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By Jonathan Gilbert



Paraguayan Landfill Orchestra Makes Sweet Music from Rubbish



They race towards a rubbish truck as it empties its load at a vast landfill on the edge of the city, hauling away bin liners that overflow with household waste. Their hands are black with dirt and their faces are hidden by headscarves that protect them from the high sun.

Recycling refuse for reuse

An estimated 500 gancheros (recyclers) work at Cateura on the outskirts of Asunción, where 1.5 tonnes of rubbish are deposited daily, separating plastic and aluminium that they sell on for as little as 15p a bag.

Among the mounds of refuse, however, are used oven trays and paint pots. Cast aside by the 2 million residents of the capital of Paraguay, they are nonetheless highly valued by Nicolás Gómez, who picks them out to make violins, guitars and cellos.

Gómez, 48, was a carpenter and ganchero but now works for Favio Chávez, the conductor of Paraguay's one and only landfill orchestra.

The Cateura Orchestra of Recycled Instruments is made up of 30 schoolchildren—the sons and daughters of recyclers—whose instruments are forged from the city's rubbish. And while its members learned to play amid the flies and stench of Cateura, they are now receiving worldwide acclaim, culminating earlier this month with a concert in Amsterdam that included Pachelbel's *Canon*.



The project was born in 2006 when Chávez, 37, began work at the landfill as a technician, helping recyclers to classify refuse. But his passion for music took him home each weekend to the small town of Carapeguá, 50 miles from Asunción, to conduct a youth orchestra.

After he brought the group to Cateura to perform, the gancheros asked Chávez if he could teach music to their children, many of whom would spend afternoons playing in the rubbish as they waited for their parents to finish work.

Trash to treasures

But as the months passed, Chávez—a long-time fan of Les Luthiers, an Argentinian band that uses homemade instruments—realized the ever-growing number of children under his tutelage needed to practise at home if they were to progress.

"A violin is worth more than a recycler's house," says Chávez. "We couldn't give a child a formal instrument as it would have put him in a difficult position. The family may have looked to sell or trade it."

"So we experimented with making them from the rubbish. We discovered which materials were most comfortable, which projected the right sound and which withstood the tension of the strings. It was fine to hand these out as they had no monetary value."

Gómez travels three times a week to Cateura to dig out material. He shapes the metal oven trays with an electric saw to form the body of a violin and engineers cellos from oil barrels. The necks of his string instruments are sculpted from old strips of wood, called palé.

Now with the aid of colleagues, Chávez—who has been teaching music since he was 13—uses the instruments to give classes to around 70 children and also directs weekly orchestra practice.

GLOSSARY

outskirts: region outside of a city
15p: 15 pence or about 30 cents
mounds: hills or mountains

cast aside: thrown away
withstood: held out against

But he has a goal that goes beyond music. Chávez believes the mentality required to learn an instrument can be applied more widely to lift his pupils out of poverty.

Paraguay is the fastest-growing country in the Americas, but nearly a third of its population lives below the poverty line. The gancheros and their children live in slums, called bañados, which occupy the swamps between Asunción and the River Paraguay.

"The state does nothing," says Gladys Águilar, 61, from a **shantytown** next to the landfill. "Politicians put a sweet in our mouths with their promises. But when they are elected all they care about is power and the sweet turns bitter."

The dreams of the children

Chávez recognizes the **shortcomings** of the government, but says families can improve their lives by considering the long term. "Poor people need to eat today," he says. "They don't think about tomorrow's problems. But learning music means you have to plan. It's very challenging to explain to a child who lives in adverse conditions that if his dream is to play the piano he needs to sit on a stool for five hours a day."

Many parents also struggle to see the advantages of such an attitude. "Most tell their kids that a violin can't feed you; that they need to work to eat," says Jorge Ríos, 35, a recycler whose two daughters play in the orchestra. "But thanks to that violin my kids have seen new countries. They have an opportunity for a better future."

They don't think about tomorrow's problems. But learning music means you have to plan.



GLOSSARY

shantytown: section of a city where people live in poorly built huts or houses

shortcomings: failures, weaknesses

pounds: monetary unit used in the United Kingdom

Ada and Noélia Ríos started attending Chávez's classes in a chapel two years ago after their grandmother, also a recycler, signed them up. They enjoy Chávez's strict regime, practising for two hours a day at their home—a shack with earth floors in the San Cayetano slum—and have travelled around Latin America with the orchestra.

"My dream is to be a musician," says Noélia, 13, clutching her guitar, made by Gómez from two large tins that once contained a Paraguayan sweet potato dessert. Her 16-year-old aunt, María Ríos, also plays in the orchestra.

"Going to other countries has opened my mind so much," says Ada, 14, a violinist. Following the trip to Amsterdam—its first outside of South America—the

orchestra will play this year in Argentina, the US, Canada, Palestine, Norway and Japan. Chávez has also received an invitation to play at June's Meltdown festival in London.

Like her sister, Ada hopes to become a musician and also dreams of owning a Stradivarius violin, worth millions of **pounds**. But for now she is more than content to play her current instrument, whose face was taken from an old paint tin. "I don't care that my violin is made out of recycled parts," she says. "To me, it's a treasure." ❖

Source: "Paraguayan Landfill Orchestra Makes Sweet Music from Rubbish" by Jonathan Gilbert, copyright © 2015 Guardian News & Media Ltd.

Want to know **more** about music?

1. *Lemonade Mouth* by Mark Peter Hughes, novel and movie

Five high school students meet in detention and form a band. Will they succeed in becoming the school's most popular rock band?

2. *It Goes Like This* by Miel Moreland, novel

Four best friends form the queer pop band Moonlight Overthrow in school. But, as they grow up, they also grow apart. When a natural disaster hits their hometown, will they find their way back to each other?

3. *All Summer Long* by Hope Larson, graphic novel

Bina is set for a summer alone after her best friend Austin goes to soccer camp. He's been acting weird and she's trying to have fun alone. Will things be the same when he comes home?

4. *Soul* (2020), directed by Pete Docter, animated film

When music teacher Joe Gardner falls down a utility access hole, his soul ends up in a place called the "Great Before." Will Joe's soul find its way home to his body so Joe can live and fulfill his dream of becoming a jazz musician?

5. *Julie and the Phantoms* (2020), television series

After her mother dies, Julie loses her love of music. Then, one day, she accidentally calls to life the ghosts of the boy band Sunset Curve. Can they help her rediscover her passion?

FOLLOW UP



Quiz?

MUSIC MANIA



Are you a real music fan? What do you know about artists, hit songs and instruments? Take this quiz and test your knowledge of music trivia.

1. What do the letters *R* and *B* stand for in the musical genre "R&B"?

- a) reggae and breakbeat
- b) reggae and blues
- c) rhythm and big band
- d) rhythm and blues

2. Céline Dion's famous song "My Heart Will Go On" was from this 1990s movie.

- a) *Romeo and Juliet*
- b) *Pretty Woman*
- c) *Titanic*
- d) *Forrest Gump*

3. What are the first names of the four best-known members of The Beatles?

- a) John, Paul, Ringo, Pete
- b) John, Paul, George, Harry
- c) Paul, John, Ringo, Harry
- d) George, Paul, John, Ringo

4. What do the singers Jim Morrison, Amy Winehouse, Kurt Cobain and Janis Joplin have in common?

- a) They were all American musicians.
- b) They all died at the age of 27.
- c) They all died in plane crashes.
- d) They were all popular in the 1990s.

5. Montréal-based Inuk singer-songwriter Elisapie is originally from this northern community in Québec.

- a) Kuujuaq
- b) Inukjuak
- c) Salluit
- d) Puvirnituq

6. This musician from Salzburg, Austria, began composing music at the age of 5 and is considered to be one of the world's greatest classical composers.

- a) Ludwig van Beethoven
- b) Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
- c) Frédéric Chopin
- d) Johann Sebastian Bach

7. This Broadway musical written by Lin-Manuel Miranda features a cast of non-white actors who tell the story of famous figures in United States history.

- a) *Hamilton*
- b) *West Side Story*
- c) *Chicago*
- d) 1776

8. The *djembe* is an instrument from Western Africa. What type of instrument is it?

- a) harp
- b) flute
- c) drum
- d) keyboard

9. This theme song from the coming-of-age movie *The Breakfast Club* reached number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in 1985.

- a) "Don't You (Forget About Me)" by Simple Minds
- b) "Careless Whisper" by George Michael
- c) "Material Girl" by Madonna
- d) "I Want to Know What Love Is" by Foreigner

10. Which of the following is not the stage name of a Québec musician-songwriter?

- a) Plume Latraverse
- b) Renaud
- c) FouKi
- d) Klô Pelgag

11. Which of the following stringed instruments is traditionally used in South Asian music?

- a) sitar
- b) guitar
- c) banjo
- d) ukulele

12. What is the real name of the Montréal singer-songwriter Coeur de Pirate?

- a) Roxane Bruneau
- b) Charlotte Cardin
- c) Ariane Moffatt
- d) Béatrice Martin

Results

Find the answers to these questions at the bottom of the page. Calculate your results and find out what your score means. Each correct answer is worth one point.

Total: _____

0–4 points

Maybe these questions just didn't strike a chord with you. The world of music is huge and expansive. There is so much to learn!

5–8 points

Music might not be your forte, but you're on your way! Research to discover more about the elements featured in this quiz to find your groove.

9–12 points

This should be music to your ears. From classical to contemporary, you are a maestro of music trivia! Rock on!

Quiz answers 1d, 2c, 3d, 4b, 5c, 6b, 7a, 8c, 9a, 10b, 11a, 12d

COOL ARTICLES AND QUIZZES

Coming soon!