

Angélica Negrón

Caracas Children and Their Resonant Voices: Thoughts on Composing with El Sistema

From <http://angelicanegron.com/education>

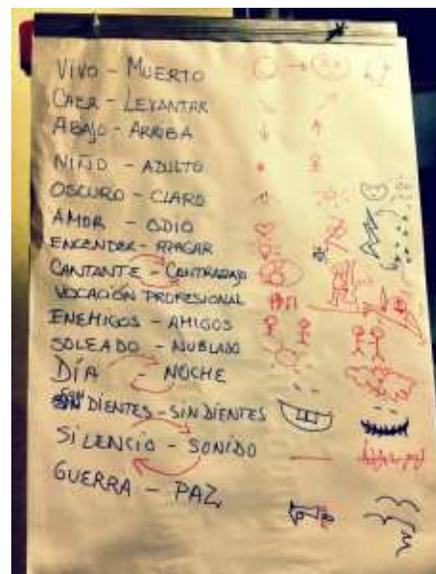


José Gregorio

A few days ago I had the fortune of traveling to Caracas with Jon Deak, the founder of New York Philharmonic's [Very Young Composers](#) program, and teaching artist extraordinaire/clarinetist Richard Mannoia to work with a group of 12 students from El Sistema on creating new music. After meeting the wonderful group of *Jóvenes Compositores Venezolanos* that were participating in this intensive composition workshop, it was evident that we were in front of children that have been waiting for us and were eager to create. The objective of our visit to Caracas was clear and extremely ambitious: to engage and lead children into a week of musical creation culminating in new pieces written for orchestra. As time was of essence, we started right away and jumped into adventurous musical games, rhythmic exercises and physical warmups as we presented them with the theme of the week, *Cambios y Transformaciones* (Change & Transformation), which was the driving force and inspiration behind the workshop and the new compositions that these very

young composers were going to be creating throughout the week. From the first time my colleague Richard Mannoia suggested this theme in our initial meeting, I thought it was genius as it provided a stimulating framework that was also particularly relevant and meaningful to this group of children.

The very first day we shared some ideas on the theme talking about what change meant to us. We created a long list of transformations that ranged from the simple (down → up, on → off, day → night) to the profound and deeply complicated (life → death, war → peace, love → hate). This later turned into a small group composition exercise in which students worked on short structured improvisations/compositions inspired by one of these transformations and performed them with the rest of the class. Students were only allowed to use their voices or bodies as sound producers (no instruments) which turned out to have a really interesting result when they shared their pieces and also allowed everyone to experiment without the limitations of traditional instruments and familiar sounds. We noticed that even when students were inspired by the same change the musical end results were very different from one another and so were the musical transformations that occurred in



Cambios y Transformaciones

their pieces. Some were very gradual and organic while others were abrupt and surprising. New sounds and ideas were starting to emerge and creative juices started flowing as children focused on exploring the idea of change through music.

We then focused on graphic ways of notating ideas and on the importance of creating a visual timeline for the big piece they were about to write as a means of keeping us focused throughout the process. Though certainly engaged in the process of creating visual timelines, students were starting to become impatient and started to repeatedly ask “*When are we going to start writing our pieces???*” Again, it was pretty apparent that there was a sense of anticipation and that these children were eager to start composing. And that’s exactly what we did on the second day, we started to write music. After having Richard lead us into a really fun transformative object warmup in which an object was passed around the circle and turned into something else with each person, we started to generate melodic material for the compositions starting with dance moves. We challenged students to create inventive, interesting and more complex rhythms that originated from those dance moves and they went for it. From here, students started to work individually with us along with a group of amazing local teaching artists (Pedro, Bertha, Juan & Rosa!!) who were all invaluable during our time there and skillfully served as mentors helping us guide the students through the process of musical composition without composing not one note for them. Some students used their instruments to convey their ideas, some were singing and other ones were writing down notes on staff paper directly from their heads. The fluidity of their musical ideas was incredible to watch and even among the noisy moments we had in the classroom (accordion, percussion & even harpsichord were all part of our particular composing orchestra) students were always extremely focused and hard at work.



Daniel's score for "The Revolution"

Every day work got more and more intensive and from the moment we started the composition process it became evident that these pieces were not going to be short & sweet 15-measure works but rather ambitious symphonic pieces with carefully selected harmonies & clever orchestration choices each with the unique personality of the young composer at work. These children all come from the incredible program El Sistema which not only creates top musicians & performers but also saves lives during the process. Even though they come from daily music classes in their local núcleo in Montalbán, what made these group of children so special was their thirst and appetite for exploring

the creative side of music: an insatiable need for composing. They even worked more on their pieces on their bus back to Montalbán to make sure their music was ready for the first rehearsal with the orchestra. Particularly extraordinary was to see how some students composed the different layers for every instrument in separate pages but when put together it all magically fit together. The ability to combine melodies and harmonies while thinking about them independently is something really striking in some of these young composers.

After just five days of composing and a loooong night of copying music & making parts (thanks Richard for patiently dictating while I copied away in Finale!), we had our first rehearsal on Saturday morning with Maestro Alfredo Rugeles and the *Orquesta de Música Contemporánea del Conservatorio de Música Simón Bolívar*. The children's pieces were demanding and each presented its own challenges for the orchestra but we were lucky to be working with two excellent conductors, Alfredo Rugeles & Régulo Stabilito, and a group of determined, hard-working, disciplined and talented young musicians from El Sistema. As Jon mentioned, we've never before seen a group of musicians that after 4 hours of rehearsal without a break, decide to continue practicing their parts when they were given their lunch break. Truly amazing to watch the transformation these 12 pieces underwent from Saturday morning's rehearsal to Tuesday afternoon's concert. The incredible Dani Bedoni and the always supportive Diana Arismendi helped us every step along the way in making sure our ambitious dreams were actually possible and the very young composers wrote brilliant new gems for this exciting new orchestra to perform. We had a really great audience for the concert that received every new composition and each young composer with the warmth, energy and enthusiasm of El Sistema's characteristic welcoming atmosphere. Each piece radiated with a distinctive splendor, from philosophical reflections on life to dramatic explorations of peace/war these group of young composers (ages 9 to 15) profoundly captured the idea of change and transformation while also managing to write compelling and engaging works that clearly exhibited the powerful compositional voice that children in Caracas have to offer. Beyond doubt one of the most transcending and inspiring experiences I've ever had.



David Loyo presenting his piece with Jon Deak



Luis Pichardo sewing his score



Jóvenes Compositores Venezolanos

Special thanks to everyone in Caracas for making our stay there so great, to Ted Wiprud from NY Philharmonic and Jon Deak for thinking about me for this wonderful journey.