

<b>Institution:</b> Royal Holloway, University of London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 33. Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Transforming public understandings of El Sistema around the world		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2010-2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Geoffrey Baker	Professor of Music	2005- 2020
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b>          Geoffrey Baker's book <i>El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth</i> has changed the international public conversation around the iconic Venezuelan youth orchestra programme. Until 2014, El Sistema was held up as a global model for music education, combining artistic quality with social change. Baker's research challenged this dominant narrative, arguing that the programme's progressive image was a myth and its social impact greatly exaggerated. This research has reshaped media representations and public understandings of the organization, as evidenced by journalistic accounts since 2014. It has contributed to reform of four youth orchestra programmes (in Colombia, Brazil, and Australia) and has impacted on musicians, El Sistema employees, and policy debates internationally. The research has also had a formative influence on two new organizations in the field of music and social action (Agrigento and Social Impact of Making Music).</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b>          El Sistema, the Venezuelan youth orchestra programme, is a global icon of music education. Labelled 'the Venezuelan musical miracle', it has been hailed around the world as a social project that has rescued hundreds of thousands of children from poverty and a life of crime, turning slum dwellers into world-class classical musicians. It has become an international byword for music and social change. <i>Gramophone</i> magazine declared it to be the second most important development in classical music of the new millennium after the invention of the iPod. Conductor Sir Simon Rattle went one better, describing it as 'the most important thing happening in music anywhere in the world' and 'the future of classical music'. On the basis of such claims and endorsements, El Sistema spread rapidly in the 2000s and became a global movement with branches in approximately 55 countries and regional governing bodies such as Sistema Europe and El Sistema USA. Yet it did so before any in-depth research had been undertaken, relying instead on institutional self-publicity and media portrayals.</p> <p>Baker's book <i>El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth</i> is the first substantial critical analysis of this celebrated programme (R1). The research points to major errors and misunderstandings in the public narrative that is circulated by the media, classical music institutions, and music education programmes around the world. Baker's extensive fieldwork uncovered significant problems, at the level both of music education (antiquated approaches to pedagogy and curriculum that have been much criticised elsewhere) and of the dynamics of the institution (a culture of authoritarianism, bullying, exploitation, and gender discrimination, and allegations of sexual abuse and corruption). The book disputes the official narrative concerning the size of the programme, the demographic profile of participants, and hence its inclusiveness. It also explores the career and personality of El Sistema's founder, José Antonio Abreu. A Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Abreu emerges as a much more complex and controversial figure than previously recognised. The research locates the ideological underpinnings of the programme in Abreu's conservative religiosity, his right-wing political leanings, and his background in neoliberal economics, raising major questions over his elevation as a socially progressive figurehead by many institutions, journalists, and supporters in the global North.</p>		

The book questions El Sistema's foundational claims for the symphony orchestra as 'a model for an ideal global society', and challenges the widely reproduced publicity narrative that the programme prioritizes social over musical goals and promotes civic values such as democracy, meritocracy, and teamwork. The programme's slogan 'Social Action through Music', claimed to be its original aim and today the centrepiece of its discourse, is revealed to have emerged as a ploy for greater funding in the 1990s, not from an altruistic founding vision in 1975. In sum, the book argues that El Sistema is far from the revolutionary social programme of contemporary imagination, and represents less the future of classical music than a step backwards towards its past.

Baker's more recent research has followed two principal paths. First, he has uncovered and analysed new sources that shed further light on the issues explored in his book – for example, the private collection of music education scholar Ana Lucía Frega, who authored an unpublished evaluation of El Sistema in 1997 and kept many illuminating but unknown reports and papers from that period (R2). Second, building on his critique of the authoritarian aspects of the Venezuelan model, he has considered ways that collective music education programmes might foster democratic artistic citizenship (R3).

### 3. References to the research

**R1:** Geoffrey Baker, *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. (ISBN: 9780199341559). Triple peer-reviewed by leading university press. Research funded by British Academy Research Development Award, £110,038 (2010–11). In REF2.

**R2:** Geoffrey Baker, with Ana Lucía Frega, "Producing musicians like sausages": New perspectives on the history and historiography of Venezuela's El Sistema,' *Music Education Research* 20 (2018), 502-516. DOI: 10.1080/14613808.2018.1433151. Double peer-reviewed article.

**R3:** Geoffrey Baker, 'Citizens or Subjects? El Sistema in Critical Perspective,' in *Artistic Citizenship: Artistry, Social Responsibility, and Ethical Praxis*, edited by David J. Elliott, Wayne D. Bowman, and Marissa Silverman, 313–38. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. (ISBN 9780199393756) Double peer-reviewed chapter published by leading university press.

**Endorsements of R1:** 'A spirited, systematic deconstruction of what is perhaps the single greatest classical music myth of our time [...] engaged, first-person reporting and sophisticated theoretical framing' (Professor Robert Fink, University of California at Los Angeles)

'A frank, rigorous and considered examination' (Professor Lucy Green, Institute of Education, University College London).

**Academic reviews of R1:** 'The music book of our times' (Dr Randall Everett Allsup, Columbia University, writing in *Music Education Research* 18 (2016), 332–4)

'Geoffrey Baker has done real service to all of us who think about issues of music education, and indeed of education, far beyond the El Sistema project' (Dr Felicity Laurence, Newcastle University, writing in *Music & Letters* 96 (2015), 683–6)

'a bold and insightful exploration... essential reading' (Dr Jonathan Savage, Institute of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, writing at <http://musiceducationuk.com>).

### 4. Details of the impact

**Context and Pathways to Impact.** Public interest in El Sistema partly reflects national and international priorities about challenging inequalities through participatory arts. Baker's research has changed public understandings of El Sistema, as revealed by media debates in the wake of his book. Further beneficiaries include third-sector organisations working in arts education, policy makers, and practitioners (performers and music educators). Pathways to impact include Baker's research-focused blog, presented in English and Spanish; media appearances and articles by Baker; workshops with practitioners and orchestral education programmes; and Baker's work as consultant or embedded researcher with music education programmes.

**Reshaping media narratives and public understandings of El Sistema.** Baker's book challenged and reshaped the established narrative of El Sistema, which had captured the

imagination of major cultural institutions, the media, and the classical music sector around the world. Until 2014, no one had questioned this narrative in the international public domain. Baker's research thus '*raised controversy as few other books regarding music education [...], generating multi-national conversations*' (*Music Education Research*, editorial, January 2016 issue). The level and breadth of debate stimulated by Baker's critical study are evident in the quantity, tone, and duration of the media coverage.

'*The El Sistema lobby is powerful throughout the world and will not take kindly to his thesis,*' noted Jonathan Savage presciently in his review (cited above). Indeed, in contrast to the positive academic reviews, the book was subjected to several prominent and hostile review-essays in the USA, illustrating the seriousness of the challenge that it posed to one of the classical music sector's favourite stories and to institutions and individuals that had invested in it. Sir Nicholas Kenyon, director of the Barbican and former director of the BBC Proms (both of which had hosted El Sistema's Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra), wrote a feature-length article in the *New York Review of Books* attacking the research and defending the programme; classical music critic Mark Swed, local champion of El Sistema graduate Gustavo Dudamel, rejected Baker's research as 'dangerous' in a long article for the *Los Angeles Times*; and classical music critic James Oestreich's extended denunciation of the book (on the grounds that it was 'depressing') appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* culture section. Such was the controversy that two articles on the book appeared in *Private Eye*.

However, such critical responses by El Sistema supporters were just one part of the international media interest (much of it more positive), which included a headline story on BBC Radio 4's *The World Tonight*; a 20-minute segment on BBC Radio 3's *Music Matters*; a live debate on the BBC's World Service; and appearances on Swedish, Swiss, and Dutch public radio. Baker published three articles on his research in *The Guardian* (shared more than 8,000 times on social media), two articles in *Classical Music*, and two in the classical music magazine *VAN*, plus articles more recently in *Scottish Review*, *The Conversation*, and *Trópico Absoluto*. Journalists wrote about the book 19 times in the media across 7 countries, in publications including *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Spectator*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Washington Post*, *O Estado de S. Paulo* (Brazil), *De Volkskrant* (Holland), *Il Foglio* (Italy), and the magazines *Symphony*, *VAN*, *Cicero*, and *Newsweek Venezuela* (E1). In total these publications have a print readership exceeding 9.3 million and a circulation exceeding 3.8 million. Baker's research-related blog posts on El Sistema have received more than 100,000 page views to date (E2). The circulation of Baker's research in major media outlets worldwide and via his own blogs has impacted significantly on public opinion.

Despite the initial controversy, the book has gone on to become a mainstay of the media narrative and has been regularly referenced by journalists across the six years since its publication. After Abreu died in 2018, Baker's research was described at length in the Associated Press obituary that was syndicated to major newspapers around the world, and in ten obituaries in leading UK and US newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The Times*, the *Financial Times*, *The Independent*, and *The Washington Post* (E3). In total the publications carrying these obituaries have a print readership exceeding 5.6 million and a circulation exceeding 2 million. Baker was subsequently interviewed on German TV (ZDF) and Radio 3's *Music Matters* and in the Swiss newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger*. Senior journalists such as Joshua Goodman (Associated Press), Richard Morrison (*The Times*), and Tom Service (BBC/*The Guardian*) have cited Baker's book repeatedly between 2014 and 2020. Morrison raised the book's main points in a major interview with Dudamel in 2016 (E1). Media articles on El Sistema now frequently include a paragraph on the challenge to the dominant narrative offered by the book (e.g. Scott Timberg's article on Dudamel in *Los Angeles Magazine*; E1). In 2016, *The Guardian* (print readership 898,000; circulation 158,000) described the formerly eulogized El Sistema as '*the controversial music project*', citing Baker's book (E1). The world-renowned Venezuelan concert pianist and Amnesty International honorary consul Gabriela Montero has repeatedly cited Baker's book in media interviews, such as a 2016 interview in *The Times* (print readership 1,049,000; circulation 404,155). Here she stated that Baker's account of '*corruption, nepotism, bullying, mismanagement and sexual abuse in El Sistema*' was '*all true. For years I've been hearing the same things as Baker puts in the book. El Sistema is a well-groomed and well-paid propaganda machine*' (E4). Baker's research – such as his 2018 journal article on El

Sistema (R2), and his discovery that Abreu did not hold a PhD as had long been claimed in official sources – has been the subject of several posts on Norman Lebrecht's *Slipped Disc*, the most-viewed classical music blog in the world (E1). This long-term and continuing exposure reveals permanent impact on media narratives of El Sistema.

**Contributing to reform of youth orchestra programmes inspired by El Sistema.** Numerous leaders and employees of El Sistema-inspired programmes around the world have contacted Baker privately to share their experiences and concerns and to seek advice, having found in his writings a unique space for critical thinking on El Sistema. In an article by music education researcher Lawrence Scripp validating Baker's research, the former El Sistema violinist Luigi Mazzocchi, now concertmaster of the Pennsylvania Ballet, explained how reading the book had transformed his understanding of his own training: *'I was in shock by reading this book because it points out many problems or many things that most don't know about El Sistema that happened behind the scenes. ... I thought those things were normal [because] I believed the El Sistema propaganda.'* Describing El Sistema as *'deeply flawed'*, Mazzocchi now advocates publicly for the programme's total reform in order to *'develop a learning organization truly consistent with democratic principles'* (E5).

One programme that has engaged in such reform is the Network of Music Schools of Medellín, Colombia. While undertaking fieldwork within the Network in 2017-18, Baker collaborated extensively with the programme on the theme of artistic citizenship, culminating in two workshops that derived from his publication on this topic (R3). As a result, the programme incorporated artistic citizenship as an official strategic priority in 2018. It also offered Baker a formal position as consultant on artistic citizenship, but since he already held a full-time academic post and therefore had to decline, the Network hired a local researcher specifically to lead on this issue (E6).

Baker's research has shaped other orchestral education programmes originally inspired by El Sistema. The musical director of Núcleos Estaduais de Orquestras Juvenis e Infantis da Bahia (NEOJIBA), Brazil, wrote: *'the management team of NEOJIBA read your book in November 2014, and in December, we presented, chapter by chapter, your findings and critical comments to our pedagogical team and to all members of the main orchestra, in order to foster discussion. Some strategic decisions we have been taking since then had influence from the book, and from these internal discussions'* (E7). These strategic decisions included: creating a psychosocial support team; producing annual reports on the social profile of beneficiaries; increasing diversity of musical practice; enabling students to take decisions about repertoire and activities; and creating a more comprehensive but also flexible curriculum (E7). After reading the book, the director of Symphony for Life (Australia) consulted Baker repeatedly about how to avoid the pitfalls of the El Sistema model and develop a more beneficial alternative, and offered him a place on its advisory board. The director of Orquestras nas Escolas (Brazil) flew to Salvador for a personal meeting with Baker to discuss his research, which she stated as having changed her perspective on her work. She invited Baker to give a keynote speech in Rio de Janeiro and collaborate with the programme; these plans have been postponed due to Covid-19.

Baker's research has also informed policy debate on the provision of music education. It was cited by a Scottish Member of Parliament, Alex Johnstone, who argued that plans for a Sistema-inspired orchestra in Dundee should be halted while its claims were investigated (E8). Baker also wrote a report on El Sistema for New Zealand's Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage, to inform future funding decisions on the country's El Sistema-inspired programme.

**Shaping new organisations in the field of music and social action.** Baker's research on the drawbacks of El Sistema's model of music education and his interest in exploring alternatives has had a formative influence on the creation and focus of two third-sector organisations for arts education. The idea for the Scottish music charity Agrigento emerged after its founder and chair, Maria Prew, read Baker's book and then met the author. Prew stated: *'Baker's book El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth has played a central role in shaping Agrigento's vision. Our aims as an organisation [...] stem directly from Baker's book. Our funding priorities and criteria have been determined through working with him, and his research led us to the exciting, cutting-edge projects that we now fund'* (E9). Baker was appointed as Director of Research at



Agrigento, which currently funds six projects working across seven countries (Australia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Nicaragua, USA and UK). Projects were selected on the basis of recognising problems identified in Baker's research as significant in the field (such as limited inclusivity or student voice, or a dearth of specialised teacher training or social curricula) and proposing to test concrete solutions and/or produce tools that might in future be implemented more widely to benefit the sector.

Director of Belgium-based SIMM (Social Impact of Making Music), Lukas Pairon, wrote: *'Reading El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth had a major impact on me and led me to imagine the creation of SIMM as an international platform for critical dialogue on musical social work.'* He highlighted how many practitioners around the world have *'read Baker's work and were inspired by its critical evaluation of certain practices and incited to adopt a less salvationist discourse towards the possible roles of music in social work'* (E10). On Pairon's invitation, Baker became a founding board member of the organisation. SIMM has influenced hundreds of representatives of socially-oriented music organisations at its symposia and seminars since 2015, at which Baker has given two keynotes and an opening address. The widespread influence of Baker's book also led to his appointment to the scientific committee of the French national orchestral programme D mos. His research has thus impacted on many organisations that collectively work with tens of thousands of young people around the world.

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

**E1:** Dossier of 27 media articles about El Sistema and its members, from newspapers and other media outlets in the UK, USA, Brazil and Europe between 2014 and 2020, citing Baker's research.

**E2:** Website usage statistics for [geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com](http://geoffbakermusic.wordpress.com). The statistics for the Spanish version [tocarypensar.com](http://tocarypensar.com) are no longer available as the website closed in 2017.

**E3:** Eleven obituaries of Jos  Antonio Abreu (March–April 2018), in major UK and US newspapers, which mention Baker's research.

**E4:** Richard Morrison, 'A pianist's lament for Venezuela' (interview with Gabriela Montero), *The Times*, 13/8/16. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/el-sistema-is-a-propaganda-machine-tdhq0bd8s>

**E5:** Lawrence Scripp, 'All that matters is how good it sounds: an interview with the former El Sistema violinist Luigi Mazzocchi', *VAN Magazine*, 21/1/16. <https://van-us.atavist.com/all-that-matters>

**E6:** Job advertisement for consultant on artistic citizenship, Network of Music Schools of Medell n, 16/3/18, <https://tinyurl.com/y9xgfpup>.

**E7:** Emails from Eduardo Torres, Musical Director of N cleos Estaduais de Orquestras Juvenis e Infantis da Bahia (NEOJIBA), 11/2/18, 19/12/20, evidencing impact of Baker's research on NEOJIBA.

**E8:** Andrew Liddle, 'Dundee urged to postpone plans while El Sistema sex abuse allegations are investigated', *The Courier*, 10/12/14. Available at: <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/news/local/dundee/141454/dundee-urged-to-postpone-plans-while-el-sistema-sex-abuse-allegations-are-investigated/>

**E9:** Testimonial from Maria Prew, founder and chair of Agrigento, 26/11/20, evidencing impact of Baker's research on the formation of Agrigento and its current projects.

**E10:** Testimonial from Lukas Pairon, founder and director of Social Impact of Making Music (SIMM), 6/10/20, evidencing impact of Baker's research on the formation and mission of SIMM.