

Interviewee: Participant 2

Interviewer: Nathalie Roué

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List of acronyms: RB=Participant 2 (Interviewee), NR=Nathalie Roué (Interviewer)

[Begin Transcript 00:00:00]

RB: [Indistinct] So, we believe that through investing in using music, you develop the cognitive skills. You develop the [indistinct]. It is investing in human capacity through music.

NR: That is right. Just tell me Robert, was the whole initiative based on the idea of El Sistema?

RB: Well, when I started the initiative, I did not know about El Sistema. I did not know about El Sistema. I started in 2001, 2002. I was in London and I did an article about El Sistema, because [indistinct] Antonio Abreu who got the alternative Nobel Peace Prize in Sweden. Then I became alert and I found a video called "60 Minutes CBS" and that was on El Sistema. So I remember I copied hundreds and distributed all over South Africa. And that is how I started to get involved. We wrote to Abreu, the El Sistema and I met with him. I think it was in 2003 or 2002. Very soon we met [indistinct]. He was touring with his big orchestra and we met and we then decided on a partnership. Many times he was just 10 minutes before coming to South Africa [indistinct]. And I visited Venezuela, the initiative, a couple of times. I also [indistinct] the orchestra. So there was a very, very in those years, you know, very good exchange, good relationship. El Sistema is in the dumps, as you might know.

NR: Okay, yes, I was not completely aware. Could you maybe explain why? What has happened?

RB: Abreu died and then the political leadership changed and the current political [indistinct] [00:02:31]. El Sistema has suffered obviously, Abreu when he died, and then they found many irregularities. It is like everywhere. Something gets big and powerful and there is a lot of

money. Then you get people coming in like [indistinct] you know. People are the same everywhere. It is just a different stage. So, I would say that in Venezuela El Sistema is almost non-existent at the moment.

NR: Okay, which is sad, okay.

RB: Of course.

NR: That is a loss.

RB: But being El Sistema, it was a model for many organisations outside Venezuela to establish networks where they follow the El Sistema concerts.

NR: Okay, that is right.

RB: [Indistinct] El Sistema America, they are called William and Booth and they run an international [indistinct]. I will send you an email, just forward you some stuff.

NR: Okay, ja. I think that will be great. Robert, I want to ask you. Okay, so basically now the idea is to sort of like start the same initiative like in collaboration with the University of Pretoria. What would you suggest? Like how does it work? How did you start your initiative, because obviously you need funds? Obviously you need colleagues to like teach and help you out. How does it work?

RB: Well, I mean if you have an institution like Pretoria with a music department [indistinct] department [00:04:21] you have got a big stage to do it, but it needs... I can [indistinct] how to start it, but it is a very intense thinking process. It is not just overnight; okay now we [indistinct] and forget this [indistinct] outreach. They never used it and it is a bad [indistinct]. You call it community exchange.

NR: Okay, community exchange. Great, okay.

RB: Community exchange or you call it [indistinct]. You call it nation building, all of these things, but this outreach; a couple of white guys that is going to the townships and help these poor [indistinct]. It is nothing like that. One has to [indistinct] you know much more [indistinct] those with little bit more scholastic intellectual knowledge that these little individuals have a lot to pass onto us. You know that. You know it.

NR: Yes, of course, ja.

RB: [Indistinct], okay, but look, you are saying that the University of Pretoria wants to start [indistinct] side of [indistinct] project like El Sistema. That is it.

NR: It is basically more me that is doing research to see if it is possible and so I am the one that actually needs to research and see if it is possible, what is needed, what are the logistics, what are the human resources, so all of that; and around that, I need then to then write my thesis.

RB: [Indistinct].

NR: That is how. Ja, so it is not the university necessarily, but I mean they are obviously very open to that, you know, because they need to...

RB: So your thesis will be a guideline of how to structure the community development project with music.

NR: That is about it, ja. That is about, yes; to research if it is possible, you know, and how does it work in different countries and you know what are the ups and downs, what are the ins and outs, you know is it possible with little funding, a lot of funding. Did you struggle by recruiting colleagues to help you teach? You know so it is all about that too, you know. So apart from like you say, you know the community building, because I mean like you know; when I taught in Mamelodi, I mean individuals, you can see how they develop. It is amazing actually how they develop, you know, personally, you know, into people that can actually have hope and so on. So there is that part, but there is the other part where I need to, you know, research on how can it be implemented basically. That is my research.

RB: Ja, you know I never thought much about what sort of like had a vision and pre-plan. You deal with that what you have on your hands at that moment and the whole development comes from there, but now saying that it is not expected to do that kind of thing, because there are people that start the community projects. I mean if you think of Peter Guy had a community project in Bloemfontein, which is amazing results. I mean all our top people from those environments come from Bochabela, the Bochabela.

NR: Yes, that is right. Yes, yes, yes. I have done my proposal now and I have already researched a bit about them too, ja.

RB: Ja, I mean it is all people that have done the job. It is just if you want to suggest a community development project to the University of Pretoria, then you really have to tap into the resources and to the infrastructure. I know the Pretoria University has several community projects in the townships already or maybe not or maybe it is just on paper, because very often institutions are forced to have to do philanthropic projects and it exists merely on paper. It is also to say [indistinct] [00:08:57]. So you need to see what departments can all get involved.

Ja, I mean in my experience with music departments, always the musicians are so busy with their own egos that they do not have any time or any energy to do something like that. Here and there you will find certain individuals, but the trade is wonderful. So my advice would be to start talking to colleagues and already people that are already teaching and are also studying at the university or working at the university, start building a core. Our elite schools, like Affies and all these places, I mean they all ask to do more like sharing; sharing skills, sharing. That is what I would call it. And the Affies had an initiative where they had kiddies from the townships coming to Affies.

NR: But that is my mom's initiative. It is the Mamelodi. I do not know if we are talking about the same thing, but ...[intervenes]

RB: Yes, yes.

NR: That is my mom, yes, Lynn Pruneau.

RB: Say the name again.

NR: Lynn Pruneau [indistinct].

RB: Ja, [indistinct].

NR: That is my mom.

RB: Then you have got a very, very, very good and honest resource.

NR: Ja, so that is my mom and I was part of that. So I was still there. I was teaching at Affies at that time and I was part of that, because we were teaching full-time at Mamelodi and then unfortunately my mom ...[intervenes]

RB: [Indistinct] [00:10:39]

NR: Okay, so you know the story and then she got attacked unfortunately. So we moved to ...[intervenes]

RB: She was attacked?

NR: Yes.

RB: She was attacked. I was also attacked. I mean we all know that. It is a very worthwhile thing if one wants to summarise the whole structure really of what has been... I will concentrate on South Africa. I will concentrate on what has been achieved here and where are the problems, why did it stop and what does it need to be extended and to be supported and then we create the value of what that would bring. And I could again [indistinct] go on talking about these things.

NR: Because Robert, I am under the impression that actually, you know, to make a project like this worthwhile and to make it work is basically you need to actually employ people, first of all, right, I mean musicians, so that they can then start teaching, you know, all the students from the townships to make it in the sense of... you know I do not think to base it on voluntary would work, right.

RB: No, no, no, voluntary never works.

NR: That never works, I mean and it is understandable.

[Start of next audio file]

RB: [Indistinct] it is very, very rare that you find people that are really volunteers. At some point they will tell you: no, I am doing this for free and it is my time and I cannot now.

NR: Exactly, ja.

RB: [Indistinct]. They receive [indistinct] that is really structured. It should be structured. It should be funded by the government. It should be funded by the university. It should really be a serious, serious, serious effort. And it is not only the fact that you learn music [indistinct] skills on all of that, but it absolutely develops the community and those children. I mean if you involve them with those values [indistinct]. They just get more equipped and [indistinct]. That is why we say music is a great investment. You invest in human capacity. Human capacity is sustainability, and sustainability is economic growth. So you need to go in on that values of why music is such a valuable tool.

NR: Exactly, okay. And then tell me, Robert, so did you specifically start the initiative MIAGI as an orchestra? Were you specifically focused on orchestra?

RB: No, no, no. It started off as an intercultural festival where I invited indigenous artists from African music [indistinct] classical and jazz. And so it was [indistinct] for those kind of things and I have also commissioned maybe 30 intercultural compositions that were performed and some of them very success when people elsewhere played it [indistinct]. So it is dialogue, an intercultural dialogue through music and that is always the important thing in our country, because we always have to think on how do you cross the barriers.

NR: Yes, exactly.

RB: How do you cross the social barriers? Music is a very important tool.

NR: To do that.

RB: So we have over the years developed a lot of content, intellectual [indistinct] on why music is so an important focus area, develop people and to bring people together. So ja, so you have to concentrate on those aspects, because music [indistinct] more than anything; every sphere of the human being. It can be used, you know, incredibly well. But we started off this festival and then I had to...

Yes, look it started off and then with the people that came to South Africa, like the English Chamber Orchestra. I organised a whole education project in Soweto with the African Youth Ensemble [indistinct] with all of that. So we started [indistinct] [00:03:51] of these initiatives and we organised in Hammanskraal, we organised the first like orchestra camp for these kids. So it was all these initiatives that you are now teaching. The standard was [indistinct], but Bochabela

kids came. They came from [indistinct] Strings from the Cape and that is how the MIAGI Orchestra started to unfold.

NR: Okay, so that is the [indistinct].

RB: So it started with the township kids and later we then structured it all better and had the national auditions, because we have a lot of people writing to us. Can they join? And [indistinct] money, I could employ somebody to run it and then before we saw we got this invitation in 2009 to go to Europe and [indistinct] from the then Minister of Arts and Culture, but then the orchestra was already very, very well-developed.

You know we had then good [indistinct] in 26, 27, 28 and then in 2009 we went to Berlin [indistinct] and it was an orchestra of 116 and we played Symphony of the New World by Dvorak, the Leonore Overture and a piece that I commissioned [indistinct]. It was an African composer [indistinct] who has already died, but he has composed a piece called [indistinct]. Ja, and it is a beautiful piece and I commissioned an arrangement for a big orchestra.

So then the orchestra was a huge success in Berlin, unexpected in the big hall, 2 500 people, standing ovations and [indistinct] started develop the orchestra, having a orchestra programme, which means people in the orchestra who did not have [indistinct], we could pay for that. We could exchange instruments. We could fix instruments; and then the next tour was 2012, 14, 16, 18, ja, and then Covid struck, but the orchestra really, really came to a standard. It is also on our website. You can see YouTube videos [indistinct] in the hall such as the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam playing the [indistinct] [00:06:25].

So that is what was achieved through the work that we started in South Africa. So I mean that is besides everything, I mean a lot of initiatives, but this was sort of a natural development and nothing forced. It developed and a beautiful orchestra. You should go on YouTube and hear them playing [indistinct], an arrangement by [indistinct].

NR: Okay, no, I will do that. I will do that. Robert, just tell me. So the funding; so you say it was with the Minister of Arts and Culture that also ...[intervenes]

RB: [Indistinct] funding very complicated. You apply everywhere. So we have had over the years we had corporate funders, we had government, we had [indistinct] organisations. I mean we had the Swedish International Development Aid, Sida. We had the [indistinct] Southern

Africa Development aid. We had the European Union. We had [indistinct] government and smaller partnership and there are corporate sponsors such as Total, Nokia, over the years. You know with 20 years we had many sponsors and ...[intervenes]

NR: And were those funds... sorry, Robert. With those funds, that is how you could, like you say, repair instruments and then let the ...[intervenes]

RB: Ja ...[intervenes]

NR: Students have individual lessons and so on, hey.

RB: Yes. That specific programme was funded by the National [indistinct]. So as you know, National [indistinct] is in shambles [indistinct] they stole the money. Ja, that is how [indistinct]. You know where are we going to recover? How did they recover with funding?

So we at the moment, we are [indistinct] [00:08:34]. We do [indistinct] projects, like for instance [indistinct] produced a nice project [indistinct] musicians, jazz musicians, because we do a lot of jazz also. So we [indistinct] something with the University of Music, University of [indistinct] that we would take a song by [indistinct] who is a very [indistinct]. He composed a piece called [indistinct], very fun piece, and the percussion professor, Dawie [indistinct], only 36. I mean he has been with us teaching our percussion section since 2014. So he came, well he made an arrangement of [indistinct] piece. So we recorded [indistinct] our part here and then he goes back to the [indistinct] hard drive and they then record the 25 young Austrian musicians, your international musicians [indistinct] and then it becomes one virtual production. So interesting stuff like that.

MIAGI is now 21 years old. So we are doing high-profile presentations in Europe especially to see what we can achieve, because funding dried up here in the country and it now needed much more than that. The work that your mother has been doing and that we have all been doing is really, really a very important thing [indistinct].

NR: Yes, exactly.

RB: And somebody like John Roos, bless his soul. Bless his soul [indistinct] and there is nothing good coming from there. Ja, so, but if you have questions, you can contact me any time.

NR: Yes, okay. That is perfect. So tell me, so with the orchestra now as it is, do you only, when you do get together, is it just for the orchestra or do you have a school now, you know where they have like individual lessons and theory classes?

RB: Ja, we have the school in Soweto that we built and established.

NR: Oh, in Soweto, okay.

RB: In Soweto, ja. It is called the... It was first the... Cape Gate was the sponsor for [indistinct]. So it was the Cape Gate MIAGI Centre for Music. Now we started, we are running it now since 2009 and in 2018 the centre became independent. It is called the Morris Isaacson Centre for Music, because it is on the premises of the famous Morris Isaacson School where in 1976 on 16 June the [indistinct]. So it is a very historic place and [indistinct] [00:12:06] go there and visit.

NR: And tell me, just how many people are employed? So do you have like a violin teacher, cello teacher?

RB: Ja. No, we have with the [indistinct] 26 people employed.

NR: Okay and I assume then obviously that is now, the musicians that are employed there are basically like what you [indistinct] orchestra. I suppose you have got the wind section. You have got strings; like a violin teacher, cello teacher.

RB: No, we have got... ja, we have got [indistinct]. With strings we have, you know, the four main; the violin. We have got a viola. We have got cello. We have got double bass. With our wind, we have wood [indistinct], quite a bit of saxophones, few unique things. Brass; we have trombone, trumpet. Surely if there are some kids who want to play the tuba, we can manage that. But the interesting thing; we have, you know, the pennywhistle.

NR: Yes, or course, ja, pennywhistle. Do you have that too?

RB: Ja, we have a pennywhistle syllabus that we work on.

NR: Oh wow, amazing.

RB: So we have got a fantastic pennywhistle group teaching regularly. And some of these pennywhistle groups go then on to other kids, go then to other wind instruments [indistinct].

NR: And tell me. Sorry, Robert, just tell me quickly. Do you have also theory classes that you offer?

RB: Ja. Theory classes; theory to everybody [indistinct], but we are all the time developing and checking and then we have also we have lot of percussion. Ja, we have got, you know, your classic percussion and we have got djembe. We also developed a syllabus for djembe.

NR: For Djembe. Okay, wow, amazing. Okay, and then tell me then; the individual lessons are they also 30 minutes? I mean, ja, so all basically work on 30 minutes. How do they work at your school?

RB: We developed a concert where you use the time to fit every kid, because you have got kids that are talented and are slower [indistinct] more time. You have kids that are talented and can really shine and they need more time. So and then you have got [indistinct] that are lazy. So, one needs to manage that. So it is a very [indistinct] and the teachers obviously they have a minimum amount of hours that they have to teach and [indistinct] these times need to be distributed to the kids where it is applicable to what they need.

NR: Oh, okay, I see. Okay, so you ...[intervenes]

RB: [Indistinct] it is a little bit more creative and then I also have to say that we have got [indistinct] of those kiddies that started there who got scholarships to go to School of the Arts in Johannesburg and we have got two brilliant little cellists studying in London at the moment.

NR: Oh, amazing. That is amazing.

RB: So there has been in eight years huge results.

NR: That is amazing. That is amazing.

RB: And we have got different ensembles busy developing all of that and you know it is always, I think, an art in these initiatives to [indistinct] and not tightening them up with [indistinct] this or that. So we now are just starting to develop a lot of [indistinct] [00:16:48] and ad hoc ensemble playing.

NR: That is right, okay.

RB: Ja. So ...[intervenes]

NR: Robert, sorry, and tell me. Did you see also, you know, like that affected the community? Like do you see the development in the children? Do you see that, you know, it is a huge benefit for the Soweto community to have that?

RB: Ja.

NR: Have you seen successful stories?

RB: We have seen tangible results, absolutely, absolutely. You know, we know some of these kids since they are babies. Also what we have very developed [indistinct] music education where we have two teachers only assigned to going into the community, into the crèches, into the day care centres and to Grade R. So, these kids [indistinct]. So they are the new intakes to the centre, because you scout for the specially-talented.

NR: Okay, no, that is amazing. Okay, and then tell me; how did you recruit your colleagues, the music educators?

RB: Teachers; well, you know through the MIAGI Orchestra and through my activity I knew many musicians and people and I knew a lot of musicians from the community that was born in the community and had all their music education in the community. And those people, some of them went to Wits and study and some went overseas, studied. So they are very equipped players. So it is a mixture of those players.

In the beginning it was also people like the [indistinct] [00:18:39] that significantly died unfortunately. So the people that had these, that themselves started music education without having a formal education, you know. So we deal with a lot of kids where the education was very mediocre and not on par with what you would have in privileged schools. So I think one needs to be [indistinct]. So it was a big mixture of personalities and I also engaged a principle or a director, music director [indistinct] Chris Bishop horn player from JPO. He is a professional musician and he also had a good feeling of what kind of people we would invite to teach. So I mean teachers like everywhere.

NR: Okay, all right ...[intervenes]

RB: [Indistinct].

NR: And then do I understand also that you do have teachers from the community as well, hey?

RB: Ja, yes.

NR: Okay, all right. And if I understand correctly, some of them even started their own initiatives, right.

RB: At the moment not really, not really. I mean there are dreams, but people cannot go without money.

NR: Yes, yes, of course.

RB: And there are... I mean when I started working in Soweto in 2000, in 2001, many of these chaps they did not have regular income. They just started teaching everything [indistinct] and you need this kind... If you want to work in a community, then you need this kind of passion.

NR: Yes, of course, definitely.

RB: I mean your mother has that. She has it. Ja.

NR: Yes, of course. No, you have to.

RB: No, she really has that and I mean that is what you have to... even the people driving, we have now at the centre independent different rules and regulations and we have got a centre [indistinct] [00:20:57] the big boss and she is hardly 30 and they have a lot of qualities, but you have to be committed 24/7 these initiatives [indistinct].

NR: No, definitely, definitely. Thank you so much, Robert.

[End Transcript 00:21:17]