



# Healing the Soul with Orchestral Music

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Oleh ELSA EMIRIA LEBBA  
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TEKS



Gonzalo Simo plays the violin during a training session with the children of the Pondok Taruna Orphanage in Cipayung, East Jakarta, Friday (29/4/2022).

Music can heal the body and soul. However, not everybody has the opportunity to study music. So Spanish national Gonzalo Simo Conde, 47, started Strings in Action (SIA), which teaches disadvantaged children to play string instruments in orchestras.

On Friday morning (29/4/2022), a blazing sun shone on Pondok Taruna Orphanage in Cipayung, East Jakarta. A gentle breeze carried the voices and laughter of the children playing at the orphanage. The soft sound of orchestral music was heard, accompanying their voices.

In a multipurpose room, around 15 boys and girls sat in a circle playing violin, cello and bass. Their string instrument performance was producing a melodious musical piece. Not far from them stood, Simo, who is tall, supervising their performance.

"Strings in Action [SIA] was inspired by El Sistema, a project in Venezuela started in the 1970s. This project provides musical education to thousands of children who need it and created similar movements in other countries. So, I applied the idea here," said Simo.

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SIA's two main programs offer musical experience for children and help provide scholarships to children interested in pursuing music. Simo emphasized that the musical instruction was not for scouting future talents.

"I only want them to enjoy and benefit from learning music. Just like sports, music is good for the brain, body and soul," said Simo, who plays the violin.

SIA has grown since its birth in 2015, when Simo began by forming an orchestral music club at Jakarta Intercultural School (JIS), where he teaches. Along with his students, the inaugural project began at a school in Pamulang, South Tangerang, Banten. Unfortunately, it did not go smoothly.

One day, Simo heard that Pondok Taruna Orphanage had an anklung (vertical bamboo xylophone) group. After talking with the management and taking JIS students to perform at the orphanage, Simo initiated a SIA project at the institution in 2017. They formed an orchestral group comprising around 35 youngsters aged 12-17 with weekly practices at JIS.



Gonzalo Simo

The SIA orchestra has performed at various events. In 2019, for instance, it appeared at four concerts held by the Association for Music in International Schools (AMIS), the Strings in Action Charity Concert, the Indonesia Orchestra and Ensemble Festival (IOEF), and the All Jakarta Honor Orchestra (AJHO). Then, the pandemic affected their practicing schedule and opportunities to perform.

### Independent

As time went by, Simo found the appropriate operational model to develop the social impact of SIA. It was the reason SIA was established as a formal foundation in 2019. Simo set up a supervisory council, recruited music teachers and staff, and purchased or accepted donated musical instruments.

When the pandemic emerged in 2020, SIA started dividing the children into two groups, a big (advanced) orchestra and a small orchestra. The division was important because different age groups had different levels of learning, including speed. Moreover, teenagers who had reached adulthood usually left the orphanage.

The members of the big orchestra are 12-18 years old and those of the small orchestra are 10-12 years old. An orchestra typically has 20-25 members. Now they practice twice a week at the orphanage, each session lasting 1.5 hours.

To date, 92 children have been involved with SIA since the project was launched.

That same year, SIA expanded to collaborate with Abigail Orphanage in Pamulang, which now has an orchestra comprising members aged 12-15 years. SIA is also exploring a possible collaboration with another orphanage in Pamulang. To date, 92 children have been involved with SIA since the project was launched.

As SIA has developed, Simo has expressed appreciation for his student, Alexandra Augustien Rachmat. Alex is president of JIS' SIA club, which she joined in 2017, and plays an important role in seeking sponsors for SIA and in managing the school club's collaboration with the foundation.

"After SIA became a foundation, the school club continued to run, but more as a support system. For example, we made a website, distribute content on social media, make training videos and organize children's programs," said Alex, who was born in Burlingame, California, the United States.

For scholarships, SIA has maintained a partnership with Amadeus Music School since 2019. So far, six children have received scholarships and gone on to pursue professional music at Amadeus. SIA is also making efforts so that the children can study music at Pelita Harapan University.

### Various situations

As an expatriate, Simo acknowledged that his view of children sometimes differed from SIA's partners. In addition, the children came from diverse backgrounds. Some of them were orphaned, while others had been abandoned by their families. Still others were no strangers to the darker side of life, such as practicing free sex and sniffing glue.

Yet Simo, who arrived in Indonesia in 2013, hopes that the children could be like him, who finds it easy to learn music. Their access to music should therefore be facilitated. Many researches had proved the benefits of music for cognitive, affective, motor and auditory development. Furthermore, music was a universal language.



Alexandra Augustien Rachmat (left) and Gonzalo Simo (right) describe their efforts to pioneer Strings in Action, on Friday (29/4/2022).

"Playing music, regardless of whether they are talented or not, can help children become better people. Music can give children a sense of belonging. Being in an orchestra is like being part of a united team in creating something beautiful, irrespective of their backgrounds," said Simo.

Simo plans to leave Indonesia this June, when his contract with JIS expires. Nevertheless, he hopes that Alex, SIA's partners and others who care will carry on the journey.

### Gonzalo Simo Conde

**Born:** Madrid, Spain, 15 Oct. 1974

### Education:

- Master in Musicology, *Universidad Autónoma de Madrid* (2002-2004)
- Bachelor in Humanities, *Universidad CEU San Pablo* (1995-1999)

**Occupation:** Music teacher at *Jakarta Intercultural School, Indonesia* (2013-present)

### Experience:

- Founder, *Strings in Action* (2015)
- Music teacher, *Chadwick International School, South Korea* (2009-2013)
- Music teacher, *International School of Busan, South Korea* (2008-2009)
- Music and Spanish language teacher, *Hsinchu International School, Taiwan* (2006-2008)

This article was translated by Aris Prawira.

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