

# Musical Pathways & “El Sistema” Experiences

*An Interview with Flutist, Conductor, and Composer Raimundo Pineda*

By Laura Clapper

**F**lutist, conductor, and composer Raimundo Pineda recently made Chicago, IL his home.

We first met in Florida, where we had the chance to read some of his chamber music compositions for flutes together. We set up this interview so he could share his experiences as a student and teacher in the El Sistema program of his home country, Venezuela, as well as his experiences working with programs in the United States that are modeled after the original El Sistema concept.

**Laura Clapper:** Can you tell us about your musical background?

**Raimundo Pineda:** Music has always had an important place in my family. My older sisters studied music and ballet and were also excellent chorus singers. My father played the trumpet at some point in his life, and my mother always shared her passion for teaching with the enjoyment of all kinds of music, especially classical music. At the age of four, I entered the musical kindergarten at the conservatory in my hometown to study with Maria Luisa Stopello, a teacher who left a very important legacy in my country [Venezuela] and in Latin America. From this wonderful course, most of the students became professional musicians over time. So, music has always been present in my life since I was a child. Traditional music touched me closely [from my experiences with my] family, and then, academic music became my passion when I joined the National System of Youth and Children Orchestras of Venezuela, also known as “El Sistema,” when I was nine years old. As a teenager, I tried a little bit with jazz and rock, but the study of so-called classical music and orchestral practice always prevailed.

I became a professional at 19 when I joined the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra. From that moment on, my perspective expanded in an extraordinary way. I discovered the importance of chamber music while being part of ensembles such as

the Aulos Flute Quartet and the Inocente Carreño Woodwind Quintet. Later in 1995, I founded “Miquirebo,” a Venezuelan Flute Quartet, with a group of friends; we played traditional Venezuelan music specially arranged and composed by members of our group. Almost immediately, I was also a founding member of the National Flute Orchestra of Venezuela, the most important ensemble of its kind in Latin America and of which I was an associate conductor and then the chief conductor for some years, further developing my career as a composer and beginning my path as a conductor.



Since 2006, I have also had the opportunity to play with “Los Sinverguenzas,” an important group that performs Venezuelan traditional music, with which I have recorded four albums. With these excellent musicians, I have learned the immense value of popular music, improvisation, and of making music with more freedom and freewill. With them, I discovered a new audience, new venues, festivals, parties, and a different point of view of the amazing world that music can offer us.

In the last 20 years, I have been alternating my career as an interpreter [performer], composer, and conductor, and I have been teaching and conducting in Venezuela and throughout Latin America always as an “El Sistema” ambassador.

**LC:** When and how did you become involved in El Sistema programs in Venezuela?

**RP:** “El Sistema” was founded in 1975. At that time, I was studying music theory at a small music school in my hometown. In the first years, “El Sistema” mainly served students from existing music schools and its growth was extremely fast, having “nucleos” in all the states of the country in just two years. I entered when I was nine years old and was a founding member of the program in my state.

under the baton of the founder of “El Sistema,” Maestro José Antonio Abreu. He was an extraordinary and visionary man with a transcendental project growing in his mind. Every rehearsal was an art class. The way in which he connected music to literature, to visual arts, how he taught us the history and life of the great composers through his music are lessons that, fortunately, I will never forget.

Over time, while still being very young and without any academic preparation, I became a teacher.



I remember that I joined the children's orchestra in 1976. In just 6 months, I was *promoted* to the youth orchestra. On many occasions, I participated in recruiting concerts in other cities that also helped to found new “nucleos.” As soon as I graduated from high school, I moved to Caracas, the capital city of Venezuela, with the idea of joining the professional orchestra.

In Caracas, the level was much higher than in my hometown, so I spent two years in a youth orchestra before being able to compete for one spot at the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra. This orchestra was

It is a premise of “El Sistema” that if you are capable of learning something today, you are also capable of teaching it immediately. So, I became a multiplier of the knowledge and experience that I was acquiring almost in parallel. The teaching method of “El Sistema” drastically breaks with the traditional method of music education. In some ways, we break a lot of rules and skip many logical steps in order to provide students with unusual technical and interpretive skills in a very short time. That and the inclusion of socially excluded children and youth have been the keys to the success of this project worldwide.



**LC:** What was it like to play with the Simón Bolívar Symphony?

**RP:** Being part of the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra has been one of the most comforting experiences of my life. I entered after a tough audition-competition when I was barely 19 years old. This orchestra has the particularity that it's made up of musicians from all the regions of Venezuela. The most advanced students of "El Sistema" always have the goal of entering this important orchestra because it represents an important achievement. Throughout 32 years, I went through all the positions in the flute section. I started as the third flute and piccolo player, always learning to the fullest from my colleagues and the plethora of extraordinary conductors who passed through our podium: Eduardo Mata, Zubin Mehta, Carl Saint Clair, Sergei Semko, Krzysztof Penderecki, Rafael Freuberg de Burgos, Claudio Abbado, Sir Simon

Rattle, Benjamin Zander, Gustavo Dudamel, and many others. Accompanying artists such as Maurice André, Jean-Pierre Rampal, Peter Lukas Graf, Ruggiero Ricci, Plácido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti, offered us a very broad vision of what it means to be an orchestral musician. The last 20 years of my 32 years in the orchestra, I served as associate principal and then principal flute. I have enjoyed the beautiful and sometimes challenging orchestral repertoire for flute.

Our music traveled through Europe, Asia, North and South America, and we were genuine ambassadors of the Venezuelan orchestra system, which today, is one of the most important and recognized educational projects in the entire world.

Later, our students, under the baton of the gifted Gustavo Dudamel, would do the same and follow our legacy as an orchestra, taking our music to another level and to other stages.

**LC:** What are some of your most memorable moments and experiences playing, teaching, and conducting in Venezuela?

**RP:** One of the most memorable moments in my life was to feel the applause of the audience for 20 minutes after a concert by our orchestra on a tour to Japan in 1991. It was the first time that a Latin American orchestra stepped on Japanese soil and the performance was truly touching. The orchestral musician, as part of a collective body, receives recognition from another collective entity for its effort and dedication. This feeling is really comforting.

As a teacher, I have had many, however, recently I was very pleased to see a picture of the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra's flute section where there were six young flute players, four of which had been my students. That is what it's about—that your teaching meant something, that they get where they are supposed to be. I feel the same way when a student writes to me telling me he/she was admitted into an important European conservatory; I feel that



every minute with that student was worth it and that everything I taught them was effective and contributed in some way to their success.

I experienced one of the most important moments as a conductor and composer during the recording of my Concerto N°1 for flute and orchestra in London in 2001. The English master William Bennett kindly invited me to conduct the famous English Chamber Orchestra in his recording and, at that time, this constituted the most important challenge of my life. The quality of the orchestra, the commitment of the recording and the fact that I was conducting my own work played by a living flute legend like William Bennett filled me with immense commitment and satisfaction at the same time.

**LC:** You recently moved to Chicago and are working with the Ravinia El Sistema program. What has your experience been like so far and how does it compare to your previous positions?

**RP:** The Sistema Ravinia is one of the “Reach Teach Play” music education programs, which is inspired by the philosophy of “El Sistema” Venezuela. We work with children and young students from several elementary and middle schools in Waukegan,

Lawndale, and Austin. Its work has been commendable and for me is an extraordinary opportunity to collaborate with them with the experience acquired directly from the hands of Jose Antonio Abreu, the founder of the original project in Venezuela.

Social exclusion and the risks that the street carry coupled with the inequality of our societies are, unfortunately, the same anywhere. Young people and children in these communities are often subdued to these scourges and have no opportunity to fight them effectively.

Music and sports have shown to be powerful strategies for change because they can transform individuals and communities if the necessary resources are wisely invested in them. In this case, Ravinia is doing very important work in these communities through offering free music instruction to a large population and trying to make it occupy a prominent place in these young people’s lives.

I am very proud to be a member of El Sistema Ravinia’s team and contribute to the program’s extraordinary work. It allows me to return, somehow, the kindness and affection that both the organization and this country have offered me.





**LC:** What advice do you have for future educators, performers, and musicians?

**RP:** Give advice implies a great commitment, and I don't feel comfortable enough doing it because I believe that human beings rarely learn from the experiences, failures, and successes of other people. Our inner nature—our ego—needs to feel it for itself by experiencing everything that you want to learn. However, I can break my own rule.

To educators: Keep alive the curiosity of your students. Curiosity is a very powerful tool that can make a noticeable difference when we try to teach something. We must provide all the necessary tools for our students so that they find the answers to their questions on their own. There are thousands of ways to reach the same common place, and it's always an adventure to see how students arrive at the truth or the knowledge through different paths, procedures, and realities.

Performers: Always put your talent and technique in service to music. Remember that technique will never supplant experience or curiosity. Enjoy the job like the very first day. Don't let the routine ruin the magic of making music. And may joy prevail above all. Study just what is necessary without enslaving oneself.

Musicians, in general, should be open to any experience, moving away from paper or sheet music from time to time, experiencing different genres, improvising, speaking through their instrument the language of music, and experiencing what is possible when nobody tells you what to do. Never underestimate the self-guided musician who can teach us much more than a thousand college professors. Please come out of the luxurious theaters and stages and play sometimes in dark places and party patios. Sometimes, the *real music* is in the least expected place, very far from the fancy theaters, tuxedos, and ties. Share with your colleagues much more than the music stand and the daily greeting.

Thanks, Laura, for this wonderful interview and thank you to the Chicago Flute Club for offering me the opportunity to show and share my work and career as a flute player, composer, and conductor. My arrival to this country and this beautiful city is a new beginning for me. You learn to give value to everything you have and do not have, everything you have learned, and everything that you have experienced. Every note you have played, every concert is part of a total that in sum is *you*, regardless of where life takes you. ~