

A Restless Art

Festival de Música de Setúbal

A case study of participatory art



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Acknowledgements:

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First published in electronic form in 2018 by
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Publication date 8 April 2018

FESTIVAL DE MÚSICA DE SETÚBAL



Teaching failure

Did you learn to play a musical instrument as a child?

Classical music is a pinnacle of human culture. Between the 18th century and the middle of the 20th, European musicians created masterpiece after masterpiece in this idiom, pushing on with new ideas and forms of expression, though always connected to the musical culture of their time. Composers' demands brought developments in music technology and performance expertise. Their achievements were rewarded with rising social status, and, for the most successful, fame and wealth. Their legacy is a body of music so vast and so rich that – as with the works of Sophocles or Shakespeare – we will never exhaust its potential for reinterpretation within the new cultures we create.

In recent decades though, the classical idea has shown signs of flagging, at least in terms of public interest and its own capacity for renewal. Nothing lasts forever, and human creativity finds new outlets as conditions change. Still, this one has been protected by a resilient institutional structure. Classical music is the gold standard of cultural capital. Its place in public policy, education and broadcasting is more secure than any other field of art. It has become a universal faith in the postcolonial era. New concert halls open every year, and classical music education programmes abound. In China, it is said that 40 million children now take piano lessons.¹ In Venezuela, 350,000 young people learn classical music in El Sistema, an education programme founded in 1975 that has inspired similar initiatives in 55 other countries, from Angola to the United States

This commitment to classical music education undoubtedly contributes to the excellence of its performance, but at what cost? There is a growing debate about how a performance style that developed in autocratic courts might need to rethink its hierarchical disciplines in multicultural societies striving for democracy.² Its present emphasis is on proficiency acquired by imitation and embodied during thousands of repetitive hours. Examinations grade technique in a system that, like the high jump, keeps raising the bar until very few can get over. Millions invest their childhoods in playing music only to learn, at 16, 18 or 23 that they are judged inadequate. This system efficiently identifies and trains exceptional musicians to continue the classical tradition, but what of those who don't make the grade? For every prize winner there are thousands of talented musicians who hide their instruments under beds, because they have been taught – despite the endless practice while their friends played, despite the effort and concentration, despite their hope and love – that music doesn't love them back.

Did you learn to play an instrument as a child? Do you play it still?

Learning success

The revolutionary aspect of the new movement to change the context for the arts is that it is leading to the development of new forms of artistic expression.

Su Braden, 1978³

Setúbal lies on the Sado Estuary, 40 kilometres south of Lisbon. Once a centre of the sardine industry, it now depends on light industry and tourists attracted to its natural world of coast, wetlands and hills. Setúbal is a diverse city whose 120,000 inhabitants include many from former colonies and other parts of Europe. Like the rest of Portugal, the city suffered in the Great Recession and the Eurozone crisis. In 2010, amid tax rises and pay cuts, when national unemployment rates reached 11%, it was four points higher here. The city council was effectively bankrupt.

It was not an obvious moment to start a music festival. And yet, when a small group of committed supporters brought that idea to the mayor and her team in August 2010, they met a positive response. Despite its difficulties – or, who knows, perhaps because of them – the city agreed. It would happen in May 2011, with some funds from the Helen Hamlyn Trust and the municipality's support in staff time, facilities and logistical assistance. That meeting also decided something else that would be absolutely decisive in the festival's success: it would be founded on community participation. Only when there was a strong base of local music making would the question of inviting professional performers even be considered.

This approach was set out by Ian Ritchie, who had been invited by the Trust to be the new festival's artistic director. Throughout his distinguished career in orchestral and festival management, Ian has prioritised community music, recognising the roots of classical music in traditional, popular song and dance. A singer trained at the Royal College of Music, his work at the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the City of

London Festival and in post-war Bosnia has rested on collaborative music making in which different voices are an asset.

'My experience is that every really good programme comes about by conversation. A programme of greater quality and value is born than any of us would have invented on our own. Together we've invented it and each of us feels we own it.'

Ian Ritchie

Such an open, facilitative approach seems out of step with the maestros, prima donnas and leaders of classical music. It might also seem brave in a world that prizes the artistic vision of a festival director. But on that Sunday afternoon in Setúbal, everyone understood that the musical creativity of local people would be any festival's chief asset. So that was where they started.



Next day, the first of many meetings was held with people from local schools, cultural institutions, community associations and support groups. Two key decisions were quickly made. First, the qualities of Setúbal's natural environment made this an obvious theme to unite the festival. The estuary's migratory birds symbolised both the epic voyages of Portugal's Golden Age and the more recent arrival of migrants: a bird became the festival's logo. Secondly, with little money available, music would be made with what was available: voices and bodies.

Song writing and percussion programmes were established in the winter of 2010, each rooted in the traditional and popular music of the Lusophone world. Local musicians were recruited to act as tutors and regular workshops established. The scarcity of instruments was overcome by making percussion from discarded oil cans, bottles and found materials, so that ideas about waste and the natural environment shaped even the sounds being made. Very soon, hundreds of children and adults were taking part in regular workshops. Seven years later, song-writing and percussion remain pillars of the festival, still animated by the original tutors.



The songwriting and choral work was developed with older pupils in six primary schools during the winter of 2010. Many of the 300 children who took part sang in a programme of traditional and new *Canções de Setúbal* at a Festival concert in May 2011. Community groups, bands and adult choirs also contributed to the first [Setúbal Music Festival](#).

There were only two conditions of participation. Every group, school or association had to collaborate with another, and what they created had to relate to the Festival theme. With these two simple rules, the social networks of participants and the creative coherence of the festival were both strengthened.

'We began the very first festival with a percussion parade of several hundred young people and, now we're onto our seventh, it's grown to about 1,000 each year. And out of all the community activities have come musical groups that have established their own existence within and out of school.'

Ian Ritchie

These engaging performances, whether in the open air or in concert venues, showed the Festival to be a generous celebration of music that honoured every culture and participant. The professional ensembles and soloists – including the Gulbenkian Choir, guitarist Pedro Caldeira Cabral and soprano Patricia Rozario – fitted naturally in this spectrum of styles and proficiency.

For Ian Ritchie, *'there is always a danger of being stuck very worthily at ground level without actually looking up and reaching for the stars'*. Bringing great musicians to Setúbal and involving them in the work at community level has been enriching for professional and non-professionals artists. They learn from, challenge and inspire each other and the Festival prides itself on making those exchanges happen as much and as deeply as possible. The best of that is when they get to create and perform together.

An exchange between community and professional music characterises the festival. The artistic budget was initially divided between equally the two activities, though as the festival has attracted funds, the professional offer has been strengthened. As time has passed, more and more schools and associations have joined in. At least 2,000 children have now participated in the song-writing programme while the percussion programme involves up to 1,000 adults and young people each year. Some of the primary school children have continued playing music in and out of school: the festival has even been able to help some buy instruments. Since 2010, Ian Ritchie estimates that as many as 10,000 local people have contributed to the Festival as creators and performers: it's a substantial proportion of Setúbal's residents.



Learning inclusion

The usual expectant hush settles on a packed concert hall. On stage, five people stand in front of a group of thirty musicians, they begin to tap out the complex, hypnotic rhythms of Steve Reich's *Music for Pieces of Wood*. It is the opening to an hour of unexpected, delightful music performed by the [Ensemble Juvenil de Setúbal](#). After Reich, the orchestra performs *Amor como Sal* by Cevanne Horrocks-Hopayian, and an arrangement of Saint-Saens' *Carnival of the Animals* by the young Portuguese composer, Sara Ross. Both pieces make full use of the group's musical palette, including the strings, brass and woodwind of classical music, electric guitar and keyboards, computers and electronics, and percussion from Africa and Latin America. But their performance skills do not end there: voice, spoken, sung and chanted, plays its part, as do moments of theatre. The playing has energy and humour, but it can be unexpectedly moving too: above all, you have no idea what will happen next.

The Ensemble was formed in 2014, with support from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation [PARTIS](#) programme.⁴ Like the festival, the group represents Setúbal's diverse people and cultures. Members are selected by audition and interview because the artistic director, Ian Ritchie, and the mentors – Rui Borges Maia (conductor and trainer), Pedro Condinho (special needs and jazz specialist) and Fernando Molina (traditional percussion) – are looking for ideas and attitudes as much as playing ability. The age range is 15 to 25, but with some flexibility to allow for individual differences. Members include young musicians aiming to study and play professionally, disabled people with a gift and desire for music, and people who play music socially and informally from aural traditions, especially in African, Latin, jazz and rock styles. Many have not been trained and don't read music, so new forms of notation have been developed to guide them.

'What an extraordinary thing it is that only half the members of the city's official youth orchestra have conventional musical training. The others are immigrants bringing their aural tradition and the instruments they actually want to play, or young people with special needs for whom we have introduced assistive technology alongside conventional instruments. And every single one of them is a musician of real quality.'

Ian Ritchie

In the music itself, you can hear Portuguese, jazz, classical and non-European accents, and the less familiar sound of the [Skoog](#), which opens music making to people with disabilities. Since there is almost no repertoire for this sound palette, the ensemble has adapted, arranged and improvised its own. It also commissions young composers, challenging them to reach beyond their existing language. This artistic strategy, born of necessity, in effect recaptures the musical practice by which classical music developed during its most creative period. For orchestras and other classical ensembles, the new was once the norm. Like its predecessors this young band is reinventing music.

'The unique musical constitution of this ensemble, representing the social democracy of the community from which it emerges, justifies the creation of a new repertoire'⁵

The Ensemble Juvenil de Setúbal has a place for everyone because it believes that everyone has a place. Each person has something to say and the ability to say it musically –if they're allowed to do it in ways that are meaningful to them. Some members could play in a classical ensemble; many could not. So valuable in other ways, a symphony orchestra has no room for people who play like this, nor for their creativity. Here though, in a musical structure responsive to its members' creativity, the test of admission is a commitment to making music.



Does the Ensemble play classical music? That depends what you think classical music is. It certainly plays serious music, seriously, taking the forms and traditions of the classical repertoire (among others) and breathing new life into them, pressing also for the development of new instruments, just as Beethoven and so many others did before. If it's not classical music as we know it, it may be none the worse for that.



Learning to play

'It would have been much harder if there'd been an existing music festival of a backward, old fashioned sort. But we started something new and it worked because there was so much space and opportunity. There was no preconception of what a youth orchestra should be, so we had a mandate to create our own.'

Ian Ritchie

In 2010, Setúbal had little musical infrastructure. The Festival succeeded because that shortage was seen as an opportunity, not a problem. There were no interests to protect, just a willingness to back local enthusiasm and the imagination to see that a multicultural city of 120,000 has many passionate, gifted and generous musicians – and many more would-be musicians – who need only a little help to create a festival that reflects the culture, history and hopes of the place they all call home: Setúbal.

The city was lucky to involve a musician and curator committed to and experienced in participatory music making. Ian Ritchie was lucky to find people and community organisations hungry for his expertise and ambition. In endless conversations, verbal and musical, ideas were shared, tested, responded to and shaped.

The difference between the classical music programmes inspired by El Sistema and the improvised creative exchange that is the Festival de Música de Setúbal lies in the distribution of power. Where the first enact top-down classical hierarchies, the second adopts the networks of the contemporary world. The first values transmission and conformity; its discipline produces fewer musicians than ex-musicians. The second values creativity and engagement; it seeks its validation in the people for whom music making becomes a rewarding part of life. Both value excel-

lence but the second approach understands that there are many paths towards it and that it may manifest itself in different ways. The first believes it needs institutional protection to survive. The second thrives on the commitment of people: its greatest resource is their creative joy in making music.

The Festival de Música de Setúbal is unique because of the specifics of people and place. At the same time, it belongs to a huge, diverse practice of new ideas in participatory music. The tiny part of that world those whose work I have seen and admired includes institutions ([Sage](#), UK), festivals ([Banlieues Bleues](#), France), music schools ([SAMP](#), Portugal), community organisations ([More Music](#), England), primary school initiatives ([Ukelila](#), Belgium) and folk projects ([Fèis Rois](#), Scotland). They work in classical, jazz, traditional, rock and world music and they have equally varied ideas about learning and playing. What they have in common though is the idea that what matters in music – above all – is the pleasure of playing.

Wayne Booth, a professor of literature who spent 40 years playing the cello with fellow amateurs, has written about the joys and pitfalls of what he called ‘amateurism’. He knew that he would never be as good as the least of the professional players, but his effort and practising was the tribute he paid to music, because he valued it so much. He believed that ‘If anything is worth doing at all, it is worth doing badly’. Booth hated low standards and mediocrity. His argument is that since playing music is such a valuable experience, doing it at whatever level you can reach is always better than not doing it at all.⁶

Weekly workshops and daily practice are the foundation of everything achieved in Setúbal but they happen in a spirit of equality, exchange and fun. Thousands of children and adults have participated in a musical education whose ethos is to empower and encourage. Few of them will become professional or even committed musicians. They won’t be joining orchestras. But nor will they be learning that they are not good enough or hiding their instruments away. Through the Festival de Música de Setúbal they are finding that the more they love music, the more it has to offer them.

‘It would be wrong to say that we have developed 250 new and fully-skilled songwriters each year, but we can claim that 250 children in primary schools get the opportunity to be actively involved in creative learning and making the choices of texts, the directions of melodies, the rhythms and the performance itself. They’re participating in something that will not leave them untouched.’

Ian Ritchie



Links

- Video: Bastidores '[Com Passos de União](#)' (Ensemble Juvenil de Setúbal)
- Video : [Festival de Música de Setúbal e Ensemble Juvenil](#) (PARTIS)

¹ [The New York Times](#), 9 July 2016,

² Cf. Baker, G., 2014, *El Sistema*, Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth, Oxford

³ Braden, S., 1978, *Artists and People*, London p. xvii)

⁴ PARTIS (Práticas Artísticas para a Inclusão Social) was launched in 2015 by the Foundation's Human Development programme for Portugal; it is currently preparing its third edition.

⁵ 'A constituição musical única deste ensemble, representando a democracia social da comunidade onde surge [...], justifica a criação de novo repertório.' Festival de Musica de Setúbal website, [project note May 2015](#)

⁶ Matarasso, F. 2012, [Where We Dream, West Bromwich Operatic Society and the Fine Art of Musical Theatre](#), West Bromwich, p, 80