MAKING MUSICAL GESTURES: MOVEMENT, EMBODIMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE AT EL SISTEMA SOMERVILLE

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Chapter One: Introduction

Actually this is funny, so in Venezuela I’ve heard that if you ask a kid what is El Sistema then they say it’s the orchestra program! If you ask a teacher or an administrator what is El Sistema they’ll say it’s a social change program...And it’s almost like a simultaneous objective – it’s like a dual objective, simultaneously a musical program – that’s the kids’ view, and a social program and that’s the political and societal view for the program. Even though a lot of parents and probably supporters, they just go to the concerts and they just love it. And I think it doesn’t need to work too hard to prove either way. As long as it’s doing its job of setting up good music teaching, then the social parts will start to happen. And vice versa – if you put things in place where kids are being mentored and they’re being encouraged to have positive role models, they’re going to be better musicians – I think that they go hand in hand. And that’s a poetic quote...that’s a beautiful quote.

-El Sistema Somerville Director

Thesis Overview

El Sistema is the classical music education system in Venezuela, which has begun to spread throughout the United States and the rest of the world, providing free access to music education and promoting its dual goal of musical excellence and social change. When describing El Sistema as the topic of this research, listeners are often puzzled about the discipline into which the thesis falls. So what do music and anthropology have in common? And what do both of these disciplines have to do with El Sistema’s ultimate goal of social change? In this instance, the answer can be summed up in one word: the body. Combining personal experience in music education with research of El Sistema Somerville and El Sistema in Venezuela has illuminated the crucial yet implicit role of the body in classical music culture, especially within the context of a program that emphasizes this role as one means of bringing about social change.

Drawing on the notion that the body functions as a subject with agency that informs each of our own individual perceptions of the world, I emphasize the degree to which this
sensing body permeates musical expression, understanding and communication. In effect, there are a series of bodily practices that are characteristic of classical music culture, and that are observable among the students and teachers of El Sistema Somerville. It is safe to say, however, that when the topic of classical music is raised it is the music, not the body, which comes to mind. Of particular interest to me, therefore, is the fact that these bodily practices are not often explicitly considered or discussed, specifically in terms of the their impact on the social dimension of music making. Especially among non-musicians, it is rare to find anyone who acknowledges the role of the body outside of the physical act of playing the instrument. Even considering my own experiences with classical music education, however, discussions of the bodily practice of classical music do not typically extend past the use of the body as a tool for expression. It is my belief, however, that the physical act of playing music with others enhances students’ sense of body awareness and therefore allows them to establish connections on a deeper level.

It is this process that is in play at El Sistema Somerville, a program that places special emphasis on the role of the body in classical music education. El Sistema sets itself apart from other music education and after school programs by incorporating distinctive bodily practices that consequently create a cohesive El Sistema culture and identity. It is this sense of identity that the students are able to connect to amidst the upper class world of classical music. The perception of teachers and parents involved in El Sistema and El Sistema Somerville is that through the holistic and positive nature of this El Sistema culture, the skills encouraged and developed allow the students to leave the program more well-rounded, confident individuals. It is critical, therefore, that the body’s
unacknowledged role in this instance of social change be recognized, as it has implications for the future of classical music education in the United States.

In order to provide a context for this argument, the thesis begins with an overview of the history and philosophy of El Sistema as it functions in Venezuela, the United States, and Somerville in particular, as well as The System’s connections to the current dialogue surrounding music education in the United States. Following a description of the methodology of my research is a chapter relating personal experience with movement in classical music playing to anthropological theories of embodiment. In chapter three, I make use of evidence from observation of the Somerville program and document analysis of El Sistema orchestras in Venezuela to outline the ways in which these programs emphasize the body’s role in classical music by incorporating their own unique bodily practices. All of this evidence comes together in the following chapter as I connect the bodily practice of El Sistema to the program’s goal of social change, and point to this emphasis on the body as an aspect of The System that sets it apart from other after school programs - and even other music education programs.

**El Sistema History and Philosophy**

The phenomenon of El Sistema has drawn much attention recently from musicians and educators from across the globe. One such writer, musician, and music educator, Tricia Tunstall, decided to travel to Venezuela to witness this notorious music education system for herself, and compiled her observations and discoveries into a book entitled *Changing Lives: Gustavo Dudamel, El Sistema, and the Transformative Power of Music*. The “legend” of El Sistema’s founding in 1975 goes as follows: Abreu, a musician and petroleum
economist, decided to follow through on his dream to create the first all-Venezuelan youth orchestra by holding an initial rehearsal in an abandoned parking garage, to which only eleven musicians made an appearance (Tunstall 2012:36). This was a revolutionary idea at the time because prior to El Sistema, admission to the few conservatories in Venezuela dedicated to the serious study of music was hard to achieve (Tunstall 2012:55). As a result, there were few opportunities for Venezuelans, and musicians from Europe and North America dominated much of the classical music world in Venezuela, often playing European symphonic works for the upper-class elite (Tunstall 2012:55). When Abreu founded El Sistema, therefore, he created “a youth orchestra in a country where there had never been one before; an all-Venezuelan orchestra in a culture where orchestra players were, almost by definition, non-Venezuelan” (Tunstall 2012:59).

Thirty-five years after that initial rehearsal, there are now about three hundred and seventy thousand youths currently participating in Venezuela’s El Sistema in almost three hundred núcleos across the entire nation (Tunstall 2012:36). “Núcleos“ are El Sistema’s music learning centers, which are often established in “found spaces,” or settings established for other purposes, such as abandoned school buildings or community centers (Tunstall 2012:39). One such núcleo, called Los Chorros, was a detention center for juvenile delinquents and abused or abandoned children before El Sistema took over the facility, and as a result, many of its first students were the abandoned children who remained at the center during this transition (Tunstall 2012:27). At each núcleo, children from ages four to eighteen arrive every day after school for three to four hours to study music theory, take lessons, and play in orchestras and ensembles (Tunstall 2012:28). Although some students travel from farther away by bus or with their parents, most of the
students live nearby (Tunstall 2012:28). Due to the large numbers of students at each núcleo, núcleo leaders will often establish several different orchestras to accommodate the varying skill levels of the students (Tunstall 2012:33). From a very early age, however, every student is given an instrument and a place in an orchestra (Tunstall 2012:33). Students may begin by playing simplified versions of major orchestral works so that they can play with more advanced players within one orchestra, but they will revisit these pieces as they acquire further skills (Tunstall 2012:36). There are many teachers at each núcleo available to give students personalized attention, and often times, students who come up through a particular núcleo will stay on into adulthood as paid teachers (Tunstall 2012:33).

As the most advanced members of each núcleo reach their teenage years, they are often encouraged to audition for a seat in the prestigious Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, often referred to as the “crown jewel of the Sistema” (Tunstall 2012:98). This orchestra tours the world and is conducted by Gustavo Dudamel, himself a product of El Sistema (Tunstall 2012:20). Dudamel, who is from “humble beginnings in Venezuela,” came up through El Sistema and was leading the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra by the young age of eighteen (Tunstall 2012:20). He began guest conducting with some of the world’s greatest orchestras in his early twenties, and was appointed as the conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2007 (Tunstall 2012:20). The Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra has undergone several transformations since its original formation, as the founding members have matured and can no longer be considered “youths.” Abreu decided, therefore, to create a new orchestra for the younger generation, which he entitled the National Children’s Orchestra (Tunstall 2012:113). It is this orchestra that Dudamel grew up with,
and as he and other members of the orchestra advanced and began to join the Simón Bolívar Orchestra, it became too large to sustain. Abreu then decided to divide the orchestra into two separate performing groups – the older generation constituting the Simón Bolívar A orchestra and the younger generation forming the Simón Bolívar B. It is the Simón Bolívar B orchestra that is conducted by Dudamel and is better known due to its world tours (Tunstall 2012:118).

El Sistema is funded through a government foundation known as “FESNOJIV,” or Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela (Tunstall 2012:35). This name was recently changed to the “Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar” (Tunstall 2012:35). In 2010, the budget for El Sistema was about one hundred and twenty million dollars, most of which came from the federal government, although private donors and bank interest earnings also played a role (Tunstall 2012:36). One of the most important aspects of the program that this budget allows is for El Sistema to be completely free for all of its participants; El Sistema provides instruments, teachers, uniforms, and often nutritional and social services for each of its students (Tunstall 2012:36). This is an important component of the program considering the fact that seventy to ninety percent of El Sistema children live in poverty (Tunstall 2012:36).

There is a distinct El Sistema philosophy that accompanies the cost-free aspect of this program. Rather than being merely a music education program, Abreu views El Sistema as a combination between music education and social reform (Tunstall 2012:X). Accompanying this philosophy is the central idea that music has the power to “rescue children” by functioning as a “potent vehicle for social reform and the fight against the perils of childhood poverty” (Tunstall 2012:X). According to Abreu, some of these “perils”
include not just the economic and physical deprivations of poverty, but also an associated “spiritual lack” including feelings of loneliness, lack of recognition, hopelessness, and low self-esteem, all of which can lead to gang membership, drugs and violence (Tunstall 2012:X-XII). As Abreu himself has stated, “Poverty generates anonymity…an orchestra means joy, motivation, teamwork, success. Music creates happiness and hope in a community...to sing and to play together means to intimately coexist. Music is immensely important in the awakening of sensibility and in the forging of values” (Tunstall 2012:38). In this way, Abreu asserts that the “spiritual wealth” accrued through music can work to overcome material poverty, and he points to the orchestra as a model for society in which students learn to work collaboratively with peers from various cultures and backgrounds (Tunstall 2012:XII). Furthermore, not only does this work on the individual level, but El Sistema also functions on a broader social dimension, as each child has an effect on both his or her family and community (Tunstall 2012:XII).

Nowhere is El Sistema’s philosophy more apparent than in the name of the primary performance center in Caracas, known as The Center for Social Action Through Music. Venezuelan architect Tomás Lugo recently designed this building, which is the main site of rehearsal and performance activity throughout the city (Tunstall 2012:41). Tunstall (2012:43) describes it as a “grand, architecturally ambitious new building” with a “modern aesthetic” located in the heart of Caracas, the architecture of which is planned so that all spaces throughout the building, even offices, are functional for rehearsing, performing and recording. Abreu is working to build six more centers across the country similar to this one, and he has a vision for Caracas to “turn this whole area into a city of music, where musicians will be rehearsing and performing constantly” (Tunstall 2012:44). Additionally,
the grandeur of the building clearly sends a message from Abreu to his students, namely that “The students of El Sistema, no matter how poor the barrios they come from, deserve the very highest level of artistry and technology (Tunstall 2012:43).

He also sends this message through his establishment of a system of luthiers throughout the country. In Venezuela, a luthier refers to a center for instrument making and repair, and it is Abreu’s vision to “establish instrument workshops all over Venezuela, a vast luthier network paralleling the orchestra network and supplying its instrumental needs – and staffed, of course, with Sistema graduates who have learned the skills of instrument-making” (Tunstall 2012:39). There are currently twelve luthier workshops throughout the country, which are developed as a way to both address El Sistema’s ever expanding instrument shortage as well as to provide El Sistema youths with training and potential future jobs (Tunstall 2012:39). Abreu once again supports his notion that “culture for the poor must never be poor culture” by working to help El Sistema teachers and students learn how to make high-quality instruments for members of the program itself (Tunstall 2012:40).

**El Sistema in the United States**

El Sistema has become a model for music education and social reform in the United States as well as in countries all over the world. One of the first prominent music educators in the United States to “discover and champion El Sistema” is Mark Churchill, Dean of the Preparatory and Continuing Education Schools of New England Conservatory (NEC) in Boston, Massachusetts (Tunstall 2012:129). Churchill initially established a connection with Abreu due to his long-time dream of creating a “pan-American youth ensemble”
As of 2009, Churchill had spent over a decade working with Abreu to foster a collaborative relationship between NEC and El Sistema, and he had traveled to Venezuela many times before to witness the youth orchestras for himself (Tunstall 2012:129). In 2009, Churchill flew to Venezuela once again to offer Abreu a TED prize, which marked the first time the prize had ever gone to an educator or a Latin American (Tunstall 2012:130). The prize included not only a financial award but also the chance for Abreu to give a live-streamed speech over the internet both explaining his vision and asking for support from those all across the United States, as well as the world (Tunstall 2012:129-130). The video also included a live performance of Dudamel conducting one of the Venezuelan youth orchestras, which allowed viewers to gain a sense of both the vision and the product of El Sistema. The videos became a kind of You Tube sensation that “for hundreds of thousands of viewers across the globe...offered a first introduction not only to Abreu but also to Dudamel and the world of the Sistema” (Tunstall 2012:131).

In 2005, Abreu and the president of NEC established a formal “friendship agreement” between FESNOJIV and the Conservatory “pledging to work together toward the common vision of music as a powerful force for change in education and society” (Tunstall 2012:136). In an effort to continue this collaboration, NEC developed the “Sistema Fellows Program,” which provides professional training for ten postgraduate musicians and educators passionate about connecting “music, youth, and social change” (Sistema Fellows Program 2013). Fellows undertake an intensive curriculum at the Conservatory in Boston before spending a month in residence at an El Sistema-inspired program in the United States, as well as a month in residence in Venezuela observing the original program (Sistema Fellows Program 2013). Many of these students go on to lead or
work in one of the El Sistema-inspired programs across the United States (Sistema Fellows Program 2013).

A similar partnership exists between El Sistema and the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, which Gustavo Dudamel currently conducts. Before Dudamel took on this role, L.A. Philharmonic president Deborah Borda traveled to Venezuela to witness the program and upon return, subsequently won approval from the orchestra’s Board of Directors to invest resources in creating a program inspired by El Sistema’s values (Tunstall 2012:137). Soon after, the Orchestra’s Education and Community Affairs departments released a document calling for a “Youth Orchestra Movement” in order to establish a “community-wide network of youth orchestras” while engaging community, civic, arts and education organizations from all across Los Angeles. The new partnership became known as YOLA, or Youth Orchestra Los Angeles, whose goal it is to create between three and five youth orchestras in underserved communities all across L.A. (Tunstall 2012:141).

Besides these initiatives, many other El Sistema-inspired programs have been developed all across the country, and on a larger scale, such programs exist in over twenty-five countries all over the world (el Sistema USA 2009-2010). There are three El Sistema-inspired programs in the Boston area alone. Besides El Sistema Somerville, there is an elementary school known as the Conservatory Lab Charter School with an El Sistema-inspired program funded through NEC, as well as a program at the Pope John Paul II Catholic Academy in Dorchester. All of these programs are part of a larger movement known as “El Sistema USA,” which works to provide a network for El Sistema-inspired programs in the US as well as a forum for discussion of pertinent issues regarding music and social change (el Sistema USA 2009-2010). All El Sistema-inspired programs in the US
strive to follow several of El Sistema’s main values, such as a mission of social change, access and excellence, the núcleo environment, intensity, use of the ensemble, CATS teacher model, multi-year continuum, family and community inclusion, and connections to outside organizations (el Sistema USA 2009-2010).

**Music Education in the United States**

As El Sistema has begun to spread throughout the United States and the rest of the world, its ideology has had a direct impact on the current dialogue surrounding music education in the United States, particularly around issues of funding and equal access. The history of music education in American schools began officially in the eighteenth century. During this time, the first school dedicated to singing was founded in Boston, the purpose of which was to develop skills for singing and reading music in the church and for numerous religious celebrations (Stanford 2012). The nineteenth century marked the establishment of the Boston Academy of Music, where students learned not only the art of singing, but were also taught the study of music and music theory (Stanford 2012). One of the founders of this Academy, Lowell Mason, went on to create a work entitled “Manual of Instruction,” which was used by several teachers outside of the school in their own teaching (Stanford 2012). This allowed Mason to begin formal music instruction at other institutions, which marked the beginning of music education in American schools (Stanford 2012). Several years later, the study of music became an established part of the school curriculum for students of all ages, and schools designed to train potential teachers in music education began to develop (Stanford 2012).
In the twentieth century, universities began to offer degrees in music, and Oberlin Conservatory became the first college to offer a Bachelor’s degree in music education (Stanford 2012). Leaders in music education began to develop organizations such as the Music Supervisor’s National Conference in order to facilitate the discussion and promotion of the study and teaching of music (Stanford 2012). In addition, schools began to establish musical ensembles for students such as bands and orchestras, and talented music students were recognized for their skills and supported through grants and scholarships (Stanford 2012). Frances Elliot Clark made a substantial impact on music education by making music more accessible through the use of record players and music libraries in schools (Stanford 2012). Most recently, symposiums such as the Tanglewood II held at Boston University in 2007 encourage preeminent educators from all over the globe to examine the history of music education, and allow such individuals to meet and discuss future plans for the ways in which music is taught (Stanford 2012).

Despite the rapid increase in music education in public schools since the eighteenth century, there is currently a great deal of debate surrounding the emphasis that educators should place on music in schools. At the elementary level, activities common to music education include singing, playing recorder or other instruments, and learning standard music notation. Later, in secondary school, students often increase their knowledge by participating in large choral or instrumental performing ensembles (Williams 2007: 20). In his article “The Music in Our Minds,” Norman M. Weinberger (psychology professor and founder of the Center for the Neurobiology of Learning and Memory at UCI) discusses the current research regarding the benefits of such musical activities. He states, “Music has the ability to facilitate acquisition, reading readiness, and general intellectual development; to
foster positive attitudes and to lower truancy in middle and high school; to enhance creativity; and to promote social development, personality adjustment, and self-worth” (Weinberger 1998:36).

Weinberger also discusses the neurological benefits of music. He presents research indicating that playing and learning music strengthens the synapses between brain cells by engaging systems such as the sensory and perceptual, cognitive, planning movements, feedback and evaluation, motivational/hedonic, and learning memory (Weinberger 1998:38). In her article in the Christian Science Monitor, Elizabeth Nesoff also points to the increased spatial reasoning associated with learning music, as well as the correlations between participation in musical activities and higher scoring in math, reading, history, geography, and SATs (Nesoff 2003). Eric Jensen, who is a staff developer and member of the Society for Neuroscience and the New York Academy of Science and specializes in the brain and learning, is a well-known advocate for arts in education. In his book Arts with the Brain in Mind, Jensen outlines the scientific evidence for the importance of music in enhancing cognitive, emotional, perceptual-motor, stress, and memory systems, and asserts that even though these effects may take months or years to show up, they are substantial and therefore should not be ignored (Jensen 2001:14). Besides discussing the neurological benefits of music, Jensen also stresses the social benefits of the arts, stating, “Even if one could get the higher scores without a basic or integrated arts curriculum, do you really want to live in a world where the best that we have to offer is a high-test-score graduate, but a person who can’t work with others, be creative and express himself, solve real-world problems, and do it with civility?” (Jensen 2001:vii).
Despite these potential benefits, arguments against music education in schools arise because of the associated costs. In his article “Music Education: An American Specialty,” Allen Britton writes that the amount of personnel and equipment required to run music programs “involves a huge and continuing monetary investment by financially hard-pressed local school districts and, in the case of parochial schools, by parishes and congregations the members of which also pay taxes for the support of public school programs” (Britton 1962:27). As of 2003, school districts all across the country were facing tight budget cuts to non-academic programs, and as a result arts classes were weighed against educational assets such as small class sizes (Nesoff 2003). Nesoff proposes that two large factors that have contributed to such budget cuts are No Child Left Behind and state testing standards, which shifted educators’ focus to “core subjects” such as English and math, forcing school districts to allocate more time and resources to academics rather than music and other arts (Nesoff 2003). Jensen also points to the argument that the arts are not efficient, as results such as higher test scores will require a significant amount of time to take effect and learning through the arts can be considered a time-consuming and indirect process (Jensen 2001:2).

In a more recent article presented on NPR in 2012, Lara Pellegrinelli discusses the current state of music education in the US. One figure shows that as of the 2009/2010 school year, ninety-four percent of schools across the nation were offering some form of music instruction (Pellegrinelli 2012). She goes on to quote Richard Kessler, Dean of Mannes College the New School of Music, who states that despite this statistic, “The disparity between what schools offer and what students actually receive can be enormous” (Pellegrinelli 2012). By this statement he refers to the large student-teacher ratio that
often results when one or two teachers are expected to teach all of the school’s students, resulting in approximately two point one million children across the country who likely do not receive music education (Pelligrinelli 2012). Even within schools where music education is offered, the teachers themselves often rate their support and resources with low percentages (Pelligrinelli 2012). Pelligrinelli also points to the clear disparity between the availability of arts in low-poverty versus high-poverty schools, revealing that only eighty-one percent of high-poverty schools offer arts education today, as compared to the one-hundred percent in 1999/2000 (Pelligrinelli 2012).

Programs such as El Sistema Somerville and others in the El Sistema USA movement are impossible to ignore when it comes to this dialogue about music education in the United States. In a time when there is a large discrepancy between the availability of music education for high-poverty students compared to low-poverty students, such El Sistema programs provide a model for equal access to arts education for students regardless of background or socio-economic situation. So far, this model has had to function differently in the United States than it does in Venezuela, however, as the government is not able to fund El Sistema-inspired programs on a large scale and most programs are therefore financed through private organizations such as professional orchestras and conservatories. El Sistema Somerville, on the other hand, is the first El Sistema-inspired program in the United States to be funded through the municipal government and integrated into an existing public school music department, providing a possible model for future programs across the country.

Using the original program in Venezuela as a guide, El Sistema-inspired programs in the United States also emphasize the social benefits of involvement in the arts by
presenting their programs as equally devoted to both music education and social reform. At El Sistema Somerville, for instance, teachers spend as much time addressing behavioral issues, building self-esteem, and providing academic assistance as they do training the children musically. The incorporation of the CATS model also emphasizes the idea that students are not involved in the program just to become musicians; there is a larger goal in mind, for participants to use the lessons learned during rehearsals to develop into well-rounded citizens who will be able to successfully interact in the world, regardless of whether or not they choose to pursue music. This sends a message that the positive social effects of music education are not simply pleasant side benefits, but that this type of education is a primary means of enacting social change.

The intensity of programs such as El Sistema Somerville also sets this model of music education apart from most music education in United States public schools. On one hand, it provides an opportunity to keep students engaged everyday after school in a productive way. By rehearsing daily for three hours during the program and also having the chance to bring instruments home to practice, the students are able to truly engage with their instruments and with the music, and therefore make noticeable progress fairly quickly. The intensity of daily rehearsals produces different results than the incorporation of a forty-minute music class into the school day twice a week, or weekly orchestra or band rehearsals. Therefore, when El Sistema students begin to recognize their own progress, they will experience more joy and excitement through music education, which will spark further interest in such programs.
El Sistema Somerville

Excerpts from my fieldnotes, taken over the period of September 2012 – March 2013, as well as descriptions of my own experiences as a musician, provide a more complete picture of El Sistema Somerville.

I enter the El Sistema room when the students are about to split up into their groups for sectionals. Simon sends me out for a private lesson with a new student who has been in the program but recently switched from viola to cello. We work on playing a D Major scale as well as some of the orchestra music, and when I play with him he is very curious and asks many questions about the cello and my playing. We rejoin the group as Simon brings the cellists downstairs for a water and bathroom break. He leads them back to the room with a game, first telling them to walk like cows, and then zombies, and finally frogs. The students have a lot of fun with this activity, and one boy even maintains his cow persona by crawling all the way back to the classroom on all fours. The students are then told to break up into two groups depending on what piece they want to play: Ode to Joy or Halleluiah Chorus. In Simon’s room, he teaches the students the piece by first having them sing a section of the music, and then having them pluck that section before they are finally allowed to use their bows and play full out. After rehearsal I go into a room down the hallway for Homework Help. I work with two girls who are struggling with reading comprehension. One of the cellists is complaining that his homework is boring and he doesn’t want to continue working on it. Simon goes to sit with the student and tries to show him why the work isn’t boring, simultaneously encouraging him by saying “You can do it!”

While an abbreviated account, this description reflects a typical day at El Sistema Somerville. Diane, a violin teacher, runs the program, along with three other teachers.
(another violinist, a violist, and a cellist). Each teacher is in charge of a group of musicians who chose to play their instrument. All of the forty-eight students in El Sistema Somerville attend the Edgerly Elementary School where the El Sistema program is held. Every day after school, the students remain in the cafeteria after everyone else has gone home for the day and prepare to play music from two-thirty until five-thirty. The teachers provide them with food for snacks during their break until three o’clock, at which point everyone makes their way upstairs to the “El Sistema classroom” on the second floor. Diane typically begins each day by gathering all of the students, teachers and mentors in this room in order to go over any announcements or engage the students in a calming activity such as learning a new song together as she plays the guitar.

Each day is typically composed of a variety of activities often beginning with a class entitled “Music and Musicianship.” In this class, students learn about musical notation, practice reading music, and engage in rhythmic exercises that require them to stomp or use their bodies in other ways. Usually following this class students make their way to separate rooms for sectional rehearsals, in which they are split up according to their instrument and placed in one of four groups. It is at this time that the teachers are able to work with their sections on the skills and music specific to their instrument, and are able to address any issues or make suggestions as they arise. The sectionals function almost as group lessons, in which the students all play together or in smaller groups and are each given a certain amount of individual attention. The students and teachers then come together for orchestra rehearsal, which takes place in the school gymnasium. This is the time when all of the work done in sectionals is applied to the group as a whole, so that each student knows his or her part and each section is able to play together. Diane and the other
teachers switch off conducting the orchestra as they rehearse scales and pieces. The goal is to have all of the sections fit together when it comes to the notes, bowings, and intonation, and to encourage energy and expressivity at the same time. Orchestra and sectional rehearsals are flexible, as Diane and the other teachers will organize alternative activities such as orchestra master classes and individual lessons.

Finally, the students make their way to their respective homework groups, which are different than their sectional groups. Different teachers specialize in various academic subjects, so students are placed in groups depending on the areas in which they need the most assistance. They have from half an hour to forty-five minutes each day to work on their homework, which usually consists of English comprehension, math, or Spanish. There are at least one or two teachers or music mentors in each room available to help the students with their work. At this point parents begin to arrive to pick up their children, and Diane usually spends at least half an hour after the program is over talking with and getting to know parents or watching students as they wait to be picked up.

No day is exactly the same at El Sistema Somerville. Not only does the order of activities change, but Diane will also organize various trips for the students to engage in activities throughout the Boston area. She has taken students to orchestra performances at the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Youth Orchestra, New England Conservatory, and LONGY, and has accompanied several students on a field trip to Brandeis University to experience a chamber music workshop by the Lydian String Quartet focused on immigration and music. She has also begun to teach them how to use a music notation software known as Noteflight in order to allow them to begin exploring music composition and the possibility of creating their own pieces of music. Besides these musically focused
activities, the students may take time during the day to visit the local library, or if the weather is nice, to simply play outside in the park. Throughout their first year in the program, the students have shared their progress with others through several performances, both for their fellow peers during the school day and for their parents after hours.

One of El Sistema Somerville’s main proponents of social change is the idea that each child should be nurtured not just as a musician but also as a whole individual. On its website, the Somerville program identifies itself with the title “El Sistema Somerville – creating citizens, artists, teachers, and scholars.” This represents what is known as the CATS model, which Diane uses as a way to connect her music education program to three spheres: the musical, the academic, and the social. Therefore, the focus is not just on learning how to play the instrument and perform certain pieces, but on creating well-rounded citizens who will leave the program more confident with their school work, their ability to interact successfully with others, and their capacity to share what they have learned with the world.

**Methodology**

True to an anthropology thesis, the majority of my research took the form of participant observation. Ethnographic fieldwork began in July of 2012, when I volunteered at two El Sistema-affiliated schools in the Boston Area. As a cellist and double major in music performance and anthropology at Brandeis University, I have been able to approach my research not just from an anthropological perspective but from a musical one as well, as I have been involved in both public and private music education for thirteen years.
At Pope John Paul II Catholic Academy, one elementary school in Dorchester with an El Sistema-inspired music program, I worked with the director of the program to create and deliver a cello workshop twice a week to several groups of students. I was able to work with one group consistently, which allowed me to get to know the students and to gain a better understanding of their music education experience through this program.

I also volunteered as an assistant at the Somerville Strings Camp, a two-week music camp for elementary school-aged string players. As a participant in this camp, I functioned as a teacher’s assistant for music theory classes as well as sectional, orchestral, and choir rehearsals. Although El Sistema was not the basis for this particular camp, the city of Somerville was the site of the newly developing El Sistema Somerville program that I later set out to study for this thesis, and the director of the program was working at the camp as a violin teacher. Therefore, my volunteer position provided me with the opportunity to make connections with key informants such as the director of the program and those involved in its development.

Overall, this fieldwork experience provided me with a more complete understanding of El Sistema as it functions at different sites in the Boston area, which allowed me to establish a context for my research of El Sistema Somerville. Originally, I explored the meaning of “social change” as it is perpetuated in these El Sistema-inspired programs, focusing specifically on possible translations in the perception or communication of this message as El Sistema is placed in a new cultural context. By pursuing this research question, I was able to gain a better understanding of the differences between El Sistema programs in Venezuela and those in the Boston area, and to glimpse the meaning of social change as it occurs in the United States. In addition, observing of the
extent to which each of the Boston programs mirror or diverge from one another has enriched my understanding of the Somerville program by allowing me to focus on one particular instance of social change within a broader context, and to therefore be aware of the complexities and nuances of El Sistema Somerville.

I began participant observation at the Edgerly Elementary School, the site of El Sistema Somerville, in the fall of 2012. I was able to participate in the program by taking on the role of a Music Mentor: a musically knowledgeable volunteer who assists the teachers and students during the after school El Sistema program. I have also attended and assisted at two of the students’ concerts. Participating as a music mentor once a week for the first year of the program has given me the chance not just to observe its evolution, but also to be a part of it and therefore feel it firsthand. I have been able to get to know individual students and teachers and to witness their challenges and successes, both musical and otherwise. By taking on a role within the community, I have established deeper connections with informants than I would have been able to do by merely observing the program. Recording my observations and inquiries through fieldnotes has allowed me to reflect upon my fieldwork experience in order to establish a complete picture of the program and begin to understand the forces of social change at work. In addition to participant observation, I conducted three interviews before beginning fieldwork at the Edgerly School – two with the director of the El Sistema program at Pope John Paul II Catholic Academy and one with the director of El Sistema Somerville prior to the official commencement of the program. During the year, I interviewed one parent with a student in the Somerville program as well as one of the four instrumental teachers. The parent spoke only Spanish, so I had the teacher translate the interview so that I was able to ask
them both questions. These interviews were instrumental in establishing both a parent and a teacher perspective of El Sistema Somerville and its impact on the students. The content of the interviews centered on each of these individuals’ experiences in the program, how they became involved, and what changes they have noticed or skills developed among the students since beginning the program. To complete my picture of El Sistema Somerville and ground my research in literature, I conducted document analysis by studying books and articles relating first-hand accounts of El Sistema as it functions in Venezuela, video clips of the Simón Bolívar Orchestra and the El Sistema Somerville orchestra, and documents from within the El Sistema Somerville program such as the Curriculum Framework.

Several logistical and social constraints played a role in shaping the methodology of my research. Due to my musical background and thus my unique role within my community of study, it made the most sense to structure my research around the method of participant observation. In trying to set up interviews with informants or expand my fieldwork time, however, transportation was a major constraint. Both over the summer and especially during the school year, not having a car or easy access to public transportation near the Edgerly School made it difficult to travel to my fieldwork destination. I had to rely on others for rides, and therefore was not able to visit the school much more than once a week or be flexible in terms of scheduling interviews. In addition, the fact that my research involved work with a vulnerable population limited my selection of potential interviewees. Although the students in El Sistema Somerville are all children under the age of eighteen, they are the main participants of the program and are therefore those most directly impacted by this idea of social change. Instead of talking to the
students about their experience I have had to rely mainly on the experiences and perspectives of teachers and parents involved in the program.

My personal relationship to this topic and community has had an interesting impact on my research experience. In one sense, I entered into my fieldwork already a part of the community I chose to study. As a classical musician and one who has been involved in music education in the Boston area for the majority of my life, I share with the participants of El Sistema Somerville common musical knowledge, experiences, and understanding, and thus a common membership in the classical music community of Boston. While this position has brought with it certain benefits, such as the opportunity to take on a mentorship role within the program and thus function as both participant and observer, it has also brought about several challenges. Foremost among these is a difficulty maintaining this very balance between insider and outsider. During my volunteer sessions each week at the Edgerly School, I was not only observing the program and conducting fieldwork, but I was called upon as a music mentor to work one-on-one with students or assist the teachers in whatever way they needed. Therefore, although I was making observations and working with my research question in mind, much of my time was spent fulfilling my mentorship duties and therefore I often felt like more of a participant in the program than an outside observer. I worked to counteract this imbalance by spending a good deal of time outside of my volunteer hours reflecting upon my experiences and recording my observations and further inquiries through detailed field notes.

Finally, it is necessary to address any biases that result from my relationship to the research topic. As someone who has grown up experiencing first hand the benefits of music education programs, I realize now that most of what I gained was made possible by
my ability to participate in private after school music organizations. Therefore, I was especially drawn to El Sistema Somerville as a research topic because of its potential to provide students of all backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses the chance to reap those same benefits at little to no cost through their public education. I was attracted to this program largely because of my belief in the transformative power of music, so it was within this context that I approached my study of El Sistema Somerville. Despite this bias, however, I have worked to remain objective towards this particular program by reflecting upon its positive and negative aspects as well as its successes and failures, in order to gain a complete and accurate picture and to truly understand the forces at work behind El Sistema Somerville.

While volunteering with the program through my fieldwork and seeing some of positive changes in the students themselves, however, I decided to take on a more applied anthropologist role. I have worked closely with the director of the program in order to collaborate on my research in a way that will be beneficial not just to me but to the program as well. By sharing my thoughts and inquiries with her, I have been able to ensure that my research and the questions I seek to answer are also of interest to her. By the time I am finished with my thesis, I plan to prepare a document complete with excerpts from my observations as well as quotes, pictures, and explanations and analysis regarding the ways in which El Sistema Somerville appears to be bringing about social change. I have also aided Diane in establishing a connection with Brandeis University, and helped coordinate a field trip for the students to visit the university for a presentation by the Lydian String Quartet. In return, Diane has helped me facilitate interviews, connected me with other
researchers, and provided me with documents about El Sistema that I would not have had access to otherwise.
Chapter Two: Embodiment and Bodily Practice in Music

In this chapter, I aim to bring to light the role of the body within classical music performance. Often thought of as a fairly stationary activity, movement and gesture actually play a significant role in the expression and communication involved in classical music making. More specifically, I will contextualize classical music practice within a framework of anthropological theories of embodiment, drawing on the work of anthropologists and philosophers such as Csordas, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and Mauss, among others. Descriptions of my personal experience as a cellist involved in music education will be intertwined with this literature review, as well as analysis based on these experiences of the role of the body within classical music.

Anthropological Theories of Embodiment

My quintet and I sit down for rehearsal. We are playing the Schubert Cello Quintet, a piece of chamber music written for two cellists, two violinists, and one violist. Our stands and chairs are set up in a formation resembling a semi-circle so that we can all see each other and therefore communicate while playing. We begin by playing through the first movement of the piece. As we prepare to play, we all shuffle slightly in our seats as we move our bodies to the correct playing position. For me, as a cellist, I instinctively shift so that I am sitting on the edge of my chair with my feet flat on the floor, my shoulders relaxed and my back straight. We don’t begin until everyone has their left hand on the fingerboard and their bow in their right hand, poised over the string. We all look towards the first violinist, who takes a slow breath while moving his body up and then back down again, simultaneously moving the bow up off of the string before lowering it in time to begin the piece. We all mimic this motion and breathe with him so that we begin the piece together. As we play, we each move our bodies in...
various ways as we sway from left to right, lean forward and back, and extend our arms in big sweeping motions or retract inward to produce smaller, more confined gestures. At one point we have to stop playing in order to discuss bowings, because the violist and second violinist have similar musical lines that require them to match their bowing direction. As we continue to play, I find myself constantly looking from my music to the other members of my group in order to follow their motions and expression, and when we arrive at the cello duet I realize that I am watching my fellow cellist more often than the notes on the page.

This excerpt provides a glimpse into my personal bodily experience as a cellist. Reflecting upon this experience, it has become increasingly apparent that much of instrumental playing is intimately bound up with movement and gesture, and more specifically, with the anthropological concept of embodiment. Anthropological theories about the body have undergone significant changes throughout history. Of particular interest is the shift to a theory of embodiment in which the body is a significant factor in the formation of culture, rather than a blank slate onto which culture is inscribed. This shift represents an attempt to move away from the previously accepted notion of the body as a “fixed, material entity subject to the empirical rules of biological science, existing prior to the mutability and flux of cultural change and diversity and characterized by unchangeable inner necessities” (Csordas 1994:1). In this view, the body is merely a biological entity that exists prior to culture and is unchanging regardless of time period, location, or community.

In a similar vein, Descartes’ famous “Cartesian dualism” provides another methodological approach to the study of the body, in which the mind and body are viewed as two distinct and unequal entities. According to Descartes, the mind “is a pure substance,
a res cogitans, distinct from the body and able to apprehend the cosmic order almost exclusively by means of its intuitive and deductive faculties. By contrast, the human body, is, like any other object in the world, a res extensa, ‘an extended unthinking thing’” (Berdayes, Esposito, and Murphy 2004:4). One key word in this explanation is the term ‘object,’ which brings about the relationship between subject and object inherent in this Cartesian dualism. Since the body is viewed as a fixed biological entity upon which culture is inscribed, it naturally takes on the role of an object that is controlled by the mind. The mind is subsequently accorded greater significance as the subject of thought and morality (Csordas 1994:8). In this way, mind/subject/culture are placed in opposition against body/object/biology, and the body is merely a tool or an extension of the mind (Csordas 1994:8).

Descartes influenced the work of another theorist of embodiment: German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger is concerned largely with understanding the concept of “Being,” or existing in the world (Encyclopedia Britannica 2013). Heidegger goes against Descartes’ view of individuals as mere “thinking subjects” whose presumed knowledge forms their perceptions of the world by theorizing instead that “being” has a lot to do with an engagement with one’s surroundings, much of which is corporeal (Encyclopedia Britannica 2013). He goes on to describe such engagement through terms such as “being-in-the-world,” in which he refers to a connection to the world felt through the body before it is experienced in the mind, and which is accompanied by a sense of involvement and commitment to others (Encyclopedia Britannica 2013).

Another theorist interested in embodiment, Marcel Mauss, is best known for his study of gesture and its role in the formation and perpetuation of culture. Within an
anthropological context, Mauss is most interested in the ways in which a biological entity such as the body becomes a “social fact” (Noland 2009:19). He set out to study body movements, sequences of gestures, or attitudes in order to understand why such bodily practices are different depending on time period, gender, or class, among other factors (Noland 2009:22). As Mauss states in his essay “Techniques of the Body,” “the body is at the same time the original tool with which humans shape their world, and the original substance out of which the human world is shaped” (Csordas 1994:6). Through this theory comes the notion that the body is an active subject that determines one’s experience in the world, as we experience our lives a certain way because of our individual bodies and the ways in which we interact with our environments. Additionally, in this quote Mauss points to the centrality of gesture both in the construction of culture and as a product of culture. Mauss also introduces the term “habitus” in his discussion of bodily practice, which is later elaborated by Bourdieu to mean the body techniques, habits, styles and skills specific to a certain culture that are learned so early on in one’s development that they are ingrained and therefore appear “natural” (AnthroBase 2001). While Bourdieu tends to view subjects as being imprinted with these conditioning practices, Mauss recognizes the body’s role in creating culture through such practices.

More so than his interest in individuals’ body techniques, Mauss is concerned with the social aspects of the moving body. He points to the fact that social conditioning can occur through gesture by describing his concept of “socially organized kinesis (Noland 2009:21). Through this notion, as subjects engage in similar bodily practices, “social conditioning reaches beyond the ideas in the mind...to lodge itself in the very tissues of the body...cultural subjects have a lived experience of such social conditioning, that is, a
sensual apprehension, in those issues” (Noland 2009:21). Another significant philosopher who theorizes about embodiment, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is greatly influenced by Mauss and shares his belief in the importance of the social in discussions of the body. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty points to the development of a kinesthetic sense of self-awareness as the result of social interactions (Noland 2009:47). Like Mauss, he is concerned with “gestures” as the link between the body as a biological and a cultural entity (Noland 2009:55). His work suggests that “culture does not reside only in objects and representations, but also in the bodily processes of perception by which those representations come into being” (Weiss and Haber 1999:147). Both Mauss and Merleau-Ponty emphasize a first-person account when it comes to the study of embodiment, as they believe that an awareness of one’s one lived bodily experience is necessary in order to analyze that of another (Noland 2009:48). Merleau-Ponty is also interested in the concept of “embodied cogitation,” which refers to the ways in which the body impacts the mind and plays a role in what the mind thinks it knows (Noland 2009:55).

In his essay “Embodied Reason,” Mark Johnson elaborates on the idea that embodied experience determines individuals’ perceptions of the world. He states, “Our conceptualization and reasoning are grounded in our embodiment, that is, in our bodily orientations, manipulations, and movements as we act in our world...we can only experience what our embodiment allows us to experience. We can only conceptualize using conceptual systems grounded in our bodily experience” (Weiss and Haber 1999:81). Johnson goes so far as to illustrate connections between structures of bodily activity and what he refers to as “higher cognitive operations,” and points to the fact that infants interact in their worlds through bodily experiences and senses that predate language.
development (Weiss and Haber 1999:99). He therefore asserts, "because embodied structures of this sort organize our emerging world, they correlatively organize and form our emerging and always developing sense of self...if we...had different bodily experiences and different kinds of interactions with our...environments, then we would have a different sense of self and different ways of understanding and reasoning" (Weiss and Haber 1999:99).

Foucault, taking inspiration from previous philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty, continues to challenge the notion that the body is entirely fixed, biological, and pre-cultural. He proposes instead that the body "has a history and is as much a cultural phenomenon as it is a biological entity" (Csordas 1994:4). What follows, according to Csordas, is the use of the body as an object of analysis in cultural discourse. He discusses three basic branches of literature, one describing an “analytic body” that focuses on aspects of the body such as “perception, practice, parts, processes, or products” (Csordas 1994:4). Another field concentrates on the “topical body,” which represents the study of the body in relation to other cultural domains such as health, politics, gender, and religion, among others (Csordas 1994:5). Finally, he refers to the “multiple body,” citing theorists such as Mary Douglas who points to the social and physical aspects of the body as “two bodies,” as well as Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock who outline “three bodies” including the individual body, the social body, and the body politic (Csordas 1994:5). In all of these branches of literature, however, the body is still treated as an object and is studied under a semiotic or representational methodology, as the body is viewed as a sign or text that can be analyzed to reveal certain aspects of culture (Csordas 1994:6-10).
In order to provide an alternative to this representational treatment of the body in anthropological literature, Csordas discusses his theory of embodiment with its ties to phenomenology rather than semiotics. He bases his theory off of the notion that the body does not just represent culture, but rather “culture is grounded in the human body” (Csordas 1994:6). He makes the distinction between the body as “a biological, material entity” and embodiment as “an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and by mode of presence and engagement in the world” (Weiss and Haber 1999:145). In order to develop a term parallel to that of “representational,” Csordas elaborates on Heidegger’s concept of “being-in-the-world,” in which he refers to a “temporally/historically informed sensory presence and engagement;” a kind of “existential immediacy” or “lived experience” (Csordas 1994:10). In this theory, the body is seen not as an object, but as a subject that lives, senses, and interacts with its environment. The mind/body dichotomy no longer applies, as each are seen as equally important and functional as a unit.

Csordas points to the implications as well as the importance of this theory, as embodiment is not designed to replace representationalist views such as the body as text, but is presented as an alternative viewpoint to theoretical discussions that places bodily experience in a position of equal importance (Csordas 1994:12). It is important to recognize the extent to which embodiment is responsible for one’s outlook, interaction with the world, and culture itself, and it is therefore a theory that should not be ignored. As Csordas states, “Why not then begin with the premise that the fact of our embodiment can be a valuable starting point for rethinking the nature of culture and our existential situation as cultural beings? I suggest that the promise of such a standpoint is to throw new light on
Questions traditionally asked by anthropologists and other scholars in the human sciences” (Csordas 1994:6).

**Embodiment in Music**

As someone who has been involved in classical music playing for over thirteen years, both as a soloist and as a member of various types of ensembles including orchestras and chamber groups, it has become increasingly evident that embodiment and bodily practice play a significant role in classical music making. What is even more interesting is the degree to which the importance of the body goes oddly unnoticed in discussions of music. While there are dance ethnographies and studies of bodily practice in dance and other movement-oriented disciplines, classical music performance is not typically included in this list. Sometimes even among musicians, but especially among non-musicians, the physicality of playing an instrument is considered secondary to the music or is not considered at all, and it is precisely this aspect of playing that I aim to bring to light. Much of this emphasis on the body is due to the fact that although musicians have discussions during rehearsals about their musical and technical ideas, the actual practice of playing and performing has no basis in verbal communication. Therefore, musicians are forced to communicate through other means, much of which is facilitated by the use of bodily senses such as sight and hearing. Personal expression and musical communication, which are at the heart of music making, are embodied processes, as playing is largely concerned with attending to and with one’s own body as well as with others’ bodies in order to make music.
The body has a role to play even before one begins to make any sound with his or her instrument. There exist “proper” seating and playing positions that one must inhabit when entering into the classical music community by learning to play an instrument. To varying degrees, this posture is characterized by positioning one’s feet flat on the floor and sitting up with a straight back on the middle or edge of one’s seat. Players assume “rest position” before they begin to play or while they are waiting to resume playing, in which they rest their instruments in an upright position on their laps or, if they are cellists, hold their bows on their right knees. Players then switch to “playing position” right before they are about to begin a piece, in which they bring their instruments up and place their bows over the strings. In one sense, these positions are used as a means of communication for players to signal to both their audience and their fellow performers whether or not they are ready to begin a piece of music. In another sense, however, these postures are a means through which players situate themselves in their environments and thus embody feelings of confidence and readiness. Sitting upright with a straight back and one’s feet planted firmly on the floor constitutes a certain way of “being-in-the-world” and interacting with one’s environment that differs drastically from a musician who tucks his or her feet under the chair, leans back or slouches while playing. Inhabiting the playing postures that musicians are taught from their first lessons allows them not just to signal their readiness to their audience and peers, but also to embody and thus feel for themselves a sense of preparedness and self-confidence.

Cueing in classical music playing is another bodily practice that allows musicians to communicate non-verbally with one another. On the surface, cueing is a term that is used to refer to the process by which classical musicians indicate to one another when to begin
or end a piece. Cueing can also be used, however, to convey the tempo of a piece of music, a change in tempo in the middle of a piece, or even the mood of the music itself. Cues are practiced, somewhat choreographed gestures that allow musicians to connect bodily with one another by breathing together and moving their bodies to the beat of the music for one brief moment before they begin to play. That one motion can convey so much information – whether the cue is slow and delicate or fast and sharp, both the players and the audience members have an immediate sense of the tempo and even the character of the beginning of the piece. This process is more than just a means for musicians to watch one another in order to begin and end a piece together or to convey information about the music; it is also largely about breathing and moving separate bodies together as one. From personal experience being coached in classical music ensembles, musicians are often told to “feel the music together.” This phrase even denotes a bodily sense in its use of the word “feel,” and I believe that it refers to this process of attending to others’ bodies not just through sight but through movement, as a kind of embodiment.

Aside from these choreographed postures and gestures, however, the way one moves while playing is a direct embodiment of musical expression. Such motions are not choreographed or practiced consciously, and they are individual to each performer. For instance, musicians may sway from side to side, open up their bodies and lean backward like Yo Yo Ma or lean forward into the instrument, pull the bow across the string in a harsh motion full of energy or drag it along so slowly that they hardly appear to be moving a muscle. While this movement is a means of expression, there is no language or code in which the body can be read in such a way that each movement represents a distinct
emotion or musical idea. Despite this fact, this motion is a means of communication between players. How is this so?

In his essay, “The Primacy of Expression,” Algis Mickunas provides an explanation for this phenomenon through his concept of the “immediacy of expression.” Mickunas argues for the immediate presence of certain emotions in bodily activities and gestures, stating, “In a human encounter there are no pure physiological data that are broadcast by the so-called external body and hence no need for analogization or projection. Corporeal expression, thus, must speak directly” (Berdayes, Esposito and Murphy 2004:39). He further argues that “body movements and gestures, postures and shapes, are not signs of something hidden, but make communicative sense,” and that therefore “corporeal expressivity is the condition for human communication” (Berdayes, Esposito and Murphy 2004:43). This idea of the immediacy of expression can be applied to embodiment in music, as musicians feel the emotions and shapes of musical phrases and express such feelings and ideas partly through the way that they move with their instruments. They are also able to feel such expression in others without reading their motions as signs or codes. Therefore, not only is this movement a means of personal expression, but it is also a means of communication. Musicians reflect this notion of the immediacy of expression as they play with others, especially after playing together for a long time. Musicians embody their own individual senses of expression, and then by attending to others’ movements they are able to feel the motions of others and gain a sense of their expression and musicality, which allows them to react further and communicate back and forth in a dynamic exchange. Much of the excitement of music making is this elaborate process of attending to one’s own body as well as to others’ bodies. Musicians simultaneously embody the music individually
and communicate their emotions to their peers through movement, thus both experiencing and creating the music as a group from one moment to the next.

**Classical Music and Movement at El Sistema Somerville**

Through my observation of the participants of El Sistema Somerville, I have noticed several bodily practices consistent with my own experience of the embodiment inherent in classical music making. These practices are passed down from the teachers to the students and thus embedded within their performance practice. On a more rudimentary level, the teachers and mentors consistently encourage the students to coordinate their bowings. Therefore the musicians in each section - and sometimes across the entire orchestra - will be moving their bows in the same direction at the same time. This has an effect both on the audience members and on the players themselves. For the audience, coordinating bowings creates a visual image in which the orchestra or sections within the orchestra are all moving together as one. For the students themselves, this process encourages them to engage with one another’s movements closely and therefore embody a feeling of unity with their peers. In fact, musicians within each section are often told that they should sound like one instrument as opposed to eight or nine individual violins or cellos. The goal of making music in an orchestra is to play together, so coordinating movements and embodying this sense of unity is an essential part of the process.

The teachers at El Sistema Somerville also encourage “proper” playing position among their students. After instructing them on the traditional way to sit and hold their instruments, they reinforce these positions during rehearsals through contests and the El Sistema “foot check.” Practicing rest position is incorporated into behavioral disciplining
as the teachers arrange informal competitions between sections of the orchestra. They often inform the students that they will be paying attention during rehearsal to which section not only behaves the best and listens to the conductor, but who also upholds proper rest position during non-playing periods or as they are waiting to be dismissed. Often, the group that wins the contest will be awarded points, which they accumulate throughout the semester in order to win a prize.

The “foot check” is a practice that seems to be unique to El Sistema Somerville, and is used as a way to transition the students into proper seating position and playing readiness. This bodily practice, which is meant to be completed as a group, occurs when the conductor takes the stage and yells “foot check!” followed by the students responding in militaristic fashion by stomping each foot on the floor in synchronized action. The conductor may repeat this process several times throughout a rehearsal if he or she feels the need to recapture the students’ attention. Besides focusing the students, the physical act of stomping encourages them to place their feet solidly on the floor, thus triggering the traditional playing posture. More importantly, however, it is evident upon observation that the students embrace this activity with vigor, and it provides them with an exciting way to transition into playing and into a posture that is not easy for young, energetic students to uphold. Finally, this bodily practice is yet another means for the students to play close attention to the movements of their peers in order to establish and embody their group connection. In this particular instance, it allows them to prepare to play together and establish a sense of group energy and readiness to take on the task at hand.

Furthermore, the teachers at El Sistema Somerville encourage the students to practice moving between these different positions by following the motions of the
conductor. A significant amount of time is spent practicing the beginnings of pieces even before the first note is played. A common exercise is for the conductor to stand at the podium while the players are in rest position, and suddenly lift up his or her arms as a signal to the orchestra to be ready to begin. At this point, the musicians are expected to bring their instruments up into playing position and keep their eyes poised on the conductor. The teachers often repeat this process several times in a row in order to emphasize the importance of this group motion and give the students several opportunities to practice. Similar to the foot check, this allows the students to embody a sense of group unity and readiness through synchronized motion. In addition, it provides them with further practice attending to the bodies of their peers and especially to the movements of the conductor.
Chapter Three: Bodily Practice Specific to El Sistema

While these movements, gestures and postures are traditions shared by all who participate in classical music education and practice, El Sistema emphasizes and expands upon the role of the body by incorporating additional, distinctive bodily practices into each student’s experience. This is evident both at the El Sistema Somerville program and within El Sistema ensembles in Venezuela, and the similarities between the two suggest that the teachers in Somerville draw upon the bodily practices in Venezuela as a source of inspiration. The following chapter presents evidence of these distinct bodily practices, gathered through document analysis of El Sistema in Venezuela as well as participant observation of the program in Somerville. In the chapter following these descriptions, I will present an analysis of the role of this bodily practice in forming deep social connections and feelings of solidarity among the students.

Bodily Practice in Venezuela

In a video from the 2007 BBC Proms, an annual eight-week festival of daily orchestral classical music concerts, conductor Gustavo Dudamel takes the stage to join the Simón Bolívar Orchestra. The young musicians are fully clad in their signature jackets, which represent the colors and design of the Venezuelan flag. The musicians raise their instruments and wave at the audience members, and then proceed to launch into a rendition of “the wave,” similar to that performed by fans at a sporting event. The audience begins to quiet down as the musicians take their seats on stage, and Dudamel launches into the beginning of the Leonard Bernstein piece that they have set out to play, entitled “Mambo.” The movement of the players is subtle at first; they sway expressively to the
music in a way that is similar to other classical musicians or youth orchestras. It is suddenly apparent to any audience member or observer, however, that this is no ordinary orchestra performance. On the words “Mambo,” the members of the first violin section simultaneously spin their instruments and jump up out of their seats. As the performance continues, basses are spinning and members of every section of the orchestra are dancing with their instruments in their seats, bouncing and swaying left and right to the beat of the music. French horn players wave their instruments around and laugh with one another as they dance and play. Finally, as the piece increases in intensity, all of the members of the orchestra actually stand up out of their seats and begin to dance in a circle around themselves. Several trumpet players display their acrobatic skills by spinning their instruments rapidly around their fingers. Basses are twirling as the musicians play and dance themselves to the end of the piece, which finishes with a final flourish in which every bow arm is thrown up into the air (BBC Proms – Simón Bolívar Orchestra – Mambo).

As someone who has attended many classical orchestra concerts and watched various recorded performances from all over the world, I was struck upon seeing the unique expressivity and vitality of the musicians in this video. Curious to see if others familiar with classical music experienced a similar reaction to an El Sistema orchestra, I turned to the book Changing Lives: Gustavo Dudamel, El Sistema, and the Transformative Power of Music by Tricia Tunstall.

At one point in her book, Tunstall describes her experience attending an open rehearsal of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra at the John F. Kennedy Center of the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. In describing the performance she states, “The cellos begin their pizzicato pulse, and then the whole orchestra is in motion. Dudamel sways,
dips, dances; all two hundred players dip and sway in their seats, reflecting his movements like a many-sided mirror” (Tunstall 2012:100). She continues in this vein, remarking on “the sheer kinetic energy happening on stage. The heat source, of course, is Dudamel himself, and the musicians match him; they play with a huge physicality, the violinists swaying dramatically forward and back, the wind players bobbing and dipping…The entire string section sways in synchronized motion, like a meadow combed by the wind” (Tunstall 2012: 104-5). Through these descriptions, it is clear that Tunstall, like myself, is struck by the enormous extent to which these musicians connect classical music playing to movement. The motions Tunstall describes, such as “bobbing and dipping” and “swaying dramatically forward and back” are not atypical of any classical orchestra, and are prime examples of the bodily practice and embodiment inherent in classical music making. The fact that Tunstall places emphasis on the orchestra “reflecting [Dudamel’s] movements like a many-sided mirror” and the string section swaying “in synchronized motion, like a meadow combed by the wind” further emphasizes the embodied nature of playing, revealing the extent to which musicians experience the music through their bodies as well as their bodily awareness of and connections to the movements of their conductor and fellow musicians. In the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, however, such movements appear to be more emphasized and exaggerated than in any other orchestra that I have seen perform. This is further illustrated by the orchestra’s tendency to connect their music not just to the motion inherent in playing, but to dance as well.

Tunstall describes the end of the Kennedy Center performance, in which the players don their Venezuelan flag jackets and launch into a production similar to that of the “Mambo” described above. Tunstall states:
The encores are two more Latin pieces, and the musicians, playing, leap to their feat. Playing, the trumpet players swing their instruments back and forth and then spin them around their fingers between phrases. Playing, the cellists twirl their instruments as though they are dance partners; the horn players execute a synchronized salsa sort of move, turning in circles one after the other. Entire sections stamp their feet and shout to punctuate the music. The percussionists toss their sticks in the air, catch them, and keep playing...I don’t know how, or why, we’re all staying in our seats. Onstage they’re dancing in pairs, dancing in sections; finally the whole orchestra is dancing. Dudamel has long since stopped conducting and is among them, dancing too (Tunstall 2012: 107).

Unlike the characteristic dipping and swaying, this dancing while playing on stage is unique to El Sistema orchestras such as the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra. Despite the central place of movement within classical music making, this bodily practice is normally a restricted kind of movement that takes place within the confines of the seated playing position characteristic of each instrument. Orchestra members are expected to stand only at the beginning of the performance when the conductor enters the stage, and once again at the end of the performance when the audience applauds. There should be little to no talking among the musicians while they are on stage. In addition, it is customary for audience members to applaud only between entire pieces, not between movements; those unlucky enough not to know this custom ahead of time will most likely illicit several scowls from fellow audience members. Therefore, classical music performance represents a strange balance between restriction in behavioral norms and expressivity through movement.

The Simón Bolívar Orchestra and Youth Orchestra seem to be playing with this balance and expanding on the bodily practice in music by encouraging even greater movement. They break out of some of the traditional boundaries of the body in music performance by incorporating dancing, both sitting and standing, into their playing, which has an effect on one another as well as on the audience. This attention to and incorporation
of movement into their playing allows the members of these orchestras to connect on another level with one another as well as with their conductor. It is also clear that this movement has a significant effect on their audience members as well, as Tunstall remarks in respect to her fellow spectators, “I don’t know how, or why, we’re all staying in our seats.” It is evident that not only those playing, but also those watching the performance feel a bodily connection to the players that instills in them the desire to raise up out of their seats and begin dancing as well.

**Bodily Practice Specific to El Sistema Somerville**

After witnessing and reading about performances by the Simón Bolívar Orchestras and other members of El Sistema Venezuela, it became immediately apparent that this style of playing is the inspiration of much of the bodily practice observable in the El Sistema Somerville program. Even though the students are young both in age and musical experience, Diane and the other teachers have begun instilling in them a sense of expressivity through movement since the very beginning of the program. Several exercises that mirror the Simón Bolívar Orchestra performances include encouragement to sway back and forth while playing as well as to stand up while playing at the end of a piece or, usually, at the very end of the concert. The connection between movement, music, and even dance is also apparent in this specific El Sistema-inspired program, as students are asked to “feel the music” with their bodies through certain exercises and classes such as Movement and Musicianship. El Sistema Somerville also has unique ways of incorporating bodily practice into the daily experience of an orchestral community through exercises such as the “El Sistema Kid chant.”
Movement and Expressivity

The cello section is having a warm-up rehearsal before going on stage for the final concert. Simon has the kids play the beginnings of the pieces they have memorized, starting with Tchaikovsky. The majority of the cello part for this piece consists of two low notes, which are played in response to the violin’s melodic line. Simon encourages his students to really put expression into these notes. Even though it is a simple part, the sound that emits from the cello on a note that low can be very intense and satisfying. Simon goes on about the fact that the violin melody is actually fairly boring, and it is really the cellists who have the coolest part in the piece. He suggests that they even pretend to be warriors when they are playing it, and acts out the part by singing and jabbing wildly at the air. The students follow his lead and put their whole bodies into those two notes. By their final run through of the piece Simon congratulates them, saying that is the best he has ever heard them play.

12/18/12

Expressivity is strongly encouraged at El Sistema Somerville. What is perhaps most telling is the fact that this teacher spent so much time encouraging his students to be expressive despite the simplicity of the music itself. This description references the El Sistema holiday concert that took place in December, which was the first major orchestral performance for most if not all of the students. Therefore, although they had made significant progress since the first time holding their instruments at the beginning of the program, the students were still playing at an elementary level. Despite the simple music consisting of two, repeated low notes on the C String, however, Simon taught them how to give their parts meaning by using their bodies as an expressive tool. He encouraged them
to establish a conception of the music in their minds by connecting the sounds to images of warriors, and then to act these images out through their movements while playing. Not only does this teach the students one method of expressing musical ideas, but it also shows them that they can use their bodies to express themselves no matter the simplicity of the music or the level of their playing.

To further emphasize this point, the teachers at El Sistema Somerville engage the students in activities in which they are instructed to play without actually using their instruments. One afternoon, during a warm up before orchestra rehearsal, I observed Diane asking the students to first sing their parts, and then to practice what they have just sung by pretending to bow their parts without singing or holding their actual instruments. The students began to go through the motions of playing and I noticed Diane telling them that she wanted to “hear the sounds with their bodies.” This quote is especially indicative of the importance of movement to the music itself, as it suggests that even without any sound, the ways in which the students move are supposed to reflect their expression and therefore evoke the music itself. Activities such as this give the students the rare opportunity to exercise this bodily practice from the very beginning of their musical careers, so that they will continue to have a sense of the connection between movement and music as they become more advanced.

El Sistema Somerville has even incorporated a class entitled “Movement and Musicianship” into the weekly schedule. This class is similar to a theory class in which students are taught global concepts such as scales, note reading, and notation, among others. In addition, the students learn rhythm within the context of movement, as they are encouraged to stand up and sway or clap to the beat. In one instance, the cello teacher
brought in glow stick wristbands for the students to wear in order to move and feel the pulse together as a group. The students also participate in what is called “silent orchestra,” in which they act like they are playing by holding “invisible instruments,” and are forced to coordinate their movements without actually playing or making a sound.

Several of the bodily practices encouraged at El Sistema Somerville are reminiscent of those of the Simón Bolívar Orchestra. For instance, the teachers place a large emphasis on having the students sway back and forth as they play. In one particular piece, the cello and bass players alternate between a plucked string on one beat and a slap of the strings and fingerboard on the next beat, creating a very rhythmic and percussive accompaniment. As they play this part along with the violins, the teachers and mentors bounce and clap along to the beat of the lower strings, prompting the cellists and bassists to swing from side to side with their instruments as they keep the time. In addition, I notice during rehearsal and one of the performances that the students seem to spontaneously begin to stand while they play the end of one of their pieces. Usually one person will begin the trend, with the rest quickly catching on until the whole orchestra (besides the cellos) is standing. Upon witnessing this, the first thing that I am reminded of is the end of the Simón Bolívar’s performance of Leonard Bernstein’s “Mambo,” during which the entire orchestra stands up with their instruments and dances around themselves as the piece reaches its exciting conclusion. It is possible that this performance practice is the inspiration for those at El Sistema Somerville, and that this is just another way to elicit expressivity in music through the body. By moving from sitting to standing, the orchestra members break out of their expected playing positions and reflect the heightened excitement of the conclusion of the piece. As one person stands and others begin to join in, the students attend to the bodies
and motions of their fellow musicians until they are all participating in one movement together, which allows them to more strongly experience a musical connection and shared sense of excitement.

**Music and Dance**

Elements of dance are incorporated into several of the activities designed to emphasize bodily practice among members of El Sistema Somerville. In one instance, as the students were waiting to begin El Sistema after finishing their snacks, Diane had them all sing a song together before leaving the cafeteria. After singing together, however, she stood in the middle of the room and asked the students to follow her movements. She proceeded to commence a series of choreographed motions that the students imitated until their bodies were loose, energized, and ready to begin the day. Besides providing a physical activity to relieve any excess energy on the part of the students, this is an exercise in paying attention to one’s body. Particularly, this activity gave the students the opportunity to practice being aware of the movements of their leader as well as their own movements in relation to those around them.

Similarly, on another afternoon, the teachers had the students gather in the El Sistema room to sing together before breaking up into sections for rehearsal. Having the students learn a new song while one of the teachers plays guitar is a common occurrence and one that I have come to understand as a transitional activity to refocus the students before rehearsal. On this particular day, however, Diane asks the musicians to come up with their own choreography as they sing, which they can do individually or with others. The students proceed to sing the song “Lean On Me” and dance or move in ways that allow
them to act out their understanding of the song. Some students form groups with their friends and attempt to imitate each other’s gestures, while others enter their own worlds and move in ways that reflect their individual expression of the music. In either case, this is an exercise in connecting music to dance and bodily practice by encouraging the students to establish their own ideas about the music, and to then communicate those ideas to themselves and to others through choreographed gestures.

**The “El Sistema Kid” Chant**

* I arrive at the school around 3:45 to find all of the kids sitting in the El Sistema room singing along to a man playing guitar and Diane playing her violin. They are singing a version of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and most of the kids are sitting quietly and they seem very involved in the exercise. The other teachers are singing along and having fun as well. I realize that I have arrived at the end because Diane starts dismissing people. Before she does, however, she tells the kids how well they’re doing and how amazing their progress has been. She points out the fact that they learned a whole new song in one day and that’s great. Then she does something that really catches my attention. She tells the students to repeat after her as she launches into a chant that begins, “I am an El Sistema Kid, and I am awesome!” The kids repeat the words as she instructs, but she insists that they don’t just say them but yell them, and continues shouting more positive adjectives such as “I am smart!” and “I am kind!” and “I am funny!” until finally... “I am a good musician!” 11/5/12

Besides showing the students that their teachers and mentors believe in them, this exercise functions as a way to encourage the students to believe the words themselves. The idea is that through the physical act of repeating these phrases, these children will
begin to internalize the messages. Significantly, Diane asks her students not just to say these words, but to yell them. There is a certain degree of energy and excitement that comes with the physicality of yelling a chant, which translates to a sense of excitement about the words that are being spoken. This energy is compounded by the fact that the exercise is done in a group. Telling one student to shout to the world that he or she is awesome may be effective under the right circumstances, but telling a whole group of students to yell the same message inside their elementary school classroom is a much more powerful experience. I view this exercise through a lens of embodiment; by yelling these words, the students embody the idea that they each have an individual voice that is important and meant to be heard. By yelling together, they also attend to one other’s bodies and actions in a way that allows them to feel a deeper sense of community as well as their place in that community. The El Sistema Kid chant therefore provides the students with a greater sense of value, as they are made to feel like an important part of something bigger than themselves.

As previously mentioned, while several of these bodily practices are specific to El Sistema Somerville, the similarities between the emphasis on the body in both Venezuela and Somerville are significant. This bodily practice is a thread that connects two El Sistema programs in entirely different countries and cultures. As I compare what I observe to my own experience with classical music education in the United States, it is evident that this emphasis on the body is a characteristic that is unique to El Sistema, and that serves to distinguish it from other classical music education programs.
Chapter Four: Embodiment and Social Change in El Sistema

As I forged deeper into my observation of El Sistema Somerville, it quickly became apparent that the unique bodily practice of this community was something worth exploring, although the precise reason for this was not immediately obvious. After further analysis and research, however, I have come to the conclusion that this aspect of El Sistema cuts to the very core of the question that I initially set out to study, namely, what are the factors contributing to this program’s notion of social change? It is my hypothesis that the embodiment and bodily practice that El Sistema Somerville derives from classical music culture and transforms using influences from El Sistema in Venezuela plays a significant but implicit role in this process of social change. The emphasis those at El Sistema Somerville place on the use of the body encourages the students to achieve a greater awareness of both their own bodies and those of their teachers and peers, thus allowing them to connect to one another on a deeper level. The uniqueness of the bodily practice as compared to other classical music education programs also contributes to the formation of a distinct El Sistema culture and group identity that the students can relate to within the larger classical music culture. Not only does this provide students with an increased sense of social inclusion and value, but they gain this feeling of social inclusion within a community that works to instill positive life skills in each student, thus encouraging them to develop not just as musicians, but as whole individuals who will go on to be successful members of society.
Forging Deeper Connections Through Movement

By paying greater attention to expression through movement and by responding to the movements of others, the students of El Sistema Somerville are able to engage in a deeper connection with their peers and teachers. In her book, *Agency and Embodiment*, Carrie Noland discusses the role of “kinesthesia” in terms of individual’s perceptions of their worlds and the formation of culture. She draws on the anthropological field of “sensuous scholarship,” which pays particular attention to the experience of the lived body and the role that this plays “not only in the emergence of subjectivity but, further, in the process of meaning construction in which cultures are involved” (Noland 2009:12). Noland defines the term kinesthesia as a type of sixth sense; an awareness of the body that isn’t always attended to, but that can be a tool for understanding “the properties of self, other, and world” (Noland 2009:13).

Much attention has been paid to the notion of kinesthesia in dance and movement ethnography. Within this context, Noland discusses the role of kinesthesia not just in terms of one’s own bodily awareness, but also in terms of intersubjective relations (Noland 2009:13). She talks about kinesthesia’s “crucial function in establishing both the individual’s body schema (a sense of the body as bounded and discrete) and the imagination we are able to exercise with respect to the feelings another embodied subject might have,” thus giving the subject a “greater awareness of both her own body and that of the other” (Noland 2009:13). Dance ethnographer Susan Leigh Foster suggests that this awareness of one’s own bodily experience allows individuals to understand how other moving bodies might feel, which leads to the conclusion that kinesthesia implies “an intimacy with the other that is sustained by an intimacy with the self” (Noland 2009:14).
This notion of kinesthesia is at play not just within dance performance but within classical music culture as well. The way in which emotion and expression are embodied within movement and gesture in classical music performance encourages the development of a sense of kinesthesia. By incorporating these gestures into their daily practice, musicians are forced to develop a greater awareness of their own bodies. Furthermore, by engaging in the group gestures inherent in orchestral and other types of ensemble playing, musicians are called upon to pay attention to the bodies and movements of their fellow musicians. During an interview with one of the violin teachers at El Sistema Somerville, I posed a question concerning the teacher’s view of the most effective aspect of the program. In his response he stated the following:

Most effective...hmm...I'd say most effective would probably be social skills. Just cause they're asked to work as a team and...especially when it's just violins, just violas, just cellos, they're all supposed to be doing the exact same thing. We're kind of asking them to be one person. Which is really tough and I don't think they've ever had to do that. In school, you know, you get to do your own thing...you have to work as a team but it's not like doing the exact same thing. And then, following one person conducting (4/20/13).

Although not explicitly, this teacher is pointing to a sense of kinesthesia that is being developed among the students, as they are often asked to do “the exact same thing” or try to “be one person.” Such instructions refer to the movements and gestures that students must be aware of in order to perform together.

It is significant that this teacher not only referenced the bodily practice of orchestral playing, but also pointed to it as being a contributing factor of the most effective aspect of the program. The teacher connects these kinds of group performative gestures to the development of social skills, as students are asked to work together in a way that is not asked of them in other settings, such as in school. It is my hypothesis that the development
of this sense of bodily awareness, or kinesthesia, does play a significant role in the forging of connections and social relationships among the students and teachers of El Sistema Somerville, as it encourages students to connect not just on a personal level, but also on a corporeal level. Although this type of connection is not often discussed, I believe that it is important to pay attention to as it has a significant impact on the degree to which students establish social relationships and the way in which they learn to interact with others. This is further highlighted by the fact that El Sistema Somerville, as opposed to other music education programs, places an additional emphasis on the bodily practice in classical music, drawing out this aspect of playing in daily rehearsals through encouragement and specialized activities.

**Role of the Body in Forming El Sistema Culture**

Not only does this bodily practice increase the connection among students, but it also plays a role in actually forming the distinct culture of El Sistema. One of the most prominent anthropologists of the body, Marcel Mauss, wrote about the body’s cultural significance in his work “Les Techniques du corps.” In this book, Mauss expands on the common belief that the body is a cultured being in that it is merely a surface on which culture is inscribed through movement (Noland 2009:20). Instead, he points to the role of the body in creating culture, as he is interested in “the way movement experience supports yet inflicts a culturally legible signification” (Noland 2009:20). Furthermore, Mauss suggests “the social production of the body and the body’s production of the social are inextricably intertwined rather than chronologically successive” (Noland 2009:21). Mauss makes an important point in introducing this notion that cultural and social forces do not
only form individual bodies, but that the movements of bodies also influence and create culture in a simultaneous and ongoing process.

It is this process that is at play both within El Sistema Somerville and El Sistema in Venezuela. Through observation of the Somerville program and analysis of videos and descriptions of El Sistema programs and ensembles in Venezuela, it is clear that the unique bodily practices of orchestras such as the Simón Bolívar orchestra greatly influence the emphasis on the body among participants of El Sistema Somerville. In both instances, individual bodies take on movements and gestures that differ from most classical music education models but are characteristic of the El Sistema Movement. Therefore, as teachers and students learn these gestures, pass them along to new members and perform them for audiences, it is largely the body that plays a role in forming and reinforcing a distinct El Sistema culture and group identity at El Sistema Somerville. This also impacts the connection among students, as they not only develop social skills and relationships through the physical act of moving together, but they develop a sense of belonging to an organization with a cohesive group identity and culture; they are all El Sistema Kids.

**Positive Values and Life Skills at El Sistema Somerville Culture**

Furthermore, the El Sistema community that the students feel a close connection to is a positive one, as the teachers encourage the students to develop skills besides musical ability that they will use to be successful, well-rounded individuals throughout the rest of their lives. First and foremost is the encouragement of self-confidence among the students. The program accomplishes this on one level simply by providing students with the opportunity to be involved with an activity beyond academics that they can feel confident
about and call their own. In addition, encouraging participants to be both students and teachers through the CATS model fosters an environment of mentorship that allows students to share their knowledge and realize that what they have to say is important. Students are also meant to feel a greater sense of value at being an essential part of something bigger than themselves; of this orchestra, this musical culture, this community. Furthermore, playing music in groups such as sectionals and orchestras improves social skills by encouraging students to work harmoniously with others in order to accomplish a common goal. Through this kind of experience, the teachers are able to impart the value of treating others with respect. The program also develops behavioral skills such as the ability to watch and listen to others as well as the capacity to sit quietly and pay attention when called upon to do so. In addition, skills such as commitment and responsibility are an inherent part of playing any musical instrument, and El Sistema Somerville perpetuates these ideals by prompting students to be self-disciplined and feel a sense of responsibility to both themselves and their peers.

**Role of the Body in Transforming Classical Music Culture**

It is evident that the body is a significant factor in the formation of this distinct El Sistema culture as well as its perpetuation of positive values and life skills. The fact that the bodily practice characteristic of El Sistema is distinguishable from that of other classical music education programs points to the possibility that the body also plays a role in transforming the already existing culture of classical music performance. In her book, *Agency and Embodiment*, Carrie Noland expands on Mauss’ notion that the body is both inscribed by and creates culture in a simultaneous and ongoing process. She elaborates
further by asking the question, “How does embodying socialized gestures produce an experience of movement – its texture and velocity – that ends up altering the routine, the body that performs the routine, and eventually, perhaps, culture itself?” (Noland 2009:2). Therefore, Noland emphasizes Mauss’ idea of the body as an agent, and asserts that the body is capable not just of creating culture, but also of transforming or resisting certain cultural norms through bodily practice. She hypothesizes that “kinesthetic experience, produced by acts of embodied gesturing, places pressure on the conditioning a body receives, encouraging variations in performance that account for larger innovations in cultural practice that cannot otherwise be explained” (Noland 2009:3).

It is this notion of the body's role in transforming culture that I aim to explore in my discussion of El Sistema and social change. The bodily practice that is characteristic of El Sistema and that sets it apart from other music programs functions to change the role of classical music culture as the members of El Sistema portray it – and embody it. Previously, I touched briefly upon my view of classical performance culture as containing an interesting tension between restraint and expressivity when it comes to bodily behavior. This tension is expressed both in the bodies of the players as well as the bodies of the audience members. For instance, musicians are taught to inhabit specific playing postures depending on whether they are simply resting with their instruments or playing them. They are supposed to remain seated except for the very beginning and ends of performances, when they are allowed to stand at specific and predetermined times in order to acknowledge applause and the conductor’s presence on stage. Similarly, tradition dictates that audience members are expected to sit quietly in their seats for the duration of the performance, and are only “allowed” to clap at specific times. If a performance is
especially well done, audience members will often stand up at the end to show their excitement and appreciation. On the other hand, however, the body is a performer’s main tool for personal expression. It is largely through musicians’ movements that they are able to both “feel” the music for themselves and communicate their interpretations and emotions to others. All of these customs, which are based in gesture and bodily practice, form a large part of the culture of classical music. The physicality of playing an instrument requires a certain body position or posture for successful playing. Certain ways of moving with the instrument also allow musicians to connect more deeply with the music. Teachers pass this knowledge on to their students, who learn from an early age the “correct” way to sit and act while playing and performing. In this way, the body plays a significant role in both forming and reinforcing the traditions that constitute classical music culture.

Within the context of El Sistema, however, the body also plays a role in transforming this culture. The incorporation of bodily practices such as extensive swaying, standing, and even dancing while playing is a new custom that members of El Sistema, both in Venezuela and Somerville, are introducing to the world of classical music. The musicians of Venezuelan youth orchestras such as the Simón Bolívar Orchestra physically break out of the restrictive boundaries of classical music making when they decide to stand up rather than sit onstage while they perform. It is clear that such gestures also have an effect on the audience members, as Tunstall illustrates through her own reaction to resist the urge to jump out of her seat and dance along with the musicians and the conductor on stage. On a smaller scale, the young students of El Sistema Somerville also incorporate extensive swaying and standing as a means of expressing themselves while playing, thus using their bodies to introduce variations on classical music cultural norms.
While explaining her view of the impact of El Sistema on the classical music community in the United States, Tunstall writes:

And so for me, as for music educators throughout the United States, the story of Gustavo Dudamel and the system that produced him comes as something of a revelation. In the context of an international pop culture that has relegated the traditions of the symphony orchestra to near-obsolescence, here is an initiative that has suddenly infused classical music with new energy and relevance (Tunstall 2012: XIII).

Tunstall further points to her view of classical music as being “culturally marginalized” and describes her own arduous experience as a music educator within this musical atmosphere, stating, “challenging this massive cultural amnesia can feel like an uphill battle” (Tunstall 2012:XIII). Therefore, it is evident that one of the ways in which El Sistema is producing “social change” is by presenting classical music - and by extension classical music education - in a new light, and by introducing the idea that this music culture can take on a fresh role in modern society. It is largely the body that accounts for this transformation. By inhabiting gestures that encourage freedom of movement and exude energy, the musicians of El Sistema elaborate on the bodily conditioning that they have received as members of the classical music culture. In changing their movement patterns, they create new customs that transform the restricted, often contained nature of classical music performance, and they share this transformation with their audiences in every concert. Through Tunstall’s comments, it is evident that El Sistema’s transformation of classical music culture is apparent to those even outside the program, and is perceived as a means for social change in “revitalizing” classical music and its role in society.
Participants’ Connection to Distinct El Sistema Culture

This transformation also plays into the development of a cohesive group identity and distinct El Sistema culture that is shared by students in both Somerville and Venezuela. In this context, it is important to consider another aspect of classical music, namely its ties with upper class culture. In their article “Social Class and Arts Consumption: The Origins and Consequences of Class Differences in Exposure to the Arts in America,” Paul Dimaggio and Michael Useem discuss the fact that historically, “The high arts, including fine art, opera, ballet, modern dance, theater, and classical music, are likely to be heavily consumed by members of the upper-middle and upper class and to be consumed with decreasing frequency as one descends the class hierarchy” (Dimaggio and Useem 1978:144). The authors point to a national cross-sectional survey conducted by the National Research Center of the Arts as evidence of the close correlation between high levels of education/income and likelihood of high-arts exposure, as well as the tendency of such “class experiences and cultural traditions” to be sustained from one generation to the next (Dimaggio and Useem 1978:144).

El Sistema goes against this trend, however, by making it a priority to provide equal access to classical music education for students of all backgrounds. Therefore in many cases, students from significantly low socioeconomic areas are being introduced to a musical practice that is often associated with upper class culture, and they are learning to be a part of this culture through the gestures and movements characteristic of classical music. The introduction of unique El Sistema bodily practices, therefore, allows for participants of El Sistema programs such as those in Venezuela and Somerville to expand on the traditional gestures associated with classical music in order to create a variation on
this “high culture” that they can more easily connect to. It is no coincidence that in videos such as the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra’s performance of Leonard Bernstein’s Mambo at the BBC Proms, the incorporation of gestures such as standing, dancing, and spinning instruments is accompanied by the donning of jackets that represent the colors of the Venezuelan flag. Therefore, such gestures seem to be intimately tied to a sense of Venezuelan culture, allowing each musician to express his or her Venezuelan identity through movement. Although the students at El Sistema Somerville do not necessarily identify personally with the Venezuelan culture, the appropriation of similar gestures connects their program to other El Sistema programs in Venezuela, thus creating a distinct El Sistema musical culture that they all share. This provides the students with a niche within the world of classical music to which they can connect, further strengthening the cohesive group identity that they share with their teachers and peers.

The development of social skills and close ties to a cohesive cultural community that grow out of the bodily practice of El Sistema Somerville play a significant role in the program’s notion of social change. In an interview over the summer before the official commencement of the program, the director discussed her view of how El Sistema Somerville would enrich the lives of those who participate:

You know the orchestra is the only thing that agrees with itself, it’s a model for a harmonious society...There’s a part for everybody to fit in and feel like you’re still part of something that’s beautiful and that’s worthwhile, and something that makes you know you’re valuable as a human being. That elevates the feeling that children have for themselves when they’re coming from a home culture where they’re not told that they’re beautiful...they’re not told that they’re wonderful and special. And that’s I think where El Sistema also then starts to deviate from just a music education program that stops at the good concert or the contest or the solo ratings or whatever. This is, no, this is about making better people, the citizen, better people who care for each other and who are invested in making each other happier together...making a beautiful sound together, not just for me, or you know, not because I’m better, but uplifting each other, so that everyone can improve.
This quote reflects what I believe to be the essence of the social change associated with El Sistema Somerville. A large part of this social change is the sense of value that students develop as a result of having a place within a positive community, as well as the program’s emphasis on fostering skills other than musical expertise among its students. The body’s role in this notion of social change is clear: the sense of connection that students feel to one another and to a larger, distinctive group culture through movement provides them with an increased sense of value and self worth, as they feel that they have a place within a community of which they are each valued members. The results of this are evident in an interview with one of the mothers of an El Sistema Somerville student, who states:

Portia is not as shy anymore; she’s a little bit more socially active. Portia, besides losing her shyness a little bit, she’s a little happier and enjoying herself generally, and I think that’s like opened up her mind...that music has opened up her mind. And she’s doing better in school, and she just seems to be a lot less stressed out and kind of enjoying herself more...With a better perspective on things. I think that El Sistema should be supported by the cities because they really bring about a lot of change and transformations in the students (4/20/13).

In addition to providing the students with a deeper connection through movement and bodily awareness, the bodily practice of orchestral playing forces the students to interact in a unique way that appears to have a positive effect on the development of their social skills. Students are asked to work collaboratively with peers from a variety of backgrounds. As one El Sistema teacher pointed out, they are also asked to coordinate their movements in such a way that they become in a sense, “one person,” which fosters a kind of deep personal interaction and sense of awareness that does not accompany many social activities.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

El Sistema. The name means “The System,” which seems evident given the program’s status as the music education system in Venezuela. Upon further investigation, however, it is clear that this name refers to more than just a system of music; it is a system of personal development, of community connection, and ultimately, of social change. When I first became aware of El Sistema as a program committed to social change through music, I was struck with the desire to investigate this claim, especially due to my experience as a fellow classical musician who has grown up in and out of music education in the United States. Upon completion of this research, I finally feel as if I have a sense of the underlying forces at work behind this notion of social change. Under the constraints of my thesis, however, especially in terms of limited time and access to informants, easy travel and finances, it is difficult for me to conclude that I have witnessed this social change. With sufficient time and resources, it may be possible to follow these students as they grow in order to track the effect that this program has had on their lives and the community, thus observing social change first-hand. What I have been able to discover under the constraints of my project, however, are participants’ perceptions of what El Sistema’s goal of social change entails. In addition, I have been able to understand some of the more implicit aspects of the notion of social change in effect at El Sistema Somerville, and to think about the interplay between these observations and participants’ perceptions of the program.

While I did not have the capacity to travel to Venezuela to observe El Sistema first-hand, I was able to approach The System from a unique perspective through an ethnographic study of one of its inspired programs in the United States. Combining this
research with document analysis of the program in Venezuela has allowed me to see some of the intriguing similarities and differences between the two programs. One aspect of El Sistema that is recognizable in both locations is the program’s emphasis on the body, as well as the body’s role in the accepted notion of social change. This emphasis is something that sets El Sistema apart not just from other music education programs, but from other non-musical after school programs as well. The fact that members of El Sistema place so much emphasis on bodily practice in classical music is especially unusual, as this aspect of music making is often neglected in deference to discussion of the music itself.

Through personal experience, however, it is striking the extent to which bodily practice, and especially embodiment, plays a role in musical performance, most notably during instances of social music making. In a program built around orchestral playing therefore, it is not surprising that the movements, gestures, and postures of students are impossible to ignore. The driving force of classical music is the ability of musicians to interpret the notes that are written on the page in a way that is individual and emotional, and to communicate their interpretation to their peers and audience members. It is through movement that the students learn to express these emotions. By attending to their bodies as they learn to express themselves, the students gain a greater sense of kinesthesis, including a sense of the bodies of those surrounding them. Therefore, through collective, simultaneous motions, the students are able to embody their group identity and feel a stronger sense of social inclusion. By placing increased emphasis on this bodily practice, El Sistema Somerville maximizes these effects and furthers the development of social skills among its students. Finally, by incorporating bodily techniques divergent from those typical of classical music into daily practice, El Sistema creates a distinct cultural identity
that the students are able to connect to within the often rigid, upper class world of classical music.

A study of this program has significant implications for the future of classical music education within the United States. It is important to recognize El Sistema as a model for an alternative approach to music education, and to investigate the ways in which this model is (or is not) able to function within a United States cultural context. El Sistema distinguishes itself in several ways from other music education programs, not least of which is its intensity and dedication to excellence. The fact that El Sistema members rehearse for several hours every day after school ensures that the students will make recognizable progress and attain a high quality level of playing. Compared to many other public school music programs that hold rehearsals once or twice a week, this intensity and recognizable progress helps foster interest and excitement among the students as they begin to feel the effects and benefits of their hard work.

Furthermore, the philosophy behind El Sistema is unparalleled among public music education programs in the United States. Of significant importance is the fact that El Sistema places equal weight on both its musical and its social goals. El Sistema is therefore not a program primarily interested in producing prodigies or even professional musicians, but a program devoted to developing young individuals into well-rounded citizens equipped with the skills necessary to be successful in the world. The fact that El Sistema not only recognizes the social benefits of music but actually places priority on these benefits makes it a model of crucial significance for music educators across the country. The Somerville program in particular may also have an impact on the translation of El Sistema-inspired programs in the United States due to its innovative model of funding. As
funding for El Sistema is one of the major differences between the programs’ sustainability in Venezuela versus the United States, El Sistema Somerville is an inspiration for other programs across the country. Not only does the program reveal its ability to gain public as opposed to private funding as well as a connection to the already existing public music education program, but the town itself shows a willingness to dedicate public funding to music education, a devotion to the arts that is lacking in much of the United States.

Furthermore, an increased awareness of the role of the body in music education and education in general may lead to a more effective educational framework. Through this study of El Sistema, it is evident that emphasizing the body’s role in music making has enormous benefits. Movement and gesture allow musicians to communicate with their peers without using verbal language, providing them with a kind of secret code that they can only use within the context of music. This provides them with a deeper connection that they cannot acquire elsewhere, and is an aspect of music education that should be incorporated into all programs. The benefits of this bodily practice extend beyond music education, to education policy in general. If this program is any indication, a holistic approach to education should be considered in other non-musical contexts. As one of the El Sistema teachers pointed out in our interview, the kind of corporeal connection that the students engage in at El Sistema Somerville is not something they are asked to participate in while in the academic classroom. In fact, students are often encouraged to sit still and avoid any movement while at their desks. This teacher points to the bodily practice involved in music making as being instrumental in the development of social skills, and it is my belief that these benefits will translate to the academic classroom as well. On another level, it is important to consider the critical role of embodiment in learning, as
incorporating physicality into academic exercises thought to be primarily cerebral may have significantly positive effects. Students will be able to more successfully link mind and body, and learn through movement in a way that will deepen their connection to the academic material at hand. Taking El Sistema as an example the lesson is simple: the body is not to be ignored.
Appendix

List of Interviewees:

• Director of El Sistema Program at Pope John Paul II Catholic Academy in Dorchester, MA
• Director of El Sistema Somerville Program
• Parent of student in El Sistema Somerville
• Violin teacher at El Sistema Somerville
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