



[*Sonorous Worlds: Musical Enchantment in Venezuela.*](#)

By Yana Stainova. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021. 280 pp. ISBN: 9780472129355.

Reviewed by Emily Hopkins, University of Saskatchewan

A lot has happened in Venezuela since El Sistema first made international headlines. The program was started by Jose Antonio Abreu in 1975 in Venezuela, providing free classical music education to residents of Venezuela's barrios, and has inspired many imitators worldwide. Stainova's book is an engaging combination of theoretical insight and observations from fieldwork and interviews with Sistema musicians spanning 2011-2018. Currently an anthropologist on faculty at McMaster University, Stainova is also a trained musician from Eastern Europe, and thus well situated to understand both

music practice and state control. This book will be interesting to music scholars, educators, and performers and anyone who has asked themselves questions about music and its place in society, particularly during times of struggle or unrest.

The book has four main sections: Music, Enchantment, Aspiration, and Power. The first section introduces El Sistema as well as the key tension between "music practice as a freedom-giving force" and the "ways in which it is summoned by powerful agents to control the wills of people" (p. 29). Stainova argues that "attending ethnographically to music and the stories that arise from it" can reveal the important political and social potential of imagination and its relationship to the future (p. 29).

The second section, "Enchantment," fleshes out a central theme for the author's reading of El Sistema. Her interlocutors consistently describe music in terms of magic and enchantment, evoking the "ephemeral energy of collective musical practice" and the power of playing music to serve as a "form of freedom" (p. 122, p. 80). Stainova recalls bringing that "vibrant affect" back to her



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

academic mentors, “still calling it magic” (p. 96). They said she needed critical distance: “It was acceptable to study why people would choose to call music magical but not to believe in that magic myself” (p. 96). She explains that while anthropology has “traditionally taken an interest in magic, sorcery, and enchantment”, earlier anthropologists situated themselves outside of any kind of lived experience, as “rational” scholars studying “irrational” magic (p. 120). Stainova describes the move towards phenomenology in the 1980s, with a shift from attempts to “explain and understand” other cultures towards “aspiring to convey the sensory realities of...fieldsites and subjects” and even to “co-experience” enchantment (p. 120). She takes this tension seriously. Referencing commodity fetishism, she explains that “describing [her] interlocutors’ fascination with music as ‘mystification’ would be condescending”; it would suggest that in her scholarly role she “benefit[s] from a superior analytical capacity to recognize their own fetishizing” (p. 98). Thus, while her analysis includes more removed observations, social and historical context, and larger institutional realities, Stainova also plays music with her interlocutors and takes seriously their challenges to “forget [her]self and [her] seriousness” and “take a break from being an anthropologist” to experience music on their terms (p. 39, p. 118). This understanding of enchantment “transcends the binaries set up between rationality and emotion” and has “important implications for...academic scholarship that goes beyond critique” (p. 27).

The third section, “Aspiration”, details the work individuals and communities put in to make this enchantment possible. Stainova reads this situation through the book *Revolutionary Mothering*,² taking seriously the role of families and mothers in particular in creating new possibilities for their children. She describes a “Consejo de Madres”: seven mothers, each representing a different sector of the barrio, collaborating to coordinate bus routes around gang activity. The enchantment of music is not a passive reprieve from daily life, but is achieved only through enormous effort from musicians and their families.

The fourth section, “Power”, addresses the role of the state and musicians’ political involvement more directly. El Sistema has always had a careful relationship to the state, receiving funding and surviving through a variety of governments, and it was widely criticized for its lack of formal response to the protests in 2018. While the protests were “a reaction to food shortages, inflation, everyday violence, and dissatisfaction with Maduro’s government,” they were also “largely limited to the middle- and upper-class parts of town” (p. 224). In contrast, musicians were often still from barrios and were divided on whether to join protests. One musician’s mother asked, “If the state gives me a salary and pays for my trips..., [d]o you think I have the right to behave like this?” However, many musicians also chose to be involved in the protests, even if the orchestra itself abstained. Stainova documents this as well as attending protests herself. She quotes one of the musicians: “I feel useless just sitting at home. I need to be either throwing bombs at the police or giving oboe classes. One of the two things” (p. 229). From 2016-2019, 4.5 million Venezuelans left

² Gumbs, Alexis Pauline, China Martens, Mai’a Williams (Eds.) *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*. PM Press: Oakland, 2016.

the country, with many El Sistema musicians among them. The book ends with a “Coda,” wherein the author meets up with several of her interlocutors in Paris in 2018. They are surviving and even thriving as musicians and music students, “creating a sense of home and finding joy in the midst of precarity” (p. 209).

It is worth situating Stainova’s work in relation to Geoffrey Baker’s notorious 2014 critique of El Sistema.³ Stainova praises Baker’s book for its “analyses, especially those about the colonial roots of the discourses about music education presented by El Sistema,” but takes issue with his “exclusively critical” approach and its “claims to truth” (p. 125). However, when Baker was writing, being critical of El Sistema was still controversial. Jose Antonio Abreu had just won a TED prize, Tricia Tunstall’s 2012 book⁴ was full of praise, and new programs were springing up everywhere. For Stainova, writing in 2021, the question of whether El Sistema is a revolutionary program that is going to save classical music and poor children is not as relevant as it was for Baker in 2014. The political reality post-2018 in Venezuela precludes a simple verdict; passing judgment on El Sistema is not really the point. Instead, she works to understand “havens of enchantment in the midst of disillusionment,” an approach that fundamentally centres the experiences of her interlocutors, good and bad (p. 129).

In the introduction, Stainova relates a story about young revolutionaries in Cuba reading Cortázar novels. They told him, “In the intervals between what we do, we love reading your stories” (p. 37). Stainova uses this anecdote to illustrate the “difficult, and often futile, question about the causal relationship between artistic practice and political change,” suggesting that “it affirms the vital role of the imagination to social and political survival and as a source of energy essential to political change” (p. 37). Music can enchant its practitioners and take them out of their ordinary lives, but this escape does not preclude political struggle. Indeed, it may create the conditions for change by allowing people to imagine different and better futures, whether that manifests as throwing bombs, teaching oboe lessons, or moving to Paris.

³ Baker, Geoffrey. *Orchestrating Venezuela’s Youth*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014.

⁴ Tunstall, Tricia. *Changing Lives: Gustavo Dudamel, El Sistema, and the Transformative Power of Music*. W.W. Norton: New York, 2012.