

# CULTURE MONSTER

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

**Quick links:** [ART](#) | [ARCHITECTURE](#) | [CLASSICAL MUSIC](#) | [THEATER](#) | [DANCE](#) | [OPERA](#)

[« Weston Naef, Getty's top photography curator, to retire](#) | [Main](#) | [Celebrities pay tribute to 2008 Kennedy Center honorees](#) »

## Dudamel even whips up grade-schoolers

1:18 PM, December 8, 2008



When General Motors called to ask about my "Slob service," I didn't take it personally. Still, as a longtime Saab loyalist, I can't say that I'm overjoyed that my tax dollars are needed to bail out the bunglers in Detroit who took over the once imaginative Swedish make a few years ago and have systematically devalued it.

I no longer expect to drive a new Saab on the road to a better future. I do, however, insist on a better future, like the one I saw at the EXPO Center on Saturday morning. The American dream exists if we want it and if we are not so stupid that we throw away all our money on the things that don't work rather than fund the things that work brilliantly.

At 10:30 a.m., [Gustavo Dudamel](#) showed up at the downtown recreation center to spend an hour rehearsing the [Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles](#). YOLA was formed a year ago by the [Los Angeles Philharmonic](#) in partnership with the [Harmony Project](#) and the [Department of Recreation and Parks](#), on the model of El Sistema, the music education program in Venezuela that puts instruments in the hands of disadvantaged children. The kids in YOLA range in age from 6 to 9. They live within a 5-mile radius of the Expo Center. They are given instruments, instruction and an orchestra rehearsal space. In return, they sign a contract agreeing to show up and practice. Most of the kids are Latino or African American.

As is well known, Dudamel, who will become music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic in October, is a product of the government-funded Venezuelan system. When you have 250,000 children in youth orchestras around the country, you might find a genius.

In the pairs of programs he conducted with the Israel Philharmonic and his soon-to-be L.A. band during the last two weeks, the 27-year-old phenomenon demonstrated a musical command -- and yes, genius -- that even some of us who have watched him closely over the last four years were not quite prepared for. The level of audience excitement just kept rising, concert after concert. By Sunday afternoon, with a final overpowering performance of Strauss' "Alpine Symphony," Disney Hall could hardly contain the commotion.

But witnessing Dudamel instruct the kids moved me most. Working on the triumphant Finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, he kept asking for more. He said he wanted an earthquake. He demonstrated how phrases should rise in intensity. He told these fledgling players to play with pride.

Turning to a timpanist who was barely taller than his drums, Dudamel showed the boy how to hit the skins as if he were dribbling a basketball. I want 10,000 times more, Dudamel said with a huge grin on his face. Suddenly the timid timpanist was no longer timid.

Dudamel reminded the trumpets that they can easily cover the strings, and encouraged them to do so. "We have to use the power of our body to play," he said, as he urged more and more ego.

He taught the strings a lesson in beauty. He asked the whole orchestra to sing a Beethoven tune. The players did -- and beautifully. Dudamel stood for a minute, with his hand over his heart, a look of bliss on his face. They then played with a new appreciation.

There was a lot of laughter, but Dudamel was also demanding. Real work was done, and some real Beethoven was the reward. Next year -- Disney Hall, he told them. He insists that he means it.

YOLA is meant to serve as a model in community, and that was exactly what it felt like. The mood in the room was one of heartwarming rapport -- among the students as well as between the students and their teachers, who sat in the orchestra, coaching and encouraging. The children high-fived one another when they got things right.

Over a two-week period, Dudamel revealed an extraordinary expertise in a wide range of music. He conducted symphonies by Brahms, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and Mendelssohn from memory (as he did the enormous "Alpine"). He proved a sensitive accompanist for soloists. Even the pianist Rudolph Buchbinder caught a bit of the Dudamel bug and didn't phone in Mozart's A-major Piano Concerto on Sunday afternoon the way he had Thursday.

Dudamel also revealed himself an exceptionally persuasive champion of contemporary music. His exquisite dynamic control and ability to create plush textures produced unforgettable performances of the works of two great Hungarian modernists, György Ligeti and György Kurtág. Best of all, Dudamel rescued Leonard Bernstein's late Concerto for Orchestra from unjust neglect.

Until two weeks ago, comparing Dudamel to Bernstein seemed to me dangerous. Let a 27-year-old be a 27-year-old, and let's not get too carried away. But with YOLA, let's get carried away. As an educator, Dudamel is, without question, the next Bernstein.

You know what's coming next. YOLA is not expensive, but it costs something and it must grow. The interest is there. Wonderful teachers are there. Dudamel will be an Angeleno before the year is out. You can put a monetary value on bailouts, but not on this. If you don't believe me, YOLA has a public concert on Feb. 21 at Santee High School.

-- Mark Swed