

# THE PILLARS OF SISTEMA

Ngā Pou e Whitu o te Whare Pūoro o Hītema

The Foundation of our Programme





## INTRODUCING TE POU – THE PILLARS OF SISTEMA

Recently I talked with a group of Sistema Whangarei tutors and volunteers.<sup>1</sup> I asked them this question: What is El Sistema? The answers varied but all focused on El Sistema being a music programme. Almost all centred around *what* we do, for example, “it’s a music programme,” “we teach music.” A few referred to *how* we do it, for example, “using stringed instruments,” “teaching through orchestra.” But no one said anything about *why* we what we do.

Answering the question “why” is crucial. To understand why we do what we do is of fundamental importance because it identifies our beliefs, defines our cause, and gives us our purpose. In short, it tells us why our organisation exists. This, in turn, explains why we give our time to help Sistema, and why our benefactors donate money and other resources.

If we look at the descriptions (often in a mission statement) of any of the many Sistema programmes around the world they will all say something like “Sistema is a programme of social development through music.” There will be phrases like “music being a tool for something larger” or reference to goals beyond music such as “creating happy and successful citizens.”

Thus, El Sistema as a social development programme is very different from regular music programmes. It is the nature of this difference that we need to explore. Simply calling our music programme “Sistema” does not, of itself, turn it magically into a social development programme. So how do we do it then? Where is the manual?

In fact, there is no manual. This is a bit paradoxical given that “El Sistema” means “The System.” Jose Antonio Abreu, the original founder of El Sistema in Venezuela, insists there is no “one way”, no prescribed formula. He counsels against mindlessly copying the Venezuelan approach saying each country, each culture, embracing Sistema must adapt it to its own unique social and cultural environment.

This, of course begs the question, what is it that we are adapting to our environment? Although there is no manual (for the good reason stated above) there is a useful guide book written by Tricia Tunstall and Eric Booth<sup>2</sup>. The authors have travelled widely examining Sistema programmes around the world. (Eric even came to Whangarei. Both Fiona and Sam are mentioned in the book and there is a picture taken of Sistema in Otangarei.)

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<sup>1</sup> This article is essentially a transcript of a November 2017 presentation by a Sistema Whangarei – Toi Akorangi trustee.

<sup>2</sup> Tunstall, T., and Booth, E. (2016) [Playing for Their Lives: the Global El Sistema Movement for Social Change Through Music](#). New York: Norton & Co.

Tunstall and Booth thoughtfully describe the variety of Sistema programmes around the world. They distil out the common themes that essentially characterise the Sistema movement and that lead to its all-important beneficial social outcomes. They conclude that it is the *quality of the learning environment* more than the pedagogy (how you teach) or the curriculum (what you teach) that makes the difference in terms of social development, and ultimately in terms of transforming lives.

Here we begin to see where Sistema differs in practice from the usual music programmes. Many of you will be familiar with Trinity College or the ABRSM approach to music education. Progress is determined in “Grades”. What is taught in each Grade is carefully prescribed, as is how it will be taught or examined. In the school system, teachers have a prescribed music curriculum they must teach and there are prescribed Unit Standards that must be met by students to gain credits.

But in Sistema programmes, it is the quality of the learning environment that is most important. Tunstall and Booth identify seven key elements that characterise the Sistema learning environment. They describe each of them in considerable detail. (I highly recommend that you read their book.) Here we will introduce each relatively briefly. I hope to show how they characterise and define how radically different the Sistema programme is from traditional music education. But given Sistema’s purpose is social development, this should not be a surprise.

The Sistema Whangarei Toi Akorangi Trust has considered these seven key elements as The Pillars or Te Pou that underpin and support everything we do in our programme. As pillars, each and every one is important but it is only altogether, functioning interdependently, that they achieve their purpose. After all, what happens to a structure when one or more of the pillars that support it are removed?

## 1. Radical Inclusion -Te Whanau Ringa Tuwhera



In many ways this first pillar is the most fundamental and the most challenging of our pou. The challenge of radical inclusiveness is succinctly stated by an El Sistema leader,<sup>3</sup> “Everyone is an asset and everyone belongs; no exceptions.” It is a simple and powerful injunction, even a bit scary when you think about it.

“Everyone is an asset” tells us to look for abilities, not deficits; to see what people can do, not what they cannot. “Everyone belongs” calls us to be positively disposed toward ‘differentness’ rather than being avoidant, or even fearful, of people who are not the same as ourselves. “No exceptions” – Wow!!

Inclusion means Sistema has a commitment to target those who might not otherwise get opportunities. In other words, those at risk for being excluded whether by being poor, in an ethnic minority, having behavioural difficulties, or other special needs.

Exclusion at many levels always accompanies poverty. Research has shown that the effects of poverty are more damaging in “first world” countries, such as New Zealand, where there is a widening gap between the rich and poor than they are in poor countries. Furthermore, there is evidence that working with children affected by poverty in richer countries is more difficult than working with such children in poor countries.

Ethnic minorities face challenges that the majority is often not sensitive to. Our challenge, especially those of us who are members of that ethnic majority, is to change this. Aotearoa New Zealand is a bi-cultural society by virtue of the Treaty of Waitangi. We must find ways to honour the Treaty within the context of Sistema.

Disruptive children typically face exclusion in a variety of settings. Often such exclusion leads to alienation which serves to increase disruptive behaviour. This, in turn, leads to even more exclusion. Our challenge is break this vicious cycle. We do not to label a youngster with (or as) a problem, and then try to modify him or her. Instead we look to modify the learning environment.

As a rule, music education programmes are exclusive rather than inclusive. Most focus on specific genres, the instrumental teachers are instrument-specific, and the ensembles require auditions for the admission of new members. Requisite exams must be passed or performance standards met in order to determine if a student progresses or, in some cases, even stays in the programme!

Sistema turns this on its head. Being inclusive means finding ways to have young musicians at different skill and developmental levels work/play together – neither exclusive auditions nor examinations anywhere to be seen! A great example of how some Sistema programmes around the world have been inclusive of special needs are the White Hands Choirs that include children with disabilities, some even totally deaf. How many music programmes would not see deafness as an excluder!!

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Tunstall and Booth, *ibid*.

Classical music has been a mainstay of Sistema programmes, arguably for very good reasons. However, this should not be to the exclusion of other genres, especially considering classical music is often associated with elitism. Elitism is simply a form of exclusion. So our challenge is to promote the benefits of classical music but without the elitism. It doesn't take much examination of the culture that has grown around classical music in today's world to realise that this is quite a challenge.

In their book, Tunstall and Booth frequently mention the development of habits of mind and heart as being a fundamental goal of Sistema programmes. "With years of practice, young learners in Sistema environments internalize the values of Sistema. The values become more than ideas expressed and embodied by their teachers; they become habits of mind and heart that are alive within each child." Such habits generalise beyond music into the way we approach life's challenges.

## 2. Ensemble Learning – Tira Puoro



Our second pillar is Ensemble Learning. This is at the heart of every Sistema programme; a "first principle" in Sistema teaching. It is important to note that "ensemble" doesn't necessarily mean "orchestra"; it includes smaller ensembles, sectionals, often with players sitting in a circle with a teacher or other leader. Such sessions tends to be participatory with contributions welcomed from the players.

Again, this is in stark contrast to traditional classical music teaching. Those steeped in the traditional approach to classical music education would question whether ensemble learning can lead to high-level instrumental and musical competence. They would likely insist that the only pathway is through many years of solitary instrumental learning in one-to-one lessons and daily private practice – as Leonard Bernstein directs here!



Only, when sufficient mastery has been achieved is playing in an orchestra or other ensemble justified. Sistema turns this on its head. Learners *begin* in ensembles. And while one-to-one lessons do happen in Sistema programmes they are more likely to involve those students who have attained advanced skill levels. It has to be acknowledged that teaching musical excellence in ensemble contexts requires special skills that are unfamiliar, and perhaps even uncomfortable, for non-Sistema music teachers.

Yet, Sistema insists, ensemble learning has both musical and social benefits. The reality for many of the students in Sistema's target group is that home practice is not possible. They may have no personal or physical space in an overcrowded house. They may even move regularly from the home of one caregiver to another. So, for some of our children, the Sistema sessions become their time for practice as well as their time for instruction and guidance. In traditional music educational approaches, of course, such children would be excluded.

Whether or not they practice outside the Sistema session (and it is, of course, desirable that they do), there are musical benefits from ensemble learning such as opportunities to enhance listening skills, to perform routinely before others and to get feedback. It provides a context for co-operative learning which, when well managed, can hugely enhance motivation. This is especially true for the development of intrinsic motivation, in other words, doing something such as learning music because the child wants to as opposed to doing so because someone else wants them to.

Ensemble learning supports the social goals of Sistema when the teaching and learning strategies are deliberately tailored to promote good interpersonal skills, including empathetic and respectful interaction. Modelling becomes an important teaching strategy to the extent that Sistema behaves as a functioning family.

### **3. Peer Learning = Ako tetahi ki tetahi**



Peer-to-peer learning is found consistently in Sistema programmes all around the world. Originally, in Venezuela, it began not as an ideal but rather a necessity – there were not enough teachers. To a large extent that remains a problem for many Sistema programmes struggling with resources. However, what at first seen as a deficit came to be appreciated as an asset.

In Venezuela, students are told from their earliest years: “You are not expected to be a teacher, but you are expected to help your friends.” The goal is a learning environment where everyone learns to get better, and everyone benefits, the helper as much as the helped. Tunstall and Booth quote David Ascanio, a founding member of the original orchestra in Venezuela, “If you know how to play four notes, it is your responsibility to teach your friend who only knows three. And in teaching your friend, you become better prepared to learn a fifth note.”

Mr. Ascanio’s mention of the fifth note refers to one of the benefits of peer learning. There is truth in the old adage that the best way to learn something is to teach it. There is some sound educational psychology here to do with the benefits of deliberate and focused recall in consolidating one’s own learning – but we won’t go into that here!

Again, at this point, many traditional music educators would be expressing alarm at the very idea of peer-to-peer learning in instrumental music. Phrases like “the blind leading the blind” or “it will just compound errors” might be bandied about. This may reflect a mind set that underestimates young people and learning, and the combination of the two.

It is sobering to reflect that a large number of musicians are self-taught – in the case of the guitar that may be the majority! And more guitars are sold world-wide than any other musical instrument. Thanks to the internet and modern technology, the potential for this is greater than it ever was. Some young self-taught musicians achieve quite remarkable levels of virtuosity.

The two greatest virtuoso classical pianists of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Franz Liszt and Fredryk Chopin, were innovators in very different styles of playing. They were both educated to conservatory level yet none of their teachers were pianists!

The conclusion here is not that music teachers are redundant. This is far from the truth. However, we must think non-traditionally about the teachers’ roles in the Sistema context. We need to explore the nature of learning and the learning environment in which peer-to-peer learning can prosper along with the social benefits that can be derived from it.

#### **4. Music as Passion and Expressivity – Ti Ihiihi o te Reo Puoro**



Recently I “discovered” a young pianist named Alexander Malofeev through YouTube and was so impressed that I showed the clip to a couple of friends who are music teachers. Throughout the performance they continuously criticised his playing, his posture, his gestures, you name it, nothing was right. I was outraged. I couldn’t believe how miserable and small-minded they were being. It was as if they had missed the music altogether.

Contrast their reaction on hearing him for the first time with that of Alondra de la Parra, the recently appointed conductor of the Queensland Symphony Orchestra: *“One day I was called by Richard, one of my colleagues at the QSO, to come downstairs to the studio here in Brisbane to listen to this pianist and I thought ‘OK, let’s see who this is,’ but I never expected to find what I found. This 13, 14 year old child sat at the piano and started playing everything in a way that I’ve only seen the great masters perform with such maturity, control of sound, emotion, imagination and solidity that you would never expect from a child that young. We were all mesmerised and I immediately told him would you want to come and play with us and he was so excited. I don’t think he really realises yet how incredible he is.”*



The review of the subsequent concert in *The Australian* (April 24, 2017) concludes: *“Then out comes the kid, Russian pianist Alexander Malofeev, 2014 winner of the International Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians. The publicity says he was born in 2001, but he looks half that age. In true wunderkind tradition, this blond-haired boy – who’s too shy to make eye contact with the audience – sits at the keyboard and turns into a monster as he lays into the famous tolling-of-the-bells opening to Rachmaninov’s Second Piano Concerto. It’s showtime, folks, the pocket-rocket practically lifting himself off the seat as he tears through the concerto with staggering facility. Impressed, entertained, and possibly moved, the audience leapt to its feet at the end. If this is typical of how Alondra de la Parra concerts are going to be, more please.”*

So why did the music teachers react so differently? Why could they see only faults, even where the faults may not even have existed, while at the same time apparently failing to recognise high quality of the music being played? Is it because music teachers can be incorrigibly miserable people? I think not! I suspect they were just being music teachers as they believe their role to be.



*"Before I heard you play it, that used to be my favorite piece."*

Confronted with a young person making music, they automatically assumed a hypercritical mode of thinking. Their role is to correct errant practices and so improve the technical skills of immature musicians. They would insist that it is only after adequate technique has been attained that the budding musician is able to give voice to any expressiveness. Only at that point do they exhort the student to play with more feeling and expressiveness. For some students this comes too late. They have already lost the motivation that comes from passion and given up. Those who persevere often require advanced master classes to encourage passion and expression!

Sistema turns this on its head. Music is never approached as primarily technical but always as something that comes from, and expresses, feeling. It is the passion and expressivity that drives technical improvement as young players want to improve their technical mastery so their performance can better convey what they feel. In other words, it is the emotional investment in the music that becomes a motivator to play as well as they can.

This has significant implications for teaching approaches. It is important to integrate having fun with music and music making. Right from the outset, the youngest musicians need to be exposed to the emotional qualities. Teachers can demonstrate this through their own performances of music. They can explicitly verbalise emotional characteristics: "Do you think this piece is happy or sad", "How can we make this sound happier?" etc.

## **5. Intensity – Te Kaha**



Intensity is characteristic of Sistema programmes. Most often this refers to the immersive quality of El Sistema, the number of hours a week children attend. By making Sistema a day-to-day component of the children's lives, it increases the opportunities to reach them in a more significant way – to help them break free of some of the cycles that hold them back, and so be truly transformative.

In Venezuela El Sistema programmes often meet five days a week, up to four hours at a time. This is possible because school hours in many South American countries leave a large part of the day free. Outside Latin America such a time commitment is more of a challenge. Nevertheless, most programmes that start with fewer hours per week intend to increase these over time. Those that have done so are often surprised by its success.

However, another important dimension of Sistema's time commitment is the continuity of this immersive experience. Because it takes years to change a life trajectory, good Sistema programmes prioritise continuity of the programme from whenever students enter it to right through high school and, in some cases, beyond.

Energy and commitment of teachers and mentors is another aspect of intensity. It takes a high level of dedication to work consistently with children that Sistema programmes target. Teachers with the attitudes of heart and mind developed through embracing these pillars have something very special that adds enormous value to the time they spend with our tamariki.

Intensity of attention and focus characterises Sistema learning environments everywhere. All good learning requires focused attention. Typically Sistema achieves this by modelling on the part of teachers and mentors who demonstrate that attention is desirable, powerful, and not incompatible with fun. Sometimes, especially with younger students, it is explicitly requested with regular reminders. For example, think of the often heard chant, "Are you listening?" with the response, "Yes we are!"

The creative use of play by teachers can turn the dullest of musical tasks into fun. Fun is a powerful way of focusing attention. Provided it is 'fun with a purpose', rather than fun for its own sake, the positive feelings fun can engender create an increased receptivity for learning.

## **6. High Musical Aspiration – Nga Whaingā Teitei**



High musical aspiration involves the pursuit of excellence. Although Sistema has this in common with the most prestigious music schools and conservatories, we find again Sistema turning conventional music education on its head.

Sistema combines high musical aspiration with radical inclusion. Many traditional music educators would assert that these are incompatible. To quote Tunstall and Booth, “Introducing radical inclusion into the realm of artistic achievement represents a challenge to all kinds of received wisdom and high arts industry belief. But the willingness to take on this challenge is at the heart of El Sistema’s distinctive vision.”

High musical aspiration is obviously important for musical achievement. However, it is also hugely important for Sistema’s social mission. In most societies people who are poor and excluded are ground down by personal and social forces that greatly limit their options and, therefore, their aspirations.

The Sistema belief is that children can aspire high in life by learning to aspire high in music. The very same habits of mind and heart that are learned in progressing to higher musical achievement, such as confidence, self-discipline, focus, and cooperative skills, are needed to aspire and achieve high in life. This is not simply woolly or wishful thinking. It reflects the research findings of social scientists.



The Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela (some members of which are pictured here with Jose Antonio Abreu) is living proof that high musical aspiration is achievable within the Sistema programme. The young people in this orchestra have grown within El Sistema. Sir Simon Rattle, the famous English conductor, was once asked if he would name the three best orchestras in the world. He replied that that would be impossible but added that he doesn’t have any difficulty in naming the fourth best orchestra in the world as being the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra.

The orchestra has played to great acclaim in many famous concert halls around the world, including at The Proms in the Royal Albert Hall, London. The story goes that the players were a bit apprehensive when they played Beethoven at their first concert in Bonn, Beethoven’s birthplace, and before the critically demanding German audience. They needn’t have worried. The audience was hugely appreciative and one critic wrote of the concert, “We have just been given lesson in Beethoven by Venezuelan teenagers.”



I lost all respect for my Organ-Grinder when I realized he was not playing but merely turning the handle! That's when I left him...

This cartoon might seem a bit esoteric, especially to those who have never heard of an organ grinder. In the olden days (long before television and the internet) people would be entertained by street music. One example of this was provided by a barrel organ, a mechanical organ that played set tunes much like a music box. The skill required of the player, often referred to as the “organ grinder”, was simply turning a handle – hardly high musical aspiration! Organ grinders often had a trained monkey which might dance to the music and / or hold a tin to collect money from the audience. In reality it was the monkey that drew the audience rather than the ‘musician’.

They say that if a joke has to be explained it completely loses its humour! However, the serious point here is that unless we have high musical aspiration in the programme we cannot expect our young people to have any more respect for themselves as musicians than the monkey has for the organ grinder.

High musical aspiration must not be seen as just an ‘add-on’ to a social programme simply to appease the music enthusiasts. High musical aspiration is an essential component for learning the psychological skills – the habits of heart and mind – that make the programme successful in its social goals.

We feel proudest of the achievements for which we have worked the hardest. New success permits us to view ourselves in a more favourable light. New possibilities emerge as excellence begets excellence. To quote Ron Berger:<sup>4</sup> “Excellence is transformational. Once the student sees what s/he is capable of, that student is never quite the same. There is a new self-image, a new notion of possibility, a new appetite for excellence.”

So, how do we ensure that the student sees that he or she is capable of excellence? We cannot merely claim that high musical aspiration is one of the pillars of Sistema, leave it at that, and expect results. One of the vital keys to change is the expectations of teachers and mentors.

“When we expect certain behaviours of others, we are likely to act in ways that make the expected behaviours more likely to occur.” This is known as the Pygmalion effect, a fascinating psychological phenomenon that was given the name in a 1980’s Harvard

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<sup>4</sup> Berger, R. (2003) An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

University study of the effects of teachers' expectations on pupil achievement. Teachers were given the IQ (intelligence) scores of their pupils at the beginning of the year. At the end of the year the pupils' academic achievement was measured and found to correlate (match) closely with the IQ scores.

Most people would not have found that very remarkable. At least, that is, until it is revealed that the IQ scores were not real, but simply numbers allocated randomly. However, the fact that the teachers had believed they were real meant they acted in ways that produced academic results that conformed to their expectations. The Pygmalion effect has been found over and over again in education and other fields of human influence.

## **7. Family and Community Involvement – Te Porowhita Whanui**



Our seventh and final pillar is family and community involvement. Families and neighbourhoods, as well as the children and young people themselves, are essential to the transformative goals of El Sistema. "It takes a village to raise a child" according to the well-known African proverb. So the active engagement of families and communities is a fundamental principle and essential practice in the El Sistema movement.

An obvious and important element in family and community involvement is the parent concert. Good things happen when parents are included in their children's music activities. Whanau support can be hugely motivational for children's progress. When respected role models show interest a student's success, s/he is more likely to be successful. At the core of this is the self-esteem that comes from accomplishing something that is valued, and the shared pride that comes from the recognition of that accomplishment. It can even raise parents' ambitions for their children as they learn what their children are capable of.



So, when we see our Music Director, Sam, turn to the audience and explain what the children have been learning or encourage audience participation in humorous ways, we know that she is doing something very important.

Also, this is why we often see whanau members sitting observing Sistema training sessions. Sometimes this will include toddlers. In traditional educational settings some teachers would find this disconcerting. But again, the purpose of encouraging this is to provide another opportunity for 'significant others' to gain insight and increased knowledge of the programme that will benefit tamariki. It further embraces Maori kaupapa and Mana whanau.

Another way in which the Sistema programme can engage with the community is to encourage opportunities for our young people to attend concerts by professionals, amateurs, and students. The Northland Sinfonia and Youth Music are obvious examples. The recent attendance by some of our tamariki at a rehearsal by members of the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra was also special, particularly as they had the opportunity to talk with orchestra members.

As our young people become more competent and confident, we can expect them to be giving concerts themselves on all sorts of public occasions. This not only raises the community profile of Sistema but, most importantly, provides for progressive musical goals and the self-esteem derived from publically demonstrating the achievement of those goals. Extending this further, we may find opportunities to collaborate on musical projects with other community groups.

Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that for some families and communities in our target group engagement becomes very challenging. The social and economic dynamics that keep families trapped in poverty and alienation are the very same dynamics that can make them unavailable, sometimes even hostile, to the Sistema programmes engaging their children. In such cases it is our challenge to always maintain an inclusive mind set, even in the face of hostility. In practice, for example, non-attendance might be a symptom of the absence of family support. Therefore, finding creative and effective ways of dealing with absentees becomes very important.

Research on educational improvement has found that, regardless of family income or background, when parents are involved their children are more likely to attend school regularly, achieve higher grades, show improved behaviour and social skills, finish high school and participate in post-secondary education and training. Maori speak of Mana Whanau when tamariki perceive they occupy a central position of importance in their whanau.

Creating opportunities and space for whanau of our tamariki, as well as members of the wider community, to be engaged actively in support roles for Sistema is important. In the spirit of inclusiveness and community involvement we should welcome anyone willing to help in any way. As in any organisation that relies on volunteers, there is often a mismatch between what someone is willing to do and current organisational need. Further, the assistance when provided may not be consistent. These are, of course, challenges. Nevertheless, we should remember that everyone who turns away (or worse, is turned away) is a link to the community that is lost.



The most exciting thing about Sistema is that it is a space where every one of us can learn and develop. Indeed we must if Sistema Whangarei – Toi Akorangi is to achieve its mission of social development through music.