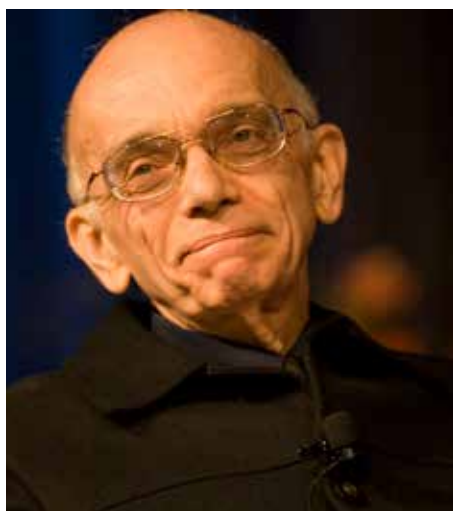


Remembering José Antonio Abreu



Glenn Ross

José Antonio Abreu at the League's National Conference, 2008

On March 24, the world lost a hugely influential figure in José Antonio Abreu, the founder of Venezuela's Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra and El Sistema, the social-action program with music performance as its centerpiece. Born on May 7, 1939, Abreu was trained as a musician and an economist. In 1975, he formed the first orchestra of what would become El Sistema. And since then, El Sistema, a government-funded program, has provided free music education in Venezuela to thousands of children, most of them living in poverty. Some of the program's graduates have gone on to top orchestra posts, including conductors Gustavo Dudamel, music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Rafael Payare, music director designate of the San Diego Symphony, while others play at orchestras internationally.

El Sistema-inspired programs have blossomed across North America as orchestras and others bring music into children's lives, usually for free, and the teaching model has been replicated in Europe, South America, and elsewhere. At its Na-

tional Conference in 2008, the League of American Orchestras brought industry-wide attention to El Sistema with sessions on the program and its impact, and a public conversation between Abreu and League President and CEO Jesse Rosen. Numerous North American orchestras, conservatories, and grassroots organizations have launched programs inspired by the El Sistema model. Some 20,000 students enrolled in El Sistema-inspired programs in the United States are a major part of his worldwide legacy. The programs are too numerous to name them all, but they include Youth Orchestra Los Angeles (YOLA), a program of the Los Angeles Philharmonic; OrchKids, run by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra; Sistema Winnipeg, a program of Canada's Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra; Play On, Philly!, a Philadelphia-based independent program; and KidzNotes, an independent program in Durham/Raleigh, North Carolina.

Here are personal tributes from orchestral leaders and youth educators who knew and worked with Maestro Abreu.

El Sistema USA has created a webpage, <https://elsistemausa.org/remembering-maestro-abreu/>, where you may share stories, letters, memories, and articles about Abreu.

“El Sistema’s impact on American orchestras has been profound. El Sistema has been an amazing spark, awakening orchestras to their enormous potential for playing an active role in creating a just society,” says League President and CEO Jesse Rosen.



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Left to right: League of American Orchestras President and CEO Jesse Rosen, composer Tania León, and José Antonio Abreu in Caracas, Venezuela in 1992.

MAESTRO JOSÉ ANTONIO ABREU was an extraordinary musician and leader who revolutionized the orchestral field's thinking on cultural equity and on the idea of access to the arts as a basic human right.

I remember meeting him first in 1992, when I traveled to Caracas with my colleague Tania León, the Cuban-American composer, to begin plans for an American Composers Orchestra festival of Venezuelan music at Carnegie Hall. Tania knew all about El Sistema and José Antonio Abreu, and of course we paid him a visit. It was inconceivable to me then that the principles of El Sistema could ever take hold in America. As the movement has in fact arrived, its impact on American orchestras has been profound. El Sistema has been an amazing spark, awakening orchestras



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to their enormous potential for playing an active role in creating a just society.

I don't say this because hundreds of orchestras have created El Sistema-inspired programs. The number is actually about twenty. But hundreds of orchestras have begun to use the incredible power of music to serve, bind, and heal their communities. Many of these orchestras were first introduced to Maestro Abreu in 2008, when he accepted our invitation to address 4,000 delegates at the National Performing Arts Convention in Denver, Colorado. In conversations with Marin Alsop and with me, Maestro Abreu showed us how the promise of the most vibrant orchestral experience lies in opening up the connections to our common humanity.

Maestro Abreu's El Sistema has modelled just how that works, and in doing so, he has been a gift to all of us in music—a true testament to the transformational power of orchestral music.

—Jesse Rosen, president and CEO, League of American Orchestras



DR. ABREU WAS A VISIONARY LEADER whose contributions to music and education cannot be understated. His pioneering initiative in making classical music a possibility for every child through the El Sistema program served as the inspiration for our very own OrchKids program in Baltimore, which is now one of the largest of its kind in the United States. Currently serving over 1,300 students in Baltimore City, OrchKids celebrates its tenth anniversary this year. We launched the program with just 30 students at one school, and we now have a presence at seven different sites throughout the city. OrchKids offers in-school, after-school and summer programming, providing music education, instruments, academic instruction, meals, and performance opportunities at no cost to students and families. I am

José Antonio Abreu with Baltimore Symphony Orchestra Music Director Marin Alsop at the League's National Conference in 2008. That same year, Alsop founded OrchKids, the BSO's free, El Sistema-inspired music education program.



José Antonio Abreu and Katie Wyatt, executive director of El Sistema USA

enormously proud of the program and know that none of this would have been possible without the extraordinary vision of Dr. Abreu. His legacy lives on through our fantastic OrchKids students and all of the other children and young people throughout the world whose futures have been indelibly changed for the better by his tremendously influential work.

—Marin Alsop, music director, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra; founder, OrchKids music education program



TO MY BELOVED MAESTRO JOSÉ ANTONIO ABREU,

My heart is overwhelmed. What comes to mind is a haiku by Jorge Luis Borges that crowns the Academy of Santa Cecilia in Rome: "Callan las cuerdas, la música sabía lo que yo siento."

The music and arts have lost one of their brightest figures. Maestro José Antonio Abreu taught us that art is a universal right and that inspiration and beauty irreversibly transform the soul of a child making them a better, healthier, and happier human being, and in turn, a better citizen.

For me, José Antonio Abreu was an inspiration, an artist, a friend, a father, and a teacher. He showed me the arcana of music with the same strength with which he taught me that the right to beauty is inalienable. He approached the universal classics with the same passion that got me closer to my roots. I owe who I am today to Maestro Abreu's generosity, humanity, and vision. I feel an immense privilege to have shared a life next to someone of his dimension.

My commitment to his legacy is eter-



Conductors and fellow Venezuelans Gustavo Dudamel and José Antonio Abreu

nal and unwavering. This is also a commitment to the millions of young people and children in Venezuela and around the world, who, like me, saw how their lives gained meaning at the very moment they were touched by music. My commitment to Maestro Abreu and El Sistema is a commitment to the future, to those children who have not yet discovered music and art. To these children, and to the millions touched by Maestro Abreu's legacy, I would like to say that this is just the beginning of the journey.

We will continue to play music, sing and fight for the world that Maestro Abreu dreamed of, and for the future legacy that he has left us.

A MI MAESTRO, JOSÉ ANTONIO ABREU,

Mi corazón está abrumado. Me viene a la cabeza un haiku de Jorge Luis Borges que corona la Academia de Santa Cecilia, en Roma: "Callan las cuerdas, la música sabía lo que yo siento".

La música y el arte han perdido a una de sus más luminosas figuras. El Maestro José Antonio Abreu, como nadie en nuestros tiempos, nos enseñó que el arte es un derecho universal y que la inspiración y la belleza transforman irreversiblemente el alma de un niño, convirtiéndolo en un ser humano más pleno, más sano, más completo, más feliz y, por ende, en un mejor ciudadano.

José Antonio Abreu fue para mi una inspiración, un artista, un amigo, un padre, un maestro. Me regaló los arcanos de la música con la misma vehemencia con que me enseñó que el derecho a la belleza

es inalienable; me acercó a los clásicos universales con la misma pasión con que me acercó a mis raíces. Lo que soy se lo debo a su generosidad, a su humanidad y a su visión. Siento un inmenso privilegio que me haya tocado compartir la vida al lado de alguien de su dimensión.

Mi compromiso con su legado es eterno e inquebrantable. Este es un compromiso además con los millones de jóvenes y niños en Venezuela y en el mundo que, como yo, vieron como su vida cobraba sentido en el momento mismo en que sublimemente eran tocados por la música. Mi compromiso con el Maestro Abreu y con El Sistema es un compromiso con el futuro, con esos niños que aun no han descubierta a la música y al arte. A ellos, y a los millones marcados por el legado del Maestro Abreu, les digo ahora que el viaje apenas comienza.

Seguiremos tocando, cantando y luchando por el mundo que el Maestro Abreu soñó, y por el legado de futuro que nos ha dejado.

—Gustavo Dudamel, music director, Los Angeles Philharmonic



MEETING DR. JOSÉ ANTONIO ABREU AND visiting the famed El Sistema program in Venezuela helped me realize that my pathway to become a productive person and professional musician was due to many people paving the way for me over the years. At that time, I was a recent graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music, having beat incredible odds to emerge from a challenging community outside of Atlanta, Georgia into one of the most demanding conservatories in the country.

What drove Dr. Abreu to do his work was a deep understanding that the symphony orchestra is the best tool for developing social discipline in the lives of the most vulnerable youth. In my first meeting with him, he said, "The fundamental principle of El Sistema is that culture for the poor cannot be a poor culture." That one phrase reminded me of the rich experience I had with music from an early age and highlighted the heart of the challenge we face as we all work together to ensure equitable experiences for people of all backgrounds. We must keep his legacy alive as we strive to make sure everyone is included in a musical process that will help the community live into its best self.

—Stanford Thompson, founder, Play On, Philly! music education program



In 2010, members of the Sistema Fellows Program at New England Conservatory went to Venezuela to learn firsthand about the program. Pictured with Abreu (left to right): Dantes Rameau, Stanford Thompson, Lorrie Heagy, Rebecca Levi, David Malek, Abreu, Jonathan Govias, Christine Witkowski, Daniel Berkowitz, Katie Wyatt, Alvaro Rodas



Courtesy El Sistema Japan

Educator Eric Booth on the launch day of El Sistema Japan, in the city of Soma, Japan, in Fukushima Prefecture, July 2012.



JOSÉ ANTONIO ABREU DIDN'T "HAVE" a vision—he "was" the pursuit of his vision. He lived an ascetic life, working endless hours and frequently forgetting to eat, to advance El Sistema. He spoke in inspirational cadenzas that few realized were meticulously crafted mini-compositions. There was no personal ego in the man; there was only music and its power to change lives.

How did he think of his legacy? Once, he told me the greatest accomplishment of El Sistema was that in our time, we can think of music as a form of rendering service to others. He also said that El Sistema is the first time a big idea from Latin America has been adopted worldwide as a solution to intractable social problems. The proof of both versions is the nearly

one million children in 66 countries who are changing their lives through music.

Western orchestras worship the virtuosity of technical perfection. El Sistema reveres the virtuosity of communication. What matters in El Sistema-inspired orchestras is what happens to people: to the lives of their members, to the communities they serve. For Western orchestras, Abreu's lasting legacy may be that they find their

future purpose (and future audiences) in dedication to the virtuosic human mission of great music.

—Eric Booth, educator and co-author, with Tricia Tunstall, of *Playing for Their Lives*, about the international growth of *El Sistema*.



DEAR MAESTRO ABREU,

I learned of your death this Saturday, after a long day of rehearsal. My heart broke at the news and at the same time was grateful. After tireless pursuit of a better world for all of us, you deserve rest. You would not take it while you were alive, and even in death your legacy is driving us to do better, to do more—always.

This weekend, I played in Beethoven's

Third Symphony, the "Eroica," and the funeral march was not yours. Yours was the hero's welcome, the surging, jubilant, wonderful mess of strings, timpani, and brass, all racing to the finish. I was out of my seat with emotion as I played, thinking of the first time I met you onstage in Caracas, thinking of all the times I had seen you since, as you followed your youth orchestras from their childhood into overwhelmingly successful careers. You followed all of us, you knew all of us, and you supported us to "luchar" for our better selves.

Your beloved "Sistema" has survived regime changes, political upheaval, and national tragedies. Because of the way you taught us to be—passionate teachers, contributors, and citizen artists—it will survive around the world for many generations to come. We continue to "trust the young." I hope you knew about the youth movement to end gun violence in the United States now; I attended a protest march in Durham during the break Saturday between rehearsals. It was full of music—you would have been proud of them. You would have encouraged their spirit. Thank you for sharing the power of music to change hearts and minds, to change lives, and to change the future for children living in poverty all over the world. Your spirit lives on in the 2 million students and musicians in Sistema-inspired programs around the world, and you will be cherished and remembered.

—Katie Wyatt, executive director, *El Sistema USA*; founder, *Kidznotes music education program*, Durham/Raleigh, North Carolina.



Young musicians in the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's OrchKids free music education program perform at the League's Conference in Baltimore, 2016.



Richard Lippert/hoz