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### El Sistema for, or against, Benton Harbor

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J. N. Andrews Honors Program  
Andrews University

HONS 497  
Honors Thesis

*El Sistema* for, or Against, Benton Harbor

Dana Wilson

04/30/2020

Advisor: Adriana Perera

Primary Advisor Signature: Adriana Perera

Department: Music

Date: April 28, 2020

## Abstract

Members of the Southwest Michigan Symphony Orchestra's Administration envision the adaptation of *El Sistema*, a famed music program from Venezuela, into the community of Benton Harbor, Michigan. My research investigates the pre-adaption of the program through a comparative analysis of both ethnic cultures, definition and description of *El Sistema*, examination of the program's application to other urban centers, and assessment of interviews with individuals instrumental to the provision of a free music program in Benton Harbor. As a result, the program demonstrates compatibility, but this study also uncovers the sensitivity of providing opportunities for an underprivileged city to avoid blind-sighted activism.

Dana Wilson

Professor Adriana Perera

HONS 497

3 April 2020

*El Sistema* for, or Against, Benton Harbor

“Do you know our history?” One of three older Black ladies sitting across from me asks as I sit on the South Shore train to commute from South Bend, Indiana to Chicago, Illinois—a primary commute usually taken by residents in the neighboring Michigan cities of Berrien Springs, St. Joseph and Benton Harbor. They previously questioned me about my future career after taking note of the instrument case next to me and they seemed pleased to know that I, a young black woman, am in the process of earning a bachelor’s degree. At this time, as a junior in college, I possess a vague but growing idea of what I plan to do with my music degree, so I mention my strong desire to provide quality music education in underprivileged communities like Benton Harbor. I eloquently state this goal and expect the typical response of approval and anticipation. However, following my answer and without hesitation, one of the women asks me about *our* history, and assuming she meant the history of black people, I respond by saying that even though I am quite knowledgeable, I am still in the process of learning. Silence follows, but in that moment, I have a feeling the ladies are not referring to Black American history, but the history of Benton Harbor—the once thriving and vibrant city of Southwest Michigan.

This question still rings in my head nearly two years later as I embark on my research study. Since my freshman year, I have always been concerned that next door to my current site of learning is a community of young people who lack the variety of opportunities, like I have had, to learn. From when I started playing the violin at age 8, my education journey gave me the

opportunity to practice repertoire rich in history, attend classes that expose me to all parts of the world, and perform for audiences to express my story, but in Benton Harbor, Michigan, students barely know the sound or looks of a violin. Despite the existence of the school system, ways of learning beyond standardized testing subjects barely exist. I speak primarily of the arts, which gives humans the ability to explore themselves and the world—to express their story and those that relate to them. Inspired by the work of *El Sistema* in Venezuela that revolutionized the impoverished youth, I want students in Benton Harbor to have access to resources for making music that could potentially change their lives. *El Sistema*, a program that provides affordable to free musical training for young people, has spread to various parts of the world, and I would like to use this model in creating a similar program in Benton Harbor.

The three Black women challenged my ideals by reminding me that I am just an outsider looking in. I am one of many who see Benton Harbor as a town in need and seek to pacify the city with many resources, but who am I to determine what the city needs? Can I implement an outsider's solution to another community? Louise Seamster, in her research about Benton Harbor's economic state, identifies the community as a "walled city" and she, along with those who take into account all the statistics of the city, formulate ideas of Benton Harbor from the outside. Almost like looking through a glass, observers see seemingly clear problems, but "that gaze inside the walls limits our understanding as gawking spectators of tragedy" (Seamster 4). The humanness of my mission to provide music instruction in underprivileged communities bears question to my truest intentions and has led me to this purpose: instead of blindly incorporating a system globally recognized as a success, I am using this project to demonstrate the need for careful and intentional planning in advocacy and activism.

## THE *EL SISTEMA* EQUATION

*El Sistema*, translated to “The System” began in Venezuela in 1975 under the direction of founder José Anotonio Abreu, with only 11 students in a basement.<sup>1</sup> With determination to multiply the program, Abreu persevered by continuing to recruit more students, and as of 2012, reports state that “[the program] comprised approximately 200 music centers, nearly 400 orchestras, 350,000 participants, around two-thirds from the country’s two poorest social strata” (Baker 3). Observers such as former Berlin Philharmonic Conductor, Simon Rattle and cellist, Mark Churchill took keen interest and started *El Sistema* chapters in their respective countries. As of 2017, 287 programs exist in 55 countries and the numbers continue to grow (Sistema Global). These programs exist in predominantly underprivileged communities and Mark Churchill stated that *El Sistema* USA targets “underserved or at-risk neighborhoods.” Looking into the evolution of such programs, I find a common equation that I call, the *MARS* (Musical Arts Revolution & Socialization) Formula:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc}
 a & + & b & = & c & & \\
 \text{Impoverished} & & \text{Musical} & & \text{Musical Revolution/} & \text{Socialization} & \\
 \text{Youth} & & \text{Instruction/Resources} & & & & 
 \end{array}$$

In 2013, the Southwest Michigan Symphony Orchestra (SMSO) bought into this equation and created the program, Music Makers, in Benton Harbor. Conductor and Director, Robin Fountain, shares during our interview his experience of being overwhelmed while hearing the Simon Bolivar Orchestra play in Berlin before Music Maker’s conception. After hearing of Richard Holloway’s adaption of *El Sistema* in Scotland, Fountain wanted the same for Benton Harbor and immediately made plans to facilitate the program through his orchestra’s education

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<sup>1</sup> From José Antonio Abreu’s TED Talk video, “The El Sistema Music Revolution”.

committee. However, while Music Makers has been around for 18 years since its initiation, the program has yet to see the “c” outcome: the fruition of growing student participation and quality musicians. This outcome, nonetheless, did not deter my inquiry of *El Sistema* as a fitful model for the development of a thriving music program in Benton Harbor. Rather, I investigated “a” and “b” to discover what factors ensure the envisioned results, “c”. The answer to whether what has worked for Venezuela will work for Benton Harbor has brought me to an understanding of both cultures and the complexity involved in translating a structure from one country to another. I hypothesize that El Sistema displays a fitful model due to its abundance of international translations to other urban centers and sustainability amidst similar socioeconomic disadvantages in Benton Harbor, Michigan. While my findings support this claim, heeding the voices of Benton Harbor’s residents inspires the need for personalizing the structure to meet the needs of the community.

When I apply for need-based scholarships, I encounter questions addressing my family’s income or education history, the community I live in, or any grave situations of the past resulting in financial strain. Additionally, I receive prompts for essays about my worldview and life experiences that have helped me push through such challenges. All these questions link to the socioeconomic status of my existence and therefore, I took the same approach to investigating the state of Benton Harbor in relation to Venezuela.

Compared to Venezuela, Benton Harbor is a rather small city with close to 10,000 residents. Venezuela, on the other hand, has 23 states with a population of over 28 million people. Almost like comparing Atlanta, Georgia—a city located in a melting pot with a population containing diverse regional cultures—to Europe—a continent with a variety of different cities composed of distinct histories and cultures—the comparison of Benton Harbor to

Venezuela may appear futile. This comparison, however, holds basis on the homogeneity of both cultures, considering the racial and ethnic grounds more common to each geographical region. African-Americans and Blacks make up over 85 percent of Benton Harbor's demographic (Data USA) and two-thirds of Venezuela is *mestizo*, or of mixed European and Indian descent (Encyclopaedia Britannica), showing a dominant race in both areas. For a closer comparison, I will focus more on Venezuela's capital, Caracas, where *El Sistema* first began. Based on the *MARS* equation, the youth of Benton Harbor appears to be the perfect "a" factor, but a comparative analysis of Venezuela and Benton Harbor's socioeconomic factors, which so closely interact and affect the human sustenance of both areas, provide investigative grounds for *El Sistema* as a functional model for Benton Harbor. Since both communities have their own complex and evolving past and present, I will first share a brief narration of each country's story. Starting with Venezuela, I title the story: *The Decisions that Crippled a Nation*.

## VENEZUELA'S STORY

About a century ago, in 1922, Venezuela discovered its prized possession of oil. Producing hundreds of barrels a day, foreign companies flocked to its market but in the 1940s, reform laws required for half of foreigners' profits be given to the state. The government income increased and the country's future looked bright as it broke away from the influence of military dictatorships of years prior. A democratic government became established near the end of the 1950s and the oil industry influenced an abundance of jobs. In the 1970s, following the Yom Kippur War, oil prices quadrupled and "made Venezuela the country with the highest per-capita income in Latin America," according to the Council of Foreign Relations. Political leaders sought to keep the industry maintained by the country, but under President Carlos Andres Perez, partnership with foreign companies expanded, decreasing Venezuela's ownership of its export. The nation's prosperity was short lived as global oil prices plummeted in the 1980s. Venezuela's economy ultimately did not survive for a variety of reasons which *Wall Street Journal*



paraphrased as “poor policy decisions, economic mismanagement, and political turmoil.” With overwhelming debt and poverty, Venezuela has difficulty moving forward on its own two feet.

Benton Harbor, similarly, has a history of its own, a tragic story that I would think only exists in the movies. To further break down the similarities and differences between Venezuela and Benton Harbor, I will now tell the non-fictional piece of Benton Harbor’s past under the title: *The Racial Stratification and Pacification of a Once Thriving City*.

## BENTON HARBOR’S STORY

At the sunset of the Vietnam War, the city of Benton Harbor brightened the state of Michigan with its contribution to the state’s fruit belt, growth of an automotive industry, and attraction of tourists. As a result of the war, many young people looking for employment migrated to the city in search for work and the predominantly White residents saw an increase of Black residents. In 1960, an episode of “white flight” occurred as White people moved out of the city and left their high-priced lands in the hands of low-income individuals. During this time, the city also witnessed a decline in its manufacturing base and unemployment continued to rise. Six years later, riots plagued the city’s streets as Black and White youth protested against each other. Every night, the streets were filled with angry young people and death ensued as 18 year-old Cecile Hunt was killed in a drive-by shooting by a group of White men. Tension ignited and as White residents continued to leave the city, Black leaders arose. The community's condition weakened, however, and resulted in the mayor’s call for a State of Emergency. The riots cooled, but into the next century, Benton Harbor continued to face problems. Emergency management procedures approved by some and abhorred by others, now seeks to take down the school district under the intervention of the Whirlpool Corporation, a global appliance manufacturing company that has established its headquarters in Benton Harbor. In its attempts to help the city, the

corporation has been perceived by many as an attack on local businesses and Black residents have struggled to maintain their own lands and retain their source of income. Stratified by white flight and pacified by Emergency Management, the city continues to work toward a new dawn.

Between the lines of both stories, the socioeconomic mixture parallel in Benton Harbor and Venezuela relate to the issues of crime, education, poverty, and employment. Named Michigan's most violent state per capita, Benton Harbor has struggled to diminish gang-related factors in its community with a reported 22 deaths per 1,000 residents (WSJM News). Venezuela has a little more than 80 deaths per 100,000 residents (Overseas Security Advisory Council) with its capital, Caracas, being named as one of the most crime infested areas of the world (USA Today). I can deduct various influential factors for these results, namely the explicit cultural music and entertainment consumed, the ignorance of the residents, or the lack of morale in the community, but despite the possible truth of these factors' influence, the history of both areas' economic decline leads to such trends of survival—surrendering to a dominant method, example, or perspective of sustaining oneself and his or her family, even at illegal costs. The existence of violence links to a lifestyle opposite to the ideal of a safe and healthy environment and onlookers seek to provide resources, like music education, as an opportunity to rescue the communities' youth.

By and large, education is presented as an effective tool to rescue youth from disadvantage yet, educational decline prevails in both Benton Harbor and Venezuela. Of Benton Harbor high-school students, less than 5% show proficiency in all subjects, whether in performance or progress. Jennifer Chambers of Detroit News reported in 2019 that due to low academic achievement and declining enrollment, "Governor Gretchen Whitmer has told the community the only course of action left is to close Benton Harbor High School and a smaller

alternative high school.” Additional information states, “Just 3% of Benton Harbor's third-graders—four of the 127 students tested—read at grade level on the 2018 state evaluation test. The state rate was 44% proficient. Zero of the district's 11th-graders were deemed college ready, according to tests in the last five years.” With these data, it becomes apparent that debt accompanies this academic problem, revealing the economic factor of the government’s withdrawal to support the school district. Venezuela parallels this academic pandemic as children refrain from attending school due to the lack of resources at each learning site and no provision of food. The *New York Times* reports that the matter of survival also comes to play as teachers face difficulty attending as well:

Thousands of the country’s 550,000 teachers did not show up to classes when schools reopened in September, according to the national teachers’ union, ditching their \$8 a month wages to try their luck abroad or in Venezuela’s booming illegal gold mines.

In Venezuela’s most-populous state of Zulia, up to 60 percent of about 65,000 teachers have deserted in recent years, according to estimates by Alexander Castro, head of the local teacher’s union (Kurmanaev and Herrera).

Considering these statistics, teachers resort to alternative income options and have to fend for themselves as students do the same deprioritizing education in their efforts to survive. Benton Harbor, in turn, has a rate of 81 percent of students counted as economically disadvantaged. For comparison, poverty is the norm for 90 percent of Venezuelans, while just under half of the city of Benton Harbor is in poverty. Even though unemployment ranks at 12.9 percent and 6.4 percent respectively, those employed have informal jobs with insufficient income. These mirroring economic disadvantages place Benton Harbor as a recognizable “a” factor and place the city under the umbrella of “inner-city,” “underprivileged,” and “low-resourced,” perfect

adjectives to fit the equation. Yet, Benton Harbor's identification in this category might carry a more distinct weight.

## THE REALISM OF RACISM

The open-ended stories of Venezuela and Benton Harbor reveal a primary differentiating factor: systemic racism. The main resources that cover the history of Venezuela and its decline do not speak of racial tensions, but as I watched a young Venezuelan violinist speak in an *El Sistema* montage for a TED Talk with Jose Antonio Abreu, I could see within her spoken idealism of integration, racial struggles still existing. She said, "There is no difference here between classes, nor white or black, or if you have money or not. Simply, if you are talented, if you have the vocation and will to be here, you get in, you share music with us and make music." The *El Sistema* of Venezuela presents itself as a haven amidst Venezuela's multifaceted crisis, and the fact that the young student mentions the aspects of class and race implies that such issues have a place in her country. I initially assumed that issues of race had rarity in Venezuela, but the words of the young violinist led me to examining the works of Jesús María Herrera. He, in his essay, *The Political Economy of Racism in Venezuela*, quotes Venezuelan politicians who claim that absence of racism. For example, Hans Neuman who led in Caracas made the following argument:

In Venezuela we complain about a lot of things that we think are wrong. But we have some things that should serve as an example to other countries. One is that race is not important in judging a person. In Venezuela, racial discrimination is not a factor either in employment or in social or intellectual realms...Prejudice against the color of his skin does not exist. This is not an obstacle here as it is in other places. (Salas 72)

Salas refutes this argument by explaining how the country also used the labor of African slaves and how immigration of Blacks from the Caribbean and America increased in search for employment as the oil economy boomed (Salas 70). Even though the majority of the population consisted of a mixed race of Indian and European, mixing expanded to include African and Indians as well. In 1983, the upper and middle classes blamed the immigrants and Afro mixed descendants for the oil industry decline. Salas states, “Although much has changed since the time of slavery, the population of African origin population and the indigenous peoples continue to belong predominately to the oppressed popular sectors” (Salas 76). Even Hugo Chávez, former Venezuelan president, received criticism due to his so-called “Negro” features and received labels such as “Indian, monkey, and thick-lipped” (Salas 82). The evidence of racism exists in different ways in Venezuela and Benton Harbor, but this fact does not negate the fact that the youth in both areas live in socioeconomically challenging environments. Recognizing the prominent role racism plays in Benton Harbor only changes how *El Sistema* translates into the American community.

In America, the explicit discrimination against identity has developed as a construct rooted in racism and permeates textbooks, hiring procedures, research, mass incarceration systems and all aspects of society with no program or system devoid of this matter. Within music alone, articles circulate the internet with titles such as: *Why is American Classical Music So White*<sup>2</sup>; *Black Composers Discuss the Role of Race*<sup>3</sup>; *Hidden in Plain Sight, Race and Racism in Music Education*<sup>4</sup>, discussing the ongoing problem of segregation and White ideals in classical music. Classical orchestras reveal this matter with Black people making 1.8 percent of American

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<sup>2</sup> *Why is American Classical Music So White* - Tom Huizenga, NPR News

<sup>3</sup> *Black Composers Discuss the Role of Race* - William Robin, New York Times

<sup>4</sup> *Hidden in Plain Sight, Race and Racism in Music Education* - Deborah Bradley, Oxford Handbooks

orchestras and Hispanics at 2.5 percent as of 2016. Beyond the music, Benton Harbor's story shows how racism floods the education system, economic interventions, and social resources provided. Neighboring cities of St. Joseph and Berrien Springs are predominately White by over 60 percent and affluent with an 88 percent higher income than the median household income of Benton Harbor residents (DataUSA). The primarily Black city of Benton Harbor continues to be at a disadvantage.

### VOICES OF BENTON HARBOR

As I continue to study Benton Harbor from an outsider's perspective, I seek to hear the voices of the city's residents in relation to the socioeconomic solutions. In regards to the schooling system which comprises 92 percent Black students, the government has threatened to shut down the high school within the next three years. Chambers reports, "[Governor] Whitmer wants to send the students to primarily White, rural and more affluent districts to address the district's \$18.3 million debt, give high schoolers access to certified teachers and allow educators to focus on K-8 education." As a response, Joseph Taylor, Vice Principal of the high-school expresses, "This is a bad plan for the community. It gets rid of a high school...High schools are the fabric of anyone's community, and good high schools create good cities" (Chambers). Taylor has support from the students and families involved and retaliation to this plan rises as students consider the transition to a whole new community with predominantly white students and a new community with different perspectives, learning styles, and coursework. Addressing the issue of the Whirlpool economic intervention, Joseph Kay—Benton Harbor resident who contributes to the documentation of Benton Harbor's developments through research of his community—shares, "Local politicians are currently backing 'redevelopment,' especially around the Whirlpool headquarters on the north side of the city, seeking to attract middle-class layers. The

market-rate housing and office space that is being constructed will do nothing to help the plight of Benton Harbor residents”. Kay explains how the plan attracts outsiders and provides little to no opportunities for the community’s young people after they complete their education.

Reverend Edward Pinkney, another Benton Harbor resident and activist states, “Whirlpool set its sights on turning the city of Benton Harbor into a lakeside resort for the wealthy. Whirlpool and other corporations teamed up and began transitioning the area from an industrial based economy to a tourist, real estate and service-based economy”. This transitioning Reverend Pinkney refers to includes the Jack Nicholas Golf Course, which covers 465 acres of the city. Conflict exists on this issue among residents as I watch the documentary, *The New Benton Harbor*, with some agreeing and other against. I notice that White people approved the plan and Black activists spoke against the intervention methods. I am unaware if this observation speaks for the entire city and each racial group but the overtones of racism ensue. Still, residents advocate for the underlying necessity:

A new political movement must be built by working people that will address the enormous social problems in cities throughout the US. The necessary resources for employment, housing, education and recreation must be attained by putting an end to social inequality and the system that subordinates the needs of all working people to the dictates of private profit (Kay).

The goal for the activists of Benton Harbor is to establish social equality for the true meaning of a community that supports each person and maintains a development from history.

### **MARS FOR MUSIC MAKERS**

At this point, I asked the question, “Does Benton Harbor need Music Makers, a version of *El Sistema*?” I wondered what a music program can do for the community amidst its

numerous sociocultural and socioeconomic struggles as I interviewed members of SMSO Administration. Visionaries before me perceived music to do wonders for the young people of the community, starting with the vision of Maestro Robin Fountain. In my interview with him, he explained that from 2013, he has desired that the children in Benton Harbor can learn instruments and meet the level of youth orchestras in the Lake Michigan area. He has hopes for Music Makers to be part of his legacy. Joelle Regovich, Education Coordinator of SMSO states the program's initial focus, "The dream is to be *El Sistema*, 'hundreds of [children] playing violin and cello, that's the dream...'" (Regovich). The director of the education committee saw things differently:

My understanding of the *El Sistema* was a two problem (pronged) approach, you're giving the kids instruments and you're teaching them the same way they would learn soccer. They don't learn soccer by getting a book...they just go play soccer with each other. The other thing is that those kids were so poor that there weren't other things for them to do. The kids here have so many different things...It's not *El Sistema*, it's an after school string class. We're providing the same idea *El Sistema* is doing but it's not community based. It's not valuable [for Benton Harbor]. The SMSO likes to put the *El Sistema* name on it." (Regovich)

In another interview, Burke Lowkey, director of the education committee, explains his different perspective of *El Sistema* and shares how the adoption of the system in the beginning had no opposition from the board but little organization to put the plan in practice. The committee and board comprises of White people who live in the neighboring city of St. Joseph or the mere outskirts of Benton Harbor. I take notice that *El Sistema* was originally made by Venezuelans for Venezuela, but when translated to America, the perspective appears as Whites providing for



youth of color, instructing them to learn music of European composers by euro-centric means with traditional classical instruments. In this plight for providing music education for Benton Harbor, I noticed that the SMSO board is just like me, looking through a glass at the conditions of the city. I know what music has done for my life and I would like to share the experience with other Black children. Tim Harris, principal of the Benton Harbor Charter School and Benton Harbor resident invited the Music Makers program to take place at the school's location and also moved forward with hiring a music and band teacher starting in Fall of 2019. Bearing witness to Harris's enthusiasm of music having function for his students, I know the program has a place in the community. Still, I want to avoid imposing my own ideals for the children as to what and how they learn about music without understanding how music already helps them. Like these well-intentioned board members, I want to pursue the vision to give the children an option for musical accomplishment and excellence - the "c" factor—but I must continue to consider the "b" factor, the provision of a structured and resourceful music program.

Following in the limelight of Venezuela's *El Sistema*, the organization of the program caters to its efficiency and revolutionary outcome. In my interview with Claudio Gonzalez, former teacher in *El Sistema*, I received insight on the program's structure. He explained that the program has a main board of directors who usually emerge from being members of the National Youth Orchestra. Under the board of directors, each state has its own director who oversees the *núcleos* or music centers and the orchestras within each state. The program features symphonic orchestra instrumentalists and vocalists and occurs after school. Students spend 4-10 hours a week committed to their private lessons, orchestra and chamber practice sessions. Since students receive minimal music education in the program, leaders partnered with local schools to coordinate music education as part of the academic curriculum. The Music Makers program does

not fall too far behind this structure, with the students attending the program twice a week after school and given instruments free of charge. Thankfully, music classes are a part of the academic course load in the Benton Harbor Charter School. The problem lies higher up the chain.

Regovich explains, “Benton Harbor is one of many projects taken on by the education committee...” (Regovich). The Music Makers program hires one teacher to oversee on site interaction and teaching of the students while members involved from the education committee manage from their offices, ordering materials needed and checking in when necessary while catering to other projects as well. The program lacks a core team of leaders to dedicate full focus to the students.

Another branch of the structure deals with the curriculum of the program. Watching one of the various documentaries on *El Sistema*, *Tocar y Luchar*, the film features faculty and students expressing the program’s ideal for music in general. Throughout the video, however, I primarily hear recordings of what is known traditionally as classical music, from Bach to Mahler. Infused with this music is some of the country’s native music. Ludim R. Pedroza in her essay *Save the Children or Save the Music* uses the example of the Venezuelan filmmaker who filmed *Tocar y Luchar*, to explain how Venezuela uses music as a form of identity through *El Sistema*:

Venezuelan filmmaker Alberto Arvelo’s 2006 documentary *Tocar y Luchar* (To Play and to Fight) casts El Sistema as a socio-musical entity whose particular brand of energy and vitality is rooted on its member’s self-recognition as “Venezuelans” and on their desire to transcend the limits imposed by disadvantageous economic conditions. Arvelo reinforces this perspective through images of children playing Baroque music under the iconic Venezuelan “bohío,” a type of hut common in the coastal region of the country. To the average foreign viewer, this is a powerful visual and aural incongruity, along with the

footage of the youth orchestra performing Beethoven symphonies, Venezuelan folk-infused music, and cross over works such as Bernstein's Mambo. Arvelo successfully defamiliarizes the viewer with the stereotypes of orchestral repertoire, the venues and the manner in which it is conventionally played, forcing us to see and hear orchestral music through the ambitious energy and unique performative style of the young players.

(Pedroza 1-2)

Pedroza emphasizes how in Venezuela, social change maintains the utmost significance, with music as a pivotal by-product. She then explores the translation of the *El Sistema* curriculum to other countries and explains how Americans and Europeans are sharing their own ideals of the program. Churchill names the program the answer to the problem of "elitism in classical music" and Simon Rattle states, "If anybody asked me, where is there something really important going on for the future of classical music, I would simply have to say, here in Venezuela" (Pedroza 3-4). Pedroza's main argument resides in the misinterpretations of outside voices portraying Venezuela's music revolution as a reason to present Beethoven and other classical composers as saving mechanisms. Venezuelans expressed resistance to classical ideals and one example from Santa Ana demonstrates how the state's *nucleo* decided to incorporate other musical genres and instruments as local non classical musicians voiced their concern (Baker 80). From *El Sistema's* model in Venezuela, I find that race and culture have developed into inseparable and dominant identities and therefore, music must be a relevant and representative voice of and for those who learn. Fountain endorses the practice of Music Makers including what he refers to as "vernacular music"—hip hop, r&b, pop and any genre included in the daily lives of the students.

## FUTURE STEPS

I conclude that while Venezuela's *El Sistema* serves as an inspirational model for the Music Makers program in Benton Harbor, the approach to maintaining the sufficiency of the program must transcend the *MARS* Formula. The "impoverished youth" of Benton Harbor should not be seen passively, as those who need to be served, but I must actively understand their perspectives, their history, and their experiences. They have voiced their determination through art already as I watch the music video for "Get Up" featuring Benton Harbor High-school students and produced and directed by Benton Harbor residents. One of the students by the rapper name, QueenBarzz, raps of her determination to rise above the negativity in her community with the following lyrics:

The demons are knockin

My city is burning

And We have no options

They do not care bout my city

They do not show us no love

They just put us in their pockets

Tell the world we do the most to them

Tell the world we are a ghost to them

But Imma make sure they hear my words

Yeah Imma make sure they hear my verse

Cause we gon go up and fly like a bird (Mission Music, 3:08 - 3:24)

With the artistic piece "Get Up" released on YouTube for the world to see, the youth of Benton Harbor have made it known that they have the power and will to continue their education and save their city. They have put their plan to practice through art and as a musician, I desire to be at the service of this community, willing to help with its mission and goals. Venezuela's youth also relay their own fight by demonstrating the use of music to enhance identity and provide more

opportunities for success through an organized structure despite the challenges their country faces. I hope that the Music Makers project continues to do the same and reap the results of its intention: “to not only demonstrate basic instrument fundamentals, but to create a daily haven of safety, joy and fun that builds every child’s self-esteem and sense of value”(SMSO). This aim directly mirrors *El Sistema*’s purpose for character development and to practically implement these features, I created materials for future testing and development of Music Makers.

Considering the efficiency of *El Sistema*’s structured leadership, musical diversity, and community culture, I decided to make materials that reflect these elements. I started with a Family Handbook for students’ families to know the purpose, schedule, and expectations of the program. This document should be given to families near the beginning of each school year and will require contact information in order for on-site off-site administrators to have regular contact with parents. The following forms are samples of the document:



## Music Makers

Family Handbook  
2019-2020  
Danva Wilson – Teacher  
770.354.3317 | danawilson.treble@gmail.com

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**Contract****Parent**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the content of the family handbook and will adhere to the requirements given.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

**Student**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the content of the family handbook and will adhere to the requirements given.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Additionally, I created a lesson plan that covers the span of the first 10 weeks and includes materials needed and potential session activities. Each week has varied options of what to review and teach depending on the pace of the students' progress as shown in the sample below:

Week 2-5 – Practice

- Bow hold technique continued
- Holding the instruments
- Open string rhythm practice
  - Suzuki Book 1, *Twinkle Twinkle Variations* on open strings
  - *Where is the Love* – Black Eyed Peas (hip-hop/ contemporary)
- Introduction to first position
  - Left finger movements and placements
- Creative playing – students create variation or rhythm based on the songs learned

Week 6-10 – Perform

- *Twinkle Twinkle Variations* with left fingers
- *Theme Variation* for fast learners
- Melody and Harmony Practice
  - Some students play open strings while the rest play the melody
- Performance positions and decorum
  - Rest position to play position
  - Bowing
  - Watching leader for cues

\*Before the final performance, students who have learned all the variations and theme for *Twinkle Twinkle* and can identify basic notation on a staff will each be evaluated separately and the passing results would provide the opportunity for each student to own an instrument and have a 15 or 30-minute private lesson once a week.

In this lesson plan, the students connect their developing music abilities with genres such as pop and hip hop, classical and rock. I hope that the variety will connect them with their familiar and expose them to something new. Including a performance will give the students an opportunity to showcase what they have learned and is a significant way to bring the community together as family, friends, and schoolteachers convene in one place. Other materials include a Diversity & Inclusion Manual for staff to learn how to effectively connect with Benton Harbor students and families, a running log in the form of a shared Google Doc for weekly entries of each session's lesson to keep the SMSO Administration informed due to their distance from the learning site.

Music Makers continues after school like *El Sistema* with courtesy of Principal Timothy Harris making the Benton Harbor Charter school as the program's primary site. Instruments and their accessories receive funding from non-profit organizations as explained by the interviewees from SMSO's education committee, avoiding any extra financial strain from participating families. These functional aspects strengthen the possibility of a successful outcome for the music program but by transcending the *MARS* Formula with a sincere motive to help others, I believe the outcome has the potential for something greater. The developing bond between leaders in St. Joseph and Berrien Springs and families in Benton Harbor who come from different backgrounds, financial classes, and races might serve as an example for the envisioned social equality advocated by Joseph Kay and Reverend Pinkney. The students who seek to improve their school's academic performance can apply their practice and mastery of playing a song to solving a difficult math problem. I do not assume these results will automatically occur, but I aim to always align with the goals of Benton Harbor's community. For QueenBarzz of Benton Harbor High-School who raps about the "demons knocking" outside her city's walls, I intend to be part of the "they" who instead, care and show love.

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