You are listening to Rebecca and Holly, we are the directors of a new society called young musicians for social justice. Young musicians to social justice seeks to bring together and empower young musicians to recognise their potential as agents of social change. And this podcast asked the question, what is the role of music in bringing about social justice? Over the next 10 weeks we are going to be hearing from a number of different speakers, all with unique perspectives on this question. We are both students at the University of Leeds we met over coffee at Hyde Park book club here in Leeds, which if you're a student, you must go to and we bonded over a mutual interest in music on social change. We really hope you enjoyed listening to our conversations as much as we did.

We are aware that some scholarship exists which calls into question the ethics of the El Sistema music programme. We do not condone any form of social injustice. However, we acknowledge that in some cases, the arts both in formal and informal education can be used to further rather than challenge systems of oppression and injustice. This is an important part of the discussion when we speak of the socio political aspects of music. However, we also believe that it is important to accept the reality that multiple conflicting narratives may exist at the same time. And in this case, we would not feel comfortable choosing to disregard one narrative

over another. If you would like to contribute to the discussion on this or any other projects, please get in touch.

Holly Jackson 1:43

So today we are joined by Natalia Luis-Bassa, which is really exciting. I'm really happy to be talking to her today. So Natalia is a dynamic conductor and a passionate advocate for young musicians education, forming partnerships with many institutions like the National Children's orchestra of Great Britain, National Youth Orchestra of Scotland, Royal Conservatory of Scotland, Leeds College of Music, Oasby Music Group and most recently, the Benedetti Foundation, amongst others. She's also a record breaker as the first person to obtain a degree in orchestral conducting in her native country of Venezuela. After completing her postgraduate studies at the Royal College of Music in London, she held the RCM Junior fellowship and opera conducting for two years. Her relationship with the RCM continues to this day as she is a professor of conducting there. Natalia holds a master's degree from the University of Huddersfield where she is a part time lecturer and has been appointed Elgar ambassador, promoting the conducting craft and orchestra playing

for young people has been a highlight of her career, and she has held many successful workshops around the country. Hi, Natalia.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 2:47

Hello, thank you for inviting me to take part.

Holly Jackson 2:50

That's okay. We're very excited to have you. So the question we ask every guest on our podcast is, what song or piece of music got you through lockdown?

Natalia Luis-Bassa 3:01

Wow, let me think, because of the fact of many opera houses giving free broadcast online of operas, for example, the Metropolitan Opera House in New York opened the programmes for people, we have the chance to watch wonderful productions in the Metropolitan Opera House, then, for example, I am very fond of pop music. So whatever was sounding in on the radio, I would listen to it. And I love salsa and Latin American music, although I'm not the best dancer in the world. But mainly, I have to tell you that probably the most I have seen was opera... on the lockdown taking advantage of the open broadcast.

Holly Jackson 3:51

Yeah, those are really good. I remember seeing there were so many open ones during - that it was really exciting. So could you could you tell us a little bit about yourself and your career?

Natalia Luis-Bassa 4:01

Well, I was born in Caracas in the capital of Venezuela. Since since very small I remember my parents telling me or actually my teachers at schools telling my parents that there was a kind of a musical inclination in me. So they advised my parents to protect and support that and actually they did. And you can imagine - they put me into piano. Yeah, I did a bit of piano but I didn't like piano they put me on guitar popular guitar, not classic guitar. So the professor said to me that I had to make my long my nails long. I didn't like it- get out no. Then I did... you can imagine a bit of percussion, a bit of everything and nothing and then a bit later when I was around 12/13 years old, holding off, but there was a moment where the professor said okay, it's about time for you to start looking for orchestral instrument. And at that moment, already the word El Sistema, which by that time was not precisely that - the name, the name changed... the name El Sistema came a little bit... a little bit later. But they were talking about the Venezuelan Youth Orchestra and maestro Antonio Abreu and that he was creating something for youth

orchestras, and many orchestras were being born in different cities in the country. And then it was my mom who did a very good research and told me - Listen, not very far from our house, there is a nucleo, which is where the orchestras gather. And do you want to go there and see what's going on. And she took me there, and I was 15 years old, 14 and a half, 15 years old. And I loved it. And it wasn't until I think seven or eight in the evening when we left the nucleo, because we were doing different things. I didn't have an instrument, but there were different activities on musical workshops, and, you know, anything - rhythmical things, and I was taking part on that. And they were showing us the orchestral instruments, they show me violins, violas, cellos, all of the possible instruments - double bass. But I wanted to play a wind instrument, I was always into a wind instrument, not because I play the recorder is because I wanted from the very, very small age, I wanted to be a wind player. And I fell in love with an instrument that I never knew before. And it was called oboe, and then I said, Okay, that's the one I want. Without knowing if it was a double reed instrument, nothing, how difficult it was - nothing. I loved it.

To make the story shorter. The time went by up to the point that the musical system -the Venezuelan Youth Orchestra, created a university level, and I was already old enough - as you can see, I started quite old,

I started when I was 15. Yeah, so and everything started seriously then meaning music theory all day started, like taking shape in - in my life. And then when I finish, when I... when I have the time and the ability and the level to go to university, I went and I was what 21/22 years old. And I started University there as an orchestral player for performance. Conducting didn't exist at that time.

So I started along with five more friends, we started pushing those two conductors, mainly to - in the director of the university, the head of the university, pushing, can you please create a curriculum? Can you please create a career - a five years career in conducting and we started pushing and pushing and pushing, and they finally sat down and created a curriculum of four years. Four years undergraduate studies in conducting and we started the five or six of us started. Wow, it was, it was amazing, because we could do some practice with the orchestras around the city. So we could go and do a bit of conducting with them, or with pianos. So we were the sort of the guinea pigs. At the beginning, it was like two years of piano and then they said - No, no, we need a bit more. So they have... they added an extra year of piano that I had to do so...it didn't matter but it was wonderful. What happened then, without me realising is that those friends of mine, or those colleagues started giving up and I ended up in 1994. I then ended up being the first and

only person to the diploma in conducting on that year. And since then, since then, I kept... the year after I came to England, and I was accepted at the Royal College of Music and the rest is history. I am here since then, since 1995. I did 25 years. Yeah, last year.

Wow.

Yeah. But since then, many conductors are among them. Gustavo Dudamel. Many, many conductors and very famous ones have came after the... university really started making very good and prepare musicians.

Holly Jackson 9:33
That's so cool. You essentially just birthed an entire generation of Venezuelan conductors all by yourself.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 9:40
(Laughing) I don't think it was me exactly. But I think it was it was the fact that the sistema was growing. The orchestras were growing also in level, so whoever had to stand in front of the orchestra had to have a very good level. Orchestras were starting to realise that the person that was conducting them was not as prepared as they were.

Holly Jackson 10:03

Hmm yeah

Natalia Luis-Bassa 10:05

So it was a kind of a, it's a necessity, they have to be prepared to be in front of the orchestra, as we all conductors need to be. If you want to play to work with the orchestra, you need to be prepared.

Holly Jackson 10:17

So for our listeners who maybe don't know - could you briefly outline what El Sistema is and what the original goal of El Sistema was?

Natalia Luis-Bassa 10:25

From the very beginning of its creation, I think sistema was following the aim that it has nowadays, which was to "rescue" in a way, those children's ... children and adolescent people that were not taking the correct path in their lives. What do I mean with this... many delinquency in Venezuela. And not very safe country. I presume, at that time, Abreu at that time - a very, very human person, watched these and said - Okay, what could be the way for me to, to transform these kids? And they had

a motto actually, the motto was like - give me your weapon and I'll give you an instrument.

Holly Jackson 11:18

Yeah.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 11:18

And that that's the way it started. It was social from the very beginning. And that's the reason why the nucleos most of them were in somehow - I don't want to say deprived areas - because some of them were not deprived, but probably were middle, low-middle class areas where people didn't have instruments or didn't have the facilities. And there is where Jose Antonio Abreu went. I'm going to talk about characters at this moment, because there is where I was formed. He went to different places in Caracas, he chose places where he knew he was going to help. Where - where he saw children were not... after school at two o'clock in the afternoon, were not doing anything but drugs or delinquency or, perhaps , nothing. So what we what can we do to make them do something busy, and he started creating that. So I think for el sistema, the original goal is what it is today is to help to support and to transform. Yes, in a way.

Holly Jackson 12:15

Do you feel that it brings communities together?

Natalia Luis-Bassa 12:34

Oh, yes. Yeah. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And I can tell you from my experience, I was in an orchestra in Caracas in one of the nucleos. And my friend - and my friend, my first flute of the orchestra, the first flute of the orchestra, she was living completely opposite from where I was living. And I had the chance to have a car and I was taking her I was giving her a lift to her house. Well, I was invited to get into her house. I was invited to have dinner with her granny and get to go on saturdays to share with them and like me, many other people. So we were making a kind of a family together. And this is I think, what it is still happening. And yes, it unites, makes communities get more together. I think nowadays, you can see that in... in some other sistema based projects around the world.

Holly Jackson 13:36

Yeah, definitely. Well, we're talking to Veronica soon - who is working in Scotland. I like that idea of sort of music education as a sort of musical family and creating like that idea of having a family outside of your own family. I think is really nice.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 13:51

And that's the way it started. If you see it if we go back to the very beginning in 1976. When it started it was - it was a family I think it the story says that Jose Antonio Abreu in a kind of a garage for I don't know in a space he found in the centre of the capital. He put like 20 stands and 40 chairs thinking that such amount of people was coming...and only six came

Holly Jackson 14:21

Oh no.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 14:22

And those six Holly are still there.

Holly Jackson 14:25

Wow, that's amazing!

Unknown Speaker 14:27

there.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 14:28

And we were looking at each other like what are we going to do now? And they started making chamber music, orchestral like with Abreu conducting them and teaching them and guiding them. And this started like the gremlins - in a good way - growing and growing and look where it is today in the other side of the world. It is today it's unbelievable.

Holly Jackson 14:49

That's really great. You've also mentioned to us that you feel that El Sistema is the reason you are here today. If you could expand a little bit on that.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 14:58

Well when I was at the University. So the career - the course was four years on my last year, I had to go to the province to conduct an orchestra full time.

Holly Jackson 15:10

Yeah.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 15:11

And full time in Venezuela means Mondays to Saturdays. Every day rehearsals, I was rehearsing from Monday to Fridays, six to nine in the evening, and Saturdays from two to six in the afternoon.

Holly Jackson 15:29

Here's me complaining about my two rehearsals a week.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 15:32

Correct, correct. And in this country where we don't rehearse ...but of course, it was a formative thing. It was different. Yeah, it was, it was a completely different thing. And I said, Yes, immediately. So that was my first time ever outside of the capital, and putting in practice what I learned not only in Venezuela, but also here in England, because I was coming to do summer courses. So I, I said, Okay, yes I'm going to do it. And I was sent to the province. And because I did several concerts with them, I had the chance to send videos of my concerts to the Royal College of Music. And that's the way I passed through the first stage of my acceptance at the Royal College of Music to do my postgraduate studies. So it is the sistema. It is it is el sistema who brought me here. Well, I don't think I would have done it if sistema didn't exist, because yeah, how would I have the practice if I didn't have the orchestra?

Holly Jackson 16:29

And that's also like how you sort of got into music more and how you found the oboe and everything anyway.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 16:34

Exactly, exactly. If you see it in a way. I mean, wherever you see it on every way you see it. It was el sistema, who - it was present every time in my life all the time.

Holly Jackson 16:45

Yeah. So in our initial conversation with you, you spoke a bit about how El Sistema's ideology and role has changed over the years in Venezuela, depending on the political situation. Do you think you could go into a bit more depth about this?

Natalia Luis-Bassa 17:02

I think that the ideology of sistema hasn't changed. As I mentioned to you earlier, I think it is the same. The thing is that sistema is not a private organisation, it's an organisation that needs the support of the government. It... whatever the government is in charge whoever the government is in charge - El sistema was asking for the government to - to help. But the years went by and someone else came, um and the

things have changed... things change and that someone else was Hugo Chavez. Hugo Chavez came in 1999. And he came to the, to the scene as a Democrat. But once he got the power into power, he started taking off the mask. And he started showing who really he was. And he - he was a dictator. And he was a person who was very much into... whatever I want to do is whatever it's going to be done. If you are not with me, you are against me. So he started shutting down radio stations, television stations - very... without any reason because I don't want you to be on air anymore. I am closing your your television station. And the year came in 2007. I was already here in England. And the year came when he realised that el sistema was his best flag to show around the world. His "social" between inverted commas... and work in Venezuela. So what he did is to show to the world that actually many people in the world thought that el sistema was created by Hugo Chavez that sistema was created in 2007 when - when the Simon Bolivar orchestra came to the Proms with Gustavo Dudamel, there is where el sistema started shining around the world. And many people thought - Wow, what's going on in Venezuela? And I actually it was my duty for me to say no no no - El Sistema is alive from 1976 - it's 40 odd years old. It doesn't have anything to do with Hugo Chavez. But this man whose name I don't think I will not pronounce anymore. That's what's so unfortunately clever. That took the sistema as his flag to show the world how much he has held the country.

And it was the opposite. He hasn't held the country at all, when he passed away in 2013, then his heir arrived, which is the one that is now is Nicolas Maduro, whose name I'm not going to say anymore, and things got worse. And what happened with el sistema, el sistema is now is.... directed the staff, the principles of the sistema, belong all to the government - have to do something with with the government. And underneath them - there are many people that are still there because they cannot leave the country because they don't have the resources to leave the country. They have to be there and do whatever the government says. Meaning if the government says we need an orchestra to play tomorrow in this stadium, and we want you to play a, b and c, they have to go and play a, b and c, because otherwise the government will not support el sistema anymore.

Holly Jackson 20:22
So it's kind of like the...

Natalia Luis-Bassa 20:24
It's blackmail.

Holly Jackson 20:25

Yeah, well, yeah, it's blackmail. But I'm guessing that like, that's completely sort of taken away the authenticity for a lot of musicians?

Natalia Luis-Bassa 20:34

I would say so. It is, it is. But I am faithful that - that things will change. The thing is that it has been for the last 21 years.

Holly Jackson 20:42

Yeah, well, I guess that you mentioned that the the ideology hasn't changed.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 20:47

No, exactly. It is still there. Yeah, it is still there.

Holly Jackson 20:50

And so we're talking to Veronica, who works in el sistema in Scotland. So I was wondering sort of what your thoughts are for the future of El Sistema across the globe? Potentially?

Natalia Luis-Bassa 21:01

Wow.

Holly Jackson 21:02

Big question. I know hahah.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 21:04

I know - I think is an easy one, it's big but it's easy. It has to be supportive.

Holly Jackson 21:11

Yeah.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 21:11

I, I think it is, is the proof of not only a social positive thing, but it's a completely different way and a good one to learn music and I need to go back again to my beginning, or someone else's beginning with sistema. Before el sistema existed, you had to study your instrument like for 10 years or whatever it took. How long does it take for you to play the cello diploma? I don't know, eight years, nine years?

Holly Jackson 21:48

longer than that, probably.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 21:50

So you have to be prepared 10 years and study instead to apply to probably one of the two orchestras that existed in Venezuela. And they will tell you, sorry, No, you cannot be here because you have to wait for someone to die.

Holly Jackson 22:04
Gosh.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 22:05
And then you might audition to that place. So what did Jose Antonio do? The - completely the opposite. He created the orchestra invited everyone to play. Everyone with age level, not musical level, age level. You come tomorrow afternoon, and you are with us. And some of us couldn't... I started off 15 ....with what am I doing, but I was there. And I was learning rhythms or other things musically talking history of music . So I think it is, is something is a project that needs to be developed everywhere, wherever it's possible. And you can, you can tell it is, it is across the world - the globe. And I think it needs to keep going. It's - it has proved unbelievably good.

Holly Jackson 22:55

Yeah, I think it's really great. Just to hear what you were saying about everyone being included initially, I think it's just... particularly in the UK, and I know Veronica will talk a bit about this, but all the music hubs are dying out. And that kind of opportunity for education is so limited to certain groups of children. And I just really like that ethos of just being like, right, come along, you're all invited, no matter what level, and we're just going to do it.

It's been really great to chat to you just before we finish. I'm just wondering if there's any way our listeners can learn a bit more about el sistema, or you and your music or if there's anything you wanted to promote while we're here.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 23:32
I have been named I don't know if you're aware, Principal guest conductor of the Oxford University orchestra.

Holly Jackson 23:38
Oh my god, that's so exciting.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 23:40

Oh, Holly. I can't believe it. It is very exciting that will mean that I will work with the orchestra every year - one, one term every year.

Holly Jackson 23:48

Yes. That's such a good idea.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 23:51

It is a wonderful idea. And I'm still pinching myself. So answering to your last question is learn more about el sistema... ooo I should have done this research...

Holly Jackson 24:01

Rebecca and I will link some resources below to information on El Sistema and you can also listen to Veronica's podcast. Thank you so much Natalia.

Natalia Luis-Bassa 24:10

My pleasure.

Rebecca Ward 0:57

So today I am joined by Veronica Yuriko. Veronica is from Venezuela and studied violin at El Sistema music programme where she obtained

her Bachelor in music. She held teaching posts in different cities around her country and was invited to deliver teacher training programmes at different conservatoires. She now lives in the UK where she works at Sistema Scotland as an upper string tutor and conductor at the big noise Centre in Raploch. She is currently studying for a master's degree in learning and teaching in the performing arts at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. She has been associated with the National Children's orchestra of Great Britain, as both a tutor and a conductor for many years, and most recently with the Benedetti foundation. Thank you so much for joining us, Veronica.

Verónica Urrego 1:39
Thank you for inviting me.

Rebecca Ward 1:41
So it's great to have you on here and particularly to chat about your work with El Sistema. So when and how did you start to get involved with El Sistema? Well, I started sistema when I was four years old back in Venezuela, as you say I was born and bred in Venezuela. And I started there singing at four years old and I stay on till I was 24 years old when I graduated from the university, an institution that belongs to the sistema

programme. And yes, in that alone - 20 years of being part of a system or a product of the system, if you want to say like that.

Okay, so how's that developed? So in what capacity are you involved with el sistema now?

Well, I actually stopped at 24 because I moved to the UK. If it wasn't because I moved to the UK, I probably would be still teaching in the system in Venezuela, but I moved here. And luckily enough, I found a job in the first ever a nucleo project or centre project of sistema in Europe. And it was founded in Scotland in Stirling in Graploch to be more precise, a community in in the Stirling Council. So I have been teaching in there or working in there with the community from 2010. Until now, well, present current we are still in there.

Hahah still there still going strong. Okay, great. So you describe el sistema as a music programme. And you could also describe it as an orchestra I suppose, or an orchestral programme? What is different about el sistema and what's the basic model the basic vision.

Verónica Urrego 3:30

I'm going to tell you the short version of it, okay, the way sistema works out there the initial idea the original idea is to work in a community or in a community of musical... of music making. So normally, you study musical education, you start privately, you start learning your instrument, but the whole idea of system so start there all the way around. So you start in a group, just for learning your instrument in a group, with your peers with people the same age or not. So there is a variety out there is one of the beauties of El Sistema programme that anyone any age, any background, doesn't matter, you come and learn. And also in a group, I always describe el sistema programme as the idea of the microcosm of a country because the orchestra is the microcosm of a country, everyone is involved. Everyone played an important role an important part for the greater good of your community. There is no competition there is no price at the end there is only a greater good. The final product is for the benefit of everyone. So if I'm telling you sistema is an orchestral programme - yes it is. We based the music making the music learning on group in some orchestral learning.

So we have started the other way you know, join the orchestra is from day one, you join an orchestra and you learn by playing.

Rebecca Ward 5:08

I love that the idea of starting from whatever background starting with people who are, whatever age, whatever ability as well as that, right?

Absolutely, whatever the ability is, and I have to say individual practice is quite boring. So it's better if you are a four year old, a seven year old, and you're, you're in that moment of your life when your social environment is so important to you to start making all these connections that also your music making, or your music learning, is in a group with your friends.

Yeah, how fun, for them.

Verónica Urrego 5:41
It is fun. It is very important, one of the most important social parts of this whole idea.

Rebecca Ward 5:49
Yeah, sure. One thing that does come to mind, and maybe you're able to shed some light on this, if you've got an orchestra of variety of different age levels and ability level once, how does that work in practice? Because I know, some people might say, well, if you've got an amazing,

you know, great a violinist and a beginner, how can you work together in an orchestra?

Verónica Urrego 6:12

And you just struck the right chord in there. I played Beethoven five with only four notes. And then when I play those four notes, I had another arrangement where I could play 20 notes. And after I left those 20, notes, and so on, and so far, so you learn, there are many arrangements of the same piece that you learn every step every level, so nobody's left behind. Yes, you will have great a fantastic virtuosos, whatever you want to call it. But you will also have the beginners and all of them will have a part to play all of them.

Rebecca Ward 6:52

What a fantastic model. I don't know, I have to say, I don't know any other model like that.

Verónica Urrego 6:56

Well, sistema was founded in 1975. So it's quite a long time for a lot and plenty of arrangement to to be done. But that's the way that's the way everyone plays a part. And even if you cannot play 100% of the notes,

you won't be left behind, you won't be sacked off the orchestra. You will be there until you learn.

Rebecca Ward 7:17

So I wonder Are there any particular challenges about the El Sistema programme?

Verónica Urrego 7:23

I'm going to tell you something quite important here. The culture class between el sistema Venezuela and sistema and not only Scotland all over the world is quite important. Because all sistema programmes around the world are inspired by El Sistema Venezuela. In Venezuela - Yes, we are encouarged to play - we are never left behind. But it's quite something that you're told what to do. You need to do exactly what your teacher said. And we have quite strong way to teach in there. But obviously, when you move around the world, not only in here, around the world, you are encountered with this clash with this culture clash. Because you cannot use the same way of teaching that we do in Venezuela, you can not implement that way of teaching in here, in my case in Scotland, so you need to learn how to roll and adapt those programmes or those ways of delivering - eh - in here in my case. So I think one of the main challenges of El Sistema is to implement one way

of teaching that has been almost impossible because there are so many talented and well equipped people that taught us over the years that is impossible to say, okay, sistema is taught this way. No. So you will not have like a recipe to teach in the Venezuelan way there is, so that presents a challenge when you have to present an idea of a unified way of teaching. That's impossible. Right? So that's the main challenge.

Rebecca Ward 9:19
And it does not feed into your own personal development for you? I mentioned before that you're studying yourself towards a master's in teaching and learning has that fed into your own studies?

Verónica Urrego 9:33
Absolutely, completely not only personally and professionally but everywhere everything because I have to adapt my own education background to the weight of teaching in here. I couldn't I couldn't teach in sistema Scotland the way I was taught in Venezuela. No way - first because to begin with the language and obviously the approaches. But is the pays, their rewards, the celebrations are quite different in my country and in here. So yes, I have learned a lot teaching in sistema Scotland and I have changed and broadened most important my

horizons and my ideas of ways of teaching methods and possibility. So it has been an absolute fantastic learning journey for me.

Rebecca Ward 10:27

Great. That's fantastic to hear. Turning now to El Sistema Scotland specifically, can you speak a bit more about the work that el sistema does with the community in Scotland?

Verónica Urrego 10:39

Well, we - we work in challenged communities. Let's work it in that way. So we have four centres around Scotland, the first one in Raploch, the second one in Glasgow, the third one in Aberdeen, and the fourth one in Douglas in Dundee. So these communities are quite, they were quite challenged, but they were picked because they they offered a huge potential to work with the kids in their communities and their schools. And they were very open for us to start going into their core their heart of their work in the heart of the education programme. So this is one of the important things that they work off system as Scotland is...we are we have the full backup of the communities that we are working with.

Rebecca Ward 11:37

And so does that involve essentially, in the same principles that we described earlier? involving musicians whatever age whatever ability and essentially recruiting them to establish an orchestra and do you have different levels of the orchestra? How does that all work? Has it got a more broad scope in terms of how you engage with the community?

Verónica Urrego 11:58

Well, in Sistema Scotland as inspired by sistema, Venezuela, we work from kids from birth, we have baby noise, and we work with them in all the ways it's true! And we work all the way to adulthood. So it doesn't matter if you leave school, you will still be participating in some kind of learning in sistema even after you leave school. So yes, we have various ensembles and it depends of the centre as well. Each centre runs their own programme adapted to whatever they need in their community. For example, in my Centre in Raploch, we have baby noise with toddlers, we have the adult orchestra so there are members of the community - doesn't mean only parents of the kids - any member of the community.

Also, within the school, we have a special needs school we provide music lessons and services for the special needs. We also have all the kids all the way from P four all the way to S five. So we have ensembles for example of Concert Band, which are woodwind, brass, and

percussion. And we have three levels ensembles for them, we also have four levels of string ensembles. So there is a variety of...it is not only classical music, so we have a whole variety of music schemes for them - for them to try.

And because we are not attached or fixed on a curriculum, we are free to try and offer them whatever is in there. Yes, we do have some kind of a line of teaching Yes, obviously, for example, jazz, we have, we have improvisation, we have old conducting. So we have all these kind of skins that offer them - not only the kids but all the others as well around the community whatever they want to try in music.

Rebecca Ward 14:06

They can try it whatever it is.

Verónica Urrego 14:08

Absolutely and yes, and they can try and they can come in once you are sistema, you will always be sistema. So you are welcome to whenever you want to. If you want to take a break and come back that's absolutely fine. We will be very happy to see you back in whatever if you don't want to play the violin because it's boring. And you want to change for a

trumpet. Why not? You're with us, you're still making music and we are very happy to see you.

Rebecca Ward 14:37

I love that.

Verónica Urrego 14:37

It's a lovely programme. It's a lovely programme, you know and you can see me I'm a completely an absolute advocate for that and converted to the sistema idea.

Rebecca Ward 14:49

Yeah, it sounds so brilliant and yeah, what a lovely, what a lovely atmosphere to learn music in etc, etc.

Verónica Urrego 14:55

Indeed.

Rebecca Ward 14:57

I know as a music teacher that often the problem it's not so much the intention of music leaders in wanting to give everyone the opportunity to learn an instrument. But often the problem up and down the country is

actually how to finance that. So I guess I'm wondering whether you're able to shed any light on where el sistema gets its financial backing from and whether it has to sort of meet any targets in that sense.

Verónica Urrego 15:24

El Sistema was started by private funding. At the beginning with somehelp from the Scottish Government, Richard ?, the founder and ? our CEO was very clever, they were very clever into establish, both our funding, private and public funding. And since el sistema Scotland has shown to everyone that has been able to come and evaluate us, we have shown the good impact that the program is making on the community. The government has been very open to support us in all of our centres. So we have very good partnerships with all the councils that we are working with, and with the central government and also with various trust and foundations around the world, actually.

Rebecca Ward 16:27

So I suppose in that sense, that's one of the benefits of it being a global initiative.

Verónica Urrego 16:33

I think so. And also that we have been able to demonstrate with actual facts, that we are making a good impact on the communities that we are working with. So everyone is quite happy to help us to promote the work that we are doing there.

Rebecca Ward 16:50
Right, fantastic. Now, obviously, the question that's driving us is, what role does music play in bringing about social justice? Are you able to elaborate on how el sistema has such a positive and is such a positive force for social change?

Verónica Urrego 17:06
I'm going to tell you, these in the best way - in one of the visions or rule, I don't know precisely how to say it. But it doesn't matter what happened today, good or bad. Tomorrow will be a new day, and you are welcomed with open arms to come and join us again, it doesn't matter we... we are going to deal with the bad things we are going to give you support. Even if we are as teachers, sometimes we struggle as well. But you are welcome tomorrow, as if nothing happened, you know, you will be - you won't be banned from your ensemble you won't be banned from your orchestral musicianship or... No, not at all. So every day will be a new day for you and you will be welcome. So social justice, yes, absolutely.

Because we are not judging you for whatever you are doing Or you're not doing. You are welcome, because you are here. And as long as you are here, you will be making music in whatever shape or form. So this is, this is very important, I think, and this is a good example of social justice.

Rebecca Ward 18:29

Yeah, I love that. I think we've talked before how the music making process that you just described, it demonstrates a formula where anybody involved in our system has the freedom to get something wrong or to change their mind or to to leave the orchestra and come back again, I think what it advocates on like a very small level is that the freedom of opportunity for people. And I think that's what I love about what you just described there is that that, for me that has the power to represent how society should work on a more macro level as well.

Verónica Urrego 19:05

And in one of the evaluations that came from the classical population, it says that - it demonstrated the importance of the bonds created between students and the positive impact on development of positive social groups, peer relationships, and cultural engagement. So I think this is another one that is very good, because you are not only giving them the choice, or the chance to play and learn how to play but also to feel

comfortable and safe in their environment that we are giving you for you to be safe. Sometimes some of these kids, the only thing stable in their life will be school and sistema or Big Noise. So we know how important we are in some of these kids lives - so how important we are offering them consistency in a safe environment. So, yes, social justice here we come.

Rebecca Ward 20:09

Yeah, absolutely he doing what you do really!

Verónica Urrego 20:13

Extensive music making. That's why we are doing and we will continue to do because sistema is here to stay for the long run. That has been one of the visions and ethos of sistema Scotland, we are not here to, to do a project for two or three years. Our main goal is to stay for the long run, to offer and keep a music tuition, willingness, a very safe and social environment for the long run. So since you're a baby, and you're attending our, you know, our baby slash toddler groups all the way to adulthood. So we are here for the long run in I think that consistency of presence - It's important for us.

Rebecca Ward 21:01

Yeah, well, thank you so much for sharing your insights into el sistema and, and a bit about your journey and your background as well. It's been really great to hear you talk about it with such passion and enthusiasm. So

Verónica Urrego 21:12
Oh, you will have it from me from everyone working in sistema, for sure. Because sistema is not a work or a job is a way of life.

Rebecca Ward 21:24
I love that.

So Holly, what did you think was most interesting about your chat with Natalia?

Holly J 21:44
Um, well, obviously, it was really interesting to hear everything Natalia had to say. But I found it particularly interesting to hear about her sort of talking about the relationship between politics and El Sistema and how it sort of changed over the years. And as some listeners may know there has been quite a bit of sort of academic discussion surrounding the ethics of El Sistema. But I thought it was particularly interesting to hear it

from Natalia, specifically relating it to Chavez and how and how that's been seen in the West from a specific way. And I think yeah, it just sort of brings into the discussion, sort of more complex issues of sort of politics and how that can relate to sort of music and social justice. What about you?

Rebecca Ward 22:29

Definitely. I think that's such a good point, I think it is good to raise that question of, you know, sometimes arts can be manipulated for a government agenda. And actually, maybe we don't think about that enough. Maybe we think about the fact that certain genres of music are preferred in a way or thought of is as elite in a way compared to others. And we don't think about how that's connected possibly to how governments have wanted us to think of the arts and think of music. And yeah, I'm really interested in this topic. I think there are a couple of philosophers that I have read up on. And so for example, John Dewey, and he talks about the fact that he passionately believes the art should be independent of government control, because arts should be this way of expressing personal experience, rather than to fit some sort of agenda. And I think, for me, that's when art or music becomes a form of social justice, but it's about self expression and Self Realisation. And I think, I think our two guests this week demonstrate that and they, and it's

one of those things in which experiences and programmes are not clear they they often can be both, you know, fulfilling for one person and unfulfilling for another person. And I think what we've touched upon in this conversation is just how messy that can be sometimes.

Holly J 23:58
I think it was also interesting to hear it from the perspective Veronica, who is working in Scotland and how that's kind of like, completely different, which sort of just highlights how things change from country to country.

Rebecca Ward 24:18
If you enjoyed listening to our conversation, please like rate and subscribe to this podcast. And be sure to give us a follow on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter at YMSJUK Have a great week.

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