

levels. Politicians, the wealthy elite, the impoverished parents of players and families—everybody is there applauding the accomplishments of these young people. One of the striking things about the performances is that they give the leadership, the political and economic leaders of the country, a crystal clear demonstration of the capacity of these dismissed masses of the population to achieve something as complex and monumental as playing a Tchaikovsky or Beethoven or Stravinsky orchestral work. They can hardly imagine doing it themselves, and yet here are these kids who have been written off by society not only accomplishing it, but doing it with a tremendous spirit and joy and skill. Their participation in the system has made them into fully developed human beings who can no longer be ignored.

Ultimately, for me, what the program accomplishes above all is to give a clear demonstration that every human being has the capacity to flourish in the highest sense, given the right support and education and nurture. It's not as though you're starting

with a bunch of kids who'd be fine with or without a music program and simply enhancing who they are. You're starting with kids at the early stages who, even if they were talented, wouldn't have had anything; and besides that, you are extending this incredible opportunity to kids who are incapacitated physically, mentally and emotionally. When you see the special needs students performing, you feel like they are some of the happiest people that you've ever met! Now, whether it's the music itself, their experience in making music, or the environment that's created by music—in other words, the openness, the quality of human communication and connection and feeling that's created by a musical environment—which aspect is most important, I don't know. The fact is that the program proves in profoundly moving ways that every human being has the capacity and the right to flourish. As a result, so many wonderful human relationships are being established in Venezuela; the music is pulling together people of great diversity toward a common view of social progress. ¶



The Youth Orchestra of the Americas (YOA) is a product of the partnership that arose between Mark Churchill, José Antonio Abreu and other like-minded individuals. Churchill became interested in forming an inter-American youth symphony after NEC's Youth Preparatory Orchestra had made several visits to Latin America. Among its many goals, the YOA strives to "use the power of music to facilitate international understanding through youth" and to "provide a vehicle for international recognition and awareness of partnerships between the Americas." Here, the YOA performs in Caracas at the Teatro Teresa Carreño. The orchestra is annually comprised of 110 members from as many as 21 countries throughout the Americas.

HANDS ACROSS THE AMERICAS: EXPERIENCING THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF MUSIC IN VENEZUELA

by

ANDREW STETSON

After nearly two years as an undergraduate at the New England Conservatory, I was well aware of our preparatory school and their frequently touring youth orchestras. I knew they occasionally had college players join the ranks and even attend the tours, but I was uninformed as to how these arrangements were made, and quite frankly the thought of performing with them had never crossed my mind. Then this past March the Youth Philharmonic Orchestra's manager called to ask if I wanted to accompany the orchestra on their tour to Venezuela and Brazil in June. I would be playing first trumpet on both Strauss's *Don Quixote* and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, helping the orchestra increase their numbers and presence.

I said yes almost instantly. I had no plans for the summer and a free trip to South America seemed like a vacation, even if I had to help out a Youth Orchestra along the way. To be honest, like many of my peers I even thought of how this trip might look on my résumé: "Gave performances throughout the world, with concerts in Venezuela and all over Brazil." Anyway, that's what this opportunity was for me at first—a working vacation, my first trip abroad. Nothing more.

I started to sense that the trip would mean a lot more to me during our hour-long bus ride from the airport to our hotel. Traveling through the mountains of Venezuela, one could see only the glow of distant lights covering the mountains. Clustered so thickly together and positioned so randomly, each light was attached to a single shack with skinny pathways traveling to and from each of them. From my vantage point on that bus, it seemed like there were millions of them. It was an astonishing image; it was inconceivable to me how people could survive in such cramped and disorganized conditions.

The next day's rehearsal brought me back to my comfort zone for a while. As we worked through our repertoire, it seemed just as if we were back in the States. But then after lunch we found ourselves on the bus yet again, this time traveling through the countryside by daylight. As we bumped along the windy, unimproved roads, I could now clearly see the vast net of poor shacks spreading across the mountains. I remember thinking how it looked almost exactly like one of those settlements you might see on an infomercial late at night, asking you to send thirty cents a day to provide one child adequate health care. I felt almost greedy for having traveled this far free of charge, on my interesting summer vacation.

But this trip wasn't about my first experience with third world poverty; it was about the power of music to transcend it. When we arrived at the Montalban Musical Training Center just outside of Caracas, we were treated to a concert by the local youth orchestra. Their music flowed effortlessly out of each section, with many of the musicians gazing only at the conductor and never their music—an ease of performance that resulted from rehearsing four hours each day after many hours of school. I was floored. How could a country that suffered such incredible poverty produce such an astonishing musical performance? How could the fine art of classical music, historically serving only the richest



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Brass section members of a Venezuelan youth orchestra performing in concert. As a symbol of national pride, these students wear Venezuela's national colors around their necks every time they perform.

of populations, be served so well by these impoverished children?

A few days later, after many more rehearsals and performances, we ended up back at the Montalban Center. This time we were invited into the classrooms, viewing performances from every aspect of the training center. The first group we saw was a small wind ensemble of students no more than twelve years old. Their performance was nothing short of professional. Again I was amazed, but with one key difference. No longer was I thinking of these Venezuelan children nearly half my age as inexperienced or even as disadvantaged; rather, I was beginning to recognize them as my musical peers.

The next group at the training center was a group of kindergarten-aged children who sang for us. Prior to learning any instrument, every musician in Venezuela starts with training in vocal skills; the concept is that singing provides the basic understanding of theory and the necessary aural skills that enhance and speed the process of learning an instrument. As we walked in the room, the children gave our orchestra a unison "Hola!" and began to sing short songs for us. The classroom was

decorated with paintings of artists and musicians, as well as with photos of prior students who had gone on to achieve musical success. One could almost feel the dreams these young children were beginning to form for their lives. As we exited the room, so did the children, walking past us in single file, one by one. Many of the members of our orchestra had brought along little trinkets to give to the children as gifts. Although unfortunately I had none to give, even so a young boy came up to me with wide eyes. "Gracias," he said, and then completed a "Thank you" in the best English he could muster. We looked at each other and smiled, a perfect, simple bond. We were doing exactly the same thing for each other. If my presence there in his world, my gift of time and music, was important to him, his presence, his gift, was equally so to me, if not more.

The last group we saw that day was the training center's most advanced orchestra performing the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth. Although they were barely able to reach the lengths of the instruments that more often than not were larger than they were, each musician played stunningly. I sat back in my chair in a persistent state of awe. How was it possible that

BUT NONE OF THESE GLOWING REPORTS AND WORDS OF PRAISE COULD QUITE COMPARE TO THE EXPERIENCE OF SEEING THESE REMARKABLE CHILDREN'S FACES, WHICH SHOWED BEYOND A DOUBT THAT POVERTY WAS NOTHING TO THEM AND THAT MUSIC WAS EVERYTHING. THESE FACES, THIS INCREDIBLE MUSIC, WAS THE CONCRETE RESULT OF DR. ABREU'S RADICAL SOCIAL VISION: ONE PERSON CAN CHANGE THE WORLD.

these young people had excelled so rapidly to a level which I, with so many advantages, had struggled to attain?

It was that day that I met the founder of this program, José Antonio Abreu. I knew that Dr. Abreu was a former musician and politician who had seen a need to bring music to all children in his country. I had seen the *60 Minutes* report and read a number of articles describing how this important program had strengthened all of Venezuela. I had even heard that the conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, Sir



The Chorus of the White Hands is famous for its special needs mission and is a remarkable and intensely moving example of social action through music. Chorus participants wear white gloves to symbolize the challenges they face, such as Down's Syndrome, deafness, and mental retardation.

Simon Rattle, had asserted that Venezuela was the future of classical music. But none of these glowing reports and words of praise could quite compare to the experience of seeing these remarkable children's faces, which showed beyond a doubt that poverty was nothing to them and that music was everything. These faces, this incredible music, was the concrete result of Dr. Abreu's radical social vision: one person *can* change the world. As a result, when that day I saw him there outside the training center, I couldn't help but embrace him and continually mutter "Thank you"—I was as excited and appreciative as the kindergarten boy had been earlier in the day! Dr. Abreu looked me straight in the eyes and just nodded towards me with an appreciation I can barely describe. Once again, nothing could have been more clear: our efforts were as one; we were, each of us—world renowned reformer, Venezuelan child, and American Conservatory student—a vital part of this revolutionary movement.

Finally, after a run-out concert and a pair of two 15-hour bus rides, we had arrived at our last day in Venezuela. We were exhausted, but Dr. Abreu met us at our hotel, hoping to share with us one last musical gift—something called the White Hands Chorus. He explained to us how this group, based out of a small town nearly four hours from our hotel, had traveled to

perform for us five days earlier, but due to scheduling problems, late bus trips, and other unplanned traveling issues, they had never been able to meet up with us. In fact, one time they had even spent four hours on a bus in the middle of Caracas just parked, waiting for the call to go on stage. Now here they were at our hotel at the last possible moment. It was just such an honor for them to perform for us.

But in truth we were the ones honored. Called the White Hands Chorus because of their signature white gloves and hand movements, the group consists primarily of deaf members who create their music with beautiful hand motions. Other members are blind or have severe mental retardation. As they entered the hotel's dining area and took their place on some risers, my mind went blank. I didn't know what to expect. I had never seen anything like it before.

Then out of the group a young man came forward to sing a song. He was not only blind, but autistic. After he was introduced and the applause subsided, he began to sing a Latin song, accompanied by a band of instrumentalists seated on the floor. His voice was as pure as any professional could hope for. Then the young man returned to the Chorus, which began to sing a series of some of the most beautiful music I had ever heard or seen. One would never think hand motions could add something so special to a choral performance until one sees nearly fifty deaf musicians, moving their hands with delicate grace and beauty, synchronized almost magically with the music. I could almost feel the sea of hands lifting my spirit. As the Chorus began to sing Ave Maria, I didn't even feel as if I were in that room anymore. It was just myself and the music, alone with nothing else. I could not believe what I was hearing, what I was seeing, and to my surprise I began to cry. I had attended hundreds of concerts in my young career, but never before had music moved me so deeply.

I now understood that all my notions about Venezuela and this trip had not only been narrow but maybe even a bit backwards. While the Venezuelan people were poor in material goods, they were richer than us in a very important way. The entire country was dedicated to supporting music, not just

music for the sake of itself, but music for the sake of humanity. Music not just for the able-bodied, but for anybody.

I couldn't help but think back to my life in the States, or more particularly, to my older brother who had suffered a brain injury when he was young and is as a result unable to walk, speak, or have fine muscle control. Although he'd always had the best possible medical care and support from my family, it is a constant struggle to find social programs that engage him in meaningful ways. For example, my brother's rehabilitation program in high school had him enrolled in a Jazz Combo, but unfortunately he was only allowed to sit and listen and never to actively participate. But now, seeing and hearing this White Hands Chorus, I suddenly felt that my brother would actually be better off in Venezuela, where there was a program that would include him musically and emotionally, and that has proven to help its members become stronger and healthier—where he would not only be immersed in the power of music, but would be encouraged to fully experience it. How was it possible, I wondered, that our nation of riches could not afford what this developing nation finds so common it can almost be taken for granted? I couldn't imagine a world where music was such a force as it is in Venezuela, but a Venezuelan couldn't imagine a world where it wasn't.

Returning home, I found my life had been forever changed. What a shame it was to look at music merely as a business! So many of us practice long and hard, all in the hope of finding a job and attaining financial security, but the remarkable children and youth orchestras of Venezuela teach us how insignificant and even empty this motivation really is. Music can no longer be just a profession to me, nor just an art form, but an incredible power—a power that enables us to raise society to new heights, not simply to please high society. I find I can no longer ignore the world's social ills when I have spent so many years perfecting the powerful tool I need to change them. All I have to do is to share this gift with others, offering myself body and mind, person by person, with the same grace and spirit as the White Hands Chorus. ¶