

## MUSIC EDUCATION: THE PATH TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

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**Abstract:** Music is a powerful phenomenon that constantly surprises us with its potential. This paper will present the results of our research on the effect of musical activities on individuals at risk of social exclusion and on pupils with special educational needs. We will put our findings into the theoretical framework of the El Sistema programme and the Suzuki Method, from which we have drawn. Based on our results, we will discuss the possibilities of music activities for the social field. We will conclude the paper with a call for a more intensive link between the musical and social spheres to accelerate the social justice process.

**Keywords:** Special Music Education, Suzuki Method, El Sistema, Social Justice, Special Educational Needs

### 1 Introduction

Music education aims to bring pupils to music and teach them to perceive, understand, and accept music. Music education can be seen as education about music and education through music. In a broader sense, music education can be situated in the school environment and a wide range of musical activities. Leisure music clubs, home music making, listening to music, learning to play instruments in art schools. There is a music education element everywhere. Of course, one cannot forget the musical arts practised at an elite level in concert halls and opera houses. However, the significant social potential of musical activities is often overlooked. The music presented in any form is not only pleasing to our ears, but it also has a beneficial effect on our souls.

The main aim of this paper is to present to the professional community a summary of the results of a series of qualitative research projects in which we investigated the impact of musical activities on the social and educational competencies of children and young adults involved in musical activities. We were not concerned with the quality of performance, we were not interested in agogics with dynamics, and we did not look at the quality of the violin bow grip or the fitting of the trumpet mouthpiece; we looked exclusively at the social aspects associated with musical activities. We framed the issue of the social and educational impact of music education and musical activities under three main headings. First, we explored new possibilities of special music education for students with special educational needs. We focused on the potential of the arts in the process of resocialisation into the intact population after leaving a residential childcare facility, and we concluded this research trilogy with a research project focusing on the phenomenon of the arts as a tool for social mobility.

In the first part of this paper, we describe the two musical-educational and musical-social concepts that formed the theoretical basis of our research. We will introduce the Venezuelan El Sistema program and the Suzuki method. In these world-renowned concepts linking music with the individual's social sphere, we sought to anchor in our conception of music education and activities. We will then present the most salient findings from our longitudinal investigation of the impact of musical activities on socially vulnerable individuals. We will conclude the paper with a strong plea for a more substantial inclusion of music and arts activities in the educational process.

### 2 El Sistema

We had the invaluable opportunity to explore the interaction of children at risk of social exclusion with the environment of a leisure music ensemble based on the El Sistema music and social programme. In 2015, we conducted intensive research on the potential of musical activities to accelerate children's educational and social competencies from residential childcare institutions. For three years, we mapped the interaction between children

from a residential facility and the environment of an orchestral ensemble. The El Sistema program's ideas helped us obtain clear evidence of the power and potential of music. We found that music is a phenomenon that does not respect any social constructs and has a positive impact on each individual (Daněk 2024).

El Sistema is a term that has become quite popular abroad in recent years. In the Czech Republic, the situation is different. The subject matter is not well developed, and the available information is not entirely accurate. The El Sistema programme originated in 1975 in Venezuela, South America. Although Venezuela has enormous wealth through substantial oil reserves, it has not escaped social problems. Social disparities were widening. The rural population moved to the cities to find work. In the cities, large-scale exclusion zones were created. Unemployment and social deprivation grew. Children, in particular, suffered from this state of society. They were threatened by pathologies such as crime, violence and prostitution. Children were often forced to neglect their schooling because they had to work. The vanishing chances of getting a promising job drove young people into the community of criminal gangs.

Into this bleak situation came José Antonio Abreu in 1975 with a novel vision. José Antonio Abreu (1939-2018) was a politician, businessman and musician. Abreu responded to the situation in society and offered children the opportunity to receive free music education. He was convinced that with the help of musical activities, it was possible to reduce social problems such as crime and violence. From the beginning, El Sistema's programme was shaped by the founder's vision that music could save children's lives and be an instrument of social change and an effective weapon in the fight against poverty. Abreu believed that music could fundamentally impact the lives of children. He saw music as a tool for social change. Abreu always emphasised the moral and ethical aspects of music. Musical activities can prevent negative social phenomena. Thus, with the support of the Venezuelan government, Abreu founded a youth orchestra program, which he named The System, or El Sistema in Spanish. The official name is FESNOJIV: Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela (Tunstal 2013). In 2011, the name of FESNOJIV was changed to Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar. However, the name El Sistema is generally used.

Precise historical data on the origins of El Sistema is not available. We refer to the descriptions of the origin of El Sistema presented by the authors collaborating with the program. The story of when Abreu founded the first orchestra in a garage is presented. This ensemble is said to have had only 11 members. However, it is now a little-known fact that in the same year, another youth orchestra was formed in Venezuela that worked closely with the original El Sistema program ensemble (Carlson 2016). From a simple garage band, the El Sistema program subsequently spread throughout Venezuela. A significant media breakthrough occurred in 1976 when Abreu presented his orchestra on public television and recited the slogan "Tocar Y Luchar." This slogan became the program's motto, which began to profile itself not as musical but primarily social. El Sistema's program had considerable government support from the start. The Venezuelan government began fully funding the program after only one year of operation.

Abreu was a skilled lobbyist. He made excellent use of his contacts and skillfully guided the El Sistema program through a series of turbulent situations in local politics. He outlasted a series of presidents. His contacts with Venezuela's political and financial top brass are often blamed on him. Critical voices point to the intertwining of the government nomenclature with the El Sistema programme. However, we must be fair and recall that in the former socialist Czechoslovakia, for example, music was

regularly used as a propaganda tool. So, there is nothing new under the sun in Venezuela, either.

Abreu was not just a politician and economist but a skilled musician. In 1967, he was recognised for his musical abilities and received the National Music Award. Abreu was even Minister of Culture from 1983. The interconnectedness of El Sistema's program with the Venezuelan government nomenclature is evident. The Venezuelan government seized on the El Sistema program to showcase the country's stability and success. Government support for El Sistema continues to this day, even though contemporary Venezuela is experiencing an economic crisis, poverty, social disruption and violence. *Inter Arma, Silent Musae*. According to available information, the El Sistema program is currently struggling with the problem of the departure of teachers and the best players of the orchestras of the El Sistema program. The future will tell if the program can overcome the difficult times in its native country.

Since its beginning, El Sistema has been emphasising its social focus. Music is seen first and foremost as a tool for social change. Authors working on the issue identify the five core ideas of the El Sistema programme as social change, orchestral approach, intensive approach, accessibility, and collaboration (Booth 2011; Govias 2011; Simpson 2017).

**Social change.** The primary goal is to enable children to achieve social improvement through a musical experience. The program is seen as not musical but primarily social.

**Orchestral approach.** The children gain musical experience in an ensemble. The emphasis on a collective approach is typical of the programme. Collective learning is presented as an effective way to acquire musical skills.

**Intensive approach.** Ensembles meet several times a week for intensive rehearsals. At frequent performances, children can showcase and share their progress with others. The program is presented as a social one, where music is meant to be a joyful gateway to a better tomorrow.

**Accessibility.** Membership in the ensemble is free and open to every child without distinction. The program is designed for the most socially needy.

**Collaboration.** The orchestral groups collaborate with other agencies, parents, schools and the community.

The results of El Sistema have been the subject of several evaluations (Hallam and Burst 2017). Yes, we can encounter critical voices that do not see the El Sistema programme as ideal. Geoffrey Baker is the most significant critic of the programme (Baker 2016; Baker et al. 2018). However, positive evaluations of the El Sistema program prevail (Hallam 2023). For example, an evaluation commissioned by the Scottish Government in 2011 identified the project's impact on the target group as unequivocally positive (GEN 2011). This research also points to a positive effect for children and young people, their families, and the wider community (GCPH 2015). Other research confirms the positive impact of the El Sistema programme on self-management (Alemán 2017; Harkins et al. 2016). In addition to these benefits, research shows that the project has also had significant financial benefits for society. Factors such as future reductions in crime, improved health, and better social outcomes are considered. The benefits to society are more significant than the resources invested in the project (Cuesta 2011).

The El Sistema program has found resonance in many countries. The moral code and methodology are not seen as dogma but as inspiration for emerging programs. It is necessary to be inspired by foreign experiences, not to unquestioningly and uncritically adopt them (Daněk et al. 2023). Emerging movements, identifying themselves as carriers of the ideas of El Sistema, adapt to the specificities of the target group, culture and traditions of the country (Marshall 2016). The El Sistema

programme has found its place in several dozen countries around the world and hundreds of thousands of children have been given the opportunity to participate in its orchestras. In 2012, the Sistema Europe Association was founded. One of the founding members of Sistema Europe is the Harmony Foundation, which has made the ideals of El Sistema possible in the Czech environment. During our research collaboration, we demonstrated musical activities' positive impact on a wide range of areas (Daněk 2024b). When analysing the music education and instrumental approaches used in the Harmony Foundation Orchestra, it became clear that elements of the Suzuki Method play a significant role in the distribution of music education activities.

### 3 Suzuki Method

The Suzuki Method is a well-known music education term. The Suzuki Method is familiar to music education experts in the Czech Republic but is not massively spread in the Czech music education environment. Shin'ichi Suzuki (1898-1998) was born into a musical family. His father ran the first violin workshop in Japan. The young Suzuki graduated from a trade school and intensively studied violin at 15. The later he picked up the violin for the first time, the harder he studied the instrument. From a young age, Suzuki was convinced that the primary goal of any endeavour was the individual's wellbeing. His study trip to Germany was key. Here, he not only met his wife, was inspired by his meeting with Albert Einstein, and perfected his violin playing, but above all, it laid the foundation for Suzuki's future method of music education. Suzuki had difficulty learning German in Germany. As he struggled with German grammar and vocabulary, he became aware that young children learn the language without any visible effort. This finding was a turning point in his understanding of music education for Suzuki. Over time, he built up the "Mother Tongue Method" approach. Suzuki's approach is built on several ideas. Suzuki argued that a safe, friendly environment and individualised approach allow children to reach their full musical potential. He believed that every child could understand and master the language of music. Language is a key phenomenon for Suzuki. He argues that it is possible to grasp music education like a mother teaches her child to speak.

How does a child learn to speak? By imitation, by repetition, from the simple to the more complex. A friendly environment is essential for healthy language development. So too for the development of musical skills. Suzuki's approach is based on the idea that no talent is entirely innate, but we can build it with the help of a conscious approach and if we can adapt the educational environment. In 1941, Suzuki published the book *Powerful Education*, in which he introduced his concept of music education to the professional community. However, the times have not been kind to Suzuki. The Japanese Empire entered the war, and music was relegated to the back burner. For the second time, *Inter Arma, Silent Musae* can be heard. However, after the end of the war rampage, Suzuki embarks on a victorious journey through the musical world. Thanks to the rise of television, he becomes immensely popular in the US. From the US, Suzuki Method spread all over the world. We can identify these fundamental principles of the Suzuki Method (Suzuki 1969; Suzuki 1981).

**Parental involvement.** As in language teaching, the parent must be involved in the educational process when teaching music. Parents should attend lessons with their children and act as home teachers during the week. It is recommended that the parents start learning to play the instrument being taught. Only then are they entitled to demand musical results from the child. The parent's primary task is to create a safe and inspiring environment. Suzuki's emphasis on the role of the parent is thought-provoking today. Often, we see parents completely delegating responsibility for educational outcomes to schools, expecting only educational gains without their engagement.

**An early start to education.** Early instruction on a musical instrument is essential for developing mental processes and

proper muscle coordination. We start at birth, surround the child with music, listen music with the child. The actual teaching should begin around the age of three. However, it is never too late; everyone is musically educable.

**Listening.** Language is learned by the child by repeated listening to spoken speech. So, too, music should be listened to every day. Emphasis is placed on selected opuses from the Suzuki repertoire so that when the child begins learning to play the instrument, he or she is already familiar with the works played. The piece being studied should also be known by the parent, in Suzuki's concept of music education, the mother. Suzuki was often criticised for his conception of the family not being in line with emancipatory currents. However, his understanding of family life must be taken in the context of the times. The parent knows, and even ideally can play, the piece being studied, which is seen as the best motivation for the child.

**Repetition.** Repetition is essential for learning to play an instrument. Children learn the opus, play it, and do not forget it. They store the piece in their musical vocabulary and thus enrich their musical language. Therefore, it is necessary to revisit mastered pieces during the lesson. Suzuki prefers frequent smaller blocks of time to long blocks of practice. He recommends creating a fixed daily schedule of preparation.

**Praise.** As with language, each child is specific. When we teach children to speak, we often praise them; the same must be valid for music education. As educators and as parents, we must be able to praise a child for mastery, even partial success. We must know that applying a one-size-fits-all education model to a child is impossible. We also support the child in building the ability to praise others. This approach enables us to strengthen social competence. Suzuki develops a positive concept where we replace negative expressions with positive ones.

**Learning with other children.** In addition to the individual approach, confrontation with other children is also needed. Group learning helps children to share their achievements and motivates them to keep working. However, it is group performance that has become a target for critics. Suzuki, in promoting the possibilities of his method, often presented large groups of children playing the same piece. Opponents interpreted these performances as a demonstration of the herd mentality of Asia. They pointed to the alleged soullessness and lack of musicality in the children's performance. We can disagree with this approach and instead point to the method's effectiveness in enabling children with different aptitudes and dispositions to master technical problems. Suzuki Method sees joint lessons as a way to socialise the child and build the ability to listen to others. Joint lessons also strengthen the ability to work as a team. However, the foundation of teaching is laid on individual teaching.

**Repertoire.** Children who acquire their native language do not practice individual language problems but use the language in their everyday lives. The repertoire of the Suzuki Method is tailored not to individual technical challenges but is placed in the context of the music itself. It does not focus on dry technique; it aims at the holistic potential of the music. The iconic tune of the Suzuki Method is the children's song *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. Suzuki has worked this simple melody into exercises that target particular technical issues in the violin play. However, Suzuki encourages students to expand their musical horizons and find inspiration in other musical genres.

**Reading the scores.** Suzuki points out that a child learns to read only after mastering speaking. He makes the same point for music. The child will be given music notation only after he has mastered the technique of playing an instrument. Playing by heart is preferred. When playing by heart, the child is not distracted by the music part and can concentrate entirely on the music itself. Suzuki does not diminish the importance of musical notation. He states that the ability to read music notation is one of the fundamental skills of music. However, Suzuki warns against too much emphasis on musical notation. Again, he refers

to the spoken word. He argues that we do not learn to speak from books but acquire our ability to speak primarily by listening. Suzuki greatly emphasises mothers' involvement in the music education process. Mothers should be able to read music to convey written music to their children. Suzuki does not just target the child alone; he extends the scope to the child's family, especially the mothers. Involving the parents in the teaching is very effective. However, we often encounter the reluctance of parents who altruistically claim to be musically uneducated.

The Suzuki Method has many supporters among music educators and top performers alike. Suzuki associations have sprung up worldwide; ironically, the least interest in the Suzuki approach is in Japan itself. The famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma is the most well-known figure in the music world associated with the Suzuki Method. However, we also see many opponents of the method. First, they claim that the Suzuki Method is based on the mechanical repetition of compositions, where musicianship is not developed. We beg to differ. The Suzuki Method sees music as a tool for developing an individual's quality. Suzuki sees music as a means of personal growth. He sees each child as a unique individual. After two years, it is assumed that each child can master the basics of playing a musical instrument. If they persevere through two more years of study, each one finds themselves on the path to mastery. However, Suzuki points out the need for regular practice, which is impossible without achieving quality results.

The Suzuki Method's primary goal is to allow the child to develop a complex personality. The method is not intended to produce child prodigies. However, many pupils go on to further their musical education. Suzuki emphasises the person of the teacher, who should have a wide range of knowledge. Character traits carry more weight than musical skills at Suzuki. When studying methodological manuals, the interdisciplinary grasp of music teaching is evident. Suzuki does not take music out of the educational reality but emphasises the important role of music in a child's education. Looking at Suzuki, we see a humble educator who believes that music can improve a person's life. He rejects mindless practising to exhaustion, seeking joy in music to motivate the child.

#### **4 Our contributions to the field of the social reception of musical activities**

El Sistema and Suzuki Method have several common features. Music education models are applicable across cultures (Mehl 2009). Like Suzuki Method from Japan, El Sistema from Venezuela has established a firm place in several different cultures. The influence of musical activities on language development is apparent (Brandt et al. 2012). Musical activities also vigorously promote prosocial behaviour (Trainor and Cirelli, 2015). The positive impact on developing communication skills for individuals with autism spectrum disorders cannot be overlooked (Sharda et al. 2018). Today, we often delegate the responsibility for education to the school, but the Suzuki Method reminds us of the irreplaceable role of parents (Einarson et al. 2022). Musical activities can also serve as a tool for social mobility (Vincent and Ball 2007). The Suzuki Method motivates a holistic view of the educational process (Thompson 2016, Hendricks et al. 2021). In the Suzuki Method, there is a strong emphasis on positive connections between educational actors (Colpritt 2000; Hendricks 2011). Significantly similar results can be observed in the El Sistema program. Children's wellbeing is significantly improved through membership in the El Sistema programme (Sperling et al. 2023; Merati et al. 2019), and research suggests a positive impact on neurocognitive function (Hedayatiet al. 2016). In particular, participation in shared musical activities greatly enhances soft life skills (Bussu and Mangiarulo, 2024). As research shows, the musical activities offered in the El Sistema program have significant socialisation potential (Bolden et al. 2021). Engagement in community work is a strong positive (Habibi et al. 2022). The impact of musical activities on educational outcomes is clear (Holochwost et al. 2017).

For this paper, we have compiled three of our previous research projects, in which it has been shown that arts activities have a significantly positive impact not only on pupils with special educational needs but also on individuals at risk of social exclusion (Daněk 2024a; Daněk 2024b). We know that our findings can hardly compete with the integrity of the Suzuki Method or the comprehensiveness of the El Sistema program. Nevertheless, some of the findings could enrich the current knowledge in special music education and the integration of education's musical and social components.

When observing online teaching during the COVID-19 epidemic, we found that the subject of music education was not given the same attention as other subjects. It would be more accurate to say that music education received almost no attention. In mainstream schools, music education is not one of the subjects that are perceived as important. We can only speculate what impact this approach to music education will have on future generations. There is a danger that the coming generations will have a more difficult contact with the arts because they have not been able to form a sufficiently strong bond with the arts, which should be conveyed in the family and school. Education should lead to art because art must be accessible to all social classes.

Furthermore, we found that the implementers of the music activities for our target group, i.e. children with special educational needs, were erudite musicians and music educators. However, they did not have sufficient experience working with children with special educational needs. The music educators we interviewed told us that they had not come into significant contact with the issue of special educational needs during their professional training. They approached problems arising from special educational needs, believing they could be solved by standard means. However, special education issues require special education intervention. When working well with children with special educational needs, it is imperative to thoroughly understand their social environment and social skills to assess their behaviour realistically (Hammel and Hourigan 2013). The demands placed on the intact population may be beyond the capabilities of children with special educational needs. This omission can result in an experience of failure, resulting in an adverse reaction from the child and an end to involvement in musical activity.

Our research has demonstrated artistic competence in most individuals involved and studied. However, the target group significantly lacks competencies that enable them to perform and, more importantly, persist in artistic activities. Respondents identified several factors influencing their approach to arts activities. We can mention social determinants, lack of long-term guidance, difficulties with the language of the artistic environment, and lack of intrinsic motivation predominate. However, artistic activities have significant potential for the group we studied. Individuals with special educational needs often possess considerable creative potential (Kapoula et al. 2016). Their creativity and creative abilities can be a compensatory and pro-growth factor. If we activate artistic competencies in our target group, we will significantly facilitate the integration phase into an intact society. These findings show the considerable potential for resocialisation not only in musical activities but also in art as such. Indeed, in today's society, communication and creative skills are valued and are directly linked to artistic activities (Nazario 2022). However, based on our results, it is clear that the target group has to overcome several obstacles. Our pedagogical duty is cultivating the educational reality to eliminate possible discriminating factors. Gradually, we have realised that an inclusive concept of education does not reduce quality; it reduces barriers. At the same time, we cannot expect the same results but must insist on equal opportunities. Everyone has the right to access education but must not, by consuming this right, restrict other participants in the educational process. It is necessary to give access to the arts to the broadest possible strata to socialise the arts. The arts have a quite extraordinary ability to influence every area of our lives positively. We are convinced that art has an irreplaceable

place in modern education; it must be accessible, open, welcoming, and developing. Art must be an elite phenomenon, not a phenomenon of the elites.

Art not only enriches our souls but has a positive impact on many areas of our lives. Through artistic activities, we acquire creativity, improve communication skills, and experience a sense of accomplishment and self-fulfilment. All of this, in turn, positively influences our employment opportunities, allowing us to climb the social ladder to positions that would be more difficult to reach without the help of artistic activities. For our target group, arts activities can be a unique (and often the only) way to overcome the dangers of social exclusion and cope with the demands of their special educational needs. However, it will be necessary to embrace the idea that special educational needs and social exclusion do not preclude the ability to benefit from arts activities and that special educational needs may hide exceptional talent. If we are willing to look for artistic talent even in environments at risk of social exclusion, we will surely be rewarded with many new great musicians, artists, and writers. Moreover, even if they do not pursue artistic activities professionally, the enriching experience associated with artistic activities will positively impact their future life trajectory. While the different social groups in our society are pervasive, social advancement is often conditioned by the level of education attained. The arts can be the key factor that opens the door to quality education. A quality education then enables social advancement, significantly eliminating the risk of social exclusion. Yes, art in education is not only art relevant to education but, above all, art relevant to society.

## 5 Conclusion

The paper introduced two globally recognised approaches to music education, the Venezuelan El Sistema programme and the Suzuki Method. These two music education models provided a theoretical framework for investigating the impact of music and musical activities on children with special educational needs and individuals at risk of social exclusion. Music education extends far beyond the social sphere of the individual. It shows that everyone can benefit from being involved in musical activities. The hundreds of thousands of children who have been through El Sistema's orchestras or have been educated in music using the Suzuki Method are proof of this. The theme of social justice has regularly resonated in our research. Why shouldn't everyone have access to musical activities? If not, we need to realise how many beneficial impulses a significant portion of the population is being deprived of. Music activates social skills, promotes educational competence, accelerates communication, and enhances creativity. These competencies will be crucial for future generations. Our planet needs socially, educationally and communicatively proficient creative individuals. Only in this way will we successfully meet the challenges posed by today's rapidly changing society. That is why we must connect the musical and educational worlds with the social world. In this way, the social potential of musical activities will be fulfilled, and music will become an instrument of harmony of tones and social justice.

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#### Primary Paper Section: A

#### Secondary Paper Section: AM