

# Leadership and Innovation Lessons: *El Sistema- Musicians for the Masses, just Classical!*

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## **The way it used to be:**

In the early 1970s in Venezuela, a life of crime on the streets was a given for youth in the poor districts- "barrios" - of Caracas and other smaller cities across the country. Over 5 million lived in the barrios dotted across the capital populated overwhelmingly by women and children, often the victims of crime perpetuated by their own men and gangsters roaming the districts.

Between palatial buildings in business enclaves fuelled by the emerging oil driven economy, shanty towns littered the city's landscape. Violence was a daily hallmark which went largely unchecked with a corrupt police and inept civil service. The rule of law and civic decency were alien concepts for these largely uneducated and hapless people caught in the fangs of economic deprivation.

Life in the barrios went into a vicious cycle where poverty triggered more violence and jail terms for the youth while education opportunities nose-dived with its attendant ramifications on any prospects for gainful employment. The limited and largely inefficient and unproductive social infrastructures of the Government and then establishments simply did not cope while the plight of the downtrodden grew with dire personal and societal consequences for those entrapped.

As a result, in a climate of entrenched lawlessness within the barrios, there was little that schools could do to drag children and youth across the line to hope and prosperity. The limited and perfunctory vocational training hardly made an impact while youth unemployment kept growing thereby preparing a fertile ground for further unrest and violence within their communities. The resulting social exclusion of the youth within the communities of the poor came at a high cost to the broader social fabric of the country.

In this bleak setting, it was not uncommon to see repeat juvenile offenders from petty crimes to robbery and in some cases, even murder. The desperate situation of the poor youth made them

vulnerable recruits for trafficking in drugs with attendant spin-off crimes such as trading in guns and weapons related offences.

In essence, the situation that then existed was one which ensured permanence of illiteracy and hence perpetual poverty, social exclusion and a gloomy outlook for the poor where prison terms and violence punctuated their lives and those of their families. As a result, there was little or no self-esteem and as David Toynbee famously said, there was a spiritual crisis and not just economic crisis.

While this prevailed in the ghettos, classical music was deemed for the elite and economically privileged. Music training was for the individual whose parents could pay for lessons with admission into the Conservatories based not solely by dint of ability but also connections in the upper classes. The prevailing view was that you needed to 'belong' high up to play the cello or violin and that where you live opened doors of opportunities.

It seemed ironic that the students of the asset rich had the requisite resources and to whom music was 'a nice to have' on their resumes but few if any really devoted the time and energy to classical music. In contrast, the 'asset poor' and 'time rich' children and youth of the barrios who were otherwise starved, would find classical music is both a great healer and door opener to their future.

### **From Poverty to Passion: Harnessing the Music of the Poor**

Traditional models to address poverty and youth issues centred on education and vocational training. These by their very definition called for significant government funding and the creation of new infrastructures, from buildings and facilities through to teachers well equipped in vocational training.

Whatever was done in this area was never going to be enough as demand for vocational training far exceeded the limited places available. To compound matters, the trainers themselves needed to be trained to stay current given the pace of technology changes and demands of prospective employers. If this was the situation in Caracas and its environs, the situation was equally bad if not worse in other cities and towns where the problems of poverty and youth unemployment continued unabated and where vocational training facilities were sparse or non-existent.

Further, with extremely low thresholds of basic school education and lack of requisite role models within peers, parents or extended families within these poor families, the success rate of the social programs left

much to be desired. As a result, these programs often failed to deliver and hence fed the cycle of frustration while lowering morale with little by way of net tangible outcomes- either by way of jobs for the youth or personal transformation to become a better person in a civil society.

Challenging the entrenched supply-side thinking of those days in the mid 1970s, economist and amateur musician Jose Antonio Abreu struck upon the idea of combining social work with classical music orchestras as a way of offering an alternative lifestyle to that of a life of crime on the streets for the poor.

Rather than cramped class rooms for vocational training, he assembled children in open spaces to learn and practice classical music as a group. While classical music was hitherto the exclusive reserve of the wealthy and connected, that which he called classical music by the few for the few, he opened up entire new vistas of opportunity with his vision of music by the masses for the masses.

With profound passion, Abreu made the learning of classical music accessible to the poor where they paid neither fees for their lessons nor needed to own their instrument. Indeed, if they could not commute to the local music centre, arrangements were made for transport and where required for boarding and lodging as long as the individual wanted to learn and play music.

Classical music Abreu reasoned is not just for the elite but for everyone and that through their music he could see the potential for personal inner growth take roots and thereby transform individuals, their families, communities, towns and cities.

Abreu reasoned that a classical music orchestra is first and foremost about togetherness where children and youth learn from each other and thereby begin to respect one another.

Through classical music orchestras, Abreu was convinced that by working together to reach agreement, they would also create something beautiful and uplifting that would help them grow within and thereby propel them on a journey of growth and prosperity, both as individuals and as members of their communities.

### **The makings of a new model:**

As we discussed earlier, social transformation programs for the poor focussed on Vocational Training. With an outer directed program, if lucky, the training would lead to economic freedom and from that

would grow self-confidence and self-esteem. Abreu rejected this approach and eliminated this factor convinced in his view that nurturing self-esteem and bringing out the music in the souls of the poor was what was first required given their abject poverty and living conditions.

Social justice programs for the poor inevitably required government funding and hence with that territory come program administration costs (and significant leakage through corruption!). Abreu while not shying from any assistance that government provides, stayed clear of being a passive recipient and worked on being self-funded through help from the well- to -do and others attracted to his vision and passion for social transformation through classical music.

El Sistema grew largely because of its spontaneity that touched literally the souls of the poor and hence grew as networks from one barrios to another. It became a self-sustaining model that did not need the largesse of Government handouts but would accept their grants without preconditions!

With the traditional models of social transformation programs, there were low levels of volunteers signing up for the vocational training programs. As there was little to show by way of success, these neither attracted the individuals nor support from their peers. Further, the low profile programs were not conducive to attract volunteers from the outside of their local communities.

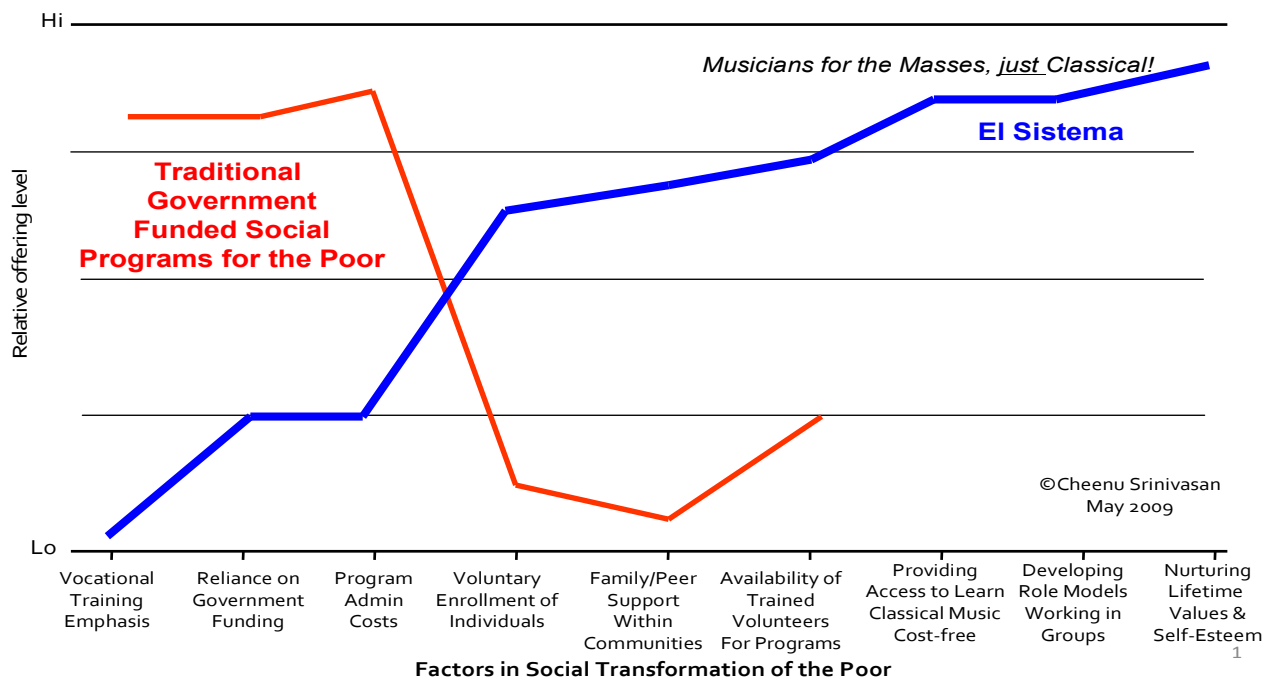
In contrast, El Sistema worked on the magic recruitment triggers that a poor kid summons with his/her peers playing music. There is something to show and share, create and enjoy working together. Hence the children and youth volunteered and joined with no compulsion, were able to pick their instruments of choice and play literally to the heart's content six days a week, attend music retreats and perform in front of large community and city audiences. As a result all these three factors- voluntary enrollment, family/peer support and availability of trained volunteers- were raised over time in contrast to prevailing norms in the mid 1970s.

The stroke of genius of Abreu was to make classical music accessible to the poor and at no cost, including providing instruments of their choice. From the ages of 2-3, children were part of the 'nucleo' with the vast majority continuing on into their teens with practices of 3-4 hours every day that kept them busy learning music (and away from the streets!), listen to their peers and build bonds of friendship. They became co-creators of music and in the process learnt lifetime values

of taking personal responsibility, teamwork, respect, cooperation and above all, develop a work ethic.

From this, came role models from the very young ages, peers to look up to and who in turn became volunteers, teachers and mentors of the children and youth over time. In essence, what was created was not just music, but a model for replication that brings classical orchestral music to the masses.

Hence the tagline in the Strategy Canvas, 'Musicians for the Masses, just Classical!' The strategy resonates in many ways, it is just that music is for all, it builds self-esteem and it is truly classical!



## Reaching out:

One may well ask as to who else did El Sistema reach out and bring into their fold?

To start with, social reformers used to the traditional supply-side planning of training and other related infrastructures began to see the value of El Sistema and became ardent advocates of this novel approach to social transformation of the poor and their communities.

Social transformation groups in more than 26 countries are now adapting El Sistema to bring change in their own communities harnessing the power of classical music orchestras.

Music instrument makers are working with El Sistema to train with instrument cleaning, maintenance and repairs. As a result, youth in poor communities who have not been able to learn music have taken up the important vocation of repairing musical instruments thereby adding to the ecology of growth of El Sistema.

Children and youth with disabilities, including vision impaired and those on the autism spectrum are being taken into the fold of El Sistema.

Riding on the back of the tremendous success of El Sistema which has towed a neutral line in the midst of political upheavals and changes in administration, corporations have joined in sponsorship of the music orchestras and centres as well as donate instruments as an integral and essential component of their Corporate Social Responsibility.

### **El Sistema Today:**

From the humble beginnings of 1975, where a mere handful of 11 students assembled in a makeshift community centre in the suburbs of Caracas, El Sistema today is a globally recognized concept of social transformation through orchestral classical music.

El Sistema has over these years enjoyed the support of all governments, including the current one. El Sistema has steered between opposing political persuasions and has stood firmly as one that all Venezuelans will say is their own with national pride.

Today, it is estimated that there in excess of 350,000 children and youth actively taking part in the programs of El Sistema. There is an expectation that there would be over 500,000 on their programs by the end of 2010!

Presently in Venezuela, there are over 100 youth orchestras, 55 children orchestras, and 270 music centres. Back in 1975, in the whole of Venezuela there were only two classical music orchestras!

Accolades for El Sistema are now coming in from all over the world. Some 26 countries have adopted their model, including the United States of America. The orchestras of El Sistema have performed at prestigious music festivals in Edinburgh (Scotland) and Germany. One

of its leading performers is Gustavo Dudamel, the youngest conductor now of the LA Philharmonic.

Sir Simon Rattle, Director of the Berlin Philharmonic had said that the youth orchestras of El Sistema from where Dudamel came from were performing the most important work in classical music anywhere in the world.

To cap it all, its founder Jose Antonio Abreu was awarded the 2009 TED Prize earlier this year.

(See link [http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/jose\\_abreu\\_on\\_kids\\_transformed\\_by\\_music.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/jose_abreu_on_kids_transformed_by_music.html) )

Abreu has been honoured with an Alternative Nobel Prize and has been named Ambassador of the Peace by UNESCO.

### **Blue Ocean's Teachable Points of Leadership and Innovation**

There are a number of Blue Ocean Strategy leadership and innovation insights we can learn from Abreu's visionary approach. While this for all practical purposes is a retrofit of the constructs of Blue Ocean Strategy to the genius of Abreu's El Sistema, we can learn from such case studies that highlight both leadership and innovation.

#### 1. Redefine the boundaries:

It is clear that Abreu having seen the prevailing programs of social transformation of the poor dared to be different. Rather than work within finite boundaries defined by the past and precedence, he opened up a new front of engaging with the poor through leadership and innovation. Abreu dared to be different!

#### 2. Identify non-customers:

Abreu's focus was first and foremost engagement of the masses. There were far more children and youth who could be gainfully engaged compared to the trouble makers and agitated youth who were the 'customers' of social programs. Clearly Abreu's focus was on 'non-customers' who could be tapped into for the greater good.

#### 3. Leverage untapped assets:

As outlined earlier, Abreu intuitively tapped into the resources of the poor- they were time-rich but asset-poor! Tapping into their very being through music, the children and youth would spend more time in

music and not in the disruptive and vicious cycle of street brawls and crime.

#### 4. Think E-R-R-C!

Innovators, be it by instinct or design, recognise that there is a collapse of distinction where every program is more or less the same. Hence they work on four areas E-R-R-C simultaneously to "Eliminate" that which is of no value and "Reduce" that which is required but only to its bare minimum. They then Raise key factors with emphasis on Create that unleashes new value.

#### 5. Create new Demand for your Products and Services

Competing is what everyone does in what one might say increasingly 'more of the same' markets. The demand for these products and services is largely defined by someone else and we seek to carve out a niche and then gain 'market' share. It is dog-eat-dog, fierce and competitive and often leaves carcasses of dead organizations!

As Abreu did, look at patterns out there, create rather than compete if you can and dare to be different! There is no need to break another person's rice bowl when you can craft one for the masses.

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As a qualified BOS consultant, Cheenu has guided a number of organizations in their value innovation initiatives underpinned by Blue Ocean Strategy. Cheenu has also applied these constructs of value innovation on social and other programs in the development of public policy.

This paper was inspired by a viewing of the TED Program and the gorgeous concert referred to in the paper of what truly is a blue ocean musical revolution. The author acknowledges the encouragement and support of Professor Mauborgne in his BOS endeavours.

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