




## ARTICLE

# Silent stages: COVID-19 as a catalyst for change in Canadian El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programmes

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## Abstract

El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programmes have become increasingly popular community music education and social welfare initiatives that aim to benefit socially and economically disadvantaged youth. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic significantly disrupted many of these programmes. The purpose of this research was to investigate how eight Canadian El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programmes adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic. We interviewed eight teachers and eight administrators and found that their programming was impacted in relation to four themes: (a) an increased emphasis on social curricula, (b) pedagogical shifts, (c) inclusion of diverse musical voices and (d) adopting anti-racism perspectives. The COVID-19 pandemic response served as a significant catalyst for change for Canadian El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programmes, utilising the disruption to rethink and address participant needs.

**Keywords:** El Sistema; pandemic response; student-centred music education; COVID-19 music education

Over the past decade, El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programmes have become increasingly popular community music education and social welfare initiatives that aim to benefit socially and economically disadvantaged youth (Corcoran, 2021; Govias, 2011). Proponents of the programmes frequently cite research that shows social and emotional benefits (Alemán et al., 2017; Ehrlin & Gustavsson, 2018; Fasano et al., 2019; Gustavsson & Ehrlin, 2018; Hopkins et al., 2017; Hospital et al., 2018; Ilari et al., 2018; Merati et al., 2019; Osborne et al., 2016), increases in academic achievement (Holochwost et al., 2017; Slater et al., 2014) and cognitive growth (Habibi et al., 2016; Hedayati et al., 2016).

Criticisms of El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programming have articulated concerns, however, that the El Sistema approach has little support from objective, evidence-based research (Baker, 2014; Baker et al., 2018; Frega & Limongi, 2019); that its emphasis on Western classical music and hierarchical orchestral structures has negative aspects related to authority, control and exclusion (Baker, 2016; Boia and Boal-Palheiros, 2017; Dobson, 2016; Rimmer, 2018); and that approaches place little emphasis on self-directed informal music learning or learners' own interests, backgrounds and music (Hallam & Creech, 2010).

In Canada, where this research was situated, a number of El Sistema and El Sistema-inspired programmes operate across the country, in various formats (Lorenzino, 2015; Smith & Lorenzino, 2016). Research examining the various programmes has largely reported positive impacts, such as the learners feeling safe, noticed and appreciated thanks to positive musical experiences, explicit teaching of personal and musical expectations and an integration of learning and citizenship (Brook & Cui, 2021); increased quality of academic work and learners feeling accepted, supported and high in self-concept (Morin, 2014); and children experiencing aesthetic beauty valuable to

growth and transformation (Mota, Baker, Ilari, O'Neill, & Senyshyn, 2016)—with a caution from the authors that what individuals actually 'get out of learning *any* prescribed music will vary considerably' (p. 56).

In March 2020, El Sistema and El Sistema-inspired programmes across Canada began drastically limiting face-to-face contact and were forced to shift and re-vision how they could continue to engage with learners. This article reports research that explored how programmes responded and adapted during the pandemic and to what extent instructors and administrators felt they were effective in meeting learners' needs.

## Review of relevant research

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic caused many El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programmes, as well as school and community music groups, to drastically modify their programming. These modifications often negatively affected vulnerable and marginalised students. For example, according to Sistema Toronto's 2020 annual report, the COVID-19 pandemic response had a disproportionate impact on racialised low-income communities. Particularly, the organisation noted that students lacked access to the internet, as well as free nutrition programmes, such as the one normally provided by Sistema Toronto's regular programming.

Sistema Scotland's Annual Report (2021) described their switch to online programming ranging from one-on-one sessions to group sessions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic response. The report identified the need for mental health support for children during COVID-19.

Investigating an after-school US community music school programme, Salvador *et al.* (2021) surveyed students, parents/caregivers, teachers, ensemble directors, music therapists and administrators about their experiences of music instruction that had shifted online. While most student and parent respondents preferred in-person instruction, some found the online options opened up new possibilities and had unanticipated silver linings. Others were discouraged by technology issues and found the experience frustrating. Some teachers similarly found certain aspects positive, such as increased options for individual instruction, while others were mostly discouraged.

de Bruin (2021) interviewed 15 secondary school instrumental music educators in Australia and found teachers had shifted to emphasise learner-centred teaching approaches geared towards connection, empathy and relationship building. de Bruin learned that both teachers and students had to be adaptable to make the interactions meaningful, that teachers talked more with students and got to know them better and that students slowed down delivery as they recognised the benefits of enquiring more about student learning and motivation.

Martinec (2020) surveyed nine choral educators across Canada about their work with choirs during the pandemic, finding overall that—despite benefits such as independent chorister growth, increased knowledge about technology, developing new pedagogical strategies and identifying new online resources—the educators felt that the various online strategies were essentially a 'band-aid solution' (p. 41) and could not replace the 'integral connections and subtle interactions that occur in face-to-face rehearsals' (p. 46). These integral connections and interactions have previously been found to impact the social and emotional learning of students (Brock *et al.*, 2008; Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015) as well as musical development (Moore *et al.*, 2003; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2018; Volpe *et al.*, 2016).

Examining the experiences of an Australian primary music teacher teaching online, Joseph and Lennox (2021) found positive aspects such as students who were usually reserved being willing to share and perform more, learners involving their families in their music making—fostering connectedness and an enhanced sense for parents of what classroom music was all about. Negative aspects included students who did not have the support at home to be able to participate fully, limited capacity for the teacher to respond to questions and provide instant feedback and considerable time needed for planning classes. The authors identify that teaching music during lockdown went beyond music content to support social and emotional health and well-being.

Barrett (2021) interviewed 11 teachers in Ontario, Canada, to investigate the effect of online learning on equitable access to quality education. Barrett found the sense of belonging from face-to-face classes and there was essentially no relationship between students. Trust in the learning community, shared purpose and quality of interactions were all undermined as instruction turned towards one-on-one communication between teacher and student. For marginalised and vulnerable students, pandemic-led online learning had a disproportionate negative affect, and many students drifted away from learning activities.

A similar finding was uncovered by Davis and Phillips (2020). The researchers surveyed 624 performing arts educators from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the USA. Key challenges faced by performing arts educators were lack of engagement, concern for students with disabilities and students from marginalised groups, as well as technological challenges related to new digital tools.

Some of the goals of El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programmes are to foster a sense of belonging, increase academic and musical achievement and help alleviate poverty among marginalised and vulnerable participants (Creech et al., 2016). As this review of literature shows, these areas were profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic response, and vulnerable and marginalised students were increasingly impacted. Previous criticisms of the El Sistema model, such as a focus on teacher-led learning (Rimmer, 2018) and the limited impact participation has on poverty within El Sistema communities (Baker et al., 2018), seem to intersect with many of the challenges that marginalised and vulnerable populations face, and the COVID-19 pandemic exasperated these issues.

### Purpose and research questions

In order to contribute to the growing body of literature examining music education during the pandemic, we sought with this study to address specifically the gap in research investigating El Sistema and El Sistema-inspired pandemic programming. This research was therefore designed to explore how Canadian programmes responded and adapted during the pandemic and to what extent instructors and administrators felt they were effective in meeting the needs of learners. The study was guided by the research question: *how has the experience of the pandemic influenced El Sistema programming?*

### Positionality

The first author is an active teacher in an El Sistema-inspired programme. They have been teaching in this method for 6 years and have some bias that these programmes are valuable to students. Their teaching strives to include student-centred approaches to learning based on creative music making. The second author is involved in the same programme in an arms-length capacity and similarly believes in the value of such programmes for students. The third author researches economically disadvantaged populations and believes that programmes like El Sistema play a critical role in reducing inequalities. We all believe strongly, however, that the value of the programmes is not inherent but depends on shaping the programming to meet the specific needs of unique students within particular contexts and in response to evolving understandings of socially just teaching and learning practices.

### Research design

Our approach to the research was oriented with a social ecological perspective of pedagogy, where teaching and learning are interrelated 'between the personal, social, the environmental and the spiritual/unknown' (Camden-Pratt, 2008, p. 5). The research focused on teacher and administrator perspectives of how teaching and learning practices in El Sistema programming were adapted during the pandemic. The research question, *How has the experience of the pandemic influenced El Sistema programming?*, was addressed through a qualitative multiple case study (Stake, 2006) of eight Canadian El Sistema and El Sistema-inspired music programmes.

**Table 1.** Programme Details

Programme	City size	Number of students
Ontario A	Large urban	>300
Ontario B	Large urban	>600
Ontario C	Small urban	<50
Manitoba	Mid urban	>150
Quebec	Large urban	>100
New Brunswick A	Mid urban	>150
New Brunswick B	Small urban	>150
Alberta	Large urban	>100

### Participants

Participants for this study included 1 teacher and 1 administrator from each of 8 El Sistema or Sistema-inspired programmes across Canada, for a total of 16 participants. The programmes are located in the provinces of Ontario (3), Manitoba (1), Quebec (1), New Brunswick (2) and Alberta (1). Most programmes moved their teaching entirely online, except for two. Those programmes continued to operate in-person, according to their province's public health guidelines. The programmes varied from small organisations with fewer than 50 students to large programmes with over 600. The teachers and administrators interviewed had been employed between 1 and 7 years. To preserve the anonymity of participants, we do not disclose specific participant demographic information, and we do not attribute quotations to particular programmes, as the Sistema community in Canada is small, and this information could make participating programmes or individuals identifiable. Details of the programmes are provided in Table 1.

### Data collection and analysis

Data were gathered through 30 min interviews with 1 teacher and 1 administrator of each programme, for a total of 16 interviews, using a standard protocol (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). Interviews took place virtually over Microsoft Teams between November 2020 and March 2021. Interviews focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on programming and student learning. Interviews were semi-structured, consisting of seven questions, derived from the research question. The first author transcribed video-recordings of each interview session using pseudonyms to designate participants.

We used an inductive approach to analysis, allowing topics, categories and themes to emerge from the data (Thomas, 2006). We first analysed interview data from each case individually and then performed a cross-case analysis that informed conclusions regarding the cases collectively (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). Across the cases, 43 initial codes were organised into 12 categories grouped in turn into four themes.

### Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness of the findings, our research procedures included member checking, triangulation, reflexivity and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking involved asking participants to review our findings for content accuracy, interpretation of the data and resonance of thematic descriptions. Participants replied through email that the findings accurately represented their thoughts and did not request any changes. Triangulation of sources was achieved through seeking input from both teacher and administrator perspectives to facilitate deeper

understanding. To foster reflexivity, we articulated our positionality, above. We also intentionally undertook the research together, to encourage dialogue and peer debriefing that would unpack and interrogate our perspectives and assumptions.

## Findings

In seeking to identify pandemic programming shifts, four themes emerged as particularly salient: (a) social curriculum, (b) pedagogical shifts, (c) diverse musical voices and (d) anti-racism.

### *Social curriculum*

The pandemic emphasised the need for participant Sistema programmes to respond to the social needs of their students. As lockdowns took effect, and programmes moved online, participants indicated that their programming pivoted to include a more robust social curriculum. This curriculum included activities such as well-being check-ins and sending letters in the mail to students. Letters, filled with encouraging notes and colourful stickers, were sent monthly in one programme. A teacher participant from another programme indicated that they individually met with students weekly over Zoom for 15 min social visits. The participant explained that in these visits, they asked how the student was feeling and what sorts of non-musical activities they participated in during the week, such as playing video games, going to the park or helping their caregiver make meals. The goal, they said, was to ‘strengthen [the] relationship [with the student], but to also look for signs of trouble . . . like if they’re visibly sad, or look in distress’. An administrator participant summarised the need for social support through the pandemic:

I’ve noticed that our students need us as friends and mentors right now. And caregivers need us as social support and miss the childcare aspect of the programme. This pandemic really put into view how much families and students need us for social supports, rather than just playing music together.

Another form of checking in and support was to arrange for the delivery of nutritious meals to programme families and to gather online to share the meal. The virtual meal sharing was seen as an important aspect of community building, and participants felt these meals were a means of recreating the celebratory feeling of a concert.

To support the social curriculum, interviewees mentioned that some programmes had invested in targeted social support training for teachers. This took place through workshops and training with trauma-informed education specialists; equity, diversity and inclusion officers, and social agencies. According to one administrator participant, the training ‘has helped our teachers feel more secure and confident in addressing the [social] needs of our students’. Teachers echoed this sentiment and indicated that they felt they had administrative support when reaching out to students and families.

Sistema programmes in this study also provided support for their students in the form of technological hardware and financial help for internet access. Participants indicated that families in their programmes often lacked the required technology to participate in online activities. While many students were provided devices for online schooling by their local school boards, Sistema programmes offered supplemental technology such as microphones and headphones.

### *Structural shifts*

Participants described a variety of structural shifts during the pandemic. Sistema programmes have been criticised in the past for the use of hierarchal methods based on orchestral music training (e.g., Boia & Boal-Palheiros, 2017; Dobson, 2016; Frega & Limongi, 2019; Kuuse, 2018). For example, Creech et al. (2016) observed that most Sistema programmes include students with a

range of musical proficiency ranging from ‘high achievers’ to novices. In some approaches, the more advanced students are called upon to assist the novices or teaching practices privilege the advanced learners (Creech *et al.* 2016). Emphasising and overtly recognising differences in musical proficiency may run the risk of setting up hierarchical relationships within the programme that work against social inclusion.

The participating educators interviewed in this study seemed to have taken these criticisms to heart. The onset of the pandemic response made clear some severe limitations of the orchestral model. Logistical issues, such as those associated with coordinating large ensembles, became prevalent and led to a shift in music pedagogy structures: ‘Obviously, we can’t lead full orchestra rehearsals effectively online. We’ve pivoted to small ensemble teaching, like duos, trios and quartets’ (administrator participant). While the structural shifts were made out of logistical necessity, participants soon recognised benefits. The teacher participant explained, ‘It has given students more focused time with the teachers, and some kids have said that they feel more connected with our little community’.

These smaller ensembles were described as less inherently hierarchical and as inviting greater and more active learner ownership of music making. Administrator and teacher participants described students contributing more to the direction of music-making sessions, for example, by choosing which exercises or repertoire to focus on or by offering more opinions about the interpretation (e.g. tempi and dynamics) of the music. Smaller ensembles were identified also as facilitating more learner-to-learner interactions, in contrast to previous orchestra rehearsals that were generally limited to teacher-to-learner interactions. Teacher participants observed the students adopting a show-and-tell approach to learning music, while the teachers took a facilitation role. A teacher participant said that ‘sometimes I just sit back [laughing] and let the kids do the work’. Further, smaller ensembles seemed to enable creative music making more easily:

We have incorporated a lot more sharing and creating our own music—even just simple made-up melodies. We do a game where we roll some dice online using YouTube and give a challenge based on the dice. One challenge might be to make a ‘dancing tune’ and the student needs to make up some dancing type sounds, whatever that means to them. (Teacher participant)

The pandemic also resulted in shifts to provide students with more individual attention from teachers, the teachers even scheduling one-on-one individual lessons—often with an emphasis on social visiting. Participants revealed that their programmes historically followed a group-based instruction approach and that individual lessons were rare. During the pandemic, however, individual lessons became commonplace. Teachers described feeling that these one-on-one lessons strengthened their teaching and student learning, as the lessons allowed for increased musical assessment opportunities and allowed teachers to forge stronger personal relationships with each student. Administrators also felt that individual lessons were valuable but were uneasy about the time and resources needed to provide these lessons when in-person programming returned. Administrators also voiced concern that their programmes have historically been based on group instruction and wondered how shifting to more individual lessons would affect their musical mission.

### ***Diverse musical voices***

Baker (2014) has criticised El Sistema programmes because they tend to privilege Western classical musical traditions. Baker (2014) has further argued that the programme’s focus on Western repertoire also limits musical exploration by focusing on adherence to established musical norms and techniques. While the use of Western orchestral music continued to be widely used across the programmes represented in this study, participants described increased

incorporation of other music based on community interests and backgrounds. For example, one programme actively consulted with the Indigenous community that many students belonged to. These consultations resulted in the incorporation of Indigenous drumming into their programming. The administrator hoped to continue this relationship when in-person programming returned and to strengthen the ties with the community by including Indigenous dance teaching. Administrator and teacher participants from another programme also related efforts to move beyond orchestral repertoire to respond to the cultural makeup of their students. Programme leadership invited community members to be a part of an artistic advisory committee to inform musical choices:

At [our programme], we have included some community members to help us choose musical styles to include alongside our orchestral programming. There is a large Haitian community, and we brought some Haitian musicians to guest-lead workshops for our students over Zoom. The students . . . reacted so enthusiastically! (Administrator participant)

In addition, participants across the country described incorporating more listening and sharing exercises, providing students the chance to share the music that *they* were listening to with the group. As a result of making space for student musical interests, teachers gained new knowledge of the diverse genres that students were engaging with:

We do a musical sharing session and it's been great to see them get into discussions about shared songs they love. I saw lots of video game music being discussed, but also unexpected genres . . . country music and K-pop . . . and film music from movies that are way too old for them [laughing]. One student became really into the drumming this year and shared a Persian drum piece that she and her dad watched. Their family are newcomers [to Canada], and it seemed that it was a bonding moment for them, and she was so happy to share it with her friends. (Teacher participant)

Programmes also made use of technology-based music apps to explore the musical interests of their students. Using online digital audio workstations, students collaborated to produce remixes of various songs. One programme was using popular songs, and another had students remix an orchestral piece they had recorded together by adding beats and loops. Additionally, some students recorded themselves playing their instruments along with the songs or adding newly composed or improvised counter-melodies and harmonies to the piece.

### **Anti-racism**

Alongside and interconnecting with the pandemic response, Sistema programmes in Canada have taken the initiative to evaluate their programming with respect to anti-racism. Participants explained that the protests spurred by the murder of George Floyd in the USA and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement inspired a re-evaluation of their programming. Sawchuk (2021) observed that the summer of BLM protests had a profound effect on all educational institutions. The two main areas that institutions began to address were anti-racism in the curricula and the composition of the teaching profession. Sawchuk (2021) mentions that one critical question is 'whose curricula do we teach?' (p. 13).

Participants from all programmes indicated that their administration had formed some sort of anti-racism committee to evaluate how hiring practices and pedagogy could support anti-racism. One administrator participant outlined that 'being limited in what we do in schools has forced us to look inward . . . and questions start to emerge about how we might be complicit in racial discrimination too'.

A topic that emerged through interviews with participants was representation and hierarchy in music:

The protests in the summer really put things into perspective for me. Are we using this [Western orchestral] music in some sort of saviour way? Like, do we really think that if we stick some kids in an orchestra, we are going to fundamentally improve their lives? We need to go way, way beyond that and consider the systemic issues our students and families face. (Teacher participant)

Participants described questioning programme missions that espoused social change through music. They were conscious of perpetuating systems of oppression and hierarchy through leader-driven rehearsals (i.e. conductor–orchestra relationships) and emphasis on Western orchestral music but articulated they did not feel that they had adequate expertise or tools to address these concerns. One teacher participant felt that they ‘were doing good things . . . [as they] see the difference being in the programme makes for students and families’. However, the participant went on to say that they hoped to become more aware of issues propagated by Western orchestral music teaching and to change their approach to be anti-racist.

Sistema organisations across Canada have been consolidating resources and learning through monthly online ‘check-ins’ created to share news from their organisations and to share ideas for virtual programming. Programmes also came together through national meetings to inform anti-racist programming and hiring practices. Through these monthly meetings, an umbrella organisation, Sistema Canada, was created with the intention of providing organisational support. An administrator participant was enthusiastic about the potential of this organisation: ‘We don’t need to feel like we’re doing this alone’. The administrator explained that having the professional support of their peers to address anti-racism in music gave them confidence to navigate change in a positive way.

## Discussion

The four themes outlined in the findings paint a picture of changing programmatic priorities, impelled by the pandemic response. Participants were deeply aware of criticisms levelled at various Sistema principles and practices, and many seemed to have taken to heart the need for programmatic changes. Such changes manifested in a greater emphasis on social support over musical excellence, a re-evaluation of using Western orchestral structures and teaching methods, a concerted effort to diversify music by inviting community and student music and voices, and a recognition of the need for anti-racism practices in programming and hiring to drive change within El Sistema organisations.

The research purpose of our study was to investigate how the pandemic impacted Sistema programming. The findings that emerged, however, did not only address pandemic impacts. While there *were* direct pandemic impacts identified, such as shifting to online learning and shifting away from large ensembles, the most notable impact of the pandemic was that it served as a catalyst for change. The pandemic brought many issues to the fore, such as a lack of student-centred learning or the impact of financial hardship to fully participate in music education. These issues had been identified in the Sistema and progressive music education research before (e.g. Baker, 2021; Hess 2021) but were emphasised by the challenges marginalised and vulnerable populations experienced during the pandemic. The pandemic was a key catalyst, but the changes described in this article were primarily a response to pre-existing criticisms of Sistema principles and practices.

In speaking with participants for this study, emphases on musical excellence and cognitive and academic impacts—previously so prominent in Sistema discourse—were noticeably absent.



Instead, participants highlighted that programming had moved from implicitly addressing social and emotional learning through music to overt social *support*—by providing meals, social check-ins, non-musical activities, letters and targeted social support training for teachers. This shift aligns with new emphases and priorities in pandemic music education identified by Joseph and Lennox (2021) and in pandemic education generally (Li et al., 2021).

Vaugeois (2007) notes that when social relations are conceptualised as a mere matter of ‘difference’, the underlying cultural, social or economic conditions that lead to difference can sometimes be ignored. In our study, we found that some of these conditions faced by participants were highlighted by the pandemic, such as needing financial support in the way of grocery cards or needing technology and internet access to continue to engage in Sistema programming.

Participants also identified a necessary programming pivot away from large group instruction. Although Sistema programmes have traditionally emphasised large ensembles (Govias, 2011), teachers and administrators recognised the benefits of more individualised and small-group interactions. As identified by participants in this study and elsewhere in the literature, such structures are inherently more student centred (Scruggs, 2009; Williams, 2019). Individual instruction can support more and richer formative assessment (de Bruin, 2021; Shaw, 2020) and foster student–teacher relationship building (Salvador et al., 2021). Meanwhile, small ensemble opportunities can enable more learner agency and musical decision-making (Weidner, 2020), facilitate peers learning from each other (Hopkins et al., 2017) and open up creative opportunities (Bishop, 2018).

Pandemic Sistema programming shifts also featured a broadening curricular emphasis on not only Western classical music but music that students listened to at home, music representative of community cultures and music students created themselves. Decentring Western classical music is a key step in anti-racist (Hamilton, 2021; Hess, 2021) and decolonising (Oberhofer, 2020) pedagogical approaches. Ladson-Billings (2014) argues that educators must incorporate the lived experiences of their culturally diverse students to create an inclusive learning environment. Specifically, Ladson-Billings advocates for culturally responsive pedagogy that integrates a student’s background, including their home and community experiences. Educator strategies include storytelling and involving students and the community in the co-creation of the curricula. Culturally responsive pedagogy means that the teacher responds to the culture of the learners and adapts the curricula accordingly. Although Sistema programmes privilege Western classical musical traditions, efforts were made to include non-Western music. One programme consulted with Indigenous community members and another integrated local Haitian community musicians. By creating a welcoming space for students to share the music *they* listen to, programmes honoured and celebrated students’ own musical selves and backgrounds (Rimmer, 2018) and supported relationship building between students and teachers. Some programmes, through composing and improvising activities, invited students’ *own* creative musical expressions into the Sistema space—a powerful means of firmly centring curriculum on the students themselves (Bolden, 2014; Kaschub & Smith, 2013, Shaw, 2020).

These changes to the original El Sistema model reflect what Baker (2021) found in his study of ‘The Red’, a social action through music initiative based in Medellín, Colombia. Though based on and founded by close collaborators of Venezuela’s El Sistema programme, Baker found that The Red was rethinking and retooling the principles and practices of El Sistema, placing greater emphasis on social well-being over musical excellence. The findings in our study reinforce Baker’s argument that there is a reconsideration of the El Sistema model taking place internationally, with some Sistema-inspired programmes moving away from El Sistema and towards progressive music education. Baker (2023) also notes that recent changes in the Sistema field sprung forth from ‘ideological shifts, such as rising interest in culturally responsive teaching and youth development’ (p. 71). Our study seems to support this thinking, though the shift in ideology was accelerated by the participants’ *experience* of the COVID-19 pandemic response.

Active anti-racism efforts were in evidence across the programmes. Participants described critically looking inwards at teaching selves and practices, in line with Hess's (2021, p. 15) urging for music educators to recognise that White supremacy 'operates in and through music education' and to resist its mechanisms. Participants described interrogating the perspective that disadvantaged youth can be 'saved' by Western classical music and structures and acknowledged the need to re-examine their hiring practices—as recommended by Hamilton (2021)—and reach out for support to learn about and enact anti-racist practices.

Western superiority can be reinforced through centring of Western culture, using superficial multiculturalism as a tool to consume 'costumes' and music of different cultures, rather than engaging with non-Western culture more meaningfully and critically (Vaugeois, 2007). In our study, there was evidence that some programmes are including non-Western music educators more meaningfully in planning and policy-making; however, this was not common among all cases.

### Limitations and directions for future research

While this study had breadth, with eight programmes examined across the country, we acknowledge that depth was limited with regard to the data collected about each case. For example, the study did not include any student or family member perspectives and included only one teacher for each programme. There were also no field observations of programme activities.

The findings from this study indicate that El Sistema and Sistema-inspired organisations in Canada are seeking to change how they respond to student needs while providing rich musical experiences. Many participants indicated that the changes to programming spurred by the pandemic will continue to be implemented when in-person teaching resumes, particularly with respect to social and anti-racist support. Future research could examine ongoing educator *and* student *and* family member perspectives on these issues, as well as their effectiveness.

### Final words

We note among our findings that some pandemic programming shifts appear to have been made in direct response to the pandemic, that is, the emphasis on a social curriculum and the necessary shift in pedagogical structures away from large-ensemble instruction. The other changes, however, towards diverse musical voices and anti-racism, were not made in direct response to the pandemic, but rather in response to issues that came to the fore *during* the pandemic, and that perhaps the pandemic helped people to notice and see with new eyes. The implication of our research is that despite initial widespread rejection of academic critiques of El Sistema, these same critiques are being implemented by educators and administrators in Canadian El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programmes. Our findings validate the critical strand of El Sistema research and suggest that this research is impacting practice. We are heartened by these shifts and hope educators will continue to make space and honour the new ways they have learned to engage with learners and music.

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**Cite this article:** Corcoran SD, Bolden B, and Butler A (2024). Silent stages: COVID-19 as a catalyst for change in Canadian El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programmes. *British Journal of Music Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051724000160>