

Harmony and Discord: The Political Symphony of Venezuela's Musical Landscape

by Eva Hernandez

“I played my way through my country's collapse” (Arteaga, 2018). Venezuela is currently known as one of the greatest exporters of immigrants in the world. Despite being a wealthy country in resources, the oppressive dictatorship of the state during the last few decades has led to a collapsed society. During the 90s, political turmoil and corruption generated widespread distrust of both political parties in Venezuela; this led voters to elect political outsider Hugo Chavez during the 1998 presidential election (Grau, 2019). Chavez' government, promising to put an end to corruption, implemented a wide variety of aggressive wealth distribution policies and social programs. Over the course of time, these policies created financial instability, high unemployment rates, and scarcity of goods like food and medicine. Due to this, the political polarization in Venezuela became so extreme that tolerance between groups is nonexistent. Venezuelans can be either for or against the government, and in the eyes of the society, and even if you are dependent on government programs, utilizing them makes you part of “the problem” according to many in opposition. From traditional Venezuelan genres like Gaita, to modern sounds like rock, many different types of music have become part of the soundtrack of Venezuela's political crisis. Songs and hymns are used by both sides of the spectrum as a means of recruitment and activism. Furthermore, the themes and genres utilized for these reasons can be further categorized into two distinct groups: pragmatic and confrontational. Confrontational forms of action are loud and aggressive, and attempt to outrage the audience in order to provoke change, leaving no room for compromise or intergroup negotiation. On the other hand, pragmatic forms of action get rid of the self-other binary, and find a common ground between groups to negotiate a change without othering (Mattern, 1998). This reality leads to the surging of many

questions regarding the subject. For one, how is music used for recruitment and how do the tactics compare between the two opposing groups in Venezuela? And additionally, which type of acting in concert is most effective at producing real change? By analyzing the outcomes of several examples of musical tactics for recruitment, one can conclude that pragmatic action draws more attention while also gathering more supporters for a cause, since it doesn't alienate a certain person or group and only focuses on the issue to be attacked.

Music as Political Propaganda

Throughout Venezuela's history, the term "canción de protesta" (literally: protest music) has been used to describe songs with political and ideological messages expressed through lyrics (Mendoza, 2014). Figures like Alí Primera, a Venezuelan musician, composer and left-wing political activist, promoted the genre through their works. The themes in these songs were influenced by the global counter-culture movement of the 60s. Even though Primera passed away long before Hugo Chavez's socialist government took power of the country, his songs acquired a different type of meaning to serve Chavez's political campaign. The expressions of minority disagreement and subversive ideas in Alí Primera's songs were used as a tool for the perpetuation of the socialist ideology and power of the ruling system within Chavez's regime. Since 1999, the songs have had more exposure in the government-compliant media than ever before and were utilized as a mass-gathering device for political propaganda in order to gain support from the poorest members of the Venezuelan society, which accounted for 80% of the country's population (Mendoza, 2018). Aside from this, the Chavist government used mixed styles of salsa and joropo, which are notably musical genres associated with Latin dance, to create short and easy to memorize songs for political rallies. These short songs were sung by the audience in a call-and-response manner after the speaker started the chant. The musical choices

of the Chavist government were meant to bring people together in support for Chavez in an active manner. The songs have exuberant rhythms that evoke positive attitudes and feelings. The atmosphere created by this music was effective in recruiting a devoted fandom for Chavez and his political ideology.

Additionally, once in power, Chavez's government did not stop using music as a tool for recruitment. Through the government's support of El Sistema (literally: The System), a Venezuelan initiative that brings free classical music education and instruments to young people around the country, a less-effective recruitment tactic spurred up. The government promoted El Sistema through media appearances as well as political rallies. They held concerts in government events and in Chavez's Sunday talk show "Aló Presidente" (literally: Hello President). El Sistema's mission was to use music as an antidote to the poverty and gang violence widespread throughout Venezuelan society (Satinova, 2019). Recruiters would go give out pamphlets and talk to parents in the poorest neighborhoods in order to convince them to rescue their unprivileged children through the program. "Hands that have touched a musical instrument will never again hold a gun", a teacher of one of the music schools quotes (Statinova, 2019). Despite El Sistema having a meaningful mission, in his talk show, Chavez only credited it for "multiplying the patriots" and lacked interest in the actual music. However, this recruitment tactic was flawed. Many musicians in El Sistema were critical of the corrupt and inefficient government that fostered a population dependent on its benevolence (Statinova, 2019). Members of the state-funded orchestra had no choice but to participate in government events which was seen by many members of the opposition as hypocritical and bought behavior.

Rise and Demise of Protest Gaita

Gaita is a regional form of Venezuelan popular music with origins in improvised songs created collectively at social gatherings in the state of Zulia (Carruyo, 2005). Gaitas are most widely heard and played around Christmas and include themes of religion, community, history and political protest. Protest Gaita has a typically contrarian view of government and calls out its negligent aspects. During the start of Chavez's presidency, *gaiteros* (Gaita musicians) mocked Chavez's confrontational personality and political style (Andrade, 2020). However, this practice wasn't uncommon or targeted, since *gaiteros* utilized sarcastic and comedic remarks in many of their songs. Protest Gaita of the time was also critical of Chavez's use of the figure of Simon Bolivar to support his actions:

“You speak so much of Bolivar/ the Bolivarian dream/ the people gave you a hand to put you up there/ but since then we only have poverty/ if Bolivar came to life, he would die again of grief.” (Barrio Obrero, 2003, “La Gaita Bolivariana”)

This song, like many other Protest Gaitas critical of Chavez's government, surged in popularity and was played heavily in radio stations and other types of media. Chavez's response to this bad publicity issue was to simply offer lucrative contracts to *gaiteros* to create and sing songs that support him at government-sponsored events (Andrade, 2020). This tactic caused Protest Gaita to lose momentum, but not disappear. By 2007, the government's authoritarian style was already having a significant impact on Venezuela's media. Even though there was never a decree that prohibited criticism of Chavez, in order for radio and TV stations to have their licenses renewed they would have to limit their attacks on the government. This self-censorship made it more difficult for Protest Gaitas to find a platform. Furthermore, after the Chavist government's implementation of currency control, the acquisition of imported goods required government authorization (Andrade, 2020). This meant that if *gaiteros* were suspected of

participating in criticism of the government, they would be denied authorization to buy performance equipment, which would drive them out of business. Chavez and his government knew how to silence musicians. From threatening their instruments, to buying off gaiteros, Chavez effectively minimized Protests Gaitas, and therefore, their impact. Today, the most renowned gaiteros have left the country, and their protest gaitas from abroad have a negligible effect on the public opinion in Venezuela.

2014 Protests and La Vida Boheme

Despite the government's success in silencing music, they cannot silence Venezuela's youth. In 2007, Movimiento Estudiantil (literally: Student Movement) was founded in opposition to Chavez's government. Students play a major role in Venezuela's protest movements, including the spike of protests beginning in February of 2014 after the sexual assault of a student near the Venezuela-Colombia border (Graffe, 2014). The immense protests of 2014 focused on outcries against the exorbitant crime rates, lack of security, inflation and food shortages. However, this time, they were protesting the new government of Nicolas Maduro, who assumed the responsibilities of the president after Chavez's death in 2013.



Venezuelan rock band, La Vida Boheme, is known as the unofficial soundtrack to these protests (Peavy, 2014). The self-censorship of the media resulted in protest music remaining underground, and within similarly underground genres like trap, reggaeton and rock. La Vida Boheme's album "Será" (literally: it will be) came out weeks after Chavez's death and carries themes of hope, weariness and frustration due to the country's diminishing state. The band has been a victim of Venezuela's violence; their manager was kidnapped and their booking agent was murdered (Peavy, 2014). La Vida Boheme uses their experiences as a way to connect with much of the Venezuelan youth, who have also been touched by the overwhelming insecurity. Lead singer Henry D'Arthenay said in an interview with WNYC, "I've been politically active since I started writing music because I always thought it was a responsibility". The band's rock songs evoke feelings of anger and empowerment through rhythm, voice, and instruments. This effect fuels the protestors' motivation at protests plagued by violent attacks of the police against students. Regardless, La Vida Boheme's songs do not have a larger impact than that due to their

confrontational character. Their songs oppose the government, and are verbally violent in doing so. The song “El Zar” (literally: The Zar) released in 2011, wishes upon the death of those in power and in support for the government:

“But God, if you get them it's better/ if you get them we'll go singing to the moon/ in a carnival, an abysmal echo/ all the evil is gone...”

La Vida Boheme's songs exclude the contrary group and leave no room for negotiation, further fueling the violence in the country.

Alfredo Graffe, a member of Movimiento Estudiantil, expresses this concern in an interview with Journal of International Affairs: “We had Hugo Chavez for thirteen years... But after he died, the problems were still there. So the problem is not about a name. The problem is not about Maduro or Chavez. The problem is about the whole country, which needs deeper solutions”. Further in the interview, Graffe also expresses: “We need to involve people who support Chavez, and who perhaps support Maduro. This is not a project for only half of the country”. Graffe is one of many students who are not satisfied by the outcomes of the protests, which are nothing but more violence and more insecurity. Venezuela needs pragmatic action. It needs to look past political polarization and come together to solve the real problems, which until now, seems like an impossible task.

2017 Protests and Willy Arteaga

A second wave of large, violent, and riotous protests in Venezuela took place in 2017. News sources around the world and Venezuelans living abroad circulated images, reports and even live events from the front lines of what seemed like a war zone. The police and the national guard went to the streets fully prepared to disperse the protesters using militarized tactics (Grau, 2019). Due to the global media exposure of the Venezuelan conflict, an important symbol of the

2017 protests became known world-wide. Dressed in patriotic colors with his only weapon being a violin, Willy Arteaga became the most recognized symbol of hope for the Venezuelan people.



Arteaga was a violinist trained through El Sistema. He serves as the prime example of someone who was supported by the government's social programs without complying to its manipulation and recruitment tactics. In the protests, he played widely known songs like the Venezuelan National Anthem and "Venezuela" (Grau, 2019). This music built a sense of national identity and belonging for those in the protests who would add the voice to Arteaga's songs. His performances were pragmatic in nature; they did not alienate those in the opposing or oppressive group, instead they attempted to include them. Arteaga's weapon was more powerful than any Molotov cocktail. He appealed to the opposing group's feelings, creating a sense of unity among every Venezuelan person. Through this pragmatic action, Arteaga attempted to recruit more

people willing to fight for the country, and not against a specific group, using music and memory.

This belief system helped Arteaga while he was in jail. Like many protesters, he was captured and tortured by the police. They broke his violin, beat him with iron rods, and left him deaf in his left ear (VPItv, 2017). Despite this, he never lost faith, he never resorted to violence. Arteaga would sing to the officers that tortured him and would appeal to their memories of what the country once was, as his way of defense. “I believe the music touched their hearts” wrote Arteaga in 2018. Arteaga, like many other Venezuelans, has fled the country and now plays his violin in the streets of New York.

Conclusion

In conclusion, like in many other revolutionary movements, music has had a significant presence and influence throughout Venezuela’s recent history. It has been used as a way to gather supporters for the Chavist government, while also as a tool for its criticism. Despite efforts, the intended functions of music have not always been fully successful. One can observe Willy Arteaga as an example. A young recruit of the government’s youth gathering device, who turned out to be the most iconic symbol of Venezuela’s last waves of protests. As a Venezuelan, I wish the solution to a long battle for freedom laid in music. However, after reviewing the several examples in this essay, one can conclude that a larger effort of union is needed. This could be achieved through music, but most importantly, by a switch in the corrupt mindset of the majority of politicians in the state.

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