



SHAUGHN AND JOHN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Maestro's career is an ode to joy

DUDAMEL, FROM PAGE 1

The tip of Dudamel's baton dipped. BOOM! BADADA-DOOM! The timpani thundered in the empty auditorium. Then came the slashing string and wind lines, like rain blowing sideways, with which Beethoven conjures maximum chaos and desperation before the bass soloist suddenly breaks through, singing.

When Dudamel conducts an orchestra these days, he feels a ghost at his shoulder. The ghost belongs to his mentor, the Venezuelan conductor and educator José Antonio Abreu, who gave him both his musical training and his philosophy of life, and who had died just a few weeks earlier, in March, at age 78.

So even though these musicians had played the Ninth countless times, and Dudamel was merely fine-tuning, he remembered what Abreu had taught him: Each opportunity to make music is a chance to bring about a better world, and each encounter with beauty is something to be taken seriously. And so, again and again, he signaled the orchestra to stop. "We have to get out of the routine of the music," he said, "and bring the feeling back. We have to believe in the text. *Freude, Freude!*" he sang — Joy, joy! "We have to end by embracing each other!"

When everything comes together like this, when hundreds of people work as one to create something so special, he knows he is right to believe what Maestro Abreu taught him. What can sound naïve and superficial in hard times is actually fundamental. Music can unite the world. The hope of human freedom lives in art. The world will change — he believes this sincerely — if people only listen.

Dudamel is aware of what some people say about him. He tries to tune it out. "People will always criticize," he says. "People will always create stories. If you get inside of that, then you don't live, you don't have a life."

THE FIRST TIME Dudamel stepped onto the conductor's podium, at just 11 or 12, he meant it as a joke. His parents were both musicians. His father, Oscar, played trombone in a salsa band, and his mother, Solange (she went by Sol), gave singing lessons. As a little boy, he would arrange his Fisher-Price figurines in the shape of an orchestra, then put classical LPs on the record player and conduct them.

That first day, though, he was only clowning around. This was in Bar-

quisimeto, Dudamel's hometown, the capital of the northwestern Venezuelan state of Lara. The teacher didn't show up for his orchestra class, so Dudamel got up from his seat in the violin section and pretended to lead the rehearsal. His friends laughed. But then something happened that no one could explain. The mood in the room changed. He asked the class to play a passage, and he found that being up there, directing the music, felt perfectly natural to him.

This class took place in a *núcleo*, a community music center, run by a government-sponsored initiative that offered free training in classical music to children after school. This initiative, which still exists, is known formally as the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela, but no one calls it that. Across Venezuela, and in the hundreds of places around the world where it has inspired similar programs, it is known simply as "the system" — *El Sistema*.

Today, even in the midst of social collapse, *El Sistema* reaches more than 500,000 students, in hundreds of *núcleos* all over the country. It's the most important institution within Venezuelan classical music, if not Venezuelan culture. It has given rise to countless imitators — there are nearly 200 *Sistema*-inspired programs in the United States alone, including the Philharmonic's YOLA — as well as books, documentaries and academic studies.

The genius of the program was how easy it was to spread. Everything was voluntary. Anyone could join. There's a persistent misconception in English-language journalism that *El Sistema* is aimed exclusively at the poor. In fact no young person is turned away. Show up, get an instrument, participate. Anyone who wanted to come to class could come, and anyone who came could eventually teach, and almost anyone who taught could start a *núcleo*. Students who had been in the program for a while would be put to work with younger stu-

quents. Then when they moved from Caracas to new towns or cities, they might think, This could work here, too. It replicated itself.

What Abreu's message consisted of — what sort of social change *El Sistema* was meant to promulgate — was not always precisely clear. His statements tended toward the gnostic: The orchestra is an ideal image of society; music strengthens the spiritual development of the country; students who play in an orchestra develop a different set of values. He was also a canny politician who knew how to frame *El Sistema*'s message to suit the priorities of whatever government happened to be in power.



DAMIÁN DOVARGANES/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Top, conducting is a kind of strange, proactive dance. You move your body, not in response to music, but in anticipation of it. Above, Gustavo Dudamel with the Youth Orchestra Los Angeles.

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More mysterious is the gift of communication. How do you put across your understanding of a musical work to the group of musicians whose performance of it will usher it into existence? Musicians who work with Dudamel tend to say that what sets him apart from other conductors isn't anything grand or obvious; it's an accumulation of small moments. How he speaks to them. How he listens to them.

And then comes the most mysterious attribute of all: the hold over an audience. The power to move. Not everyone gets that, among those to whom the rest is given.

HE DOES NOT like to think about getting older or about the ways in which he has changed. You could say that he has spent his whole career as a kind of accelerated child — he was a prodigy, then a wunderkind, a pupil, a good son, a golden boy — and that life has now taken him to a place where he will have to decide what his adulthood will look like.

Dudamel does not see it that way, however. From his perspective, life is a series of invisibly overlapping moments, and he has lived each one as sincerely as he could. "My path," he says, "this path has been so natural." All his experiences have led him here, to this place where he feels so happy. Why would he draw lines? Every day is new.

He was sitting in his office, an hour or so before the season's final concert. Martin, his 7-year-old son, was encamped behind his desk, playing Minecraft on the iMac. Outside the door, Dudamel's assistant, Ebner Sobalvarro, a young man with a shaved head and rimless glasses, sat at his own desk, greeting the musicians going past with their instrument cases. An oboist was warming up down the hall. A soprano sang scales.

How to deal for such a long time with this amount of beauty? When so much of the world is not, cannot be, beautiful? It made him sad, he said, so sad, to see the suffering in the world, the hunger, the misery in Venezuela. "Very complex and very bad," Dudamel told me. In 2014, amid falling oil prices and violence in the streets, Dudamel and Abreu appeared on television with Maduro, to look at the blueprints for a new concert hall in Barquisimeto. It would be designed by Frank Gehry and named after Dudamel.

El Sistema views music as a source of social change, but depends on the good will of an authoritarian government for its survival; hence perhaps Dudamel's reluctance to speak explicitly about politics. The more political he becomes, the more he puts his social movement at risk.

He is sure, though, that he is right to believe in optimism over ideology. If only people could hear one another. He thinks that unrest — the unrest in Venezuela, the unrest in the United States — can be an opportunity for new understandings to take shape. The essential thing, he thinks, is not for one side or the other to win, but for people to come together. *Let us strike up more pleasing and more joyful sounds!*

But, I asked, what if avoiding ideology only plays into the hands of the people abusing their power? Is there a line beyond which the only possible response is resistance?

"I believe in people," he said gently. "It makes me sad sometimes. It makes me desperate. But at the same time, I take all of that to, to, I don't know, to the muscle, or to this part of the soul that is optimistic, and I see things can be better."

Adapted from an article that originally appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*. Brian Phillips is the author of "Impossible Owls: Essays." This is his first feature article for the magazine.

He has been called the savior of classical music so often that a movement is dedicated to proving he isn't.

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