



Stephen Fairbanks

Abstract

The arts are regarded as having a unique capacity to drive social Transformation. Accordingly, arts education programmes often position themselves as being ideally situated to deliver ‘social justice’. The youth orchestra programme known as El Sistema is one such programme and has – in recent years – captured the imagination of many classical music enthusiasts throughout the world. This paper uses El Sistema as a case-study to examine some of the theoretical and philosophical difficulties associated with ascribing social transformation to a particular medium and genre of the arts. Current research into El Sistema – and the Sistema-inspired derivatives – has become polarised, with some writers identifying the liberating impact of arts education while other writers concern themselves with the neo-colonial and ideological entrapments of the programmes. In this paper, I argue that such tensions emanate from divergent understandings of ‘social transformation’ and ‘social justice’. I draw upon the theoretical contributions of Pierre Bourdieu, David Miller, and Estelle Jorgensen to assert that a pluralistic understanding of ‘social justice’ can aid in dismantling the friction between such divergent views, allowing arts practices to retain their beautiful and elusive complexity even as they are co-opted into social endeavours.

Bio

Stephen Fairbanks is a first year PhD student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge, where he is pursuing research into perceptions of social justice among the beneficiaries of various music-education-as-social-justice programmes in the UK and how such programmes institutionalise and perpetuate moral, cultural, and political values. This work builds upon his previous research into the worldwide proliferation of the Venezuelan youth orchestra programme known as El Sistema. Prior to his research pursuits, he worked as a school teacher in Park City, Utah, USA, where he directed the high school orchestras, taught the middle school strings classes, and coordinated an after-school ‘Sistema-inspired’ elementary strings programme. Concurrent with the school teaching, he was also the music director of the Evanston Civic Orchestra in Evanston, Wyoming, USA. He and his wife have three children.