

Introduction

The sound of a flute beckons me to follow. I do. It takes me away from the din of children playing during the habitual recess that comes after music classes. I turn a corner of the building and continue down a long corridor. There, I meet a little girl of about eight. She is kneeling in front of a bench, her toes pressed into the ground, and holding a flute high in her hands. Her eyes are fixed on a piece of white paper lined with staves. The sheet music is propped on a bench—her makeshift music stand. Her thin fingers rise and fall like little hammers onto the silver keys of the flute. Her chin is cast slightly down as she directs a flow of air across the mouthpiece. I scramble to find my sound recorder. The girl is playing a passage from Tchaikovsky's *Marche slave* and keeps stumbling on a high note that, as I know from experience, requires a tightening of the diaphragm and a prayer to the gods to come out right. Every time she gets the note wrong, she starts again. Finally, she gets it right. I sigh silently with relief. She puts her flute down. Only then does she feel my gaze and turn her head to look at me.

I speak to her briefly, ask her what it is that she likes about music. "With music, I create my own stories and bring them into being," she replies. The end of recess is then called, and she rushes to where the entire orchestra of two dozen or so children between the ages of six and ten is gathering for rehearsal. As I look on, I am left thinking about her stories. Where do they come from? Where do they take her?

The children are sitting on chairs brought over to a meadow next to the school building. Many of the children are so small that their feet do

not touch the ground. They begin playing the second movement of Gustav Mahler's First Symphony. *Re-la-re-la* thump the drums, reminiscent of the human heart. At some point, they all put their instruments down and begin to sing: *re-la-re-la*, in a low but powerful chant. Mothers are gathered nearby to listen. Some have children playing oboes, and the mothers breathe in and out in synchrony with the young players. A light wind is blowing, first seen, when the tall, centennial trees nearby begin to sway, and then felt, as it gently descends to caress all of us gathered there. *Within a few minutes, it is all over. The conductor's hands collect the sound, and then there is silence. But the music has transformed the atmosphere, still hovering above all of us in the music-imbued silence.*¹ These are the words that I, at the time a doctoral student at Brown University, jot down in a notebook.

This encounter took place in January 2015 at a music school in Sarare,² a small town in northeastern Venezuela. The school is part of the *Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela (FESNOJIV)* or State Foundation of the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela, a nationwide music education network popularly called El Sistema.³ This Venezuelan initiative aspires to remedy poverty by bringing free classical music education and instruments to close to one million children and youth all over the country, whose total population is just under thirty million.⁴ Though the majority of the participants are children, many, including most of my interlocutors, are young people over the age of eighteen.⁵ Founded in 1975 by Venezuelan economist and musician José Antonio Abreu, the state-funded institution has weathered seven jolting changes in government. Hugo Chávez (and, after his death, the incumbent president Nicolás Maduro) enthusiastically incorporated the institution into the political agenda of the socialist project. Fueled by an oil boom, the institution grew exponentially during those years and became famous around the world. El Sistema encompasses 1,210 orchestras for children and youth in Venezuela. These are housed within smaller El Sistema branches, such as Sarare, called *núcleos*, 423 in number and scattered throughout the country. Activities at the *núcleos* take place daily between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m., after regular school classes are over.

Sarare is a three-hour drive from the capital, Caracas, along a road that meanders between the sand and crashing waves of the coast and steep green hills of tropical vegetation. Like most neighborhoods that hold El Sistema *núcleos*, this one in Sarare is in one of Venezuela's *barrios*, or working-class neighborhoods on the urban periphery.⁶ *Barrios*, which house around 50

percent of the Venezuelan population, are almost entirely constructed by their residents.⁷ *Barrios* have lower-quality public infrastructure, schools, health care facilities, and legal protection, a symptom of their exclusion from the rest of the city. *Barrios* are also the areas most severely affected by police and drug-related gun violence. *Barrio* residents are generally people of indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan descent who find themselves in the lowest socioeconomic strata of Venezuelan society.⁸ Long a part of the urban landscape, *barrios* expanded significantly in several waves of urbanization over the course of the twentieth century.⁹ They became the focus of the socially progressive policies of Hugo Chávez's government (1999–2013), which succeeded in dramatically decreasing poverty.¹⁰ Yet *barrio* residents have continued to live in the shadows of different forms of social exclusion. As Venezuela rapidly descended into political and economic crisis over the course of my research (2011–2015), I watched as the *barrio* residents' precarious livelihoods were hard hit.

In my fieldwork, it was a priority for me to study the significance of music practice for residents of Venezuela's many *barrios*, such as the girl playing the flute in Sarare. In their music lives, I could listen to one instance of the creativity people summoned to build new worlds in the face of political violence, of imagining and presenting themselves otherwise, of affirming a right to a future. Beyond the artistic dimensions of these transformations, El Sistema also provided students with scholarships and membership in a world-famous musical community, thus placing residents of the *barrios* in ambiguous and fluctuating class and social positions.

After that day in Sarare, I returned to Caracas, where I was living, the image of the girl nestled in my mind. The Venezuelan capital, routinely referred to as one of the most dangerous cities in the world, is infamous for its high homicide rates.¹¹ These statistics generate pervasive fear among the population. But violence is not evenly distributed. It is feared the most by the upper classes who live in gated communities and commute in bulletproof cars and by foreigners, such as myself, who perceive themselves to be likely targets of such violence. Statistically, however, the perpetrators and casualties of this violence are predominantly young men of color who live on the urban margins and frequently form part of armed neighborhood groups called *bandas*.¹² Throughout the book I will refer to everyday violence to describe the overall sense of insecurity that gripped daily life in urban Venezuela. This insecurity became magnified by anti-government protests that flooded the streets of Caracas in February 2014 and by the excessive,

lethal force used by state police aiming to quell them. As I walked home that evening, I saw that protesters had once again blocked traffic and set trash on fire. Already that same day (and certainly now), the scene in the little *núcleo* seemed but a dream. Yet it had touched me and continues to resonate in me.

My fascination with this scene—of the girl kneeling on the ground and playing the flute—is also viscerally personal. A couple of decades earlier, in an entirely different historical and geographic context, that eight-year-old girl was me.

When I was two years old, a wave of revolutions brought about the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and thrust my native Bulgaria into political and economic transition. Observing the scene from our balcony in Sofia, as a small child waving a blue flag, I was in awe. Traffic on the four-lane boulevard below, one of the few points of predictability in my life, was stopped because of the crowds. Someone was pushing an upright piano on the street and playing the rock ballad “Wind of Change” by the Scorpions. The protests in Venezuela, similarly targeting a repressive socialist government, reminded me vividly of those very first childhood memories in Bulgaria. When I was six, I began playing the piano. At eleven, I also took up the flute. Like the girl in the coastal town in Venezuela, and like the countless other musicians and their families that I talked to, I could frequently be found playing on my own, engrossed in the music. In the struggle to get a note right. In the endless repetition to master a phrase, until it was settled in the muscle memory of my fingers. In the little stories I told myself to accompany each piece. In the skip to my step that the hour of playing music gave me. In the sense of purpose and stability that music provided, a counterpoint to the movement of social tectonics around me. A decade later, I moved to the United States to attend college and would find in music a form of sustenance in the face of another life transition.

The encounter with the girl kneeling on the floor so she could use a bench as a music stand has haunted me for years. There is only a single line in my fieldnotes dedicated to the girl—*A little girl is kneeling on the floor in front of a bench on which her score is poised*—and the recording of her playing Tchaikovsky’s slow and mournful melody. I never learned her name, and yet the sensorial memory of her lives with me in vivid detail. What was it that moved this girl to spend recess learning a passage from a piece by Tchaikovsky? What drove her mother to dedicate a few hours daily to bringing her to and from the *núcleo*? What did it mean, for people involved in El Sistema, to be moved so deeply by music? What repercussions did that

experience have on their daily lives? Finally, why had such an extraordinary number of young people in Venezuela chosen to invest their desires in classical music?

ENCHANTMENT

Thinking through the encounter with the girl – and seeking the vocabulary to describe it – led me to the idea of enchantment. “*Me encanta*,” my interlocutors would often say about music, meaning that music enchants them or, more colloquially, that they love it. But enchantment also lingered in how they described music as magical. In how they said “*me llena*” – literally, music “fills me” but also “touches” or “overwhelms me.” To be enchanted is to experience wonder and fascination. To be, as the girl was, paying rapt attention. To let oneself be moved. To enchant is to have a strong influence over another, to move them deeply. Such was the power that the girl exercised over me, that each of the musicians in the little orchestra had over one another, and over their audience, in the moment of playing together.

If scholars have described enchantment as a “temporarily immobilizing encounter,” I was struck by the movement that could live in enchantment, by the embodied dimensions of creation.¹³ Breathing. Fingering. Coordination. Enchantment, as the concept emerged from my fieldwork, requires the active cultivation of a skill, what we might think of as bodily techniques.¹⁴ Each time the girl repeated the musical phrase, she was reaching for a vision she had of the music. In the labor of creation, she was building a sonorous world that, as I came close to her, I, too, began to inhabit. In its incompleteness, in the forward momentum of its creation, it pointed toward a future. It was a world of the imagination, a dimension of reality, that disobeyed a linear temporality and incorporated futurity as an element of the everyday. Enchantment also speaks of musical vibrations. Its root, in French, is *chante*, which means “song.” The verb “to sing” also sounds in the Spanish *en-cantar*.¹⁵ To enchant, then, can mean to surround with song and sound.

What draws me to the concept of enchantment is that it simultaneously contains, and goes beyond, surprise and wonder.¹⁶ While “to wonder” is to feel curiosity or doubt, as in a state of hesitation, “to enchant” implies decisiveness and certainty – a power over another.¹⁷ Surprise, and even wonder, may dissipate once the phenomenon that surprised us is explained. Enchantment lingers and, by doing so, transforms us. Enchantment con-

tains the unresolved. It lacks an impulse, as wonder might, to understand and explain. Unlike surprise, which has to be unexpected and unusual, enchantment can be cultivated—through discipline and work on the self.¹⁸ It cannot be completely analyzed, explained, or understood. In this state of mind, instead of aspiring toward “epistemological domination,” we are comfortable with the idea of being lost, of being exposed to that which we cannot master.¹⁹ Though I never came to hear the specific content of her stories, listening to the girl had transformed me. Her stories, as they became embodied in sound, had touched me. Their sounded intensity would continue to resonate in me.

Enchantment, as I understand it, is also different from the art of magic and trickery, which implies intentional cunning and deception. Magicians master tricks in order to give “visual and verbal cues that lead spectators to make erroneous inferences about the world.”²⁰ They rely on their knowledge of human perception and cognition in order to trick their audiences into believing something falsely. In the enchantment I seek to portray, both parties are invested in the world of fantasy that they are creating, without believing that it is real. Instead of cunning and distance, there is full immersion in the experience. As J. R. R. Tolkien notes, the world of fantasy and enchantment is “uncorrupted, it does not seek delusion or bewitchment and domination; it seeks shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves.”²¹

I studied the concept of enchantment in the scholarly literature that formed part of my anthropological training. In my first-year graduate course on ethnographic theory, we read Max Weber’s classic rendering of modernity as “disenchanted.” He argued that, during the Enlightenment, the development of science made the world knowable and calculable, leaving less room and possibility for people to be surprised.²² That same semester, I was commuting through snowstorms to Harvard University to take a class called *On Beauty* with Elaine Scarry. Through examples from literature and the arts, she convinced us that sites of beauty could move us to the point that we cease to occupy the center of our worlds. These ideas challenged the view of modernity as disenchanted and helped me see pockets of enchantment that exist even in the midst of widespread disillusionment. Anthropological literature on magic, however, reads contemporary enchantments as symptoms of and responses to systemic forces, such as politics, capitalism, and bureaucracy.²³ I commenced my fieldwork with these two approaches in my mind: one drew my attention to the structural forces in which experi-

ences of beauty and enchantment were entangled, while the other attuned me to their world-building potential.

I join a group of scholars who have argued against the binary painted by Weber and the stark contrast it establishes between a time of enchantment and one of disenchantment. They seek to challenge the disenchantment narrative by seeing our modern times as full of enchantments.²⁴ These enchantments are not solely reducible to delusions resulting from the mass media,²⁵ the effects of millennial capitalism's uneven global development,²⁶ or the enchanting power of capitalism itself.²⁷ Rather, these enchantments are expressed in the creative, productive, and playful engagements that take place in the present. These affirmative acts are significant precisely because they illuminate how "in the midst of the destruction, another world is growing."²⁸ With the ostensible demise of religion and the triumph of science and reason, "a variety of secular and conscious strategies for re-enchantment"²⁹ have arisen that are neither the insidious enchantments described by Theodor Adorno nor the resurgence of traditional or outdated practices. Such strategies seek to revive the concept of enchantment not as a relic of the past but as an energy present in the act of doing something we love: living, affirming, and expressing what political theorist Jane Bennett describes as our "deep and powerful attachments" to the world.³⁰ As Demian, an eighteen-year-old oboe player, once explained to me, enchantment means being fully immersed in an experience—the state of mind that results when we are absolutely concentrated on an activity.

I came to Venezuela drawn by the opportunity to study the intersection of artistic production and social change. I had recently completed a study of poetic production in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship and through the country's transition to democracy. I had found poetry to be a sensitive barometer of political change as well as an avenue for expressing veiled forms of political critique in the face of brutal censorship. More than focusing on the poetic form itself, in Chile, I was attracted to hearing poets and readers discuss how poetry could speak to a shared sense of pain they endured during the violence of the dictatorship. In poetry, people found an artistic space in which they could simultaneously critique the status quo and re-imagine social reality. One poet, Javier Bello, called his own writing a "heterotopia,"³¹ wherein certain sensibilities and historical memory denied public expression could exist. This earlier research shaped my interest in the social life of art, the ways in which art forms part of people's everyday lives, their political and social dreams.

In those first attempts to understand what music meant to young people in Venezuela, I was told that good music had “a life behind it,” a story, an experience, and that technical virtuosity was not enough. Alma, a twenty-four-year-old percussion player, remembered singing in a choir as a young child. “With music, I was always imagining things,” she said with a smile. Like the girl in Sarare, through music, Alma could create stories that were her own, stories to live by. Stories brought ordinary life into music; they turned music, and the leaps of imagination it afforded, into ordinary life. The stories behind the music were what gave sounds their force to intervene in the world and in the self. I turned my attention away from the musical form itself and toward the worlds of the imagination condensed in and triggered by sound.³² This helped me to see El Sistema musicians not as passive performers of an already written text but as agentive creators bringing a piece of music into existence.

At the beginning of my research, I had set out to measure the “social impact” of music playing among marginalized Venezuelan communities. Yet on arrival, I quickly found that reducing the musicians’ collective engagement with music to measurable consequences, such as upward mobility and declines in rates of poverty and everyday violence, flattened the depth and intensity of these relationships. For the girl in Sarare, playing music was constitutive of worlds the dimensions of which largely evaded measurement or even analysis. These worlds were perceptible in the sounds of her music and in the stories she told herself. I had allowed myself to be moved by her music both metaphorically and also quite literally, as I followed the sound that took me to her and experienced the sound of her playing as vibrations in my body. The material manifestation of music as vibration, as something we perceive not only through our hearing sense but also through our entire bodies, draws attention to the aliveness of objects beyond the human, what I elaborate in a later chapter as “musical vitalities.” It was my own enchantment with the girl’s music that helped me recognize and feel the vital force of her playing. Enchantment brought me to sense, if not completely understand, this force. It was the affect that later led me to encounters with each of my interlocutors.

The musicians’ capacity to build worlds they called their own was important in a time of political and economic turmoil in Venezuela, when so much was out of people’s control. Alma, who had lost most of her sight due to genetic illness, had to learn by heart all of the pieces that her orchestra performed. She shared how, when she was a teenager learning Beethoven’s

Second Symphony, the piece sounded in her head everywhere she went: in the subway, during breaks in between university classes, on the local bus that took her home, in bed as she was falling asleep at night. Alma lived with her family in a neighborhood on Caracas's less affluent west side. The lack of control she had over her environment because of her impaired vision was further exacerbated by the insecurity that characterized life in the *barrio*. Kinship ties, the music she was learning, and the world of the imagination were anchors that gave Alma a sense of predictability.

The significance of these worlds of the imagination resonates with ethnomusicologist Gavin Steingo's description of music as "a domain of sensory reality at odds with the accepted ordering of society."³³ In his study of kwaito, a South African genre of music commonly criticized for being escapist, he argues that it instead "doubles reality," allowing musicians and their audiences to "imagine and even experience a world that does not yet exist."³⁴ In Venezuela, the boundary between music and everyday life was also fluid. Because people emerged transformed by their engagements with music, these sensory realities were not states that were categorically separate from daily life. Rather, they spilled into each other.³⁵ One day I was sitting next to Demian, listening to an El Sistema children's orchestra deliver a moving performance of Mahler's Second Symphony. I asked him, surprised, "How can they play this music so well if they have not lived long enough to know the death, pain, and love which are essential themes of this composer's music?" Demian responded, "It's because the music itself teaches them about life." He believed that people are transformed by music in ways that change how they perceive and engage with the world. While Demian, like others, felt that the music itself had the power to transform people, I examined how the *stories* people told about music and the collective practices around it, rather than something essential about the musical form itself, acted as a motor of transformation. Instead of a horizon out of reach, the sensory transformation triggered by music and stories became a part of oneself and one's lived reality. Demian's own experience illustrated how this transformation happened. "I died with Manfred," he told me after a concert in which he had played, referring to the protagonist of Tchaikovsky's symphony by the same name.

Cultivating my own capacity to be enchanted became a way of partaking in the worlds my interlocutors were creating.³⁶ I did not, however, imagine I was having experiences identical to those of my interlocutors. Rather, I felt we were enveloped in a collective phenomenon of physical vibration and, potentially, an experience of similar emotional intensity. I allowed myself

to be moved and transformed by their music, without striving to demystify their experiences by translating them into familiar categories of sociopolitical analysis. This was a way of attending to or reaching toward the futures they were building, worlds that did not obey the logics, rationality, or measuring systems of the wider social context. My ethnographic enchantments come close to what Kathleen Stewart beautifully calls attunement—“a sharpening of attention . . . to the expressivity of something coming into existence.”³⁷ Or, as João Biehl and Peter Locke put it, a focus on “how bodies escape their figurations and forge unanticipated space-times.”³⁸ A full immersion in the activity of playing and dreaming³⁹ did not mean ignoring the structures of power within which experiences of enchantment were suspended. On the contrary, it was about allowing methodological and conceptual space for listening to people’s lives as forms of being and creating that extend beyond an oppressive social reality.

“Making music is an act of creation,” Daniel, a conductor, once remarked. His comment helped me see how music and stories create selves and worlds against and in spite of the political, social, and historical forces that sway people’s lives.⁴⁰ In this ethnography, I attend to the creative tension between an analytical understanding of state and institutional power and the generative energy of a musical enchantment not solely motivated by a response to dominant forces. The consequences of these energies may take place within political and social coordinates and vocabulary or remain “beyond,” where the musical world is not entirely encompassed by sociopolitical categories.⁴¹ I listen for their resonance in how music practice becomes a thread in the weave of daily life, shapes ways of being in and story-ing the world, and is essential to the construction of a sense of self.⁴² These stories also point to what lies beyond the auditory: the visual and narrative associations that people have with music.

While the ethnographic material for this book was gathered at a particular institution—Venezuela’s El Sistema—it is not an ethnography of the institution per se. All of my interlocutors were, at one point or another, members of El Sistema: I interviewed students, conductors, *núcleo* directors, and supporting staff. However, my ethnography does not aim to give a portrait of the average student at the institution. It does not aspire to provide a comprehensive understanding of the institution’s functioning, or its flaws, nor does it pass verdicts on the success or failure of the musical experiment. Instead, it portrays how people may continue to build worlds of experience and self-

expression that allow them to flourish in the midst of suffering, marginalization, and social injustice.

MUSIC AND POLITICS

The idea that making and listening to music produces states of enchantment is hardly new. Musicians, psychologists, neuroscientists, and music theorists have all elaborated on the strong impact music has on us. “The most rational minds in history have always yielded to a slight mystic haze when the subject of music has been broached, recognizing the beautiful and utterly satisfying combination of mathematics and magic that music is,” Leonard Bernstein observes in *The Joy of Music*.⁴³ Scientists have studied the emotional and physiological responses that music can evoke—elevated heart rate, goose bumps, changes in breathing and skin temperature—naming these states “chills.”⁴⁴ Brain imaging has also revealed how strong emotional responses to music produce changes in neural activity and brain structures.⁴⁵ Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin in *This Is Your Brain On Music* writes about music’s effect on people using a vocabulary similar to that used to describe the effects of drugs. Ethnomusicologist Judith Becker uses arguments of biological hardwiring and cultural predispositions to study music’s impact on people. She links the deep emotions experienced when listening to music to those of the trances practiced during religious rituals. Her term *deep listeners* describes “persons who are profoundly moved, perhaps even to tears, by simply listening to a piece of music.”⁴⁶ Becker speaks of the trancing achieved in music as “life enchanting”⁴⁷ and argues that for deep listeners, music “opens pathways for being not ordinarily experienced in everyday life.”⁴⁸ Ethnomusicologists have focused on the ways in which music is nonetheless embedded in the textures of everyday life, studying the historical, cultural, and social underpinnings of deeply felt experiences of music.⁴⁹

But music also bewitches. It can possess the listener. Picture Odysseus, tethered to the mast of his ship, still straining to heed the sirens’ call. Or consider Plato’s warning that “the musician, like the orator, plays with dangerous forms of enchantment” and that “[music] penetrates to the center of the soul.”⁵⁰ For this classical philosopher, these transfixing powers of music are grounds for government regulation and oversight. “Music forces me to forget myself. . . . It hypnotizes,” complains Pozdnyshv, the main charac-

ter of Leo Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*. After a particularly moving concert, he remarks, "In China music is a state affair. That's how it should be. Can we really permit anyone who wishes, to hypnotize another person or even many people, and then do with them as he wishes?"⁵¹ And Vladimir Lenin, extolling the power of Beethoven to Maxim Gorky, once remarked, "I can't listen to music too often. It affects your nerves, makes you want to say stupid nice things, and stroke the heads of people who could create such beauty while living in this vile hell."⁵² "Music . . . there is something only semi-articulate about it, something dubious, irresponsible, indifferent," declares Settembrini, a character from Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. "My distaste for music is political," he clarifies.⁵³ The idea that music acts as a type of opium is the basis of Adorno's critique of tonal music in modernity: it dulls our senses, giving us a respite from an oppressive reality, and thus makes us tolerant of injustice by affirming the status quo.⁵⁴ In *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth*, Geoffrey Baker describes being smitten by El Sistema's orchestral performances, only to later come back to his senses in recognition of how the institution was strategically enchanting its audiences.⁵⁵ While Baker claims that "El Sistema seems to repel rational analysis,"⁵⁶ I ask what it would mean to undo the binary relationship of reason and emotion, allowing instead for enchantments to meaningfully transform us even as we remain conscious of how they function as conduits of power. I will argue, in the following pages, for incorporating enchantment as a central feature of academic analysis.⁵⁷

If Pozdnyshv finds protection from the hypnotizing effects of music in state regulation, history has shown us that repressive political regimes can summon music's capacity to produce awe and wonder for their own purposes. In Nazi Germany, the monumental music of composers like Anton Bruckner was used to inspire "awe-struck quiet contemplation" and the "shutting-up of complainers."⁵⁸ The Soviet state, especially under Stalin, exercised strict control over the kind of music that could be composed and performed, terrorizing intellectuals and musicians, such as Dmitri Shostakovich, who stepped out of line.⁵⁹ The Venezuelan state, which historically has been El Sistema's major funder,⁶⁰ similarly used the affective power of music to promote its own political agenda. This was most clearly seen at state celebrations, where it was typical for an orchestra numbering in the hundreds, along with a hundred-person choir, to perform under the banners and slogans of the socialist political project.⁶¹ Although the official state discourse at these events frequently described the function of music through

phrases such as “multiplying patriots,” the musicians’ experiences of these concerts went beyond these framings. Their accounts revealed a plenitude of other desires and experiences—flights of the imagination that simultaneously affirmed and escaped the symbolic order. Many musicians appealed to what they described as music’s ineffability in order to claim spaces of individual and collective experience that were not overdetermined by the state. For my interlocutors, music generated a set of energies that were unpredictable and unruly, refusing to be entirely encompassed by stable meanings, definitions, and political uses. This reflected the musicians’ belief in the ability of music to resist full subjection.

The tension between the experience of music practice as a freedom-giving force and the ways in which it is summoned by powerful agents to control the wills of people captures the reasons I am writing this book as well as its three main arguments. First, music practice gives us an understanding of how people experience the systemic forces that govern their lives, such as states, institutions, and social exclusion. Second, music practices emanate their own forms of power that act within and beyond the systemic forces that attempt to control them. And finally, attending ethnographically to music and the stories that arise from it reveals the vibrating political and social potential of the imagination as constitutive of worlds and ways of being that point toward emergent futures.

THE LABOR OF DREAMING

Rather than seeing enchantment and music as singular instances that strike us like bolts of lightning, I explore the cultivation of skills through the daily labor and technical mastery that, as any musician knows, is an essential element of artistic creativity. The Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter, famous for performing on a completely dark stage, was once asked by an interviewer if it was not important for the audience to see the face of the performer: “Why? The face of a performer only expresses labor. The labor that goes into performing a piece of music.”⁶²

This labor is illustrated in the kneeling pose of the girl in *Sarare*, in her repetition of the same musical phrase until she got it right. The effort of practicing, aspiring toward an aim, is part of a process that is incomplete and open-ended, moving us toward a goal, a future moment of mastery, however fleeting. Yet, as the girl in *Sarare* taught me, this is a labor not only of

learning how to play an instrument but also of the imagination: of creating stories, worlds, and futures to call one's own. It is the work of being able to imagine oneself differently, beyond the paths prescribed for people living on the urban margins. "I want to be like Gustavo Dudamel when I grow up," a six-year-old boy told me on a dusty street in a small town in Venezuela. He was referring to El Sistema's most famous graduate: Dudamel is an eminent conductor and has been the music and artistic director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic since 2009. I looked at the boy with a mixture of admiration and a sinking feeling of doubt. Statistically, the odds were against him. It was more probable that he would become a member of one of the *bandas*, the common term for armed neighborhood groups, and that he would never leave the borders of the *barrio* where he grew up. I would eventually come to appreciate how the forces of marginalization that made these dreams improbable were precisely what made them so powerful. The little boy, like his parents, was acutely aware of these social realities and still dared to dream against them. "[T]he power of such dreams is in having them and working towards them, regardless of whether or not they come to fruition," Laurence Ralph notes in his ethnography of gangs in Chicago.⁶³ Among the El Sistema musicians I talked to, the labor of self-creation pushed against the cyclical dynamics of everyday violence, the rules and philosophy of an institution nicknamed "the System," and a political system that sought its own preservation despite the high human cost.

Thinking about the labor and practices of the self that underlie enchantment illuminates the voluntary and agentive, in addition to the more docile and passive, dimensions of the experience. To be enchanted is not only to be vulnerable to manipulation, open to the penetration of power. There is power in the capacity to "be affected,"⁶⁴ in opening up to others, in creating together, in interdependence. Studying the labor and collaboration underlying enchantment among young people in Venezuela challenges perceptions of enchantment as resulting from an "infantilized" incapacity to distinguish between fantasy and reality and underlines the agency of young people as political actors in Latin America.⁶⁵ Considering both the laborious and magical dimensions of enchantment is a conceptual lens for understanding state power in Venezuela.

Hugo Chávez's rise to the presidency in 1999 formed part of a wave of left-leaning and progressive governments that came to power in the 1990s and 2000s in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and, of course, Venezuela, a phenomenon that became popularly known as "the pink tide."

Progressive governments on the left improved the living conditions of the working classes and contributed to the growth of the middle class. These positive changes were especially salient in Venezuela, where the government implemented successful literacy campaigns, health care expansion, and housing subsidies for low-income groups. Chávez employed the term *Bolivarian Revolution* to describe the new policies, which increased university attendance and lowered unemployment rates.⁶⁶ His administration was also successful in reducing poverty and social inequality. In 1999, 50 percent of the population of Venezuela lived in poverty. By 2011, this number was down to 27 percent.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, critics point out that the new Latin American left did not change the fundamental structures of these societies, instead reproducing “the basic patterns of simultaneous wealth and poverty, of luxury alongside misery.”⁶⁸ Venezuela represents perhaps the most tragic failure. From 1999 to 2012, the country registered 144,000 homicides, giving it the reputation as one of the most violent places on earth. Venezuela also has by far the highest inflation of any country in the world, with an annual rate of 6,500 percent in 2021.⁶⁹ In April 2018, prices were rising at a monthly rate of 80 percent, making basic goods unaffordable.⁷⁰ By June 2018, black market rates, reflecting international exchange values, reached almost two million *bolívares* to one US dollar.⁷¹ Shortages of food and medicine, as well as the rapid spread of infectious disease, all point to an imminent humanitarian crisis. The situation is also reflected in immigration patterns: 4.5 million Venezuelans fled the country between 2016 and 2019,⁷² finding shelter in other Latin American countries, in the United States, and in Europe.⁷³ The government of Nicolás Maduro, Chávez’s successor, represses dissent and violates democratic principles.

Thinking about the past from the vantage point of failed political projects, old enchantments with the Bolivarian Revolution as well as other leftist projects in Latin America might be read as a blind fascination later revealed to be flawed. Seeing from the perspective of political failure could lead us to portray the enchantment with Chávez as one of falling under the spell of a charismatic leader whose power rested on oil wealth.⁷⁴ Indeed, this is how Venezuelan anthropologist Fernando Coronil, in his work *The Magical State*, described the Venezuelan state of the twentieth century: a “magnanimous sorcerer, endowed with the power to replace reality with fabulous fictions propped up by oil wealth.”⁷⁵ Recent scholarship, however, has challenged this image of the masses as passive spectators of state magic,

focusing instead on the leading role the country's citizens played in mobilizing and effecting political change in different moments of Venezuelan history—before and following Independence⁷⁶ and into the decades directly preceding Chávez's rise to power.⁷⁷ The work on the self, central to musical enchantment, similarly foregrounds the idea of labor as the foundation for enchantment in relation to the Venezuelan state. Rather than assuming a passive mass waiting to be periodically enchanted or disenchanting by state actors, our attention is drawn to the labor of grassroots organizing that, much like the disciplined practice of an instrument, laid the groundwork for the popular support of Chávez's political project. Enchantment with the political project did not happen mechanically, or purely in response to charismatic political leadership, but required tapping into a social force and energy that was already present and brewing.⁷⁸

Today, measurable human consequences, the crucial correlates of economic indicators, are witness to the failure of the socialist political project in Venezuela. As leftist governments in Latin America are collapsing, how do we think about their lasting social impact? What social change, some of it immeasurable, persists, even in the ruins of these political orders and in the wake of disenchantment with political leadership? Might we look for social change not in the successes and failures of states and political projects but in everyday transformations, such as the length of the horizons of people's dreams and changes in how they anticipate the future?

"The moment we think of the world as disenchanting . . . we set limits to the ways the past can be narrated," Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us.⁷⁹ I read this as an invitation to resist taking a present moment of political and economic collapse as proof of the futility of past enchantments. Instead of seeking measurable consequences, I listen to the meaning and significance these enchantments had for people in the past, what changes in their imagination they brought about. I do this by being attentive to the dreams, hopes, and joys that animated the past and may still linger in the present. Preserving the vibrancy of people's enchantments is a way of doing justice to latent social and political potential that might yet find its unpredictable manifestation.

I caught one such spark while chatting with a mother who was waiting for her daughter to finish orchestra rehearsal in an El Sistema school in Caracas. "Before Chávez came to power, poor people could not get an education," she said, referring to her own life growing up in an urban *barrio*. "Now it is different. But still, it is much more difficult for an adult to get an education than for a child." Acknowledging the limitations in her own

life, she admired how her daughter saw the future. “She has other ideas. She has a different vision of things. I know she wants to be a doctor,” she said proudly. Her daughter had longer horizons of dreaming. While still classed, gendered, racialized, and subject to forces of oppression and domination,⁸⁰ people like the mother and daughter in this Caracas *núcleo* had the audacity to imagine themselves and their futures differently. These dreams, with their forward momentum, already transcended the limitations imposed by social marginalization.

It is precisely in moments of political collapse and disillusionment that one may, or even longs to, imagine an otherwise – the existence of alternatives to what is.⁸¹ Religion and music scholar Ashon Crawley urges us to consider how performances may “produce otherwise possibilities for thought, for action, for being and becoming.”⁸² Making music engages the imagination, affirms a sense of self, and involves others. As an act of frequently collective creation, the music performed at Venezuela’s El Sistema in its mere existence already pushes against the forces of collapse and destruction around it. The consequences of music practice may take place within measurable political coordinates—a concert honoring the state, a scholarship that facilitates upward mobility, the acquisition of a remunerable, sustaining skill such as playing an instrument—or remain beyond present-day discursive and sociopolitical categories. Against the backdrop of a social order that denies their existence, *barrio* residents are asserting their right to be, live, create, flourish, and dream. Negating one’s erasure through acts of creation holds political potential. To account for these energies and transformations, in turn, requires an ethnographic attentiveness to “*what could be*, as a crucial dimension of what is or was”⁸³ and to fantasy as not an escape from reality but an opportunity to live our reality more deeply.⁸⁴

When we attend to and honor the ephemeral, the fleeting, or the unfinished in art and music, we learn something about the ways in which we think about the political and economic systems that shape our lives. Doing so might lead us to appreciate the power of collective enchantment with a political project, such as the Bolivarian Revolution, as the expression of social energy and the capacity to dream. For this social force to be meaningful, it need not necessarily find its culmination in a stable political system or measurable social outcomes. Its history is itself a monument to the power of social mobilization, a reminder that such a force is possible, latent. Preserved in collective memory, this force resonates in the present, within and beyond the political and economic ruins, its future open and unfinished.

SOCIAL INEFFABILITY

The tension between the force of musical enchantment and the other forces that framed people's lives and aspirations did not remain stable throughout my time in Venezuela. When I returned for a full year of fieldwork in 2013, gun violence was claiming more lives; shortages of basic goods were making people wait in hours-long lines; and the government, clinging to power following Chávez's death in March of that year, was becoming increasingly exigent in its demands for political loyalty. Against this backdrop, El Sistema's silence in the face of a repressive government and its willingness to continue giving performances at state events attracted the ire of the opposition and a condemnation from Western critics. I knew that the institution's silence did not reflect the diverse positions held by its musicians. Some, as I saw with my own eyes in 2014, would be on the front line at protests, throwing rocks at police who then responded with tear gas and bullets. Others remained complacent in positions of comfort and power within the institution. And still a great many were silent because they could not find a viable political position to inhabit in a social environment weighed down by a history of social exclusion and struggle. "I had never seen so many blond people in one place," Angel, a violinist, remarked when we joined one of the anti-government protests. He was pointing to the severe divisions in Venezuelan society along the intersecting lines of race and class and a corresponding political polarization: *barrio* residents tended to support the Chávez government, while the primarily white upper classes supported the opposition.⁸⁵ As a young *barrio* resident, Angel was both discontent with the government and uncomfortable with the opposition, historically associated with right-wing governments.

I use the term *social ineffability* to describe the ambiguous social and political positions of many El Sistema musicians, a nuance of the Venezuelan political landscape revealed by my long-term fieldwork with young people, whose views on politics and music were dynamic. As scholars have noted, Venezuelan society is highly polarized, divided into supporters of the Chávez government and the opposition.⁸⁶ This political polarization reflects and reproduces the ethno-racial and social division in Venezuela, where residents of the urban *barrios* tend to be of Afro-Venezuelan and indigenous background, while the upper-class population are lighter skinned and often flaunt their European origins. These social divisions were visibly mapped onto the segregation of urban space in Caracas, a city neatly divided into the

poor west and the wealthy east. People of different political affiliations led distinct lives and had vastly different interpretations of social reality, such as the causes of social problems and attitudes toward the government. While the majority of El Sistema musicians lived in urban *barrios*, their political positions were not always clearly pronounced, and many preferred to identify neither with the government nor with the opposition.

Underneath the silence of the institution, I listened to the social dilemmas faced by young El Sistema musicians. Their parents, who had come of age during the neoliberal governments of the 1980s, carried vivid memories of a time of utter disregard and abuse by the state. In 1998, Hugo Chávez had spoken to their struggle and placed them at the center of his socially conscious policies. Even in a time of disillusionment with the current government, memories of historical trauma made *barrio* residents incapable of trusting the opposition and fearful of any change. Most of the young musicians were of a generation that had lived its entire life under Chávez's leadership. As the government faltered, they were quick to become disenfranchised and yet mistrusted the opposition because of their parents' stories and because its supporters hailed from the upper classes, whose social experiences were so different from their own. These musicians were torn by a loyalty to their parents, many of whom were Chávez supporters, to a state that purportedly defended the rights of disenfranchised populations, and to an institution that had provided them with an education and musical instruments. Such were the roots of these young people's inchoate political opinions, their hesitation to articulate political resistance and to uncritically embrace the project of the opposition. By 2015, as the world around them crumbled, belonging to El Sistema, with its scholarships and daily schedules, became one of the few points of predictability in the musicians' lives. Their participation in state-sponsored El Sistema events could be read as political docility and submissiveness, a contentment with the status quo. If one listened closely, however, one heard a restlessness, a forceful desire for another way of being seeking its expression. This desire was audible even among the El Sistema musicians who were not as politically visible.

In one of his lectures at Berkeley in 1980, Argentine novelist Julio Cortázar spoke about the ludic, or playful, dimensions of literature and about the *cronopios*, made-up creatures that became characters in many of his stories. In the question and answer period, a student asked Cortázar what usefulness the *cronopios* might have for young people in their times—for people in Nicaragua, for example, who were fighting to rebuild a coun-

try. Cortázar replied that he did not come up with these magical creatures for them to make any historical or political sense. But he went on to tell the story of how, on a visit to Cuba, he met a few young people who were fighting in the revolution. For security reasons, the meeting took place in a dark room. They told him, “Listen, we wanted to see you and speak to you for a minute to tell you that in the intervals in between what we do, we love reading your stories about *cronopios*.” Later, one of the girls said, “We lost the book and then we found it eaten up by a dog; only fifteen pages remain and each of us has one page in their pocket.”⁸⁷ I love this story because it transcends the difficult, and often futile, question about the causal relationship between artistic practice and political change. Yet it affirms the vital role of the imagination to social and political survival and as a source of energy essential to political change. Years before I confronted these questions in Venezuela, Chilean poet Raúl Zurita had answered my youthful question about how poetry could change the world similarly: “[T]here is no single great social change that is also not a poetic change: a change in the imagination, a change in how we see the world.”

METHODS AND WRITING BEYOND WORDS

“Language has been granted too much power,” new materialist scholar Karen Barad declares in an essay in which she critiques the scholarly importance given to discourse to the detriment of taking seriously the vitality and agency of matter.⁸⁸ A focus on language places inordinate attention on the symbolic, relegating to the background or subordinating pre-symbolic or other non-semiotic modes of communication.⁸⁹ Barad urges us, instead, to think about the material resonance of nonverbal practices. In my writing, I privilege the sensory experiences and life stories with which sound is entwined rather than the genre of classical music itself.

“Music cannot be explained, it has to be felt,” said Gerardo, a violinist, in response to my question about what music meant to him, echoing new materialist shifts away from language. His words reflected a sentiment common among musicians at El Sistema—that the feeling of being enchanted by music was *inefable*, ineffable, or beyond words. At first, I found these descriptions of music poetic. They were rich metaphors with which to think about how playing an instrument could allow one to transcend social reality. At the same time, I was aware that ineffability, in its more negative light, is a

category produced by colonialism to describe the Global South and its presumed resistance to the logics and rationality of science in Western modernity.⁹⁰ Aware of these connotations, I nevertheless use the term throughout this book because I find it analytically and politically productive. Ineffability resists easy, neat categorization and asks us instead to listen attentively to people and their stories rather than to rely on preconceived categories of class and political conviction. I realized that by invoking ineffability, the musicians were asking me to feel their music in order to understand them. They wanted me to inhabit that space of transcendence together with them and to incorporate co-participation and the co-experience of music in my ethnographic methodology.

I began by sitting in on hours of collective instrument classes and orchestra rehearsals, which were a daily part of the musicians' lives. This was familiar to me: the hour a day of playing music had been an essential beat in the rhythm of my own life when growing up. My entire schedule—from doing homework to exercising and meeting friends—revolved around making time for piano practice. For El Sistema musicians (and for their families, if the musicians were very young), this commitment was even greater, as rehearsals took up entire afternoons and sometimes even longer. At these rehearsals, I witnessed the discipline and practice that went into developing the techniques particular to each instrument, from breathing and the control of facial muscles for wind instruments to fingering and bowing for the strings. While in my own childhood the daily piano playing took place in solitude, for El Sistema musicians music practice was almost entirely collective. They learned how to play while playing together with other instruments. Playing, listening, and coordination with others became essential to the musicians. If one section of instruments had not learned their part well, the conductor would make the entire orchestra wait for them to work out a passage before rehearsal could continue. The frequently tedious daily training, discipline, and practice in classes and rehearsals provided the skills and groundwork that then enabled one to lose oneself in an experience of music. To reach for the ineffable.

"Let's just play together, and you'll see for yourself," Nahia, a pianist, admonished me one day, in response to my inquiry about the meaning of music. For Nahia, this was a light-hearted proposition that we do something she loved. For me, it provoked all the feelings of self-conscious shyness that had marked my playing as a child. My meaningful relationship with music, and the deep experiences that it evoked, was a private affair, only occasion-

ally broken by my teachers' insistence that I play at an annual recital. Nahia was inviting me to share that space of musical enchantment, to open myself up to the unpredictability and magic of collective music playing. She asked that I forget myself and my seriousness.⁹¹

And so, I began to play,⁹² first as an accompanying pianist to musicians who played the oboe, violin, and cello; later I played and taught the flute in the small El Sistema *núcleo* that I call Aguila.⁹³ Playing together with others granted me access to what the musicians called the ineffability of music, as embodied, lived, and experientially significant.⁹⁴ While our concrete experiences of a piece of music were shaped by a confluence of personal, social, and historical factors,⁹⁵ the collective playing of music allowed for a sharing of energies and intensities, if not necessarily specific content. "Although we cannot ever know for certain what any other person feels, we can study closely the skills and behaviors through which others perceive," writes Greg Downey, an anthropologist who approached the study of capoeira by training together with people as a point of access into their experiences.⁹⁶

Playing music alongside others implies a co-experience of musical time⁹⁷; music requires "a temporal dimension in which to unfold."⁹⁸ While viewers can turn to painting and sculpture at their own leisure, for listeners the experience of music is limited to the moment in which sound is produced. Music can intensify or "quicken" time,⁹⁹ the time of the everyday, or it can slow it down. This depends both on the internal organization of the musical piece, its score, and on how it is performed, as each interpreting musician can extend or quicken a note or a passage. While the solo performer makes these decisions on her own, when playing with others, the density of musical time is collectively negotiated. One instrument can set a certain pace, an energy, and the others have to follow, a negotiation often dictated by the hierarchies of an orchestra. Sociologist Alfred Schütz describes how when playing music together, "performer and listener are tuned-in to one another, are living together through the same flux, are growing older together while the musical process lasts."¹⁰⁰ My ability to partake in the collective experience of music bridged the disjuncture between music performance and the consequent recounting of it at a later time.

In addition to playing together, I also relied on the more traditional anthropological medium of the interview in order to hear the stories that resided behind each sound.¹⁰¹ Especially at first, these interviews revealed the extent to which the musicians' views on music were shaped by institutional discourses about music.¹⁰² These discourses were familiar to me from

my studies of the advertising literature and films about El Sistema as well as from my archival research of newspaper coverage of El Sistema and José Antonio Abreu from 1975 until the present.¹⁰³ “Music makes people better,” the El Sistema musicians would tell me again and again. *Everyone is saying the same thing. In different words*, reads a line in some of my first field note entries, expressing a frustration with the powerful institutional discourses that framed music. Especially in the more formal setting of an interview, musicians frequently fell back on platitudes about music as a magical force that would solve society’s ills. As I got to know the musicians better, and once they realized that I was interested in hearing about their lives and experiences and not in their rendition of the official discourse of the institution, their more poetic voices emerged. Even as they deemed the experience of being touched by music to be beyond words (or perhaps for that very reason), they engaged in a creative struggle to find words to describe it.¹⁰⁴ In those moments, language became a key to the experience of the ineffable.

To hear their stories, or what Demian called “the life behind the music,” I relied on participant observation, which allowed me to catch fleeting comments exchanged during rehearsals, breaks, and after concerts. In interviews, both oral and written, I reached deeper for these stories while being careful not to reduce the material power of sound entirely to words and discourse. I conducted formal interviews with more than one hundred musicians and their families, music teachers, El Sistema directors, and supporting staff and spoke informally to dozens of others. Outside of the institution, I interviewed Venezuelan intellectuals as well as directors at PDVSA (Venezuela’s national petroleum company) and the National Anti-Drug Office, state institutions that sponsor and collaborate with El Sistema. The majority of my interviews were with musicians who were eighteen years of age and older. When I did interview children and youth between the ages of six and seventeen, I first sought permission from the director of each *núcleo* and their parents, as stipulated by Brown’s Institutional Review Board. These interviews always took place in the public setting of the *núcleo* or in the musicians’ homes with their parents present. I also conducted ten family-wide interviews with both youth and their parents. Family conversations inspired productive reflections on how participants and their close relatives perceive the effects of music practice on children’s everyday activities, future goals, family, and community relations. I asked musicians to tell me what they experienced when playing or listening to a particular piece of music. The metaphors that emerged in these interviews colored

my own experience of El Sistema participants' music. They also, as in the case of ineffability, became conceptual tools with which I thought about the place of music in the wider social and political context. As Mel Chen notes, "language users are 'animate theorists' insofar as they deploy and rework such orders of matter."¹⁰⁵ Listening to the words that the musicians chose to talk about music revealed the vitality they attributed to it. The aliveness of music was intertwined with that of each performer but also to some extent exceeded human agency and control.

The musicians taught me to be an attentive listener—to their music, to other instruments when performing together, but also, and importantly for ethnography, to the sounds that permeated everyday life.¹⁰⁶ They would pick up the sounds of the city, from an ambulance siren to birdsong, and vocally reproduce it. Sounds stood out sharply in the topography of their perception. A surprising sound from our environment would interrupt a conversation or an interview, stunning me out of my intellectual ruminations that had made me temporarily numb to sound. The musicians' fascination with sound inspired me to consciously train my own ethnographic ear.¹⁰⁷ This meant being attentive to the sounds and silences of the city as they coexisted or clashed with the sounds of music practice: the honking and growling of traffic, the pulsating rhythm of *reggaeton* blasting from local buses, the urgent and repetitive chanting of the anti-government protesters, the pulse of cross fire exchanged between armed neighborhood groups, the explosion of tear gas bombs and protesters' screaming, each giving voice to political violence.¹⁰⁸ I came to hear these sounds as embodied representations of social forces that permeated our everyday lives.

The beauty of these sonorous energies was their multiplicity and resistance to fixed definitions. The musicians' diverse accounts of music, and their insistence that music could not be explained, challenged the centrality of referential and symbolic meaning to both music and human experience.¹⁰⁹ Instead, they were pointing out that musical meaning resided in its physical and affective dimensions, which were unpredictable, unruly, surprising. Many El Sistema musicians valued these musical intensities, the rich array of thoughts and feelings they evoked. They cherished the perceived gap between musical experience and the ability to give a complete account of it¹¹⁰ and even protected music from explanation or exploitation. This reflected a certain belief in the ability of music to resist full subjection. These experiences could be accessed in playing together, when ephemeral and nonverbal energies were powerfully experienced in time, without hav-

ing to be analyzed or explained. They pointed to embodied, rather than semantic, meaning as a source of ethnographic material and knowledge.

Summoning sound as a mode of analysis¹¹¹ and collective music-making as methodology also turned my attention to the musical dimensions of language: the rhythm, sounds, and pulse of words, both those of my interlocutors and the ones I myself was choosing to write this ethnography.¹¹² Here I am inspired by performance studies scholar Deborah Kapchan who sees “sound writing as a genre in which sound is not (just) an object of analysis but a vibration that infuses the word with its own materiality.”¹¹³ The role of the ethnographer when writing about sound is to be a “translator between worlds—the writer listening to and translating sound through embodied experience, the body translating the encounter between word and sound, sound translating and transforming both word and author.”¹¹⁴ For sound to infuse the word means, to me, that my writing will embody certain rhythms, that words will carry forth sounds and not only meaning. The pages that follow are an ethnography “beyond words,” wherein I stretch the limits of language, especially academic language, in exploring new, expressive realms in ethnographic writing. I use a language whose form—such as its rhythm and sound—is inseparable from, and at moments takes priority over, content. Rather than as a means of conveying information, I hope to use language to create a feeling, to bring the reader closer to the sensory realities of the musicians as they make music and in their daily lives.¹¹⁵ It is a language that, like music, speaks to perception, emotion, and the imagination as well as conceptual reason. As a political gesture, this language attempts to bridge the gap between the coevalness of fieldwork and the analytical distance typically established in ethnographic writing. In addition to being stylistic, the work of infusing the word with sound is also theoretical. In transposing the vibrating materiality of music into words, I aim to create academic space for ephemeral forces,¹¹⁶ such as music, that have a transformative impact on my interlocutors’ lives.

As ethnomusicologists and anthropologists remind us, stories are a medium of “resisting closure, of embracing life as reverberation”¹¹⁷ and writing as “unresolved.”¹¹⁸ Resisting closure as an intellectual position has been essential to me as I struggle to write about a complex, contradictory, and constantly shifting political and social reality in Venezuela. Stories survive through the turbulence of drifting social tectonics, radically altered life destinies, and changing views—both those of my interlocutors and, as a reflection, my own. Stories, as they are rooted in experience, reverberate in the

present but do not claim to represent it fully. Since my interlocutors were primarily young people, the dynamism of their lives and opinions was even more pronounced. A couple of years after I first met Demian, I reminded him that he had once told me that music was his entire life. “I was young then,” the twenty-year-old responded. “I don’t agree with that statement anymore. What is more important to me now are *las vivencias* (the experiences),” he said. After a pause, he concluded, “They are what make my music.” Such shifts in opinion applied to music, political convictions, and attitudes toward El Sistema as an institution.

To capture the dynamic social and political environment that defined my fieldwork, this book is written in short chapters. The chapters that follow are not in strictly linear order. Some are connected chronologically, others thematically. Each one stops short of exhausting a topic completely; like in a musical piece, different themes introduced in an earlier chapter return at a later point. Some chapters are more ethnographic, others more conceptual. The roughly chronological arc of the book reflects the waxing and waning of enchantment, my own and that of my interlocutors. To some extent, the dynamics of enchantment and disenchantment were affected by my interlocutors’ transition from childhood to youth and adulthood and the greater experience within the institution that accompanied this growth. These dynamics were also influenced by the delicate counterpoint between musical enchantment and sociopolitical processes, illuminating how our enchantments at times resist, and at other times give in to, larger systemic forces. Moreover, the fragmentation produced by the shorter chapters mimics the fragmentation of daily life in Venezuela, accentuated by the slow tempo of bureaucracy, traffic, and the frequent disruption of urban space caused by the protests that defined a major portion of my fieldwork. The structure and rhythm of writing encode the materiality of systemic forces and the transformations they provoked.

The book is divided into four sections. Each introduces a major theme in how I theorize sound enchantment in relation to systemic forces. While there are common threads that run through all of the sections, each one represents a particular theme that stood out at every stage of my fieldwork. The themes are intentionally broad, acquiring an ethnographic specificity in the shorter chapters. For example, “Power” reflects the tightening grip of the state and the institution in the latter part of my fieldwork and into the present day. The organization of the book reflects my own ethnographic and methodological arc, as different themes gained intensity over the course of my research.

The first section, “Music,” serves as an introduction to how members of El Sistema thought about and articulated their relationship to music, specifically the value they attached to the act of being touched or moved by music. It introduces the reader to some of the main interlocutors in the book. This section offers a glimpse into the affective and embodied experience of enchantment, how it transforms musicians’ relationship to urban space, their perceptions of themselves, and their conceptions of the future. An important concept that emerges in this section is *la chispa* (spark) which describes the unpredictable and contagious magic that emerges in a moment of collective music playing. This chapter positions musical enchantments within the limitations imposed by El Sistema as an institution. It explores institutional dynamics, as well as their reverberations within the broader social environment, through telling the history of El Sistema since it was founded in 1975, in relation to the dynamics of petroleum and major social discourses that circulated at the time.

The next section, “Enchantment,” thinks about the concept at the heart of the book through the life of its protagonist, the oboe player Demian. Enchantment with music appears as both embedded in the rhythms of everyday life and constituting a break, an excess from those rhythms. This break is established through both the virtual ruptures with reality afforded by music and the aspirations for upward mobility attached to participation in El Sistema. Enchantment describes the human lives that vibrate in music as well as the vitality of matter that exceeds the human. This section uses Maussian and contemporary anthropological notions of the gift to describe the ways in which enchantment is transferred from one person to another in the act of teaching. I approach enchantment ethnographically both by playing together with the musicians and by allowing myself to be enchanted and moved by their music—what I call a method of enchantment. Here I argue against the idea that being enchanted is a momentary state of illusion that is then analyzed away with rational thought. Rather, I think about it as a vital force that waxes and wanes through periods of fascination and disillusionment. A conceptualization of enchantment that transcends the binaries set up between rationality and emotion has important implications for thinking about a form of academic scholarship that goes beyond critique.

The section titled “Aspiration” emphasizes a strand that runs through the previous section: the aspirations for the future that are contained in how people talk about music. My orientation toward aspiration stems from my close ethnographic work with young people, for whom the future was a prominent part of their present, pulling along the inter-generational

dreaming of their parents. People's dreams are founded in the daily labor and practices of the self that are part of learning how to play an instrument. The political valence of these dreams and their revolutionary thrust coalesce against the backdrop of different forms of everyday violence that pervade Venezuelan society. This violence manifests and is experienced most clearly through the discourses of upper-class residents that describe *barrio* residents as "lazy," "marginals," or an unwanted population that is "in excess." These discourses are also spatially reflected in the fragmentation of urban space along ethno-racial and class lines. I argue that the musicians' crossing of urban divisions to attend El Sistema schools articulates an alternative form of belonging that I call "sonic citizenship." This is most poignantly observed through the figure of the mother of El Sistema musicians from the *barrios* and her dreams about her children as expressed through her investment in their musical practice.

The last section, "Power," discusses different forms of power that flow through the day-to-day lives of musicians and affect or threaten individual and collective experiences of enchantment. I detail the discursive and temporal dimensions of how the state, the institution, and bureaucracy exercise control over musicians' lives, in counterpoint to how they experience and talk about music. Music playing both emerges as a conduit of state and institutional power, mimicking some of its rhythms, and constitutes an excess, an overflowing of energy that refuses to be completely contained. Some of this energy manifests in the weaving of communities across social fault lines through collective orchestral practice. Although not a remedy for inequality, these cross-class communities constitute alternative forms of being together that momentarily transcend social divides. I argue that such embodied acts of listening and the social bonds they form are types of agency that may remain illegible or inaudible to dominant forms of power but nevertheless have latent social and political potential. Some musicians transposed these nascent forms of agency into overt political action by participating in anti-government protests. Although some of my interlocutors were ambivalent when choosing among available political narratives, they found in music one possible avenue for expressing social and political aspirations and desires.