 El Sistema**

La Fundacion del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela (The Venezuelan National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras), more commonly known as El Sistema, was founded by Dr. José Antonio Abreu in 1975. Between 1989 and 1994 petroleum economist and conductor Abreu was minister of culture in Venezuela (Baker, 2018, 3). Abreu was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 (Baker, 2018, 3). In 1996, the music education organization El Sistema became a national social service in Venezuela. It operates under the Ministry of Health and Social Development (Lui, 2012, 31-32). El Sistema functions in over 300 music education centers in Venezuela, reaching 1-2% of all citizens between ages 3-30 (Shieh 2015, 2,8).

El Sistema became internationally renowned in 2007 due to the debut of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra in the BBC Proms. SBYO is an elite ensemble (Baker, 2018, 16). The apparent success of El Sistema as a community music programme inspired music educators globally (Lui, 2012, 3) Since 2010 over 1000 replications of El Sistema have been founded in over 55 countries, including Finland (Bull 2015, 122). The system of

operation differs in each project, i.e. in England El Sistema projects are weaved into curriculums in underprivileged schools (Bull 2015, 123).

The main body of work describing the general infrastructure of El Sistema is written by music educator and El Sistema representative Jonathan Govias (Lui, 2012, 39). Govias (2011) argues that the five fundamental albeit unofficial principles of El Sistema are social change, ensembles, frequency, accessibility and connectivity. Though listed in no order of importance, he maintains that the interaction of social change and music is the core of the entire organization. (Govias, 2011, 2) The motto of El Sistema is “tocar y luchar”, to play and to fight (Shieh 2015, 12). The music education programme is framed by El Sistema representatives as a social project that provides rescue from poverty and crime (Logan 2016, 66).

Prioritizing musical ensembles over individualist development of skills is integral to the goal of community development within El Sistema. A new member of El Sistema is assigned into an ensemble from the beginning. Students practice in the núcleos and are encouraged to share their knowledge and skills via peer-to-peer teaching. This practice is at least partially a result of a lack of resources. The emphasis on the communal aspects of music making is interconnected with the aim of creating group identity (Lui 2012, 35). El Sistema requires frequent participation in orchestra or choir training. Because of the policy of accessibility and non-selectivity, effort and commitment are valued over technical musical ability (Govias 2011, 2). Prior musical training is not required in order to participate. Frequent attendance is emphasized in order to provide alternative activity and identity to at-risk youth (Lui 2012, 36). According to El Sistema representatives, the programme targets underprivileged members of society (Lui 2012, 46).

The name El Sistema is rarely directly translated as “The System”, because of the associations it provokes with rigid form or structure. A more fitting translation would be “The Network.” El Sistema is an interconnected web of núcleos, each containing a minimum of a children’s orchestra, a youth orchestra and a professional orchestra (Lui 2012, 38). Connectivity is ensured by enabling free movement inside the network (Govias 2011, 2). Accomplished students are encouraged to move from community orchestras to more advanced regional orchestras (Lui 2012, 46). Each núcleo is autonomous, there is no specific curriculum to adhere to. The intention of the lack of method-

ology is to empower each núcleo to make decisions with their specific local community in mind (Lui 2012, 39).

In this chapter I have articulated the most distinctive characteristics of El Sistema's Venezuelan programme. This is not a comprehensive depiction of all the various structures in which El Sistema has appeared globally. My purpose was to provide a background in order to explore in more detail the ways in which Western classical music is considered as a vehicle for social change within El Sistema.

### **3. Research objective**

In this chapter I will present my research process. First, I will exhibit the research objective and research question. I will then detail the process of a systematical literature review and present my search terms. Finally, I will display research ethics and how they have guided my research process.

#### **3.1 Research question**

In this study I will examine how Western classical music is harnessed for social change in the context of El Sistema. I view the music education project through the lenses of critical pedagogy and postcolonial theory. My research question is:

What are the implications of focusing on Western classical music as a vehicle for social change within the global music education movement El Sistema?

#### **3.2 Systematic literature review**

This is a qualitative theoretical inquiry. No original empirical research has been conducted for this thesis. The method of research applied in this thesis is a systematic literature review. In a systematic literature review, the objective is to define what is currently known about the topic at hand. The existing research is identified, evaluated and subsequently synthesized (Fink 1998, 6). The purpose of this systematical literature review is to guide the reader through the synthesis of results into a fuller understanding of the topic. The synthesis includes finding parallels and contrasts within the essential information provided by existing research (Salminen 2011, 10).

Arlene Fink describes the qualities of a successful systematical literature review as systematic, comprehensive, explicit and reproducible (Fink 1998, 16). All stages of research must be conducted in an orderly, transparent manner. The research question must be as specific as possible and it should be answered by relevant, peer-reviewed sources (Salminen 2011, 15). The research question is to be answered accurately and comprehensively. Every source must be critically reviewed according to a set of standards

crafted by the researcher (Salminen 2011, 17). A systematical literature review must be based on high-quality research for it to have any importance (Fink 1998, 16). The meticulousness and comprehensiveness of the process is in direct correlation with the reliability of the results (Salminen 2011, 17). However, comprehensiveness is frivolous if the sources are not of quality.

For a systematical literature review to be explicit, all citations and references must be made transparent. The reader should always have clarity on whose voice is being heard. This is made clear by referencing the sources accordingly. Attention is paid towards the viewpoint of each source in order to take all possible bias into account. The method of review should be so clear that it is easily reproducible. Research conducted in a subjective, unsystematic manner will lead to unjustifiable conclusions (Fink 1998, 2). However, qualitative research is inevitably subjective in the sense that it always involves interpretation, which influences the results. Clarity and transparency of method provides the possibility for other researchers to evaluate the credibility of the work (Fink 1998, 16).

A systematical literature review is often part of the conceptual framework of larger empirical research (Salminen 2011, 15). What is already known is made clear before embarking on the adventure of searching for new information. The results of a systematical literature review might be conflicting or confusing. This was relevant in my research, for the results contained surprisingly opposing views on the same topics. The review can be used as a tool to identify and communicate the need for new, improved research. A systematical literature review may also develop existing theories further or test new hypothesis (Salminen 2011, 9). This effective method provides a way for quenching curiosity on the results of previous research while evaluating the quality of it.

### **3.3 Research process**

This literature review has been conducted with the seven-step model developed by Arlene Fink. These steps are not necessarily chronological, a research process involves fluctuating between different stages. The first step, developing an accurate yet substantial research question, was a rather tedious process of elimination (Fink 1998, 7). I began with vague notions of researching the relationship between accessibility and Western classical music. I was drawn in by concepts such as cultural capital and social innovation. As I began to delve into the research, it struck me that the global music education movement El Sistema seemed to be a meeting point of these ideas.

After creating the first draft of the research question, I began selecting article database and choosing search terms. I searched literature regarding critical pedagogy and post-colonialism at the library and used databases FINNA, EBSCO and ARSCA to gather peer-reviewed articles on El Sistema. The search terms included “El Sistema AND music education”, “El Sistema AND classical music”, “classical music AND colonialism”.

The fourth step in Fink's model is applying practical screening criteria for the sake of narrowing the research down. In order to exclude unnecessary sources, I searched for peer-reviewed articles published in English or Finnish between 2009-2019. If I were fluent in Spanish, I would have incorporated it into the criteria. Spanish is the main language of Venezuela, the origin country of El Sistema. The fifth step is applying methodological screening in order to find the best quality of research. This thesis is built on the available peer-reviewed research on El Sistema and its relationship with social change. Literature on El Sistema comes across as biased, for most of the authors are involved with El Sistema (Lui, 2012, 30). I incorporated one article (Govias 2011) written by an El Sistema representative to balance out the critical scholarly articles and give perspective from a person inside the movement. All other resources were peer-reviewed articles, masters theses and literature of the field. The sixth step is reviewing the literature that has been gathered through this meticulous screening process. I developed a method of first lightly reading through the text a few times before combing through it with the research question in mind. In this way I sought to avoid augmenting the text to fit my research. The seventh step is synthesizing the results. It is this final step that proved the most interesting and thought-provoking. Searching for similarities and difference was reminiscent of conjuring a rather large puzzle together. I have gathered my results into chapter 4 of this thesis and presented a summary and my conclusions in chapter 5.

### **3.4 Ethical issues**

Good scientific practice is imperative for research to be ethically acceptable. By following the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board for Research Integrity, I have tried to ensure the reliability and credibility of my results. Good scientific practice has been integral to every phase of my research process. Choice of topic is the first ethical decision of the researcher. In this thesis I have aimed to create a highly specific research question for the systematic literature review to be accurate within the limited context of a bachelor's thesis. Good scientific practice entails conducting research and reporting

results with utmost transparency and accuracy. Methods of data-collection and evaluation adhere to scientific criteria and other researchers' work is always given due credit.

During my research I have strived for clarity in referencing the work I reviewed. (TENK 2012, 5). The reliability of a systematic literature review is intrinsically connected with the accuracy of the research question and the amount of research being reviewed (Salminen 2011, 15-16). A literature review becomes systematic when attention is paid specifically towards the shared results of former research (Salminen 2011, 10). The selection and analyzing of sources will always reflect the choices of one individual. I aspired to be as unbiased as possible in the process. This was aided by the scarcity of research on El Sistema, I have taken all the English literature I could access into account. I have tried to remain equally critical towards all sources. Maintaining an objective stance while conducting qualitative research on a subject one is passionate about is admittedly challenging. In accordance with the ideals of critical pedagogy, I have resisted the urge to act as an impartial frontier and stated clearly those opinions which are my own.

The possible biases or financial affiliations of the researcher must be disclosed (TENK 2012, 5). I have nothing to gain financially from writing this thesis. I approach this topic as an individual with a loving relationship towards classical music, in this sense I have an insider's perspective on the topic. However, I have no affiliation to El Sistema and have never taken part in their programme. I grew up in Australia, a land irrevocably altered by colonialism. With Irish, German and British roots, I am part of a lineage that profited from the imperialist pursuits of the British empire. In these ways, I view El Sistema and the position of Western classical music within it from the position of an outsider. I am in many ways reflecting on cultural and societal structures I have no personal experience of.

## 4 Results

In this chapter, I will present my results. I will employ the dual lenses of critical pedagogy and postcolonial theory to interpret the results. First, I will establish the discourse of social change within the music education movement El Sistema. I will then consider the relationship between Western classical music and social change. Finally, I will observe the implications of focusing on Western classical music as a vehicle for social change within El Sistema and how this affects the future of the global music education movement.

### 4.1 El Sistema and social change

*“We have to realize that the moment a child receives an instrument he stops being a poor child.”*

*José Antonio Abreu*

The global music education movement El Sistema is explicitly framed as a project that aims for social change (Shieh 2015, 1). In Venezuela, the organization claims to rescue youth from poverty and criminal life through providing orchestral training (Lui 2012, 46). El Sistema representative Jonathan Govias argues that social change within El Sistema flows from a commitment to music and community, in trials and celebrations, practice and concerts. The causes and effects are inherently intertwined – there is less music without social change and less social change without music (Govias 2011, 2). El Sistema projects pursue musical excellence which results in community development and vice versa (Lui 2012, 34). Conductor Leon Botstein claims that El Sistema is not only unrivaled in its approach to social change, but also manages to achieve it through high artistic quality (Shieh 2015, 2). Researcher John Clammer supports this philosophy by stating that education in arts provides practical tools for poverty alleviation and the support of local communities (Clammer 2015, 12). El Sistema is a community-based programme, but the primary focus is on the development of the individual (Shieh 2015, 8). Social change is reached through “shots” of transformed individuals moving between the núcleos and society, causing a ripple effect as they come in contact with lives around them (Shieh 2015, 8). Through involving such large numbers, El Sistema has begun to produce employment for i.e. teachers, luthiers and social workers, resulting in a powerful economic impact in Venezuela (Shieh 2015, 2).

However, in recent years scholars have become increasingly suspicious of the impact El Sistema has on social change, for there is no independent research to support it (Baker 2018, 11). Geoffrey Baker, a prominent figure of El Sistema related research, argues that the dominant narrative surrounding El Sistema resembles a myth. Social change was not mentioned in the original constitution of El Sistema. According to Baker, the strategic discourse of social change emerged in the mid 1990-s due to the populist political climate of Venezuela. El Sistema functions as a government funded non-governmental organization, which means that the finances flow from the people in political power (Logan 2016, 72). El Sistema now swallows most of the public funding allocated for arts in Venezuela (Fink 2017, 4). Owen Logan argues, that the myth of El Sistema might serve as a veil to obscure the lack of meaningful structural change. The government funded music education programme creates a welcome diversion from complex issues such as rising crime rates and systemic inequality (Logan 2016, 80). El Sistema tends to emphasize its ability to create social change in funding applications, claiming that involvement in orchestral music will inspire ambition and lead to a hard-working new generation. In this way, the discourse of advocating for social change is leveraged for gaining funding and political credibility (Spruce 2017, 2). The public relations office of El Sistema has been successful in creating almost unanimous praise within the media, resulting in accusations of being successful in producing propaganda rather than social change (Logan 2016, 3).

Abreu, the founder of El Sistema, has on multiple occasions stated that physical poverty can be distracted by concentrating on “spiritual richness” (Lui 2012, 37). El Sistema may reinforce the inequality it wishes to address due to an insufficient understanding of poverty. Poverty is a complex global structural issue, not a question of cultural deficiency (Bull 2016, 142). Researcher Eric Shieh argues that framing El Sistema as “rescue” might ultimately restrict the emerging agency of the musicians. For a project aiming for increasingly equal distribution of wealth, El Sistema is curiously unconcerned about overproducing musicians (Shieh 2015, 7). Shieh asserts that involving so many young Venezuelans in musical careers could distract the process of addressing larger social issues. El Sistema is also framed as crime intervention, employing narrative imagery of guns being exchanged for violins (Logan 2016, 66). As the music education organization has grown, so have the crime rates in Venezuela, rendering the claims unsupported by statistics (Logan 2016, 67). Logan argues that these claims are dangerously misrepresenting the problems Venezuela has with organized crime, the elite that profits from it

and the severely corrupted criminal justice system. Violent crime is not a cultural norm that can be replaced by Western classical music. Logan asserts that the promise of social change within El Sistema is based on a dubious belief in meritocracy. The merits of an individual can only be evaluated justly in an equal society (Logan 2016, 63).

As the music education programme has expanded globally, the focus of social change has shifted according to the new contexts (Bull 2016, 120). Bull argues that El Sistema projects in England frame Western classical music as a vehicle for social change within working class communities. However, the word “class” is not used in describing the efforts of the project, it is rather narrated as targeting deprived or underprivileged students (Bull 2016, 124). In Sweden, the aim of El Sistema projects is related to addressing issues of segregation within multicultural communities (Bergman, Lindgren & Sæther 2016, 3). In order to evaluate the efficiency of El Sistema as a project for social change cultural contexts must be taken into consideration (Bull 2016, 142). The absence of statistics of results seem insufficient for a programme working towards self-proclaimed social change (Shieh 2015, 7). Shieh argues, that social change is seemingly simply assumed to happen through involvement in music education (Shieh 2015, 8). It is reasonable to assume that El Sistema provides some social change for some students, while failing to be a general solution to the complex socioeconomic problems of various cultural contexts (Logan 2016, 59).

## **4.2 Western classical music and social change**

*“We have to realize that the moment a child receives an instrument he stops being a poor child.”*

*José Antonio Abreu*

The Western philosophical tendency of reification has caused musical works to be valued over the act of making music (Small 1998, 2). The concept of art was separated from other cultural practice in the seventeenth century (Clammer 2015, 9). Therefore, in the Western world, music is commonly perceived as being the essence of the action. Through reification the correct interpretation of music is understood to lie within the sonic structure of the piece rather than in the imagination of people connecting with it. This creates a situation where the meaning of the piece is set in stone by the often dead composer, regardless of the historical or cultural context in which the piece is ap-

proached (Spruce 2017, 3). When the meaning of music resides in musical works, performance either clarifies or obscures it (Small 1998, 5). Christopher Small asserts that music is primarily an activity that all humans in some way participate in and have a relationship to. Similarly, John Clammer proposes that art above all represents what we do (Clammer 2015, 7). Small introduces the concept of musicking, derived from the verb “to music”. Musicking is the act of participating, in any form or capacity, in a musical performance. This entails listening, rehearsing, performing, dancing, composing or contributing in some other way (Small 1998, 9). In the tradition of Western classical music, musical communication is perceived as a direct flow from the composer into the ears of the listener through the medium of performance (Small 1998, 6). Small argues that viewing performance through the concept of musicking acknowledges the communication flowing from all participants into all directions. The process of reification has paved the way for Western classical music to be framed as a vehicle for social change (Bull 2016, 136).

Western classical music was developed by the two powers of civilization, the church and the monarchs, resulting in lasting cultural implications of elitism (Lui 2012, 50). Small argues that the canon of Western classical work is to this day held in a privileged position in relation to other musics. For example, musicology is commonly understood as the science of Western classical music while other musics are studied as ethnomusicology (Small 1998, 3). Researcher Anna Bull argues that the socioeconomic positions and identities of individuals are connected to their cultural practices and preferences. Class is connected to different forms of capital, not merely economical. In England, Western classical music is primarily consumed by members of the middle- and upper class (Bull 2016, 124). Therefore, it can be considered as a means for the working class to gain cultural capital (Bull 2016, 125). Using a specific category of art in order to solve societal problems is harnessing cultural capital (Clammer 2015, 15). Bull maintains that this reinforces and underlines existing socioeconomic differences by reproducing privilege through music education. Education passes economic and moral values on to succeeding generations (Small 1998, 131). Lui asserts that music is a powerful tool to instill values and identity into communities. Because of this reality, framing Western classical music as a vehicle for social change strengthens the hegemony of the cultural practice (Lui 2012, 48).

The global music education movement El Sistema seems to leverage the elitist history of classical music as a vehicle for social change (Shieh 2015, 10) According to Shieh,

El Sistema founder José Antonio Abreu frequently expressed that coming into close proximity of Western European cultural practices awakens the student to resist poverty. Hence focus on a repertoire of Western classical music, the main artistic mediums being symphony orchestras and choirs (Shieh 2015, 8). In El Sistema projects, the symphony orchestra is framed as an ideal of society, where every musician contributes towards creating harmony and beauty (Lui 2012, 54). According to Lui, this commitment to music is portrayed as a symbol of hope. Musicologist Robert Fink states that the symphony orchestra, as a late Victorian innovation, is restrictive and authoritarian by nature. The hierarchical structure limits reciprocal communication (Fink 2017, 3). It is questionable whether the fixed context of a symphony orchestra encourages the students to gain agency in society at large (Shieh 2015, 9). Jonathan Govias admits, that committing to such a degree to the artistic medium might jeopardize the student's access to multifaceted music education (Logan 2016, 63).

Researcher Anna Bull argues, that seeing Western classical music as a vehicle for social change within the global music education movement El Sistema is based on Victorian values. Gaining cultural capital through the influence of Western art is assumed to be morally uplifting to such a degree that social change is inevitable (Bull 2016, 126). According to Bull, a defining characteristic of Victorian values is the investment in a future self. The intricate aesthetic of classical music and the tedious practice that learning an instrument requires promote the values of commitment and prolonged gratification (Logan 2016, 60). The founder of El Sistema has often described Western classical music as a way of advancing nobility (Logan 2016, 72). Bull maintains that this translates as a long-term investment in cultural capital. Through engaging in Western classical music, underprivileged students have an opportunity to resemble their more privileged peers (Bull 2016, 131). El Sistema thus encourages behavioral change rather than structural social change (Bull 2016, 138). In order to be motivated to invest into a future self, an individual must be able to imagine a fair social order in which they benefit from their labor. Faith in the future emerges from the absence of material hardship (Bull 2016, 134). Albeit having the capacity to positively impact individual lives, El Sistema does not provide a strategy to overcome socioeconomical problems at large (Bull 2016, 132).

Employing Western classical music as a vehicle for social change in a Latin American country evokes a concerning resemblance to cultural imperialism (Lui 2012, 49). It is difficult to imagine other musics being transformed into social projects and then framed as redeeming youth from poverty and crime (Logan 2016, 69). Logan maintains that El

Sistema resembles schemes of “civilizing the other”. The repertoire of El Sistema implies that the cultural heritage of the musicians is considered lacking (Bull 2016, 142). The constitution of El Sistema does not disclose the reasons for adopting a Western cultural practice into a Venezuelan education programme. However, ensembles practicing and performing canonic European works have been common in Latin America since the 16th century (Baker 2018, 13). In a postcolonial context, students are vulnerable to learning an artform that possibly eclipses agency (Shieh 2015, 9). The hegemonic position of Western classical music is a powerful cultural force. Shieh argues that because El Sistema lacks engagement with the histories and contexts of Western classical music, the musicians are left unempowered to gain critical literacy. After integrating works from other musics into their repertoire, El Sistema has been accused of luring them into the confines of the Western symphony orchestra (Logan 2016, 63). According to Logan, the approach has been tokenistic. Interacting with multiple musical traditions while recognizing their contexts instead of settling to reproduce Western classical music could free El Sistema from allegations of cultural imperialism (Shieh 2015, 11).

Cultural traditions and systems tend to replicate themselves, unless they are willingly and knowingly disturbed (Shieh 2015, 10). Lui presents El Sistema as a cultural project that mimics the traditional practice of classical music and questions the elitist associations connected to it. Mimicry probes the power dynamics of a post-colonial context, thus affecting social change. (Lui 2012, 55). El Sistema, through the context in which it operates, has the power to provide reimaginings of the Western tradition of classical music (Shieh 2015, 10). The practical methods with which El Sistema questions the tradition is arguably more subtle than radical. Adding a few dance moves or folk instruments to a piece of classical music is not revolutionary. According to Shieh it is nevertheless an oversimplification to dismiss the music education movement as a mere product of cultural imperialism. Shieh indicates that participants of El Sistema often cultivate a vibrant, meaningful relationship with Western classical music. Participants also seek identity, community and skill. These are valuable resources in Venezuela, where socio-economical possibilities are limited (Shieh 2015, 10). However, as Shieh states, participating in El Sistema does not guarantee agency over one’s circumstances or a sense of ownership of classical music. Globalization has accelerated the pace in which forms of art migrate, rotate and return to their origin (Clammer 2015, 10). Clammer insists that because of globalization, practicing cultural traditions in different contexts is unavoidable. There is no use resisting the inevitability of globalization (Shieh

2015, 9). Eric Shieh argues that in this light, students in Venezuela becoming acquainted with a foreign cultural tradition is not futile. Insinuating that the practice of classical music is by nature capable of affecting social change in a postcolonial context fails to take into consideration the exploitative history of the tradition (Logan 2016, 65).

### **4.3 The future of El Sistema**

The field of Western classical music has been sparked with joy by the prospect of it affecting social change. According to conductor Leon Botstein, El Sistema proves the predicted extinction of classical music to be false (Shieh 2015, 2). According to Shieh, El Sistema is providing an example of renegotiating the image of Western classical music. However, there is little evidence that the field of classical music has been remarkably transformed due to the emergence of El Sistema into the public consciousness (Shieh 2015, 10). Robert Fink argues, that rather than representing the global future of Western classical music, El Sistema is haunting the artform with its colonial past (Fink 2017, 3). When using Western classical music as a vehicle for social change, promoting cultural responsibility within social projects is of paramount importance. Only by acknowledging the defects of the cultural practice, healthy social change can be achieved (Clammer 2015, 6). In the case of Western classical music, such defects are i.e. the hierarchies of power, class inequality, ethnic discrimination and the history of Western global exploitation (Shieh 2015, 1-2). The historical and cultural contexts of Western classical music lend a moral weight to the programme (Bull 2016, 139). If these issues are not addressed, El Sistema is in danger of being a reproduction of existing culture. Clammer argues that this would be avoided by engaging with the past through cultivating critical literacy (Clammer 2015, 6). In order to move forward, El Sistema should as an organization face the colonialist assumptions on which it was formed (Shieh 2015, 9). In order to fairly judge the music education programme, attention must be paid not only to the repertoire but also to the manner in which it is performed (Shieh 2015, 9). According to Shieh, advocating for composing as a part of the curriculum would magnify the voices of the participants. Arrangements where elements from folk- and pop music are fused with Western classical music may further separate El Sistema from merely reproducing tradition (Shieh 2015, 10). Freedom in music might result in a less problematic social context (Bull 2016, 143). Ideally, El Sistema would provide commentary on the meanings and implications of Western classical music.

## 5. Summary and discussion

The objective of my research was to consider the implications of focusing on Western classical music as a vehicle for social change within the global music education movement El Sistema. In this chapter I will summarize and discuss the results of my research. I will consider the meaning of results in relation to wider society, music education and the field of Western classical music. Finally, I will present topics for further research and evaluate the reliability of my results.

### 5.1 Summary

Western classical music is considered as a vehicle for social change within the global music education movement El Sistema. Orchestral training is framed as a means of community development, advancing the social mobility of one individual at a time. Scholarly research does not support the claims of El Sistema having an impact on poverty alleviation and crime prevention (Baker 2018, 12). This prompts consideration on whether the repertoire of Western classical music capable of affecting social change. The possible upward social mobility might be unconnected with the repertoire and rather the product of providing activity and investing in children (Bull 2016, 142). Even so, the change El Sistema influences is behavioral rather than socioeconomic. El Sistema undermines its capacity to affect structural social change due to its political and financial relations with the government of Venezuela.

When framing El Sistema through the dual lenses of postcolonialism and critical pedagogy, conceptualizing Western classical music as a neutral good in the pursuit of social change seems concerning. Considering the development of agency and critical literacy introduced to us by Paulo Freire, it is important to evaluate El Sistema as a means to reproduce hegemonic cultural practices (Spruce 2017, 3). It is reasonable to question whether the hierarchical culture of a symphony orchestra advances the emerging agency of the young musicians. Western classical music is considered as cultural capital. The

privileged position of the cultural practice is leveraged as a means for social change. In this way, El Sistema is arguably reinforcing the inequality it wishes to address.

The history and cultural context of Venezuela raises concerns of the imperialist nature of the El Sistema agenda. Cultural traditions reproduce themselves, unless they are consciously interrupted. In a postcolonial context, participants of El Sistema are vulnerable to losing their agency to a hegemonic cultural practice. El Sistema employs a universalist discourse when justifying their choice of repertoire, implying that Western classical music is free from the constraints of history and geography. This connects with the philosophy of reification, where the meaning of music is understood as prescribed by the composer, regardless of cultural contexts.

## **5.2 Discussion**

The global need for social change operates within increasingly complex structural assemblages. Assuming that a specific artform can address a variety of social issues in vastly different cultural contexts around the globe seems like an oversimplification. Claims of alleviating poverty, providing crime intervention, promoting upward social mobility and relieving issues of segregation are all claims made by El Sistema projects, left unsupported by scholarly research. I wonder, whether the decreasing funding towards arts motivates music education projects to make claims of advancing social change. The strategic discourse is employed as a means to gain funding and political relevancy. In recent years, the promotion of classical music is also often legitimized with the positive effects it has on cognitive skills. Supposedly music education will then produce more successful individuals in the workforce (Bull 2016, 142).

Arts education, in and of itself, is valuable. In the field of music education, El Sistema operates as a project that advances accessibility to Western classical music. Owning an instrument, acquiring tuition and having time and energy to practice demands resources, which sets socioeconomic boundaries around the artform. An organization that requires i.e. no prior training creates access to music education for children who are outside those boundaries. The joy of making music grows when it is shared. Providing children with instruments and orchestral training is, from the perspective of a music educator and violinist, a positive phenomenon. Disguising the need for structural societal change by augmenting the outcomes of a music education programme is not. It is of note that

scholars do not question participating in El Sistema bringing moments of musical joy into the lives of thousands of children. However, the irresponsible claims of social change are doing a disservice to the music education movement.

Considering the use of Western classical music as a vehicle for social change has to begin with contemplating the history of the artform. The association to elitism is not surprising for a cultural practice rooted in the church and the monarchs of Europe. Overpowering emphasis on the value of musical works has created a climate in which it is possible to claim that certain repertoire can be harnessed as cultural capital. If music was understood as action rather than as an abstract concept, social change would be understood as a result of people coming together to music. This shift of philosophy would alleviate the weight of repertoire choices. Simultaneously Western classical music would lose its privileged position over other musics.

Cultural practices are strong entities. The music education movement El Sistema seems to underestimate the implications of repertoire choice. If cultural practices are not actively disturbed, they are by default reproducing themselves. For example, works of female composers will not be heard in concert halls unless someone has the will to search for them, blow the dust off the covers and practice. It requires less effort to play the unfortunately more familiar works of male composers. According to Paulo Freire, education should equip students to resist oppression. Learning to verbalize mechanisms of reification and cultural capitalization must be integrated into the educational praxis of Western classical music in order for the artform to renew itself. Music education is not an isolated, neutral function of society. It operates within the confines of geography, history, politics, economy and other systems of differences. Music, albeit immaterial, is not an abstract form of art.

### **5.3 Reliability**

In this thesis I have reviewed research on critical pedagogy and post-colonialism as a lens through which to observe research on El Sistema. I have considered El Sistema as a global music education movement, taking into consideration the expansion from Venezuela to a world-wide phenomenon. My research objective was to evaluate the implications of focusing on Western classical music as a vehicle for social change within the global music education movement El Sistema. The balance between providing adequate context and maintaining a focus on the research question was hard to find. During the

research process I often found myself sidetracked into reading about El Sistema or Western classical music or social change, but not the relationship of the three. This became clear in the phase of editing my results, for I had to remove parts that no longer answered the question. Limiting the language of resources to English and Finnish limited the amount of resources, for research on El Sistema often in Spanish. El Sistema-related research is rather new considering the music education movement was founded in 1975. Adequate amounts of research concerning the crossroads of the three key concepts were found to strengthen the reliability of my research.

An inherent flaw of literature reviews is the phenomenon of texts giving different answers depending on which question it is faced with. The literature I reviewed was not originally written to directly answer my research question. Sifting through large volumes of text while trying to find relevant information is a process of evaluation. In the context of qualitative research, objectivity is difficult to maintain. In this case, identifying possible biases and communicating them to the reader supports the reliability of the research more than feigning objectivity would.

The music education movement El Sistema polarizes opinions. On the one hand, there were the reports conjured by El Sistema representatives such as Govias, containing little criticism. On the other hand, works by researchers such as Baker seem to be voicing quite strong opinions through their choices of words etc. Finding nuance was a challenge in the midst of the research. I have no personal experiences of El Sistema, so I relied entirely on the retellings of others.

Throughout the research process I have attempted to be as systematic as possible. I have avoided plagiarism by meticulously giving credit to the resources. To my best ability, I kept my personal affiliations with Western classical music from affecting the process. I have been honest and critical about the results.

## **5.4 Further research**

The global music education movement El Sistema is a polarizing phenomenon. It seems to hold many of the burning questions of the field of Western classical music. Therefore, I think further research on El Sistema will be created in the future. Creating acces-

sibility to instrumental training and bringing more people in is vital for the livelihood of classical music. Accessibility created by reinforcing inequality will only further reproduce the elitist nature of Western classical music. Accessibility in this context would be understood as breaking more than physical boundaries, for example the socioeconomic, cultural and behavioral ones. What is the social network and economic status needed for a child to begin learning an instrument? Research could steer El Sistema towards a culturally sustainable, socially responsible future. This would require teachers and representatives of El Sistema to listen to research and take it into account.

In my upcoming master's thesis, I plan to continue research on the larger themes that surround El Sistema, but perhaps in a different frame. Further researching the intersections of postcolonialism and Western classical music would provide further insight into the accusations of cultural imperialism. These issues apply in various geographical contexts, i.e. the rise of Western classical music in parts of Asia. Research on the intersections of genuine enthusiasm for the artform and the conceptualization of cultural capital would be insightful.

The concept of Western classical music as a form of cultural capital is yet to be addressed in the average setting of music education. According to Anna Bull, music education is influenced by Victorian values. The concepts of a future self and classical music as work ethic tie in with the functions of cultural capital. Communication of identity through musical preference and practice relate to social mobility. The field of music education could use more research on the socioeconomic readings of music.

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