

unoriginal, characterizations of skewed gender dynamics as though this were all that was expected of them. The subject matter may be Central American, but the book provides very little evidence of specifically Central American approaches to gender. After reading this uneven yet rather ideologically uniform collection, it is difficult not to ask whether gender theory is not simply the latest metropolitan ideology to be projected onto the isthmian bourgeoisie, the successor to Romanticism and positivism, and the sparring partner of globalizing neo-liberalism, as revolutionary Marxism was the antagonist of modernizant national capitalism in the late 20th century. Justice for millions of displaced, marginalized, widowed, impoverished or abused women, or for gay men who face violent discrimination, matters a lot; even in the purely literary realm, making Central America's gender theories sound identical to those of the United States matters much less.

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GEOFFREY BAKER. *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xiii + 362 pp.

El Sistema is the Venezuelan youth orchestra program founded in 1975 by politician, economist, and conductor José Antonio Abreu (1939-). Through the promise of using music in the service of society, *El Sistema* has garnered political and economic support to expand across Venezuela through the establishment of music-education centers called *núcleos*. News media reports, documentaries, a book, and a long list of international awards have highlighted this musical movement. As a result, *El Sistema* has captured the attention of a wider public to become a global phenomenon. However, despite its increasing popularity, Geoffrey Baker, a Reader in the Music Department of Royal Holloway, University of London, correctly asserts that this project has been subject to little or no in-depth research or serious debate. Baker explains that, in Baroque fashion, the spectacle of *El Sistema* has won over the hearts of global audiences, while, at the same time, suppressing the mind. His full-length, critical study of *El Sistema* is, therefore, a necessary and timely addition to discussions of the program in relation to music, education, and social justice in Venezuela, Latin America, and beyond.

Baker takes us on a well-organized journey, beginning with an introduction outlining the theoretical foundations, approach, and sources of the study, and continuing on through the analysis of *El Sistema* in four

parts: 1) The Institution and its Leaders, 2) Music Education, 3) Social Education, and finally, 4) Impact. This book represents scholarly writing at its best; it is intellectually stimulating, yet engaging and clearly written. The author reviews in detail the current research on the orchestra as a social organization, music pedagogy and curriculum, and culture and development to demonstrate that *El Sistema* actually does much of the opposite of what it claims. The author convincingly argues that, instead of being the future of music and music education, the program is actually regressive in its rigid, repetitive, and disciplinary techniques, in reality limiting opportunities for young musicians. Furthermore, the author contends that the program's focus on the European Romantic canon reproduces colonial dynamics in the region, and threatens local progressive and evidence-based cultural programs. What is revealed in Baker's study is that the dominant narrative on *El Sistema* is largely constructed, promoted, and perpetuated by the program itself, when in fact there are multiple narratives that must be considered. Baker, therefore, seeks to go beyond the official narrative of the program to rigorously consider a myriad of unofficial ones, namely the perceptions and experiences of participants in the program. As a result, his study reveals a much more complex scenario.

In addition to strong theoretical groundings and an exhaustive examination of the published literature on the program, Baker employs critical ethnography to document program experiences through approximately 100 semi-structured interviews. He also relies on informal conversations and his own observations of lessons, rehearsals, performances, administrative activities, and program infrastructure. Social media also proved to be an important space for observing unofficial conversations about the program. In all, Baker spent one year (2010-2011) completing ethnographic research in Venezuela. His approach, appropriate to both the social sciences and the humanities, allowed the researcher to witness and document the sometimes-vast differences between the dominant ideology structuring the program and the lived experience of those participating in it. There are eight illustrations in the book, and all but two emphasize the perspective of ethnographic observation adopted by the author in his study (from the printed schedule of the author's tour of one of the *núcleos*, to a series of personal photographs ranging from the *El Sistema* headquarters, to performance and practice spaces).

Baker is well positioned to undertake this study. He is the author of two other highly regarded books on music in Latin America: *Imposing Harmony: Music and Society in Colonial Cuzco* (2008), winner of the American Musicological Society's Robert Stevenson Award, and *Buena Vista in the Club: Rap, Reggaetón, and Revolution in Havana* (2011). He has

also featured childhood music learning in Cuba and Venezuela through a series of films entitled "Growing into Music." In addition to being a scholar, Baker is a music teacher and a classical musician. Unlike other commentators of *El Sistema*, past and present, he is a Spanish-speaker with extensive knowledge and experience of Latin American music, institutions, and cultural policy. This knowledge base allows him to compare and contrast *El Sistema* with other music education programs and cultural initiatives in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, and Costa Rica. As *El Sistema* has moved beyond Venezuela to expand globally, he also studies the program in relation to other models of classical music making and performance, such as the Orpheus Chamber Music Orchestra in New York and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra founded by Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said. Furthermore, he also considers *El Sistema* in relation to music-education alternatives in Europe and North America.

As *El Sistema* is such a well-publicized and popular program in the collective conscience, it is understandable that this study is controversial and has been met with intense resistance by those invested in the initiative. The most vocal in their skepticism thus far are those working on *El Sistema*-inspired programs outside of Latin America. Some have charged that Baker's claims are unsubstantiated, in effect criticizing the ethnographic approach that relies on largely anonymous informant accounts. Anticipating these criticisms, Baker makes it clear that he is interested in the intersections of culture, ideology, and understandings of the program; the unofficial narratives are, in fact, pervasive undercurrents of the program, and, therefore, must enter into the discussion. While I agree that Baker's language can be quite strong, especially in the introduction ("cult," "climate of fear," "mafia"), the concerns of both the author and his informants do indeed deserve scholarly attention and (continued) academic study. Instead of seeking to denigrate the program, as has been claimed, Baker instead presents an important opportunity to intensely debate a highly influential program, with the hope of improving the current and future possibilities for music education and social action in Venezuela and around the world.

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