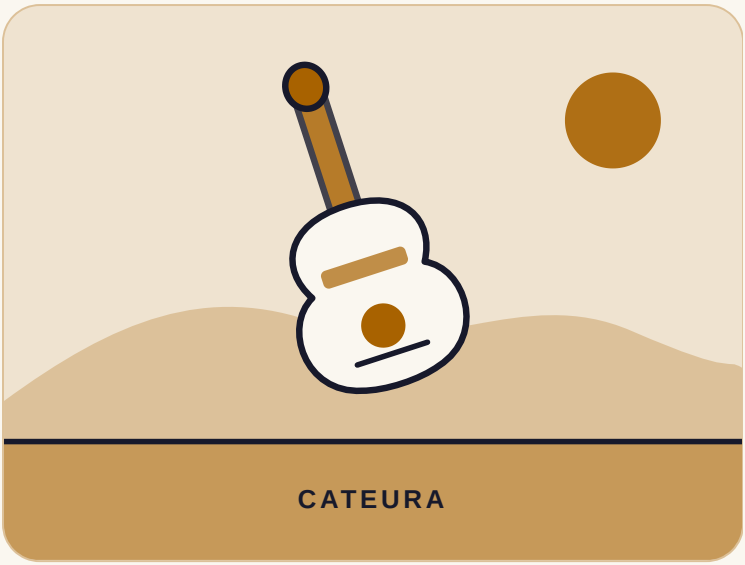

PARAGUAY

The orchestra that plays on trash

In a Paraguayan landfill slum, children play violins made from oven trays and oil barrels.

WHERE	Cateura, near Asunción
WHO	Favio Chávez and Nicolás Gómez, who built an orchestra from trash
WHEN	2006 to 2016

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Cateura is a poor neighbourhood beside a huge landfill outside Asunción, the capital of Paraguay. Many families there earn a living as trash-pickers. They sort plastic and metal and sell it. In 2012, the AP news agency said about 25,000 families lived there.

In 2006, a man named Favio Chávez came to work at the landfill. He was a technician who helped the pickers sort waste. He was also a music teacher.

The pickers' children often played among the rubbish while their parents worked. Chávez brought two guitars to keep them busy, and away from the dangerous machines. More and more children wanted to join. But he had only five instruments to share.

Music from trash

Real instruments were too costly. A child could not safely take one home. The family might sell it.

> **A violin is worth more than a recycler's house.**
>
> FAVIO CHÁVEZ, QUOTED IN THE GUARDIAN

So Chávez asked for help from Nicolás Gómez, a trash-picker and carpenter. Gómez had left school after fifth grade. He knew how to work with wood and metal.

2006	5	25,000
year Chávez began work at the landfill	instruments to share at the start	families near the landfill in 2012 (AP)

Gómez built violins from old oven trays and cellos from oil barrels. Other makers turned bottle caps and metal pipes into saxophones. Tin cans became flutes. Old X-rays became drum skins.

These instruments had no resale value. So no child had to be left out.

A way out

Soon there was an orchestra. In 2012, about 20 children played in it, the AP said. They played Mozart, Beethoven and the Beatles. That year, they travelled to Brazil, Panama and Colombia.

Tania Vera, 15, lived in a wooden shack by a dirty stream. The orchestra took her to Rio de Janeiro. She said she bathed in the sea there. She never thought her dreams would come true.

Chávez says his goal goes beyond music. He wants a way out of the landfill for the children and their families. The landfill still operates. A film about the orchestra, Landfill Harmonic, has also been made.

How it unfolded

- **2006** Favio Chávez starts work at the Cateura landfill.
- **2012** The orchestra plays in Brazil, Panama and Colombia.
- **2013** It plays a concert in Amsterdam.
- **2016** The film Landfill Harmonic opens in the US.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

The instruments are made of trash, so they have no resale value. That is why every child can have one.

Children whose parents sort the city's waste now play music that audiences abroad want to hear.

OUR TAKE

A landfill gave the children their instruments, and music gave them a way to be seen.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1

Turn a limit into a rule

Chávez could not hand out costly violins. So he made ones that were worth nothing to a buyer.

Try this: Name one limit you face. Ask what it could make possible.

2 Ask the person with the skill

He asked a trash-picker and carpenter to build the instruments.

Try this: Ask someone near you with a skill you lack to help with one small job.

3 Start with what you have

He began with two guitars and five instruments to share.

Try this: Start this week with what is already on your desk or shelf.

4 Give people a path

Every child can join the music school. As they improve, they move into the orchestra.

Try this: Offer one person clear steps toward a goal, not only advice.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

What a city throws away can still make music.

Sources

NBC News (from the AP)
‘A way out of the landfill’: Paraguay kids play Mozart with violins made from trash (2012)

Gulf Times (from the Guardian)
Landfill orchestra makes music from rubbish (2013)

Equal Times
The youth orchestra that turns waste into musical instruments (2016)

Fact-check note: The three sources agree on the main story and differ on details. The orchestra began in 2006 (Equal Times, Gulf Times); the AP says Chávez opened his music school “five years ago” in 2012, which would be about 2007; the story gives 2006 for when he began work at the landfill. How the first trash instruments came about differs: the AP says Chávez asked Gómez to make instruments for the younger children; Equal Times says Chávez asked him to repair a broken violin, and Gómez built a new one from its wood and scrap metal; the Guardian says the group made instruments from rubbish because real ones were too valuable to hand out. The story says only that Chávez asked Gómez for help. Size: about 20 children (AP, 2012) or 30 (Guardian, 2013); Equal Times says hundreds of children now study at the school; the story gives the AP’s 2012 figure and credits it. The 25,000 families near the landfill is the AP’s 2012 figure. The “five instruments” and the two guitars come from the AP and Equal Times respectively. The Amsterdam concert is from the Guardian, published in May 2013. The Guardian article was read on Gulf Times, which reprints it. The quote is from the Guardian. Tania Vera’s words are the AP’s, from 2012. The film’s date varies: Wikipedia says it debuted in 2015 at festivals; Equal Times says its official US release was in September 2016. Wikipedia’s account, which names another co-founder of the music school, was not used. Figures are from 2012 to 2016 and may have changed. The pin shows the Cateura landfill area. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.