

Interviewee: Participant 4

Interviewer: Nathalie Roué

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List of Acronyms: GG=Participant 4, NR=Interviewer

[Begin Transcript 00:00:00]

GG: But we really felt, it really felt that there are opportunities here and sense to give back that we have learned in 16 years of being in South Africa. In Western Europe they need a different way of looking at music education; and because we got stuck here for three months instead of one week two years ago, because they locked down the airports, the first lockdown. So we could not get back home to South Africa and that is why this happens, otherwise we would have never even considered going, but we stayed here for three months, because we could not fly back to Johannesburg and then we discovered that a lot of institutions here are stuck with their curriculums, with didactical approaches, with all kinds of stuff. And then I came alongside because I wanted to sell something back to my country of birth.

Now one thing led to another and they asked me if I did not want to be a director of the Institute for Arts and Culture and on a national level start designing new music curriculum to methodologies, and then just one thing led to another and I thought well, and my wife had the same feeling. Like maybe this is the time to see our parents really grow old after 16 years, but our hearts are still in South Africa. We also still have a place in Pretoria fully-furnished and we are there five, six times per year. I also still teach at UP online and in Bloem and in Cape Town online at the universities. So I am still very connected and love to go back to my church in Pretoria every two, three months. We were just there three weeks ago. So anyway, it is a bit of a hybrid lifestyle I guess. Our hearts are in South Africa, but we know that the calling at the moment is here, not in South Africa, although everybody was sad to see us leave, which is always nice, but still.

NR: Okay, Gerben, just tell me where in Holland do you live now? Where are you now?

GG: We live on the border with Germany which is very cool, so near Arnhem. Well Holland is super small. So it does not really matter where you live. You can get anywhere within two hours' drive.

NR: Okay, that is great ...[intervenes]

GG: But we live on the border. So it is bilingual, which is nice. So the institute is also on the border. So I am half in Germany, half in Holland. So it is a nice mix.

NR: Okay, that is great. Listen, Gerben, and you can hear me properly, hey? Is my sound okay on your side?

GG: Ja, it is fine, ja.

NR: Is it. Is it all right? Okay, so Gerben, so like I tried to explain, I am busy now with my thesis and it is about the El Sistema-inspired programme that I am exploring how to implement in collaboration with the University of Pretoria. So obviously now I would like to interview people like you, for example, that you know that had experience about this and you know give really advice on how. What is your background, you know, with regards to these programme for example? So Gerben, could you maybe explain to me what is your background with regards to community music programme? Like how have you been involved with programmes like this?

GG: I got involved; I think it must have been somewhere around 2009, 2010. I was asked to do street opera in townships, conduct operas and involve the community and I have always had that heart for our community when it comes to music education. That is also why I stayed in South Africa. I knew about El Sistema before I came to South Africa. So I took those philosophies and I started [indistinct] [00:04:10] in Pretoria at the back of Hatfield Christian Church based on those principles to link, to test as a test pilot to see if it would work or not. This was when we came to South Africa 2005.

And then this grew so quickly and the results were so amazing that... well, I started to, then I started a proper music academy based on this and then also a record company and a music publishing house based on the same philosophies and through the church also a worship academy more on the equipping side of faith and education, more for professional musicians from all over the world that wants to connect faith and music and how to work out that balance, but with the same underlying philosophies as El Sistema actually.

NR: El Sistema. So sorry, Gerben, when you say the same philosophies, that is because you are reaching out to the community or is it because; like El Sistema, they are more into like starting an orchestra, you know getting a lot of people together or ...[intervenes]

GG: So that it is almost you know one-on-one lessons, all the activities in group formats and so I had to write new curriculum for that, because in South Africa it was and still is very much focused on one-on-one and a lot of competitions and a lot of exams and diplomas. So this is a very actually old European approach obviously from the colonial times; and I just did not see that at all. When I came to South Africa, I thought why on earth are they implementing these systems that I have been hating since I was 7 years old in Holland and England. It does not make sense to me, except for the exceptionally talented or on the exceptionally not talented scale or autism spectrum or the exceptions, but for the bulk of the kids, the peer-to-peer learning aspects and the social aspects and the safety aspect of being in a group with your peers is what makes you more relaxed as a human being, and with that there is less shame to express oneself in music, as little as you are. So those kinds of foundations of El Sistema I used. Then I started looking at the curriculum and I organised, together with people from Venezuela and from Boston, a guy, another conductor who did a PhD actually on this topic who wrote on El Sistema or did extensive research in South America on El Sistema and ...[intervenes]

NR: Oh wow. Sorry, Gerben. Who is he? Maybe I can try and just see if I can find his thesis online.

GG: You can. I should have his thesis somewhere. It is just like many moons ago. Let me quickly...

NR: Because I think that will be so valuable you know for my research as well.

GG: Ja, his name is Jonathan Andrew Govias.

NR: Okay, yes, okay. So it is Jonathan, okay, Jonathan.

GG: Ja, he still works in... He was officially an Abreu fellow; so from the Abreu Foundation. So he at New England Conservatory and now he works in Iowa State University. He is a conductor there, but his thesis was on El Sistema and he came to South Africa through a mutual friend of ours in Berlin. I worked in Berlin for a long time before I came to South Africa; and so anyway, we met up and he was in the middle of finishing up his doctorate and I was just in the

middle of... So he was flying here. My background does not allow me to do that; flying here academically and I was doing the work on ground level in the townships, but with this thinking. So we met each other and it was perfect in the right time. So he was able to give me, you know, parameters and guidelines and things first-hand from Venezuela. So that was pretty cool.

So we did a big symposium at University of Cape Town with the professors over there, music education departments and musicology, and it was very rough. South Africa was not really for us. I still think it is kind of rough in South Africa, but I tried at least for 16 years, also at your university. I mean my methodologies, a conducting teacher and percussion at UP were also rooted in that. I just never told them, but they were very happy. So it does work. So I was a little bit of a secret agent there in that sense.

Anyway, so back to that; so we did a symposium in Cape Town and we just had three-day sessions with a lot of the teachers, lecturers there and some of the students and also with the quartet from Caracas from Venezuela, a string quartet, just to show them how it practically works and get the stories like first-hand instead of just academically or just from my experience in South Africa. So that is how it all started.

And then I was so encouraged. I went back to Pretoria and started all the stuff I just shared with you, round about 2008/9, somewhere there. I started academies and all the other stuff to test-drive it and then eventually when I felt this curriculum actually works on this approach and also retraining the teachers. That was a big thing; and a lot of resistance; like in Cape Town at the University of Stellenbosch. No, it was in Cape Town. That is UCT. A lot of resistance; like not understanding why must we change. Everything is fine, but you know I saw as a conductor that it was not fine, because at that time I conducted the South African National Youth Orchestra a lot and for the first time in the history all the first generation black kids musicians came into the National Youth Orchestra and they just came... so it was a culture clash that it could not be bridged by a normal rehearsal methodology, for instance.

So as a conductor I had to choose to go the El Sistema route to approach the National Youth Orchestra in South Africa to get them to play a lesson differently and feel differently and engage differently in order to bridge the two cultures. The one that came from the formalised training and the other one came from other sources, so to speak, and in order to mix them and to still do Shostakovich's 9th Symphony and Benjamin Britten Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra responsibly.

So that was another step in my career that I thought or in my life rather that that was very exciting to take to see how do you now put that way of thinking into practise as a rehearsal matter. How do you transform symphony orchestras to that model or at least to that philosophy? I mean the model you cannot really carbon-copy one-on-one. South Africa is different than Venezuela and I also do not like some of the stuff in El Sistema that they have there, but anyway, do not like in the sense that I do not think it would work in South Africa after there so long. So that was another thing. And then I started with the same school like a proper, like they are doing in Caracas and Mamelodi, and that still exists in the ...[intervenes]

NR: Where is that, Gerben, where in Mamelodi?

GG: In the poorest area way against where all the refugees came about eight, nine years ago where they had all these racial fights and problems, way against the mountain at Leska.

NR: Oh, is it there? Okay.

GG: Leska, so all the way in the back where it is not developed and where they are still actually ostracised and not integrated and a lot of kids. So we started a foundation there; Viva Foundation it is called. We started a primary school and later on a high school and then we connected the music school to it; so, same as the system in Caracas. We gave them shoes. We gave them food, couple of 100 kids. In the meantime it is about 500 kids or 5/600 and we give them music lessons every single day.

NR: Oh yes, okay, like El Sistema. So it is based on every day, ja.

GG: That remerged with an angle of music therapy and not so orchestral as in Caracas, because the trauma and the complications there are different and in some cases even worse than in Caracas, I think. So ja, so that is what we did and now in the meantime two years ago in Corona time I started another school in Cullinan. So that is a bit more developed area, but also to see how does it work in a poor area, but that is more developed, is more safe, less criminal statistics.

But the cool thing; at Viva in Mamelodi is that we saw by talking to the police and getting statistics, we saw that prostitution and gangs went down percentage-wise. Already six months or after we started the school, we were able to draw most of the young girls off of the streets into the school every single day and music lessons still like 6 o'clock and then feed them and the guys 14, 15, 16 years old, same. And you just get, literally get them off the streets, which

means your crime stats go down. So then [indistinct] [00:14:50] get excited and the local politicians started get excited, because this is then what music does in culture. You use it as a weapon against crime, and that was beautiful to see that.

And so now we are starting in Cullinan to see what happens if you do it in a more developed, more safe area, but the similar problems when it comes to poverty and stability. And that is really interesting as well to tweak the curriculum in a different way to fit that community. So in a sense now after about 15 years of all of that, just a couple of examples I have done more and that, but those are the headliners.

Now I actually think the name El Sistema, for instance, is weirdly chosen for South African context, because it is not really a system at all. I really call it, as you would have noticed a few times now, a philosophy. The systemic approach comes after you have done proper research, you know, of the community where you want to make a difference, where you want transformation. And in Venezuela it really became about the music and, you know, 160-something youth orchestras at the time that I was there and a lot of... and you know and all on high level and all these conductors that come out of there and I know them all also personally. I have worked with some of them and it is wonderful as world class, but that has never been my intention in South Africa, because they fall into the same trap of kwazi perfectionism if you do not watch it, of fanaticism, as you have with an English, you know, Grade 1 to 8 system with competitions.

So I have never personally chased after that stuff. I wanted to balance the existing system out. Also I am not against the existing systems in South Africa of talent development. I just do not agree with them, but it does not mean they are bad. It means I always felt there is no alternative. Either the kids fall for that system and they succeed or they do not succeed and the talent gets lost. And that last, that latter part I have severe problems with. That is the kind of stuff that I cannot sleep at night as an educator. Then I go no, no, no, every child deserves an opportunity to engage with music and arts and develop, and I believe in every child being talented in those areas. To what extent, I do not care. If they are ever going to perform with me in a professional orchestra, who cares you know? But maybe they can transform their family; maybe one uncle who has bad behaviour or one dad or one mom, you know. It can make a difference; and I have seen it. I have seen it make a difference and that is what, you know, that was my intention when I engaged with that when I saw in South Africa music is not used, music education is not used primarily to help people as a weapon against all kinds of things or for the

wellbeing of people, but is used either very commercially as superficial entertainment instead of art or it is used to shine on a personal level to show that you are better than somebody else.

And there was very little, when I started these things, there was very few things in South Africa that were in between filling up the void and I felt that that was, you know, in terms of... what is it in English, the *grondwet*, the constitution. It was almost constitutionally not okay to not give equal opportunity to every South African child. And that was my basic starting point and then I thought well, if I have to look at a system in the world that counterfeits this and it brings a bit of balance, it probably is that way of thinking; for the same reason [indistinct] [00:19:20] adopted it and adapted it for the same reason. Royal School of Music looked at El Sistema and adopted and adapted it into their existing curriculum for the same reasons; and that obviously strengthens my belief already beginning of the century that I start; if institutions like that that I have also been to find that necessary to bring that kind of social and wellbeing balance and that different take on music and music education, then how much more should that happen in countries like South Africa where you have democracy and where you have a starting point that is incredibly complex with so many different cultures, 11 official languages.

So there is such a long road to go to create one country with one kind of South Africa, if that is ever going to happen, but I mean at least a country where people start listening to each other, where they respect each other and where you have normal conversations without tiptoeing, you know, *et cetera, et cetera*. Now I think what has been failing since 1996 is that Arts and Culture has not been optimised from a methodology and a didactical approach point of view to actually be used to accomplish that goal.

NR: Okay, I see. Gerben, but can you tell me now with regards to what you are saying now, you know with the background of South Africa, what would your opinion be, for example, now if the University of Pretoria do implement a programme like that? Do you think it would be great for the communities? What is your opinion about that?

GG: It is a very broad question, right.

NR: What are your views basically?

GG: Look, obviously my first response; this is the reason that I said yes when they offered me the job at UP actually. So I would say it is incredibly necessary and I would say, you know, I had the privilege of teaching, part-time teaching there for 12 years as a conducting lecturer and the last three years full-time on staff of the faculty; and well, some people thought I was weird or

crazy, but they liked it. All my colleagues at UP, you know, including myself cried a little bit when I decided I need to go somewhere else and maybe I will be back or whatever.

I think a lot of the things work; the transformation of the upsell of the symphony orchestra within one year. I do not take full credit for that. I stand on the shoulders of people like Abreu in Caracas and a whole bunch of others that I have learned from, like Jonathan and with that symposium and [indistinct] [00:22:29] *et cetera, et cetera, et cetera*. You know all of that are brought into UP without UP knowing. I mean it is not something that I, you know, displayed in my job interview with all the professors and the dean. They knew about my academies and my alternative way of teaching and they actually said: 'well, we like it so much. We see so much fruits of the last 10 years of you being in South Africa. We want to create a position around you as a person. So you do not have to fill anybody's shoes. We are giving you a full-time job so that you can be yourself.'

Well, that is the biggest compliment I have ever had in my entire life. It is like: oh, that is great. That is really, because usually at a university you have to fill a position. I did not have to fill a position. I was given a position that fits me and my way of teaching, which is not perfect at all, but like I said, it is an alternative and that was welcomed. And if you would interview some of my conducting students, they would probably tell you funny stories of the weird things I do when I teach. That is not so much in your English, British way of university think.

NR: Gerben, just tell me. I was thinking now. Since you have founded like the Viva Foundation, for example. So with regards to let us say now there is a programme that the university now would like to implement. What would the logistics be behind that? So from your experience, what did you need to have, like even financially-wise, all of that? What would the university need to do in order for that to happen?

GG: Are you talking implementing? Look, you can implement it as university in two ways. Obviously you could implement it as a programme, but in the community and be there as UP in the township doing this thing or you can have the entire philosophy across the board and the entire bachelor's degree. That is what; I have doing both. First I did the township implementation being there physically and then the last three years full-time I brought it to UP and everybody was super happy and thought: 'okay, wow, we have never seen the orchestra transform within a year. That is weird.' They thought it was because I am a brilliant conductor. I do not think I am a brilliant conductor. I really do not take that kind of credit. I know I can

conduct and I am musical, blah, blah, blah, but not that good. It is really because I use the El Sistema approach that made that orchestra to transform completely in one year.

So your question can be applied to both or one or the other or both/and. If you are talking about the first one, which by the looks of it, I mean your body language gave away that that is what you meant. Zoom is better than a phone call, therefore. But you know then I would say you need a very strong team of people who is not afraid. You need fearlessness. You need to not... but you do not need people that want to try it out, because those children deserve better. That is the first thing, because it is about sustainability and not using them as lab rats, academic lab rats, which of course you do. I also do, but that is in their benefit long-term, because by doing the academic research, I made this sustainable and I get the sustainable funding. Like those things in Mamelodi is sustainably funded until eternity. It is like it is just done. I never have to worry about money there, as long as I am kind of alive and I make sure in writing that after my death it is also still funded. So you do need a lot of money, because it is music lessons every day.

NR: Of course, that is the thing exactly. But do you have people that actually sponsor? Do you have sponsors, Gerben? How do you know that there are going to be sponsors?

GG: For the whole village that I built there were a team of people. We have sponsors. There are banks that have invested. There are big corporations that have invested nationally, internationally. There is a bunch of tutors from different countries that invest in the content and the curriculum. I have got a whole team now in Holland on a national level, on a music educational national level from the government that are using me as a pilot to see can we also start these things in Western Europe after Corona to help with debriefing after the pandemic and trauma counselling.

So I am now using it as trauma counselling methodology here where I live and to debrief the very young ones between 4 and 8 years old. I am using groups of children to do debriefing with the El Sistema approach, workshop, community-based approach, because in Western Europe loneliness is a big problem, because everybody is spoilt and is rich and can retreat. They can isolate themselves.

South Africa luckily, because of the problems South Africa has, the blessing is that you have to look for people. You cannot thrive on your own in South Africa. That is not possible. You have to build community. So in that sense El Sistema is a perfect approach for that need. Whereas

in Europe El Sistema is needed, because people do not need community. They think. So they wither and they die mentally. So I am using it differently here. That is also one of the reasons that I felt like I need to be here for a while, because there is a need here that is really bad. There are big problems here, mental problems. That is different.

So to come back to your question; you need strong men and women who will go there physically that have a heart for... let us say also heart for the statistics. If you would for instance get, if I can get to you for instance all the stats and all the stories or some of the stories of the last 10 years, some of the amazing things that have happened there at Viva Village through the persons who are still leading it there on the grounds every day still. And with those stories you could go to other areas and say: listen, the police department there, these are the stats. You can use music. Do you know you can use music to lower your crime stats and prostitution and gang and rape?

And like what we also do is; we have got an American company to sponsor a high-tech system, Wi-Fi high-tech system for alarm notification for girls, teenage girls in the shacks that they can use whenever they feel threatened, for instance. Then they come running to the Viva Village and they have full access and we take them in. And there is an electronic system that they have in their pockets and it goes directly to the police station in Mamelodi. And so after like two, three weeks the police rocks up immediately when something, a threatening situation, whatever it is, occurs. And because of that, all the threats have disappeared, and I am talking about family threats. I am talking about threats of rape or incest or you name it, like the rough stuff. So that is also part of the thinking. It is not just, with all respect, stupid music lessons.

NR: [Indistinct] [00:31:06]

GG: It is about the heartbeat and turning that into music. It is about being able to sing a melody because you are not threatened, being able to sing songs and measure without dissonance, because life is a little bit better than last week. You know, so you connect life and music the whole time. So you need to source. So the first thing you need to do, to answer your question, is to source the right people that understand this, that do not see music as the goal, but as a means to get to a better quality of life and then maybe some of them; and by the way, lots of them actually did land at universities and music faculties and a choir that we started there has stood internationally already, because it is brilliance. So you know in South Africa there is one thing you have to... I never worried about talent in South Africa.

NR: That is true. I agree.

GG: In Holland, I mean, the reason we... Holland showcases the best orchestras in the world and choirs and musicians, because we have money, but it is not because we have so much talent. It is not on the talent scale. You have to really find them somewhere and then pump a lot of money, throw money at them and then eventually use that for marketing and then everybody knows about it, right, like the Concertgebouw or you name it.

But in South Africa generally the talent is like insane, but there is not enough support and money, but also not support as in people with the right hearts without some kind of weird competition that is used that can actually take those kids by the hand and develop them organically and holistically and see them as human beings that happen to have a talent and improve their lives so that it improves their self-esteem so that they can stand on international stages.

And thank God we have these products as well. I mean one of the best leading tenor opera singers in Europe is a South African from Jo'burg who grew up in Soweto that I happen to have coached together with Richard Kok and he is now singing. He is the lead tenor. He sings all the solos in the Deutsche Oper Berlin with Daniel Barenboim like every single day of his life now, but he is a product of that kind of smile; like he does not compete with anybody. He has never done a competition. He did his degree in Frankfurt or in Cologne and then got scouted and now he is in Berlin and I spoke to... I was in Berlin two months ago and spoke to him and he is like still as unassuming as when I met him in Soweto. He says like: 'Gerben, thank you so much for the opportunities that I got with you with the Bach Choir at the university. That was so cool and this and that.' And he is like one of the most famous tenors in the whole of Germany at the moment, working with the most famous opera company and the most famous conductor in the world and he is still like 'I so love it' and then he speaks about, you know, Figaro or the role that he has to play and then next week it is *Così fan tutte* and it is exactly the same guy, and so that makes me proud. Then I go like: okay, this guy gets it. This is it. He is just trying to make a difference. He is trying to make other people's lives a little bit more, a little bit less Western European, a little bit less constipated, a little bit less stuck-up, a little bit less spoilt and capitalistic in other words.

It is fantastic and he is not an exception. There are people at the Metropolitan Opera in New York that we have raised up like that. There are people all over. So it is happening. So it is possible, but step one is: you need the people who unselfishly with a goal in mind, with focus,

with talent, with intelligence, but selflessly and without fear say yes to this way of music education, because it is not easy, as you read the biography of Abreu and all that. I mean to start this is not for sissies. But I have not one second regretted this in my life. It made me a better conductor. I want to believe it made me a better person, but that you have to check with my wife, I guess, and I my friends. But it definitely made me a better musician, without a doubt, absolutely. I have learned so much from these children that I was supposed to teach; that it definitely made me a better conductor as well. I am pretty convinced.

Step two would be that you find with the statistics and with your findings and with a team of people that you warm the hearts of, you know, rich people and convince them. Some of them; banks you convince with statistics, you know, and other companies you convince with stories. Other private persons you convince with [indistinct] [00:36:05] maybe or concerts or letting the choir from Mamelodi sing and they all are moved to tears and there is a chequebook. There are different avenues that I choose or chose, but I had a sponsor from the first week and 10 years down the line I still have a sponsor.

So it can be done and I did not have to lobby or [indistinct] or do weird things. I do not do that anyway. I am not good at that. If people do not want to believe that this is a good thing, that is fine, but then those are not the people that are in my circles. You know you filter them. So I have also never been disappointed, because you know this in advance. I mean of the 40 or 50 million South Africans, they are going to be... you only need a handful that see it with you and then you [indistinct].

And also if you need; in the beginning none of the South Africans wanted to give, because you know how they are, most companies, like: 'oh no, but we need to take care of our own new BMW' or whatever and they go like: 'no, no, no. I first want to see if it works and then maybe just start.' So I just went like: okay, cool. I am going to do this for free anyway. So there we go. So I just started. And then I got funding from Europe and then it started to work and then everybody wants to be part of the success and then they all came back and went like: oh ja, [indistinct]. I would love to connect my big name [indistinct] [00:37:38].

NR: Listen, Gerben, I was thinking now. In terms of now like the philosophy of El Sistema; so would you... if we take that into the concept of South Africa, would the orchestra philosophy be good or do you think the choir, for example, I think choir also would be good too if you have the same approach to actually attract many people from the community and then even choir. A choir would be quite a good option, right?

GG: Ja, and another... choir would be a very good option and another wonderful thing that I have discovered funny enough in Western Europe last year when I came here, I have started that, since two weeks I have started that. It is hot off the press. It is called a leerorkest, in other words a learning orchestra. It is a concept that is fully based on: you do not even have to be able to play an instrument. You come. And the government here is so excited. They are sponsoring it. So companies give this. Insurance companies are sponsoring me to start this orchestra. Why? Because it alleviate stress, which we all know music-making, but it adds stress if you have to play right and wrong notes, right, because then you feel bad about yourself and you do not need that stress.

So what I do is; I start an orchestra in the middle of the week, Wednesday afternoon 3 o'clock when people go like: 'oh ja, I still have to go Thursday and Friday'. So high profile managers with a lot of stress; I have approached all the big companies and said: I think your guys are not functioning well on Thursday and on Friday. I am sure they actually do not want to work anymore; and they all affirmed it. They said: 'ja, that is true'. I said: I can help you. I can start up an orchestra where they just come and they make sounds. They do not make music. We make sounds. It is a learning orchestra and it is learning how to de-stress and to debrief what happens in your life or what happens in your work.

So that could really work in South Africa as well, because I have seen the same pattern and businesses in South Africa. And so, I got businesses to sponsor this orchestra and insurance companies that [indistinct] [00:39:59] okay, if you become a member of this orchestra, you have to pay less, you know, you have to pay less insurance. It is the same deal as that sporting facilities in South Africa have with your insurance companies, you know. If you become a member of Virgin Active, you pay less insurance, right. You get a discount. Ja. This does not exist in the orchestra music world. So that is your niche. That is where you can get a lot of money in South Africa to say that: why do you sponsor sports facilities and organisations and fitness clubs? Why do they get money from insurance companies with a discount for the clients? Why not when you start a choir with people who cannot read or write notes, who cannot even sing; why do not you start an orchestra? It is the same as for the fitness clubs. Think about it; same philosophy. This is very El Sistemico.

When you choose an insurance company and you read in the brochure you get 20% discount if you go to Virgin Active, because we have a deal with them, then you might be obese. You might not know how to do fitness. You might not even know how to do Zumba or how to do

spinning. You are a total amateur. You are a total loser when you go to that fitness club. You just go there. Why? – Because you get discounts on the insurance. So you go with a little bit of shame to the fitness club and you think: okay, here I am. You just bought pants and it looks ridiculous and there you go and then you get a coach, *et cetera, et cetera*.

So nobody thinks that is weird, because everybody does that. Everybody does that. So I just thought let us do the same thing in the orchestral world. So I approached insurance companies and within one meeting they said: that makes perfect sense. We do it with sports and we know that leisure, when it comes to music-making, unless you add the stress of exams and diplomas and competitions; that defies the purpose, because they still have to see you shrink eventually.

NR: [Indistinct].

GG: [Indistinct] [00:42:19]. We are trying to prevent spending all that money by saying to the insurance company it is much more expensive to pay for therapy and for psychiatry and for a psychologist or treat depression with music students. That is much more expensive than when you give them 15 or 20% discount on insurance by going to an orchestra or a choir where there is no stress and it is just stress relief for the wellbeing of a person. So then I started. It is hilarious. So we have an orchestra together. We get national instrument funding from Holland to give all the instruments that we want from €9 per year, which is like nothing.

NR: It is nothing, ja.

GG: What is that? R15 per... ja, it is 15. No, wait, €9; that is R150 per year. Now you have a violin or a cello or a double bass or timpani or whatever. So we got them to sponsor. So I have got a whole concert full of instruments. People come in with their tie and jacket and from banks and from every and also little kids and moms that have nothing to do on a Wednesday afternoon or people in education that have to teach until 2 o'clock in high school and then they come and they go like: you know what, I could go to a fitness club or I could go to musical fitness. So they come to me and they come in and they pick an instrument. A clarinet; they have never seen a clarinet. They would need to put the reed in. And then I teach them how to make a sound and I have got professionals in every section that help them with the basics and we make music and within a couple of weeks now it actually starts to sound great. They have never had music lessons. They cannot read music, but it starts to sound great. It is a complete miracle in front of your eyes, and that is El Sistema. So this could ...[intervenes]

NR: I am going to need to come, I need to come and see this. It sounds amazing.

GG: It is hilarious and so much fun and it is like it is just these people, you must see these people come in. They come from work and their employers give them two hours off to do this. So they would come. They do this and then they go back to work transformed. Like they leap and they bounce out of the concert hall. This was amazing. And then I get phone calls from the employer saying like: 'what are you guys doing to my...? They come back like new people. Their Thursdays and their Fridays become more productive. Thank you so much. Can I send more people?' So now we have 80 people every Wednesday. Now I have a waiting list. So we are like: oh, stop. Now I need to raise up other weird conductors that also can do this, because it is quite tension on the ears, you can imagine, you know. It is like...

NR: Gerben, I was thinking. Do you have specifics or any of that that I can like see? Do you have anything on paper?

GG: Ja, ja, ja, we also have [indistinct] [00:45:35].

NR: Even from the Viva, for example, Viva Foundation or anything that you can send me or that I can access on the internet.

GG: For sure. I will send you links and some paperwork and all that and also from the leerorkest.

NR: Yes, please, please. That is amazing. That is amazing, Gerben.

GG: I think the practical thing that you could implement at UP or wherever you go. Look, of course it is a little bit inspired by El Sistema, because maybe you know that El Sistema works with the [indistinct] [00:46:08] orchestra. Are you aware of that?

NR: Yes, yes, I know about it, ja.

GG: Ja. So, but that is... so it is a similar approach, but I just took it a step further by thinking, and I found somebody from Spain, a woman from Spain who actually initiated this, but she is not a conductor. So now she found me and now this thing is... now we are a nice little team, but anyway, she also said to me like: ja, this [indistinct] orchestra that works with kids of course and that is great, and that is for sure what you can do in any township anywhere in the world or any community for that matter.

But then she took it a step further, because she is also a psychologist and a music therapist and she went like: I think a lot of people need to be able to play in an orchestra, discover the joy of

orchestral playing, the social aspects, the listening aspects, the visual aspects, the sensation of producing a sound without stress that it needs to be in tune, out of tune, in time, out of... That will come later. It will come by itself. And that is how we found each other. So she already made a website and so everything is on there and also I will send you a document on the business model, how we got insurance companies and other companies to sponsor it and how to approach it.

And I think if I would have been longer at UP, I would have suggested this definitely to Mr Johnson and also with Dorette and with Clarinda, but I have already had talks two years ago that I said I think we need to go into the townships and the UP gets onto my existing projects to have master's and doctoral students do research there, because I think it is the way to go in South Africa to eventually balance that whole music education problem out so that you have both and, so that all kinds of people can get into a system of music education and not just the one that fit the colonial box. Whether you are black or white does not matter.

NR: It does not. So Gerben, you have spoken to Dorette about this already. So Dorette and you already; oh, that is great, okay. Ja, she told me I must get hold of you and she said: 'no, no, no, get hold of Gerben. You have to speak to him.' So okay, now I understand, okay.

GG: She knows about it and all my colleagues from music therapy and music education. I spoke to Sonja Cruywagen about this at length to see if we can link UP to the existing projects to see if we can notice that talent and come from a different angle and bring it into the academic level eventually and not just through Boys High and Girls High or what have you.

NR: Exactly, exactly.

GG: So that was my biggest dream and it still is and that is also why I am saying I have not immigrated. I am not back home. My home is still in South Africa. I just happen to see certain things here in Holland in those three months that we were stuck here. I just saw these kinds of things in Holland as well with surprise, because it is a first-world country and I think they are missing it. Something must be done here as well. And because it is easier here because there is more money, I was able to quickly last year, you know, put all these things in place and all these new ideas, because it is easier to find money here; and test-driving them now here, but I would be honoured to work with you or whoever or a team of people, because I am in South Africa anyway every two, three months per year to see if we can develop similar things there and maybe even with European money, because the money that comes largely for the

curriculum for Mamelodi is also from Holland. So I could, and I have a carte blanche to spend it as I want to, as long as I, you know, tell them what I do.

So we can also look at maybe part of the money we can use as seed money for you to start up something new for your; you know for your research. I will be more to investigate on this side of the world as well if I could find money for you to help out in whatever way, because I think it is needed. I know it is needed.

NR: That is wonderful. And I mean I have seen it myself, because I mean I have taught with my mom in Mamelodi. You know she has got also a music school in Mamelodi. So we taught there. I taught there for eight years. So I know exactly what you are talking about and I mean I also have my own students then that actually developed from... you know how it goes. They do not have families or they do not have parents. All of them they develop and they actually matriculate and they actually, some of them become musicians. Some of them actually start working. Some of them provide for their families. You know so, and that is why it is also so dear to my heart, you know. And Gerben, if you would not mind, like you say, sending me the documents, even the business documents, you know, how to maybe, you know like your ideas to start funding something like that; even the statistics. That will be great if you can send for my research. That would obviously be a very good way of, you know, showing and proving how it can actually improve community. So that would really be awesome if you can ...[intervenes]

GG: Definitely. I will also give you the contact details of the couple that is running the Viva Village in Mamelodi.

NR: Please.

GG: So they live in Cullinan and on their plot on the farm. They have built a second music school. So they have it like [indistinct] [00:52:02]. So it will be cool for you to meet them or go there or see what they do and, you know.

NR: That will be great [indistinct].

GG: My big dream there is to really expand it and make it really proper music therapy, to be honest, and less music school, because I have noticed more and more and more that on the counselling side or on the therapeutic sides and on the debriefing sides there is a bigger need than the musical development. That will then come by itself, because it is every day. So it goes

very quickly actually, because the talent is there, but it should not be the focus. And so that was my big shock when I came to Holland that this is exactly what is needed here as well.

The war in Ukraine actually puts another, kind of casts another shadow on life here and there is even more fear. Now last week I worked with 200 refugees from the Ukraine. I organised that they could sleep, that they get houses and it is mostly women and children, because the men are fighting. So these are disrupted families. So we are doing a lot of therapy with them, a lot of djembe workshops and classical music concerts, because they are very cultured. I mean Kyiv is an extremely cultured capital. So you must not treat them as asylum-seekers. They are very just intelligent people who just had to leave their country, but not because they are poor or something or poorly educated.

So now we are using a lot of our ways of approach, more the El Sistema philosophy to see if we can use it for special methodologies for the refugees, because they all stay here. So now we get them status as civilian, but also so that they can work; and the kids from tomorrow, in fact, the kids go into Dutch schools. So now I am teaching them Dutch songs just to get the language in; you know things like that; so that you can do in South Africa as well. I have always wondered why on earth with 11 languages we do not, we are not smart enough to do music education using the 11 languages in a much better sophisticated way. It is one element.

I see it now with... I teach them every day in a group of people from my arts institutes and they do not know a word of Dutch, but within a week they all arrived last week; 252 of them. And within a week they can sing Dutch choruses of pop songs and they know what it means in Russian. So it is so simple. It is just offensive how simple it is actually. A few are willing to [indistinct] [00:55:11] of the old colonial curriculum that does it only in one way with some that are not relevant with the methodology that only appeals to a very small percentage of any population, to be honest.

NR: Exactly. No, listen, Gerben, thank you so much. I am going to have to go and teach my students here, but I am so excited and it is really amazing to hear from your side and your perspective and your background with regards to community music programme. I really hope that in future that I am going to be able to work with you, connect with you and take this further, because now this is my research that I was really... I mean I think it will be great if we can take it actually further and, you know, like do... yes, exactly.

GG: Research is very important. I did six years of research in South Africa before I had the guts to do something, really. Take your time, because when you do it, it needs to be sustainable, because otherwise another trauma into that child. So, but luckily some foundations you can build on, but I waited for six years to know absolutely certain this is going to work, so I do not damage the children further. I do not start it and then six months down the line: oh, we have to stop it because there is no money or nobody wants to do it anymore. I would not be able to look in the mirror if that happens, you know. At least if I can help. I mean stuff can always happen, but I need to be sure that nothing in me causes that to happen, but that is just ethic, it is my ethic committee.

NR: Exactly. No, that is amazing. That is really great, but Gerben, thank you so much. Thank you so much.

GG: I will send you the links. I will also let Jonathan know in America that you are most likely going to contact him and if we can use his thesis, his doctoral thesis and he will also probably... I will give you his contact details, because he is still very much connected to that community that all had researched that like 10, 15 years go. So he can probably give you a lot of other contacts all over the world that can help and with like Caracas, because he knows the people personally there. So that can help you probably.

And then I will also give you the contact details of a woman, Shirley Esrop in Berlin. She is an Australian journalist and she was a for-fighter of all of this in South Africa, because she has got family in South Africa, but she lives in Berlin now and she does visit South Africa regularly and she has also the same heart and she is in the opera world, internationally known in the opera world, but with her I have done those street operas in Cape Town, in Khayelitsha and other places, in Jo'burg Theatre as well and give all the high school kids their first flying experiences and they also flew up to Czech Republic and do it there and won a prize even in international opera. These are high school kids from Khayelitsha and they won prizes in opera competitions; like it is hilarious. This is all proof that it really works. It is amazing. So I will give you all that stuff so you can contact those people as well.

NR: Thank you so much. Thanks, Gerben. Thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it. It is really, I mean it is amazing to hear all your stories.

GG: Enjoy your research.

NR: Thank you so much. Thanks, Gerben and I will speak to you again.