

# Towards a Pragmatic Approach?

- Evaluation of Musical Outreach Programs

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## Background.

The last decades have shown an increasing interest in musical programs aimed at socially marginalized children and adolescents. Many of these programs have been influenced by El Sistema (ES) from Venezuela. However, there has been different perceptions of ES and the affiliated programs – a discussion with almost religious overtones.

A personal experience of this was a field study in a local program in 2015 which found that the evaluation seemed to disregard the obvious challenges – maybe an example of what ES critic Geoff Baker has called ‘an alignment with advocacy rather than explorative research’?<sup>1</sup> As a response to this Creech et al.<sup>2</sup> in 2016 published an updated review of ‘research, evaluation, and critical debates’ that, although generally positive, tried to incorporate critical voices.

## Aims

With this project I aim to see where the research since then has brought us. Are we getting nearer a more nuanced picture with room for enthusiasm as well as skepticism?

In a wider perspective, the purpose of this project is to encourage communication between the different positions and, not least, between the practitioners and the academics, applying nuanced and reliable evaluations - and obtain results that can form a credible basis for new initiatives.

## Methods

Based on the research question ‘how are the programs described and evaluated?’, the study is incorporating a selection of evaluations and academic literature published within the last five years (2015-2020).

## Results

The studies have found a positive development in the literature, displaying a more nuanced view on the programs. It shows that the almost ‘fundamentalist’ attitudes are being replaced by a more pragmatic approach. It now seems acceptable to both acknowledge aspects such as societal and cultural inclusion, improved musical/social skills and learning abilities - and at the same time point at problematic sides such as high dropout rates and a lack of democratic involvement for the children and their teachers.

<sup>1</sup> Baker, G., Bull, A., & Taylor, M. (2018). Who watches the watchmen? Evaluating evaluations of El Sistema. *British Journal of Music Education*, Vol.35 (3), p.255-269

<sup>2</sup> Creech, A., Fairbanks, S., Gonzalez-Moreno, P., Lorenzino, L., Sandoval, E., & Waitman, G. (2016). El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programmes: A literature review of research, evaluation, and critical debates. *Sistema Global*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).



ES pioneer Gustave Dudamel.. Photo: Rainer Maillard, Bloomberg News



MusikUnik violin class concert, Aarhus, 2015. Author's private photo.