

# THE NATIONAL SYSTEM OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH ORCHESTRAS OF VENEZUELA

by

JOSÉ ANTONIO ABREU

*In recognition of his untiring work to promote the art of music as a tool for human development, Mr Abreu was awarded UNESCO's International Music Prize in 1993 and the Right Livelihood Award in 2000. The text that follows is José Antonio Abreu's acceptance speech for the 2000 Right Livelihood Award.*

My heart is filled with joy today as I receive the Right Livelihood Award without any merit of my own that would have made me worthy of this renowned honor. I accept it in the name of those distinguished artists and teachers who have accompanied me over 27 years with admirable unselfishness and solidarity while being inspired by the noble ideas of the children and the young people of Latin America. The new musical generation of Latin America is evidence of a continent that has found a splendid model in its young people's orchestras and choirs.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, prominent writer of the continent, as he received the Nobel prize for Literature insisted that his work should be considered as inseparable from the "tempestuous reality" of Latin America. Beyond their legends, the people of Latin America have been able to consolidate a distinctive culture, which is not just formed by an isolated avant-garde. The powerful reality that now emerges is leading the way to a new Latin-American century where the arts are transformed in an irreversible way into a social right of all our people and where the artistic development of the young becomes a social revolution.

The National System of Children and Youth Orchestras of Venezuela forms a network of 125 youth orchestras and 60 children's orchestras, established in all our provinces. The essential objective of this system, embracing 125,000 young people, is not just aiming at artistic expression but is placing itself in the global context of the politics of Participation, Integration, Prevention, Education, and Saving the Young.

An orchestra is much more than a mere artistic structure. For the young, playing music together is a way of deeply interacting with one another, evoking a devotion to excellence, the discipline of working together and the interdependence between sections, voices and instruments. This is the way the orchestral community, through its musical message, approaches the complex equilibrium of multiple, dynamic, and subtle values. This is why the youth and child orchestras and choirs are so valuable as a means of integrating young people into a social life based upon solidarity, as well as being an instrument promoting personal fulfillment. This shows also how useful and important the work of the orchestras is in the formation of character: it stimulates the mind and sense, helping the participant develop his or her intellectual capabilities and powers of expression.

The System puts forward a special program, with a national scope, designed for the many physically and mentally challenged juveniles and children, aiming at treatment and rehabilitation through the use of methods and techniques of modern musical therapy. The System is taking on a great number of abandoned children, which involves concern with their education, rehabilitation, and return to their families.

It also provides further education for the young in a special field, namely the manufac-

JOSÉ ANTONIO ABREU WAS BORN IN VENEZUELA IN 1939. HIS EDUCATION PURSUED TWO TRACKS: HE OBTAINED A PH.D. IN PETROLEUM ECONOMICS IN 1961, AND IN 1964 GRADUATED AS A COMPOSER AND ORGANIST FROM VENEZUELA'S NATIONAL CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC. BY 1969 HE WAS A PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS AND PROFESSOR OF PLANNING AT DIFFERENT UNIVERSITIES, AND WAS ALSO A DEPUTY IN THE VENEZUELAN CONGRESS. IN 1975 HE FOUNDED THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA SIMON BOLIVAR AND THE NATIONAL SYMPHONY YOUTH ORCHESTRA (NSYO) AND IN 1998 HE WAS DESIGNATED UNESCO GOODWILL AMBASSADOR. HIS YOUTH AND CHILDREN'S ORCHESTRA NETWORK, A NATIONWIDE ORGANIZATION OF 102 VENEZUELAN YOUTH ORCHESTRAS AND 55 CHILDREN'S ORCHESTRAS, COMPRISING CLOSE TO 100,000 YOUNG MUSICIANS, IS PART OF THE MUSIC FOR SOCIAL ACTION PROJECT, WHICH USES MUSICAL EDUCATION TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE.



*Dr. Abreu's National System of Children and Youth Orchestras of Venezuela brings Venezuelan youth and their communities together through music. Because the System ideology is considered both spiritual and apolitical, participants from all walks of life develop a unique sense of community and camaraderie.*

turing and repair of musical instruments, aiming at the development of a national network of small businesses manufacturing instruments for national and regional markets.

Through its newly formed program, "Music and Country," the System is making a great effort to ensure that the research, conservation, and practice of Venezuelan music reaches young people and communities. The aim is to strengthen the consciousness of our national, social and historical identity among the new generations. It is the program that organizes seminars, concerts and recitals, directed towards the poor under the slogan "for music – against drugs, violence and crime." The structure and methodology of the system is based upon a style of leadership that is flexible, open, and democratic, and this favors the integration of as many children and juveniles as possible.

The project's importance to society is visible mainly in three spheres: the personal-social sphere, the family sphere, and the community sphere. In the personal-social sphere, the children and

juveniles brought together through music are characterized by their spiritual, moral, intellectual, and emotional development. Being in an orchestra from their early years helps the individual to grow within a healthy group, gaining invaluable intellectual, social and emotional experiences and learning the values of patience, discipline, endurance, the ability to compromise, and the value of one's personal contribution in order to fulfill a collective end.

All of this helps to create a positive self-image, strong self-esteem, and a sense of confidence. There has proven to be a strong, positive relationship between doing well in the regular school and the study of music. In order to get admitted to the musical studies, the children and the juveniles have to do well in regular school, and this demands that they make good use of their time, capabilities, and skills. The children and juveniles participating in the program demonstrate improved attention and communication capabilities, as well as improved understanding of mathematics. This shows how the program creates a sense of being and social solidarity.

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The family sphere is characterized by the unconditional help that the children and young people playing in the orchestras receive from their parents and relatives in order to help them stay in the orchestras, fulfilling the goals that each one has formed according to their own talent and interest. The way the majority of the family members are supporting the children either economically or with emotional encouragement is really impressive. The child, when discovering the joys of practicing a musical instrument and getting an inkling of the possibilities that the orchestra can offer him or her, begins to aspire towards a better economical and social situation for his or her family and relatives. This represents the will to improve the conditions for all, as well as to improve the condition of oneself.

The majority of the children and juveniles belong to the groups that are the most vulnerable and excluded in all of the Venezuelan society. Participating in the orchestral

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movement has made it possible for them to set up new goals, plans, projects, and dreams and, at the same time, it is a way of creating meaning and helping them in their day-to-day struggles for better life-conditions through the variety of opportunities that the orchestral movement is offering them.

In the community sphere, the orchestras reveal themselves as a new kind of cultural area where the interchange of new ideas and perceptions take place. In this way, town squares, theaters, schools, churches, and parks are literally being filled with rapidly increasing number of youth and child orchestras of Venezuela, showing us a new way of social interaction, enlarging the culture of our country. When living with music becomes natural, music ceases to be considered a luxury. If it forms a part of ordinary life, a child can play the violin in his or her humble home or in their father's garage, and many others can participate in recitals and concerts no matter where they live, in a coastal village as well as in a community up in the hills. Material poverty is thus being defeated by spiritual affluence. What's more, the latter can provide the physical condition, the ethical principles, and the emotional and intellectual tools necessary for overcoming the former.

The System is directed by a set of ethical principles, a process in which the student is actively participating, creating, playing, listening, co-operating. As a consequence, the music—and all that it brings with it in relation to personal development, the interaction within the family and the community spirit—is spontaneous and forms a natural part of life. Music is no longer separated from daily life, but is in

fact nourished by and nourishes daily life. Nourished by music, everyday life is transformed into an aesthetic experience, where harmony and beauty is cultivated in different areas such as nature, the school, the city, even in oneself. One learns to see art not just as something that belongs in a museum or in a concert hall, but as something ever present in our surroundings, in the people we meet, and the things we see each day—all this in contrast to and against the violence that is often a dominant part of social, everyday life.

The System performs a preventative function in that it helps young people to stay away from drug abuse, prostitution, alcoholism, indifference, crime, bad company and corruption. The reason is that participating in the orchestral movement is an inexhaustible source of personal development directed toward the fulfillment of both personal and collective goals.

The Venezuelan orchestral phenomenon exposes the false dichotomy between popular and academic music, as it incorporates both in its repertoire when performing the weekly concerts in different villages and cities all over the country. The so-called classical music is now a natural and integrated part of the cultural repertoire of our people, a fact that only confirms its universal qualities as a language. In the same way, our popular music is being enriched by the possibility of symphonic expression, permitting its rhythm and tones to transform into multi-

colored sounds through the rich set of instruments in an orchestra.

The National System of Pre-school, Child and Youth orchestras is contributing toward creating an image of Venezuelan music as a way leading to success, as a professional career with status and social recognition, thus becoming a model and an opportunity for the young people of Venezuela.

Ladies and Gentleman: Spreading youth orchestras is no different from sowing the seeds of nations and peoples, as in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela or in Trinidad-Tobago, Jamaica, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Cuba, Panama, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico, where the development of youth orchestras is seen as a symbol of national integration.

Ladies and Gentlemen: I hereby solemnly declare the intention, within the next few months, to complete the organization and establishment of the Youth and Child Orchestra of the American Continent. The basic structure will be the creation and the inauguration of the symphonic Youth Orchestra of the Americas, consisting of a selection of all different national orchestral systems of all the member states in the organization. This is a commitment essentially based upon a conception that doesn't dichotomize education and culture, but unifies them in one indissoluble spiritual dimension: creating a world where we all can live in dignity and liberty. ¶

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## ***A Portrait of Music Education as Social Action: New England Conservatory's Partnership with José Antonio Abreu's National Children and Youth Orchestra and Choir System in Venezuela***

*For the past 25 years Mark Churchill has served as Dean of Preparatory and Continuing Education at New England Conservatory. During this time he has created numerous music education partnerships and initiatives aimed at bringing music to underserved populations and advocating the central place of music in the education of all young people.*

*This issue of the Journal is focused on how innovative programs in music-in-education are advancing music in changing times. Much has been written about the marvelous efforts José Antonio Abreu has led in Venezuela and South America. As someone who has had numerous opportunities to observe and interact with these programs, in what way do you feel Abreu's orchestra system has come to advance his country's music and education in such a significant way?*

It's difficult to start with the José Antonio Abreu story anywhere in the middle. You have to understand this man in his larger context, and perhaps something about the evolution of how he came to believe in music as a primary tool for social change. Abreu is thoroughly Venezuelan, and South American; he believes in his culture, in the values and integrity of his country, and in its unique ways of thinking. He believes fervently in the artistic capacity of his people. He's a highly educated man with advanced degrees in music and economics; in fact, for a number of years he was an economics professor at the major business university in Caracas. He was also a leading musician, an organist and conductor, as well as a musical commentator. He's held a number of government posts including cabinet level ministerial positions.

Thirty years ago, Abreu saw a situation in Venezuela where classical music, European music, was enjoyed by only a very small section of the elite population. There were two orchestras in Caracas, or maybe just one. They gave very few concerts, which were attended by only the upper levels of society largely for social reasons. The orchestras were comprised mostly of Europeans and some North Americans, but almost no Venezuelans. In fact, there is a very touching story about a Venezuelan cellist who had been to Europe to study and who came back to Venezuela when he was 17 or 18 years old, tried to audition for the national orchestra, and was turned away; it was thought that he was too young to understand Mozart or Beethoven, and besides he was Venezuelan and you had to be European to begin to understand what this music was about and how to play it! Well, he was so discouraged that he sought to pursue another life profession. However, the times were indeed changing. The cellist happened to hear that a man named José Antonio Abreu was starting a youth orchestra, and so

the young man attended the first rehearsal, along with 11 or 12 other musicians in a parking garage! That evening Abreu announced to this handful of young Venezuelan musicians that they were beginning a movement that would change the course of Venezuelan history.

And so they did! And all because Abreu so deeply believed that his countrymen had a right to perform and enjoy and be inspired by what he considered the world's greatest music. It's a wonderful story. The young cellist remains a major leader of the movement to this day. In a year or two this little orchestra had reached the size of a full symphony orchestra and was already traveling throughout Mexico and the Andes countries, establishing a sense of accomplishment and pride among the young musicians of Venezuela. In time, this orchestra grew into the Simon Bolivar Orchestra, which is comprised largely of Venezuelans and is by far the most outstanding orchestra in the country. It was conducted for many years by Eduardo Mata, a world-renowned conductor who toured with the orchestra throughout Europe and the US and made a series of outstanding recordings of music by Latin American composers and others.

### **MUSIC AS A LIBERATING PROCESS**

During the emergence of a youth orchestra movement in Venezuela, Abreu's passionate desire to help his country as a political leader, as an economist, and as a musician all came together in an even more ambitious idea: that the study of orchestral instruments and classical music could be a liberating process for the poorest of Venezuela's citizens. As a result, he began some placement programs sponsored by the government's Social Services Ministry to offer completely free daily music instruction in a number of the poorest neighborhoods in Caracas and the surrounding communities. The effects of these programs

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