

What is the same? What is different?

Article for The Ensemble

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To smile is, from any angle, the response of the soul. Many say that the eyes are the window to a person's deepest feelings. When we play, sing or we strive, we smile, we open our eyes and we enrich our spirit.

Where I come from we wake up very early. There are large queues to get on the bus. It's not even 7 in the morning and you find a captivating chaos. It is the Metro in Caracas and it runs under the great buildings in the Venezuelan capital. Some days, when you step out, the sun shines hard on you. Others, a torrential downpour refreshes El Avila, our mountain. It is the same rain and the same sun that covers our plains, and our most remote towns and cities.

This is the dawn of music; the smiles and the dances of the heart of an orchestra, of a dance, of a struggle. A struggle against poverty and crime. A struggle to achieve integration and the right to give a sense to our lives.

Where I come from we are multicolored birds, a flag with three stripes, yellow trees, dew on orchids, water falls. We are the wind of Barlovento, the celebration of San Pedro in Guatire, the drums of Saint Juan. We are memorable traditions, the warmth of Zulia, the fisherman in the East, the black gold and the coast of the Caribbean.

We are the Frailejon of the Andes, the prickly pear of the desert, the singing in Carora and the celebrations of the flowers in the large plantations. We are also canoes across the great rivers, the songs of the farmer milking the cow, cocoa, rum and sugar cane.

We are cities, slums and tales of the road. We are mothers that strive, large parishes, musical trees with orchestras as leaves and that give values as fruit. We are, also, staircases winding up the "barrio" with buckets of water, the graffiti around the city, squares with pigeons and old street vendors. We are coconut sweets, harp, cuatro and maracas, the Joropo of the plains, the slapping of shoes against the ground and grandma's hugs.

We are an example of character, of striving, of integration and of social change through music. We are responsible for planting orchestras and choirs throughout Venezuela.

Where I come from we are El Sistema. We are that smile that starts with words like learning, discipline and flexibility.

Learning through collective musical education makes us a model of courage and strength; of striving for peace, and for world integration. Our work to prevent poorly channeled leisure, against child pornography, crime, drugs and extreme poverty have made us a model of inspiration for the world.

El Sistema in Venezuela is characterized by the versatility of its structure, the challenge, the discipline, the diversity of its repertoire and works with a high level of technical and interpretive execution. These are the first features that describe our development as a pedagogical model.

For nearly 40 years, each of our nucleos has handled diverse initiation profiles. This has allowed them to maintain the same purpose and the same musical vision of social progress.

Small towns, great cities, villages and the less privileged areas develop their musical initiation in different manners, even though they maintain the same mission, vision, philosophy, sequential repertoire and struggle for excellence.

Leaders, managers, instructors and teachers in each nucleo creatively apply existing music programs and develop new ones, adapting to the changing needs of the communities they work with. This allows them to honor, enrich and further the development of the local cultural traditions of each nucleo.

The pedagogical base works as a spiral model of learning. Teachers teach the student how to teach. Then the student multiplies this knowledge, opening up a range of opportunities through collective musical practice, especially for children and youths from the most vulnerable social levels. They are provided the opportunity to develop one or more musical activities, playing an instrument that will help them overcome any problems related to social integration and enriching their values through the quest for musical excellence.

How do we teach this in a different country? What is the same? What is different? A smile is a smile in the Arctic, in Antarctica, in Asia and even on the Moon. And, fortunately, it will always have the same effect: to fill a child with happiness and dreams.

I have worked in different countries, but one of my greatest experiences was as a volunteer in Children's Home Uummanaq, an institution in Northern Greenland that houses young people that have experienced neglect and difficult life. There I understood that there is no better way to teach collective music practice than by understanding where the students come from. Understanding their daily routine, understanding how snow feels like. Even experimenting to see if the breeze on the sleds is similar, at least a bit, to the wind on my face when I ride the bus that takes me back home in Venezuela.

When you take interest and learn from your community, you study their needs and, also, you teach them about music, you plant a tree. A tree that you must water every day so that it can flourish into great values.

Yes, we all know that we live in a world filled with diverse communities, and geographical spots where hundreds of migrants converge. This means that often we take longer in identifying a starting point or a reference to integrate. Now, just think of the word happiness. Each of these communities alike understands that happiness can be achieved when you give notes that translate into helping others.

Language, time, latitudes, seasons, traditions, policies, beliefs, and geography describe nations. But the art of music as a universal language constructs smiles.

What is different?

Different is the way we make bread, the way we dance and the way we emphasize words.

Different is the point where you are; the physics that describes space, time, latitude and altitude.

Different is that today I see the Avila from my window, and tomorrow a beautiful iceberg.

Different can be many things when you have to teach a philosophy of musical practice anywhere in the world that does not resemble one bit to the city where you were born.

Different is everything that is not the same. Sounds obvious, right?

Different also is nothing, when you know that the work we are striving for has the same meaning.

But being different is something that always depends on where you are looking from. So to teach the philosophy and vision constructed by maestro José Antonio Abreu anywhere in the world is the same... and it's different.

It is the same because we are fighting to change the lives of children, youths, families and teachers. Showing them that they can have a different life, in which they can sleep soundly, dream and wake knowing they have something to fight for... that is the same in any part of the world. But how you teach that through music is just what has to be different.

The learning process depends on the community in which you find yourself; considering their needs, their tastes and even their laws.

No matter if what we fought for is the same or sounds different. Let's fight for the social rescue of children, and let's use the teaching different processes by learning from our community and for our community.

Allow El Sistema in your country to sound like your music or any music. Allow it to smile and show its eyes, hair and skin of any color, in mountains, deserts, valleys or great cities.

Just allow the music to sound among smiles; that the teaching always fills the children with hope. Allow the orchestra or the choir, no matter its country, its language or its traditions, to use any and all resources to become a great family.

I don't want to finish without mentioning what I do whenever I teach in another country. The answer is very simple and it is something I discovered through my experience in El Sistema: I smile and I become another student.