

## Why I Don't Talk Politics

Gustavo Dudamel, *Los Angeles Times*, September 29, 2015

<https://www.gustavodudamel.com/us-en/gustavo-dudamel-why-i-don-t-talk-politics>

My two musical families, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela, will unite to play the complete symphonies of Beethoven starting Tuesday. This collaboration is thrilling for me on a personal level, and it will honor Latino pride, presence, history and power in my adopted home of Los Angeles.

But as wonderful as the moment is, I am not naive about the political stage these performances might create. It is possible that protesters will attempt to use the concerts to signal their support for or opposition to government policies in Venezuela.

As a Venezuelan and a public person, I often end up in the center of such political theater. Because I have been reluctant to speak out on events in my home country, I have been much criticized. Many have tried to define me and my political beliefs, or to tell me what I ought to believe. Now I wish to speak for myself.

I am neither a politician nor an activist. Although I am aware that even something as benign as conducting an orchestra may have deep political ramifications, I will not publicly take a political position or align myself with one point of view or one party in Venezuela or in the United States.

People want to know where my heart is. I deeply respect peaceful protest. I am profoundly moved by the protesters here and in Venezuela; I feel their passion and I hear their voices. But I do not agree with them on every issue. At the same time, I have respect for Venezuela's leaders and the offices they hold, although, again, I do not agree with every decision they make.

Let me provide some perspective. I am the product of El Sistema, the government-financed music education program started in 1975 by my mentor, José Antonio Abreu. It provides free classical music training for Venezuela's children while promoting human dignity, opportunity and development. It is important to note that every Venezuelan government since 1975 has supported El Sistema, and that the current government has increased the program's reach in the last three years. Now, more than 700,000 children a year are part of El Sistema, up from 500,000.

Everything that I am and everything that I have achieved is a direct result of my participation in El Sistema and the steadfast mentoring of Maestro Abreu. El Sistema instilled in me what I stand for today: equality, fairness and opportunity.

In El Sistema's orchestras, the son of an opposition leader and the daughter of a government minister may sit next to each other creating beautiful music. In that moment, they know no politics. They are not defined by their differences; they are defined by what they share — a passion for great music.

If I aligned myself with one political philosophy or another, then, by extension, I could also politicize El Sistema. That might turn a revered and successful program into a political punching bag and make it much more vulnerable to political whims. El Sistema is far too important to subject to everyday political discourse and battles. It must remain above the fray.

To those who believe I have been silent too long, I say this: Do not mistake my lack of political posturing for a lack of compassion or beliefs.

So often the world is divided by what we disagree about. Maybe I'm an idealist, but I imagine a world defined by what we have in common. The gifted musicians I have the honor of conducting are a metaphor for what talent, unity and hope can achieve.

My music is my voice, and my orchestras play for all people of the world who seek a better future. I raise my baton for opportunity, unity and hope. Listen carefully and perhaps you will hear it too.