



guardian.co.uk

## TOMSERVICE ONCLASSICAL BLOG



### How YOLA is changing children's lives



Gustavo Dudamel conducting the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra. Photograph: Chris Christodoulou/BBC

Last Saturday in Los Angeles, conductor [Gustavo Dudamel](#) made his debut with a new orchestra. Not some chamber-scale off-shoot of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, where he takes up the music directorship in a few months, but a group of about a hundred children, aged from 7-14, who play with [YOLA](#), the Youth Orchestra LA.

It's an inspirational scheme. The LA Phil have set this orchestra up in a financially and musically deprived suburb of the city in partnership with the [Harmony project](#) – an LA-based charity that gives free instruments to those who would never otherwise have the chance to play violins, trumpets, or cellos – and the [EXPO centre](#), which provides the venue for the rehearsals. When I was there a couple of weeks ago, I heard these kids play an arrangement of the finale from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Some of them had only been learning their instruments for a few weeks, and the most experienced just for a few months, so we're not talking a budding National Youth Orchestra here. But as well as the conductor's attempt to stop the flute section sticking pencils into their instrument and to command a bit of discipline in the ranks of an unruly cello section, there was an impressive commitment to get through the piece, and an uninhibited and enthusiastic racket.

Best of all was the sense that the YOLA is working across generations to give opportunities for whole families who otherwise would not have the means to sponsor their children's musical ambitions. At a meeting of the kids' parents, amateur [Ed Barguiarena](#) led a moving workshop that revealed the power of music to change lives.

Some of the parents, mostly Hispanic and African-American, broke down in tears as they told the group how YOLA was allowing their children to realise their own dreams of becoming a musician, or simply of playing the piano, the trumpet, the violin.

Music education in the school system in LA is in a much more precarious state than it is here – if your school doesn't do music, you aren't ever going to get the chance to start on a journey of learning the nuts and bolts of it, since there's no meaningful state or federal commitment to provide the basics of music education. This means that YOLA is not just an orchestra, but a whole culture of music teaching. It's only the start though: the idea is to roll out the YOLA model all over the city, and create a network of orchestras in underprivileged areas.

There is an obvious precedent for this kind of scheme – Venezuela's [El Sistema](#) project, which has transformed the musical life of an entire nation, with Dudamel as its most obvious success story. The whole YOLA project was set up in honour of Dudamel's arrival in the city; a symbol of the cultural legacy he wants to leave in LA.

But unlike in this country, where we have set up pilot projects called [Sistema Scotland](#) as well as [a similiar scheme in England](#), what impressed me most about YOLA is that it's not an attempt to ship in a model developed in another culture into the suburbs of LA, but an idea that's sensitive to the individual needs and situations of the city and its people. We could learn a lot from that, instead of hoping that just by calling something "Sistema Scotland" and jumping on an exotic, South-American sounding bandwagon, our music-educational culture will somehow be transformed.

Many of the YOLA children will have been meeting Dudamel for the first time. For most he will probably be just be another conductor, not the musical superstar he is for the rest of the city. And that means they will have a personal relationship with him for the rest of their lives.

---

[Previous](#)

[Blog home](#)

[Next](#)

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2008