Friday November 24, 2006 The Guardian

Land of hope and glory

How do you take kids in the shanty towns of Caracas out of poverty? You turn them into world-beating classical musicians. Charlotte Higgins reports from Venezuela

A child in the beginners class at the Montalban Academic Centre, Caracas. Photograph: David Rochkind/Polaris

The Jose Marti Bolivarian School, in the barrio of Sarria in Caracas, is ringing with music. In the school hall, string players, most aged about eight, are pounding away with cast-iron technique at some Beethoven. Through a thickly tropical, dusty garden, a hesitant pom-pom-pomming incongruously reveals itself as the tune of Pop Goes the Weasel - a young tuba player is having a lesson in a corridor. In the gymnasium, sunshine fluttering in through gashes in the roof, 11-year-old Paola Chistoni is being coached. "My trompetita, little trumpeter," says Rafael Elster, director of the school's music, pride in his voice.

When he dispassionately explains the violent realities of the barrio that lies beyond the firmly locked school gates, Elster seems to be describing a different world from that of these cheerful, focused children. We are in one of Caracas's seemingly endless drifts of fragile-looking shacks and ad-hoc homes, which creep out from the central urban sprawl to colonise any space they can, merging with the wooded mountains that circle the city. "Two weeks ago, a mother took three bullets in the chest. Four or five of the mothers of kids here have been shot; a lot of the kids are orphans," he says. "There's a lot of gang fighting - but the police are as bad, if not worse. They come in

shooting. Last time, they shot a couple of kids. People have killed to get a space to build a shack alongside the river just over there." He gestures beyond the high school walls.

Up and down Venezuela, a quarter of a million kids are doing exactly what I am seeing here - spending six afternoons a week, from 2pm to 6pm, intensively studying classical music. This is a radical social project in which children, often living in unthinkable circumstances, are given the chance to punch through the poverty cycle - with the help of skills learned through music.

The System, as it is known (the hefty official title of the organisation that runs the project is Fundacion del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela) was born more than 30 years ago. But because of its perceived success, President Hugo Chavez has deemed it in tune with the socialist-revolutionary times. These days, the System has government funding of $29m (pounds 15m) a year - and it is seen as a flagship of national achievement, with children from youth orchestras frequently accompanying the comandante on his excursions as head of state. And the System is attracting international imitators - closest to home, the Scottish Arts Council is about to establish a pilot scheme on the Venezuelan model in one of the nation's most deprived housing schemes.

According to Richard Holloway, chair of SAC and a former bishop of Edinburgh: "You can't help being knocked out by the sexy, almost spiritual intensity of the playing of these kids; it is so deeply human. We decided we wanted to see whether a similar sort of project could make a difference in Scotland, in the sort of settled, workless areas that seem stubbornly resistant to attempts to break the cycle of poverty. It will either take off, or be an interesting experiment that doesn't work."

However, the System is also turning heads abroad because it is producing - and exporting - musicians of extraordinary quality. One of these is Edicson Ruiz, who, at 17, became the youngest ever bass player in the Berlin Philharmonic. At nine, he had been stacking supermarket shelves to contribute to the family's meagre income. Then, most strikingly, there is 25-year-old Gustavo Dudamel, who this year became chief conductor of the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra (spurning Birmingham, according to rumour, whose

orchestra is seeking a replacement for Sakari Oramo). He has just brought out a CD of Beethoven symphonies with the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela, the System's flagship ensemble.

Simon Rattle calls Dudamel "the most astonishingly gifted conductor I've ever come across". And he hails the system that produced him. "There is nothing more important in the world of music than what is happening in Venezuela," he says. "If anyone asks me where is something really important going on for the future of classical music, I say here." The combination of big talent and radical social action - tearing apart tired prejudices about classical music's elitism - is extraordinarily heady. Is Venezuela the unlikely country that could be the saviour of classical music?

It does not seem such a ludicrous notion when I watch the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra perform in Rome (British audiences will have to wait for this treat until next summer's Edinburgh festival). Dudamel shares the podium with Claudio Abbado - Rattle's predecessor at the Berlin Philharmonic is a mentor to Dudamel, and such a fan of the System that he spent three months last winter working with children in Venezuela. There are more than 100 children on stage, and, playing Beethoven's Fifth, they sound less like an orchestra than like a solid wall of thunderous, elemental sound. But more than that, the vitality of this music-making, the rapt faces of these young musicians, render words such as "urgent" and "passionate" utterly inadequate. In fact, everything they do makes European and North American ways of dealing with classical music seem grey and dull. These young people, aged up to 25, are playing as if their lives depended upon it - and in some ways, perhaps they do.

At the end of the concert, the lights dip into darkness. After a few seconds the orchestra is revealed again, now dressed in the gold, blue and red of Venezuela's national colours. They throw themselves into a showstopper, Danzon by the Mexican composer Arturo Marquez. Violins and violas sway and arc in unison, like shoals of fish. Whole sections leap up and start, literally, to dance to the infectious, sexy salsa rhythms. The audience go crazy. I've never seen anything like it.

The following day, I talk to Dudamel. Unsurprisingly, there's a strong streak of national pride in all this. "The orchestra is like a flag," he says. "When we go to another country, it's as if we are going to the World Cup, or the Olympics." One of the striking things about him is his confidence in attacking works usually deemed to require heft and maturity, such as Mahler's Second; it is an audacious act to record Beethoven's Fifth and Seventh at age 25. But, he tells me, this is because of the System. The biggest hurdle for British teenagers who fancy themselves conductors is the lack of ensembles to work with, until they can start formal postgraduate studies. But Dudamel has been conducting nearly every day of his life since he was a kid growing up in the town of Barquisimeto in Lara state, 350km west of Caracas. "I was assistant conductor of the local chamber orchestra at 13 - that was normal. I was conducting the Barquisimeto Youth Orchestra aged 14 - that was normal. When I was 17, I was made music director of the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra - that was normal."

In Caracas, I find out more about the System at the Centro Academico Infantil de Montalban. This is one of the city's main "nuclei" - centres where children drawn from different schools come after classes finish at lunchtime to study music all afternoon. Susan Siman, who runs the nucleus, shows me round the complex, attended by 900 children. We see a class where about 20 tiny kids are taking their first steps towards playing the violin. Most of them are about four years old, though one is a toddler with a dummy in her mouth. "Don't cross your feet. Sit as straight as a building," says the teacher. The communal teaching is reminiscent of the Suzuki method, but, says Siman, it is "embedded in the social realities of Venezuela".

For these very young children, says Siman, "the method uses singing, dancing, arts and crafts, and there's lots of focus on parents' involvement". The key, she says, is that "music is seen as play rather than a chore, so the kids don't push it away." It turns European pedagogy on its head. Most of us who studied musical instrument as children remember desperately solitary, often boring hours practising alone. Here, everything is communal, everything is about the team. In the System, practice is supervised - which, according to Elster, "means nothing can go wrong". As Rattle also observes, you also immediately notice a different feeling among these children from the

competitive, individualistic atmosphere that prevails if you are a young musician hot-housed in Britain. The culture here is one of mutual support. The point is not to be the best, but to be the best you can. The height of achievement for these children is to be part of the national youth orchestra - in other words, to be part of a group, an ensemble. There is much less focus on aspiring to be the Nietzschean superhero at the front playing the Sibelius Violin Concerto, or what have you - an aspiration that is, after all, nearly always frustrated.

Older kids are rehearsing in the Montalban Nucleus Orchestra. One hundred and twenty of them, including a mighty 48 violins, are led by nine-year-old Luz Maria in a deafening rendition of Suppe's Light Cavalry Overture. Luz tells me later: "I'd rather be here than at home. There, I wouldn't be doing anything. I'd just be lying around." Siman says: "The goal is not about music. It's about discipline, respect, achievement through work and teamwork, and never, ever taking away the idea of being excellent."

Why has this project yielded such results in a country more famous for oil, chocolate and revolutionary politics than classical music? The answer, says Dudamel, comes down to one man, Jose Antonio Abreu. This 67-year-old, who trained as an economist as well as a musician, "has dedicated his whole life to this", according to the conductor. "Without him, it wouldn't work. He has never had a family, he has no wife, and no kids. But, in a sense, he has 250,000 kids."

Maestro Abreu, as he is universally known, is a delicate, birdlike man, verging on the shabby. He has built the System with religious zeal. Dudamel calls him "otherworldly", and there is certainly a monkishness about him; though he doesn't mention it openly, it is obvious that creating the System has been an act of deep religious devotion. When he starts to talk and fixes you with his gleaming eyes, you realise he is an operator of enormous charisma and shrewdness. Necessarily - to have kept the project going through 30 years of varying degrees of political instability is a feat. It is important that the System has always been run independently of government, though it is funded by the state. A recent coup was to switch that funding to the revolution-friendly Department for Social Development and Popular Participation, away from the less favoured and increasingly cash-starved Department for Culture.

The way Abreu talks about the System is clearly designed to chime with Chavez-speak - a question of inflection, one might say, rather than anything so cynical as spin. He describes it as "primarily a social inclusion project - very fast and effective social inclusion. It's not just about personal happiness, but about learning skills to hold a profession, with dignity." Many children have ended up part of the System's self-perpetuation, as music teachers; some have taken other paths. The System kids tend to be comparatively high achievers.

The System grew, in the beginning, from Abreu's observation that Venezuela had no orchestra composed of Venezuelans (though there was an ensemble consisting mainly of European emigres). He invited, cajoled and arm-twisted until he had put one together; the first concert of Venezuela's new youth orchestra was on April 30 1975. Abreu says: "Music and art education were at that time confined to families who could afford to buy instruments. I felt that music education and art should be part of the patrimony of the whole country. From the beginning, I had the idea of inserting strong teachers in classrooms in sectors with dire social needs.

"In those cases, it's not just the lack of a roof or of bread, it's also a spiritual lack - a loneliness and lack of recognition. The philosophy of the system shows that the vicious circle of poverty can be broken when a child poor in material possessions acquires spiritual wealth through music. Our ideal is of a country in which art is within the reach of every citizen so that we can no longer talk about art being the property of the elite, but the heritage of the people."

In some ways, his rhetoric is not so different from that of the British government, which has made "access" to the arts its big policy idea over its decade in power. The difference is that Abreu has made the idea reality, in a much more wholehearted, focused and radical way than we have ever done here. If Gordon Brown, insofar as he thinks about the arts at all, believes classical music is a decadent, middle-class pursuit that has little value to the public at large, he would do well to see how it is being reinvented in Venezuela.

On December 3, it is predicted, Hugo Chavez will comfortably win another term, thanks to his huge support

among Venezuela's poor. That should secure the System's stability for the coming years. But what of the long term? Abreu, the driven spirit behind this musical revolution, is not immortal. Can the system fulfil its promise even when it is not presided over by its founder?

When I ask Dudamel what he wants to achieve in life, his answer is simple: "I want to work with the big orchestras. I want to have a big family. But the most important thing is the project - the System."

• The Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela's recording of Beethoven's Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel, is out now on Deutsche Grammophon.