

## Full-Length Article

## Part 1:

**Community Music Therapy and El Sistema: Addressing the Empowerment Needs of Individuals and Communities Facing Socioeconomic Marginalization**Virginia Eulacio Cierniak<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>Montclair State University, New Jersey, United States of America**Abstract**

Music is an accessible tool that has been used to foster change within people and societies, even in those places facing socioeconomic marginalization due to poverty, discrimination, and lack of access to resources. Social capital has to do with the resources and networks available within a society, which may help confront issues faced by individuals and communities. Community Music Therapy (CoMT) and the music education movement known as *El Sistema*\* both utilize music—understood as social capital—to address social justice. Part I of this article defines CoMT and examines the purpose and goals of CoMT and El Sistema comparatively, and the ways in which their programs may address the empowerment needs of individuals and communities facing socioeconomic marginalization. Part II reviews the findings of a study that leads toward a suggestion of how these two approaches may be able to work synergistically to achieve their shared goals. Findings reveal many parallels and divergences between El Sistema and CoMT which may be useful in advancing change. This article defines the role of the music, program structure, social justice goals, outcomes, music education practice, areas of intersection, existing scholarly research, and criticisms each has received, in an effort to further advance the understanding and possibilities music's influence may have on society.

**Keywords:** CoMT, El Sistema, social justice, social capital, communitymultilingual abstract | [mmd.iammonline.com](http://mmd.iammonline.com)

In theory, both Community Music Therapy (CoMT) and *El Sistema* see participation in music-making and the arts as drivers for social justice and change. The purpose of this study was to comparatively examine the ways in which CoMT and El Sistema programs may address the empowerment needs of individuals and communities facing socioeconomic marginalization and suggest how these two approaches may be able to work synergistically to achieve their shared goals. This is an important topic, because a comparative analysis of CoMT and El Sistema programs had yet to be studied. The independent successes achieved so far with the CoMT and El Sistema approaches demonstrate that music can indeed be made accessible to anyone. While there are some differences in the ways CoMT and El Sistema provide access to music, there are also some ways in which they align. One of the most important points at which these two disciplines intersect is that both offer the capacity to promote change in those directly involved, such as students, clients and group

members, as well as those involved indirectly, such as families and the larger community.

*Community Music Therapy*

CoMT is considered a practice, subdiscipline, and professional specialty.[1] Its principles shift from those of conventional music therapy theory and practice.[1-4] CoMT is challenging, redefining, and expanding aspects of music therapy.[1,3,5-14] One of the main ways in which CoMT is challenging and expanding on conventional music therapy is that the focus is not only on the individuals and their needs. It is also on increasing possibilities for action, and the promotion of health and well-being of the clients who often face obstacles to health due to an inability to fully participate in social and cultural life.[1,3,15] Additionally, there is an emphasis on considering aspects of culture and the context in which the process takes place.[5,6,10-14] The client is both the individual and the community.[1,3,6,12-14,16]

CoMT practice guidelines PREPARE, participatory, resource-oriented, ecological, performative, activist, reflective, and ethics-driven, are applied based on context and needs.[1,3,11,13] Since the work is dependent on the

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\* *El Sistema* is a music education program founded by Jose Antonio Abreu in the 1970s in Venezuela. From the beginning, the main aims have been to provide access music education at no cost, as well as addressing social goals. Over the years its success stories have spread and many El Sistema-inspired programs have been started around the world.

environment, the context or circumstances, and the setting, it cannot be standardized; it changes with time and place.[1,3,12,13] This allows CoMT to address a broad range of goals such as cultural participation, health promotion, and the social and political issues faced by individuals and their communities or societies across a variety of contexts.[1,3,5,7,12,13,16] CoMT goals are addressed by promoting social justice and welfare in the community by deconstructing historical isolation and marginalization, addressing specific social challenges, promoting safety and engagement, encouraging community integration while building and strengthening the identity and culture of the individuals and the community, and by shifting the focus into developing and implementing new social policies in which health, education, and culture come together.[1,3,5,7,12,13,16,17]

Working musically with groups and individuals within communal situations is a natural part of what music can offer.[6,16,17] Musicking is a “communal phenomenon” that plays an integral role in allowing the work to unfold in CoMT settings.[1,3,5-7,10,11,13,16,17] Musicking in the broadest meaning of the term can be seen as a representation of what the world is like, as well as a model of what the individuals and community wish it to be, which can then address different aspects of individuals’ lives.[5,6,13,16,17]

According to Stige[13,16] and Stige and Aarø[1], the traditional therapeutic triad (client, therapist, music) is expanded to include the community, the culture, the context, and other relationships. The music therapist is not considered an expert but a collaborator in the process, and the role of the therapist expands. The music therapist becomes a “musicking community worker...who promotes social welfare [by reducing barriers to participation] in and through a community.”[13] The expanded role of the therapist within CoMT creates tension with conventional music therapy practice and ethical guidelines.[2,4] The music therapists must get immersed in the culture of the community and make an effort to constantly evolve and understand the societies in which they practice.[12,14] Most importantly, these therapists facilitate the natural process of connecting, healing, and evolving by staying open to the various therapeutic opportunities that music offers within the various ecological layers and systems, seeing the clients as cultural and musical beings, and taking part in the music while being there psychologically and physically in order to help clients find their place within the community.[1,3,5,11,14,16,18]

#### *Goals, Aims, and Purposes*

In CoMT, aesthetic objectives are social objectives, since playing together increases the participants’ possibilities for action.[12,19] One of the main goals in CoMT is to be able to reach musical *communitas* and flow, where participants share musical companionship and a musical community: A common world, time, and space that allows for both

individuality and unity.[6,10,19-22] Participating in CoMT allows for social change (through social learning) and for building a community in which both individual and communal cultural identity development can occur.[1,13] Once the cultural identity of individuals and the group starts to form, participants are able to get an increased sense of belonging and participation in the community, which helps to break down barriers and give access to hopes and dreams about what the world could be like, while at the same time addressing the health and well-being of participants.[1,5,6,13]

#### *Methodology*

CoMT methods can include all four of traditional music therapy’s interventions (recreation/orchestration, improvisation, songwriting, and receptive experiences) with an emphasis on successful and meaningful participation, as well as an opportunity for fun and free play.[8,10] Interventions are carried out within hypertextuality, in which there are many different paths to follow and explore as the relationships change and evolve throughout the music therapy process.[13] In addition, performance takes on an important role, creating opportunities for socialization and subjectivity among members and functioning as a medium of expression, empowerment, and sharing the music with others in the community.[1,3,5,7,8,10,13,14,16] The music therapist also carries out assessments that take into consideration the role of health affordances, formulates goals and objectives that can be met collaboratively with the group, implements interventions, and evaluates the therapy process in a reflective manner.[1,10,13]

#### *Outcomes*

CoMT has a wide variety of outcomes, both for individuals and for the community. Outcomes for individuals can include increased self-esteem, self-worth and communication; emotional expression and catharsis; gaining personal control; mental stimulation; relief of stress and anxiety; gaining a sense of pride and achievement; decreased isolation through finding a place in society; an increased feeling of responsibility; finding meaning, hope, and happiness in life; increased creativity; increased independence and empowerment; discovering how to connect with a healthy place within themselves; increased ability to experience trust and recognize the humanity of others through the music; and having the opportunity to be a leader and try out different social roles.[1,5,7,8,10,12,15-17]

Outcomes for the community include gaining a sense of emotional closeness; forming relationships and increased proximity to others; feelings of acceptance and belonging; community development and integration; reducing barriers to participation within the community; learning about social organization; reflecting the community’s musical culture; the reduction of stigma and opening up of integration processes; and transmitting community history and heritage while

creating bridges among different cultures.[1,3,5,7,8,12,13,15-17] Last, both the individual and the community are able to develop and strengthen their cultural identities and experience increased possibilities for action.[1,3,5,8,12,15-17,19,21]

#### *CoMT in the United States*

According to Ghetti[3], the practice of CoMT is not as common or widespread in the United States as it is in Scandinavia and Latin America. The fact that this kind of practice is less common may be due to hesitation about engaging in something that is in conflict with the American Music Therapy Association Code of Ethics, especially number 3.5, which states that the music therapist “will not enter into dual relationships with clients/students/research subjects.”[2,23] While working to fulfill the many roles within CoMT practice, dual relationships can easily form. Despite this conflict, CoMT practice is still more common in places like New York City. Current examples include work in the Thirtieth Street Men’s Shelter, Turry’s community performance practices, Jampel’s work at Baltic Street helping individuals with mental health needs integrate into the community, Ramsey’s “Happy Hour,” and Sensory Friendly Concerts.[3,24]

#### *El Sistema*

El Sistema, also known as Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela (FESNOJIV) or Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar (FMSB), is a music education program that started in Venezuela.[25,26] This program provides access to various aspects of music education to children and young adults who primarily come from a low socioeconomic status.[25-30] When the program started, music was only available for the elite. Jose Antonio Abreu saw that there was a need for orchestras in which everyone could participate and decided to take action.[25,26,31]

Abreu’s vision was to expand as much as possible, so the orchestra rehearsed during the week, and then on weekends the musicians would travel, spread the word, and teach others what they were doing in Caracas.[26] Even though Abreu’s vision seemed impossible—maybe even crazy—everyone trusted him and did as asked. [25,26] The way that El Sistema started is important because it set the stage for the immense expansion that occurred in the years that followed. There are now many educational centers around Venezuela reaching almost half a million children and young adults, and its success has inspired programs in many countries around the world, including the United States.

#### *Philosophy and Principles*

El Sistema’s motto is *Tocar, Cantar y Luchar*— “to play, to sing and to strive.”[25-27] While artistic excellence is one of its goals, El Sistema’s focus is on music for social change, social and emotional development, and the formation of

empathic human communities.[26,28,29] El Sistema is about giving access to music to all children, especially those who may not be able to have contact with music otherwise, by providing music instruction at no cost.[25,26,29] But it is more than that; it is about accomplishing “democratic ideals, justice and social inclusion, rescuing children and young people through art, increasing people’s sensitivity, [and] work and education as a road to collective and self-fulfillment.”[25]

El Sistema is an artistic and humanitarian revolution where access to music has been democratized to anyone.[25,29] It is a mission to create better human beings, or citizens of the world.[26] This is true not only for the children who participate but also for their families and the community that surrounds them.[25,26,28,30] It is a fight against conventional standards that say that intellect is more important than feelings and emotions, and that the arts are only for the few.[26,29] Abreu did not accept those standards as a reality and was often quoted saying that “culture for the poor must never be poor culture”[26] In other words, a person’s socioeconomic status should not dictate the level of culture that he or she is able to experience and participate in. Once people are able to create and express beauty by playing a musical instrument, they are able to understand the essence of humanity.[27]

#### *Practice*

El Sistema teaches that the orchestra (or choir or band) is an interdependent community that fundamentally agrees and has a common goal, one in which members are responsible for each other.[27] It is a place where there are no class distinctions and where social roles are equalized, yet it has its own identity and fingerprint—a sort of *communitas*. [19,27] The orchestra has the ability portray representations and symbols of harmony, order, the aesthetic and the beautiful, the universal, and the language of the invisible; it represents the essence of its members.[27] This is something has been a source of criticism about El Sistema, however, as orchestras are inherently hierarchical, competitive, and respond to the will and wishes of a single ruler, the conductor.[31,32]

In Venezuela, El Sistema is mainly set up through educational centers, called *nucleos*. [25,26] While there is a set curriculum for all of El Sistema, so children can continue to play if they move, each *nucleo* has its own personality and way of working.[26] This curriculum is sometimes seen as lacking in flexibility.[31,32] El Sistema is in a permanent state of “being and not yet being.”[26] This means that the way in which El Sistema works is constantly evolving and has the flexibility to be molded according to the specific needs that arise.[26,30] This is reflected in El Sistema–inspired programs around the world. An example of molding that has occurred based on the needs of the community is the special education program. There was no access to music for children with special needs in Venezuela, a *nucleo* in Lara, became the pioneer in inclusive groups and instruction.[26]

The guiding principles that hold El Sistema teaching together are social and emotional development, ensemble-based instruction and learning, high musical aspiration, artistic excellence, radical inclusion, peer learning, music as passion and expressivity, intensity of instruction and music making, family and community involvement, and most importantly, providing musical access as a way for children to break down barriers, with an emphasis on passion and fun.[25-30]

#### *Outcomes*

El Sistema has given birth to many great musicians, but not all participants pursue professional careers in music.[25,26] While there are programs that place great emphasis on artistic excellence and high musical quality, there are El Sistema *nucleos* that give more weight to the social and emotional development and well-being of their participants.[25,26,28,29]

El Sistema's individual and communal outcomes include participation in culture and society, access to expression through music, transformation of adversity into hope, transformation of challenge into action, and turning dreams into reality.[25,29,31] El Sistema involves social learning about discipline, responsibility, team practice and the experience of being in agreement.[26,27] It provides access to all classes, equalizes by taking away class distinctions, and has the ability to unite entire communities, thus creating a sense of belonging. [26-29] It allows for socialization and transmits values such as solidarity; a sense of harmony and order; compassion; and the expression of sublime feelings within the realms of the aesthetic, the beautiful, and the universal.[27,28,29]

#### *El Sistema in the United States*

The El Sistema movement in the United States is strong. The number of El Sistema-inspired programs is rapidly growing across the entire country. As of 2017, there are 161 programs across the country, each serving an average of 191 students.[33] There are also two organizations, El Sistema USA and Take A Stand, as well as a master's program, dedicated to the training and support of professional El Sistema teaching artists and administrators, with the aim of advancing the El Sistema presence in the United States. The configuration of programs in the United States reflects El Sistema practice around the world, as each program varies widely, even among programs that are in the same state or that are run by the same organization.[33]

#### *Social Justice*

Social justice is a complex concept, as its main linguistic elements, *social* and *justice*, have no universal definition or meaning; it manifests differently depending on context, requires the consideration of many different aspects of humanity, and is not carried out in equal measure across different societies.<sup>24,34</sup> Regardless of what social justice looks

like at any given place or to any given person or community, it is fair to say that it is absent when individuals and communities face socioeconomic marginalization.<sup>1,24,34</sup>

Advancing social justice signifies working for the good of all in order to reach socioeconomic equality and democracy.[35] In other words, working for social justice means promoting and securing basic human rights.[15] Social justice can be advanced by focusing on social inclusion, health and well-being, people's right to exist, and engendering a sense of belonging to groups and/or society.[17] Social welfare is deeply connected to social justice, as welfare and equality are the antithesis of poverty, inequality, and discrimination.[1]

#### *Social Welfare*

According to the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion<sup>36</sup>, prerequisites for health include peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable ecosystem, sustainable resources, social justice, and equity. Social welfare pertains to the overall well-being, prosperity, and health of both the community and the individuals that live within it.[13] Due to lack of access, marginalized individuals often face obstacles that prevent them from reaching an optimal state of health and well-being.[37-39]

The welfare state is a concept applied by government and social agencies to attempt to guarantee social stability and justice by placing minimum public safety nets for the community and its individuals.[13] Such public safety nets usually include programs that aim to improve health and provide access to services to people in the community.[13] Even though traditional health programs are necessary to maintain the health of individuals in a community, there are different ways in which health issues can be addressed.

Welfare programs can motivate individuals to improve on their health behaviors and thus improve their quality of life.[21,40] When implemented across a group within the community, these health behaviors can be manifested as mutual care of people's biological, psychological, social, and cultural well-being.[13] In other words, health can be represented by the quality of interactions and activities that the community and its individuals engage in.[13] By taking into account the quality of the interactions, health becomes a part of the relational and communal aspects of a person's life.[13,21] As a result, health is no longer only about the individual but also actively seeks to address human coexistence.<sup>13,21</sup> Social justice and social welfare can therefore be advanced with resources that exist within individuals and society, such as social capital.

#### *Social Capital*

Social capital plays a role in the health of individuals and society as a whole. It can be a positive resource that consists of social networks, connections among people, relationships (friends, family, groups), norms and values, sense of

reciprocity and social obligations, trust, and individuals' overall feelings of group membership and belonging.[40,41] Social capital is the basis for a civil society, as it is the "glue that holds communities together" and helps generate cooperation and trust in a mutually beneficial manner.[40]

There are several indicators of social capital. These include active group participation, community and civic involvement, the presence of social networks or connections (at any level), trust, the formation of norms and values, empowerment, reciprocity, and formal or informal learning.[40] It is essential that participation be active, as it strengthens social capital development by becoming a basis for inclusion, praxis for social goods, a source of information flow, and the using and sharing of resources among people.[24,40] Since social capital has to do with resources, one of the ways in which welfare state programs can address the health of communities and individuals is by providing them with opportunities for and access to social capital.

Social capital can be an important by-product of cultural activities, such as music, that require active participation and have an artistic purpose.[40,41] Music can be a resource for the development of social capital and community building, as it strengthens individuals and communities by encouraging people to engage positively in the world and society.[40] Social capital can therefore be expanded through musical participation within a community by decreasing barriers and increasing the possibilities for action.[12,16,21]

### *Music as Social Capital*

Music can influence an individual's health and mode of being and play a role in the process of forming and strengthening an individual's social and cultural identity.[5,19,21] It provides resources for increasing feelings of vitality; increasing emotional awareness; constructing an environment conducive to feelings of belonging, integration, and community; planting a sense of agency; instilling hope and security; and providing a sense of meaning and coherence in life.[5,14,15,19,21] Participating in music-making activities can increase an individual's social competency and communications skills and provide sense of trust, while increasing the ability to see other people's humanity.[14,15,21] Music-making is semiotic activity that can act as symbolic capital, enabling people to feel at home in the surrounding culture and environment.[19,21] Music-making activities can be a representation of human interaction and can lead to cultural innovations within noncultural realms.[8,19]

In working with musical capital, aesthetic objectives are social objectives.[12] Musical capital can therefore act as a template for nonaesthetic matters, making musical capital a cultural and political enterprise.[12,19] Musical capital can be a source of world building, which includes social formation, social ordering, and social enrichment, and a vehicle for cultural development.[19] Musical capital represents the performance of relationships and roles in communal practices

through musicking and musicing, and the formation of musical *communitas*, which allows for building bridges and utopian imaginations.[1,6,13,14,19,20,42] One example of programs that have addressed social capital through music throughout history can be found in the practices of community music around the world.[42]

### *Community Music*

Community music practices have and continue to address issues of social justice and social change by utilizing musical capital through a wide variety of representations around the world.[42] Community music resists categorization, as there is no national or global consensus about what it entails.[24,42] In its most basic form, community music involves teaching, experiencing, and performing music.[42] Community music programs do not have a global definition, but they do adhere to a few principles. These basic principles include active participation, mixed age and ability, group communication, skills sharing, and inclusion of diverse groups and people.[34] Community music practice is responsive to local needs and values.[24] Different interpretations of the basic principles and the imperative to respond to local needs and values call for different kinds of structures.

Community music usually emphasize lifelong learning and access for all, whether the projects are occasional, one-time, or ongoing.[42] In aiming to offer equal access to all, community music can serve a restorative social justice role, where the focus is on supporting a more equitable social order and building or restoring the community served by increasing its social capital.[24,40,42] Some initiatives may focus on music aesthetics; others may focus on personal and social well-being; and still others may focus on both.[4,42]

Community music programs utilize music to meet the social, cultural, emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual needs of individuals and their communities.[34] Community music has a positive impact on individuals, families, schools, and community relationships.[34] Active participation in community music not only results in acquiring musical skills but also in emotional growth, increased confidence, increased self-worth and agency, a sense of mastery, a sense of fulfillment, and empowerment.[34] Furthermore, community music can increase social capital by emphasizing shared experiences, participation and engagement, sense of belonging, mutual respect, trust and reciprocity, collaboration, the development of social networks and resources, shared norms and values, and fellowship.[34,40]

Due to the great variety of structures, goals, and purposes of community music programs, practitioners find themselves needing to perform a number of different roles. These include musician, teacher, researcher, and activist; the role taken is determined in response to the particular situation.[42] The community music practitioner's skills are important, but knowledge and understanding of the community being served is essential, as that plays a part in determining a program's

ability to successfully address its goals.[34] Ethics should also be at the forefront of the community music practitioner's skill set.[24] Since there is no governing body that community practitioners respond to, their standards of practice and ethics are determined by each practitioner's own set of morals and values.[4,24]

### Finding Connections

Community music practices have deep similarities with both CoMT and El Sistema. Given community music's aims and purposes, its focus on equity and access, and the ways in which community music practices are structured according to the needs of the community served, it can be said that El Sistema programs are a community music practice. The same can be said about CoMT. An important difference, however, is that El Sistema focuses on children, while community music works with people across the life span. In this sense, community music practices are more like CoMT.

According to O'Grady and McFerran<sup>4</sup>, health should be considered as a nonlinear continuum involving four stages: acute illness/crisis, rehabilitation, community, and well-being. Community music practices work with people in the community and well-being stages while CoMT practices work with people throughout the entire health care continuum.[43] When taking this into consideration, the notion that El Sistema can be considered a community music practice is strengthened, as El Sistema programs are most likely to serve people in the community and well-being stages of health. Regardless of the health stages that are addressed through El Sistema and CoMT programs, aspects of their essence and practice have the potential to aid, inform, and be mutually beneficial in achieving their shared goals.

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### Biographical Statements

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