

Gustavo Dudamel – Symphony Orchestra Conductor and Violinist, Conductor of the National Youth Orchestra of Venezuela, Conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic – by Joan Franklin Smutny (from *Heroes of Giftedness*, 2009, Gifted Education Press).

“We must let ourselves be moved by that art that brings us together...and begin to recognize ourselves in our essences, our identity—through art, which is the only world where we can find the true revelation of our being.” José Antonio Abreu
Founder of the National System of Children and Youth Orchestras of Venezuela

Gustavo Dudamel’s mother little knew that her son would one day become a world renowned conductor when she gave him a set of toy soldiers. But even back then, Gustavo revealed his soul to be more attune to music than militarism, for he quickly arranged the soldiers into an orchestra and began conducting them (Harrell, 2007). Music called to him from an early age. Born in 1981 in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, he was first drawn to the music of his father, a trombonist in a salsa group. In a **60 Minutes** interview (2008), Gustavo said that he wanted to follow his father’s footsteps, but his arms were too short.

So Gustavo Dudamel did what thousands of children in Venezuela do; he went to one of the hundreds of music schools of the National System of Children and Youth Orchestras of Venezuela, founded in the 1970s by pioneer musician and economist, José Anotonio Abreu. Dudamel received a violin and quickly responded to the nurturing atmosphere, the demanding work, and the joy and thrill of learning and making orchestral music. The rules were simple: students are given an instrument as soon as they can hold it; tuition, trips and music are free in return for the children’s promise to play in one of the ensembles; students commit to a rigorous schedule of three to four hours a day, six days a week.

Gustavo Dudamel thrived in this world. He immersed himself in the violin, studying under José Luis Jimenez at the Jacinto Lara Conservatory and later, José Francisco del Castillo at the Latin-American Violin Academy. But while the strings transported him as a musician, he still wanted to conduct. After all, as he explained in the interview, he had conducted many concerts in his house (imaginatively) when he was six. So, in 1995, he took up the formal study of conducting with Rodolfo Saglimbeni; later, he continued his studies with the great founder of the Venezuelan music system, José Antonio Abreu. As a result of his prodigious gifts, he found himself appointed, in 1999, to the position of music director for the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra (the national youth orchestra that draws upon the most promising students throughout the country).

Had he lived in any other country, it is a question whether the little boy who loved to conduct toy soldiers would ever become at the young age of 18, the music director of such an accomplished orchestra. Indeed, Dudamel’s rise cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the mentoring system that launched him. Created and founded by the musical visionary, José Antonio Abreu over three decades ago, the National System of Children and Youth Orchestras of Venezuela enrolls approximately 250,000 students, the majority from poor communities. Across Venezuela, Abreu has established 246 centers, admitting children between 2 and 18, assigning them instruments and organizing them into groups with instructors.

For thousands of children and young people, El Sistema, as it is called, provides the only path away from the despair of the streets. In his **60 Minutes** interview, Gustavo confirmed this in his own life: “The music saved me. I’m sure of this. With all these bad things around you, you are exposed to these things...up close. Music gave me a way to be far, far away from these things” (CBS, February 2008). Gustavo Dudamel’s dazzling gifts are a testament to Abreu’s vision and the scope of his music education program. Major figures in the classical music world agree. Sir Simon Rattle, Conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, has called it “the most important thing happening in classical music anywhere in the world” (Lubow, 2007).

Dudamel’s assignment as music director of The Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra was anything but ordinary. Composed of the most talented students in the Venezuelan orchestra system, the orchestra under his direction has given concerts in Europe, the United States and Israel, receiving highest praise throughout the classical music circuit. Conducting heavy-weights such as Claudio Abbado, Zubin Mehta, and Simon Rattle have worked with them, sometimes for weeks, and laud the tremendous achievements of “El Sistema.” Daniel Barenboim, who has become an important mentor to the young conductor, also recognizes that something new is emerging from Venezuela. In 2006,

a Deutsche Grammophon recording of Gustavo Dudamel and the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra was released to wide distribution, and in 2007 the German recording industry conferred upon the conductor their coveted ECHO Award in the “New Artist of the Year” category.

Despite the breathless pace of his recent life – winning first prize at the Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition in 2004, becoming Principal Conductor of the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra of Sweden in 2006, and guest conducting in Berlin, Vienna, Israel, London, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and New York – Dudamel has never withdrawn from the youth orchestra of his childhood. In 2007 in Edinburgh, a reporter (Harrell, 2007) found him trying to convey to the string section the precise quality he wanted in a passage of Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 10: an atmosphere of terror straight from the purges of Stalin’s brutal regime. Imitating the explosive sound of a firing squad, he let out a passionate “pop pop pop!” to express what he wanted. In the electrifying performance that followed later on, the conductor and his orchestra had found their Shostakovich.

When Gustavo Dudamel entered the Hollywood Bowl in 2005 for his conducting debut in the United States, another adventure awaited him. The orchestra felt the force of a new conducting prodigy. Holding the baton extremely high, he responded to every nuance in the music and during fast and frenetic passages, appeared to lift right off the podium in a whirling dance of baton and arm and flying hair that sent chills through both the orchestra and audience. Some compared his passionate embodiment of music to the great Leonard Bernstein. Michele Zukofsky, principal clarinetist of the LAP said: “When he’s conducting the piece, you’re feeling like it’s just been composed, it’s like he’s creating it himself” (Lubow, 2007).

In 2009, Gustavo Dudamel succeeded the distinguished and greatly loved conductor, Esa-Pekka Salonen, another prodigy who spotted Dudamel himself while serving as a juror at the Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition. In choosing Gustavo Dudamel, the Los Angeles Philharmonic is also committing itself to an education initiative, “Youth Orchestra L.A.,” directly modeled on a Venezuelan prototype. Starting with youngsters between age 8 and 12 in a disadvantaged district of central Los Angeles, it aims to provide a musical instrument and a place in a youth orchestra for every young person in Los Angeles County who wants one. Hence, what inspires many at this auspicious beginning of the Dudamel era at the Los Angeles Philharmonic is not only his breathtaking gifts as conductor, but also the gifts he can bestow on impoverished, disaffected youth in Los Angeles, many of whom have not yet felt the power of music.

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