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Maestro Dudamel, Venezuelan Soft Power and Lessons for America ^[1]

The New York Philharmonic's recent Pyongyang concert has garnered extensive international news coverage over the momentary piercing of North Korea's thick carapace. But rather than seeking as far as the Hermit Kingdom for evidence of a truly effective use of classical music as soft power, we'd arguably do better to look in our own back yard: Los Angeles to be precise, in the guise of the L.A. Philharmonic's next music director, Gustavo Dudamel. The extraordinary young conductor is the embodiment of Venezuela's one real soft power asset. The U.S. has much to learn from Maestro Dudamel's story and experience as policy formulators think about future public diplomacy initiatives.

In general, skepticism is warranted about the soft power potential of orchestral music performance. True, Leonard Bernstein made a splash when he took the New York Philharmonic to the Soviet Union in 1959, just as his successors have just done in North Korea. But as one-off events, it's questionable whether one can discern any long-term persuasive or attractive achievement.

But Gustavo Dudamel and what he represents is different. Dudamel is the most illustrious progeny of a Venezuelan youth music education program that receives kudos the world over, including the highest praise of emulation. The Fundacion del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela, or simply "el Sistema," was established in 1975 by José Antonio Abreu, an economist-cum-musician, to bring the benefits of instrument instruction and performance to poor and troubled Venezuelan children. El Sistema provides lessons and youth orchestras to some 250,000 youngsters and, in doing so, an alternative to crime and self-abuse. Dudamel himself has said in this regard: "The music saved me. I'm sure of this."

El Sistema also offers a conduit for the most talented young musicians to find their way up through competitive regional ensembles to the apex Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra. How good is the Simon Bolivar? When the orchestra appeared in New York this past autumn under Gustavo Dudamel's baton, the New York Times reviewer rhapsodized about the young musicians' "sweeping, urgent, often brilliant playing"; and he glowingly described the el Sistema program for Times readers.

With the imprimatur of figures like Berlin Philharmonic conductor Simon Rattle, who has called el Sistema "the most important thing happening in classical music in the world today", similar programs have been set up in 22 Latin American and other Western Hemisphere states, Scotland, and most notably the U.S., where in Los Angeles Dudamel will play a leading role in the Philharmonic's new Youth Orchestra LA, a public-private initiative "devoted to providing quality instrumental music education for children with the greatest needs, fewest resources

and little or no access to instrumental music education."

For Venezuela's strongman Hugo Chavez, el Sistema represents a critical exception to the lackluster performance at home and abroad of his so-called "Bolivarian revolution", and it is unsurprising that he gives the program far more financial support than did his predecessors. Unlike petrodollar-driven foreign aid programs like free eye operations in Venezuela for impoverished Latin Americans and reduced-price home heating oil in the U.S., in partnership with Joseph P. Kennedy II's Citizens Energy Corporation, el Sistema is soft power that does its job effectively. It represents more than a crass, ineffective attempt to buy good public relations; rather, it is a grand, universally lauded idea for the development of human capital.

Herein lies a powerful lesson for U.S. foreign policy formulators as they look to rehabilitate America's currently tattered international prestige. The program that José Antonio Abreu dreamed up three decades ago is tailor-made for public diplomacy outreach by the U.S. to underprivileged peoples and regions that have in many cases seen violence, ideological extremism and concomitant anti-Americanism.

The U.S. could co-opt and adapt the el Sistema program, carefully emphasizing that the program long predates Chavez in Venezuela, both overseas and indeed within the U.S. itself. And America should go beyond music in its human capital aid efforts, to encompass the performing and creative arts in general, including acting, dance, painting and sculpture, photography, and writing (in combination with literacy programs). El Sistema is based in part on the idea that "the Devil Finds Work for Idle Hands"—fill those hands with musical instruments, paint brushes, cameras, and pens, and they are far less likely to grasp weapons or drugs. Those whose lives are improved will be citizens better equipped to participate in local and global society, and they will know whom to thank for their improved horizons. Moreover, the world can only be grateful if the U.S. helps identify and cultivate more prodigies from developing regions like Gustavo Dudamel.

Properly implemented, an American-sponsored youth arts education initiative would provide an ongoing soft power benefit to our international standing and objectives. Who knows? Perhaps a future U.S.-inspired el Sistema in North Korea will be the means of realizing New York Philharmonic conductor Loren Maazel's stated hope that "someday a composer may write a work entitled 'Americans in Pyongyang.'"
