

The Pennsylvania State University
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***EL CUATRO VENEZOLANO: HISTORY, GLOBALIZATION, AND ITS MUSICAL
EXPANSION THROUGH MIGRATION IN RECENT TIMES***

A Thesis in

Music

by

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ABSTRACT

The Venezuelan *cuatro* has been explored for generations mainly as a harmonic instrument to accompany singers and play songs that are not specifically for it. In the case of the classical music world, it is traditional and common to see instruments like the piano, violin or cello that play standards of Western European music. By studying the *cuatro* as a symbol of identity in Venezuela this thesis will explain why and how this instrument has become itself, and how it keeps adapting to its new home or genre of music, wherever it may be. For example, even though these days the orchestras and audiences are more open to the ideas of diverse repertoires, it is rare to see an entire concerto played by a folk music instrument. That is the case of *Odisea*, by Gonzalo Grau and his idea to use the traditional symphonic orchestra ensemble to accompany a Venezuelan *cuatro*. The idea behind the piece is also related to the diplomacy that a musical instrument or genre can produce in an event or within society. This thesis will discuss colonial history of South America, organology, modern history and the ideas behind the Venezuelan *cuatro* and its role as an ambassador to the Venezuelan diaspora.

Keywords: Venezuela, *cuatro*, diaspora, migration, musical instrument, C4 Trio

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
 Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Colonial times in the new world and the birth of the Venezuelan cuatro.....	5
Colonial times in the New World.....	6
Musical instruments inherited from Western Europe	7
 Chapter 2. FROM FOLKLORE TO MAINSTREAM.....	11
Venezuelan Music Ensembles in the 20th Century.....	13
El Grupo Raices de Venezuela.....	13
El Cuarteto.....	14
Serenata Guayanesa.....	16
Ensamble Gurrufío.....	17
Los Sinvergüenzas.....	18
 Chapter 3. POLITICS, MIGRATION AND <i>EL CUATRO</i> AS VENEZUELA'S CULTURAL AMBASSADOR.....	20
<i>El cuatro</i> : Venezuelan national instrument.....	20
Political crisis and mass migration.....	21
Cultural policies in Venezuela between 1998 and 2013.....	22
The 1x1 law by CONATEL.....	22
Diaspora, politics and reinvention.....	25
Concertos for Solo Cuatro and orchestra.....	27
Leonardo Lozano (b.1965).....	27
Gonzalo Grau (b. 1972).....	29
 Conclusion.....	32
 Bibliography.....	33

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Vihuela Española.....	8
Figure 1.2 Puerto Rican cuatro.....	9
Figure 1.3 Venezuelan cuatro and parts.....	9
Figure 2.1: Carne en Vara.....	11
Figure 2.2: Dr. Casanova showing the tuning of the Medio Quinto.....	13
Figure 2.3: El Grupo Raices de Venezuela.....	14
Figure 2.4: El Cuarteto.....	15
Figure 2.5: Serenata Guayanesa.....	16
Figure 2.6: Ensamble Gurrufio.....	18
Figure 2.7: Los Sinvergüenzas.....	19
Figure 3.1: C4 Trio.....	24
Figure 3.2: C4 Trio and Luis Enrique in “Añoranza”	28

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To all, GRACIAS TOTALES and VIVA VENEZUELA!

DEDICATION

To my homeland, Venezuela, who lives and prevails in every single one of those 8.000.000+ people that have started a new life outside of her borders,
may we return in a not-so-distant future with pride, freedom and in democracy,

To those inside the country, who persevere and carry on with life, even in dark times.

To all who make music their career in and outside of Venezuela,
your work has immense value, and I applaud you in the distance.

May these lines help other cultures understand the beauty of Venezuelan folklore.

In times of uncertainty, may research, music and knowledge be
the beacon of the freedom we all need.

Gloria al Bravo Pueblo.

(Glory to the Brave People)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Venezuelan cuatro is today considered Venezuela's national instrument. Derived from Spanish guitars imported to the New World by colonizers in the early 1500s, the cuatro is intimately bound up with issues of colonialism, nationalism, and transcultural exchange. According to the *Enciclopedia de la Música en Venezuela*¹, today's cuatro—although it has undergone technological changes—can still be traced back to the Renaissance guitars brought to Venezuela by Jesuit missionaries sent by the Spanish Crown to “civilize” the native population through language, religion, and customs. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the cuatro's significance expanded beyond its traditional folk associations, becoming an important agent of musical hybridization within the concert tradition. Evidence of this is the Concerto for Venezuelan Cuatro and Orchestra by composer Gonzalo Grau (b. 1972), premiered in 2023 by Jorge Glem (member of the Grammy award-winning group C4 Trio) and accompanied by the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Gustavo Dudamel's baton. In my thesis, I aim to explore the Venezuelan cuatro as a newly globalized instrument that not only engages the folk music tradition but also interacts with a wide variety of musical genres, raising complex issues surrounding national identity, musical style, and diasporic relationships.

The Venezuelan cuatro has made appearances in different stages across the world because of the displacement and diaspora caused by the dictatorship that started with Hugo Chavez Frias (1954-2013) winning the democratic presidential elections in December of 1998. Chavez's government turned into an authoritarian regime that is still established today under Nicolas Maduro

¹ José Peñín, and Walter Guido, *Enciclopedia de la música en Venezuela: A-H* (Caracas, Venezuela: Fundación Bigott, 1998).

Moros (b. 1962), who was assigned by Chavez himself to be the candidate for the Oficialismo² in his last national television address to the country. He did this also because of the likelihood that he could die in the surgery that he had arranged in Cuba days later. Following Chavez's death in 2013, Maduro was declared the victor in elections that were considered to be fraudulent by the Opposition, due to the closeness of the results. The Carter Center was present during the entire process (before, during and after the election) as international observers, and participated in the audit requested by the Opposition leader at the moment, Henrique Capriles Radonski. The suit filed at the Tribunal Supremo de Justicia declared that there was no inconsistency in the results published initially and therefore Maduro became the president of Venezuela in that same year.³

The continuous debacle and economic crisis that followed obligated nearly eight million people to leave the country to look for a better future and better opportunities. This exodus has been one of the worst and most difficult times in Venezuelan history due to food and medicine shortages, hyperinflation⁴ at unimaginable levels, extreme street violence, and poverty. Among those who were forced to leave Venezuela in 2017 were the members of C4 Trio: Edward Ramirez moved to Bogotá, Colombia with his wife and son, while Jorge Glem and Hector Molina moved to New York City and Miami, USA (respectively). While living in exile, C4 Trio started experimenting with musical genres outside of the traditional Venezuelan repertoire. Alongside traditional Venezuelan styles, they have explored bossa nova, jazz, Latin jazz, salsa, and bachata, and have collaborated with artists across the globe. Hence, despite the extremely difficult situation imposed by their exile, living and working outside of Venezuela has allowed C4 Trio to

² Refers to the officials or government. Politically, Venezuela is divided between *Oficialismo* vs. *Oposición* (Officials vs. Opposition), which was established after Chavez's triumph in 1998.

³ Hugo Pérez Hernáiz, "Carter Center Issues Final Report on 2013 Presidential Election," Venezuelan Politics and Human Rights, July 18, 2020, <https://www.venezuelablog.org/carter-center-issues-final-report-on-2013/>.

demonstrate the versatility of the cuatro and the ways in which it can contribute to the fusion of musical styles, raising the instrument's profile in a global sense.

My intention with this research is to showcase the Venezuelan cuatro as an instrument that can be used for more than folkloric music. I will explore the organological and historical evolution of the cuatro Venezolano and how it has reached renowned stages throughout the world, such as the Hollywood Bowl and Carnegie Hall, among others. Through the lens of the cuatro, I will also expose the difficult political situation that has caused the massive migration of approximately eight million people who have been displaced around the world between 2002 and 2024.

In researching the cuatro and its journey through music in Venezuela, I have found that several sources explore the history of the instrument and its folkloric element from an ethnomusicological perspective. Yet, I have not encountered studies on the current political situation linked to the instrument and its musical evolution within the repertoire of not only Venezuelan music, but also of other countries and genres.

A primary source that informed my perspective is the trio's own book titled *C4 Trio y la Leyenda de los Cuatros Explosivos*⁵ written by Gerardo Guarache Ocque. In this book Guarache tells C4's story in a very detailed manner, exposing the developments that led the members of the group to move not just outside of Venezuela but to different places in the world, and how they made it work. Other important sources are the books by Jose Antonio Calcaño and Alberto Calzavara, considered the "bibles" of Venezuelan music history. These contain research made by these two musicologists who wrote about music in Venezuela and its development in continental America from colonial times to the mid-20th century. The other half of the century and its

⁵ Translation to English: C4 Trio and the Legend of the Explosive Cuatros.

protagonists – some of whom are still living – made it their priority to mix folk music and its instruments with classical repertoires and instruments. Groups such as El Cuarteto, Arcano, Ensemble Gurrufío, and Recoveco, just to name a few, set up the foundation for the future of folk music in Venezuela. These advances made the Venezuelan cuatro an important element that was always present in all these ensembles. In the early 2000s, some artists started experimenting with the construction of the instrument and the possibilities to make a completely electric version of it. Today, and due to the diaspora caused by the massive migration that took place mainly in the past decade, cuatro builders or Luthiers have set up their shops across the world. That is the case of Edgar and Daniel Morillo, who have built a large number of cuatros in their shop located in Tampa, Florida. They are natives of Barquisimeto, Lara, which is the “Cremona” of cuatro building in Venezuela.

Given the nature of the project, this research will be conducted through qualitative methodology. The intention is to document the ideas behind the Venezuelan cuatro’s expansion due to the massive exodus that the country has been experiencing. Scholarly books in politics and music, journal articles, e-news websites, an encyclopedia and few interviews will serve as sources, while the music and organology of the instrument will serve as proof of the versatility of the Venezuelan cuatro. This topic is of significance to the fields of musicology and ethnomusicology. There exist few English-language studies of the phenomenon that the Venezuelan cuatro represents, not only in the lives of Venezuelan migrants but also for those still at home. There is also an opportunity here to acknowledge that the Venezuelan cuatro’s globalization has been a positive force in promoting Venezuelan music throughout the globe. Ironically, the cuatro’s expansion into new forms and genres would likely not have happened if not for the ongoing

political crisis in Venezuela over the past twenty years, which led to the formation of a massive diaspora of over eight million citizens.

This thesis is divided into three chapters: the remainder of Chapter 1 will investigate the history and organology of the Venezuelan cuatro, specifically how its predecessors, the vihuela and the Spanish guitar, seem to transcend time through the cuatro. I will also mention specific details related to the construction of the instrument, tuning, and materials employed to produce it, as well as the means through which cuatros are reaching many countries in the world. Chapter 2 will explore the different musical groups formed during the second half of the 20th century, such as Ensemble Gurrufío and El Cuarteto, among others, and their impact on the globalization of the Venezuelan cuatro. Finally, Chapter 3 will explore politics, migration and the cuatro in its expansion through the world in recent times. It is imperative to this project to understand the current political and diasporic situation of Venezuela, to see the value and reach that the Venezuelan cuatro has achieved in the rest of the world.

Colonial times in the new world and the birth of the Venezuelan cuatro

The information about Western Europe's musical tradition regarding the Renaissance and the Early Baroque era is widely available and all our musical foundations are based on it. We have sufficient information about musical developments in countries like England, Italy, Germany and France, but there is not a lot known about the Spanish musical scene at the time. We do know that the Romani⁶ communities first appeared in Spain during the earlier years of the 15th century and

⁶ The Romani people (formerly known as Gypsies, a term now considered derogatory) originated in Northern India and first arrived in Europe between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. <https://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/conosciamo-i-roma-e-i-sinti/chi-sono/da-dove-vengono-il-nome/il-nome-rom-sinto->

settled in the south of the country. However, this period is not well documented, and there is even less evidence about music during the colonial times in Hispanic America, or as they called it back then: *Nueva España*.⁷

Colonial times in the New World

Columbus found the New World on October 12, 1492, but it wasn't until 1498, during his third voyage, that he reached what is now South America. This voyage had the objective of moving farther south through what is today Trinidad and Tobago and the coastal border of Venezuela and then going back to *Hispaniola* (Haiti and Dominican Republic) before returning to Spain.⁸ Their finding upon arriving to the South American continental land was that there was a different type of terrain, one rich in resources. They arrived in Venezuela to what today is the Peninsula de Paria, Estado Sucre. They noticed that this land was full of precious metals like gold, and it was inhabited by indigenous communities that are still present in the area, such as the *Cumanagoto* tribe.

Upon their arrival, the Spanish colonizers brought with them many of their traditions and imposed them as the norm in the New World. Even though there is minimal recollection in written documents, the transferal of knowledge was mainly done through music. During the beginnings of the Colonial Era in the American continent and all the way until the 17th century, the traditions were passed orally. This means that the different generations passed down to the younger ones their knowledge about their culture, traditions, and duties within their communities. After the Spanish first arrived, they followed with several Jesuit missions to evangelize the native Americans

[zingaro.php#::~:~:text=%E2%80%9CRoma%E2%80%9D%20is%20the%20word%20\(to%20define%20the%20Roma%20people.](http://zingaro.php#::~:~:text=%E2%80%9CRoma%E2%80%9D%20is%20the%20word%20(to%20define%20the%20Roma%20people.)

⁷ English translation: New Spain.

⁸

<https://www.historycentral.com/explorers/Columbus3.html#::~:~:text=On%20May%2030th%2C%201498%2C%20Columbus,the%20colony%20had%20reached%20Spain.>

all over the continent. They also brought musical instruments from Western Europe to use at churches and to teach the natives how to play them. In fact, it was a great privilege to be selected to be part of the *Capillas Musicales*⁹ and to learn from the *Maestro de Capilla*, because that meant to be taught to work with sheet music. In some other cases, they incorporated traditional instruments from the community, and this gave the music a very interesting quality of sound. Examples of this are the maracas and several types of drums that were already used in rituals and ceremonies by the indigenous people.

Musical instruments inherited from Western Europe

The lute was an important instrument in European secular music during the Renaissance and Baroque eras and was brought to the American continent in one of the very first missions sent by the Spanish crown after the discoveries of Columbus's third travel in 1498. The lute took part in the first stages of evangelization that the Jesuits conducted upon their arrival and continued to be used in church services through the 16th century. This instrument had also its Spanish version called the *vihuela española*, which was slightly different in shape and more closely resembles today's guitar (see figure 1.1).

⁹ Mariantonia Palacios, "La Música En Las Misiones Jesuíticas Del Territorio Venezolano," *Boletín Academia Nacional De La Historia* no. 396, vol. XCIX (2016), p. 68.



Figure 1.1: Vihuela Española.

Source: <https://musiqueandocole.blogspot.com/2017/08/la-vihuela.html>

The vihuela española preceded the Spanish guitar and influenced other countries to explore different types of plucked string instruments like the *triple*, the *charango*, the *guitarrita*, the *seis*, the *doce*, and last but not least, the *cuatro*.

Venezuela and Puerto Rico share the cuatro as a traditional instrument but their versions are very different from each other. The Venezuelan cuatro is modeled after the vihuela española and has only one set of four strings made of nylon.¹⁰ On the other hand, while the Puerto Rican cuatro's name comes from its initial number of courses ("cuatro," in English "four)," this version evolved into a high-pitched guitar-like instrument that has ten wired strings set up in pairs. The body of the Puerto Rican cuatro is similar to that of a viola or violin and has the size of the Spanish guitar (see figure 1. 2).

¹⁰ The Puerto Rican Cuatro Project. "The instruments." <http://www.cuatro-pr.org/node/70>.



Figure 1. 2: Puerto Rican cuatro

The diocese of Caracas ordered a set of vihuelas commissioned to be built in Spain and brought to the island of Cubagua (eastern Venezuela) in the 1520s. According to Calzavara (1987), the vihuela of the 16th century had treatises written dedicated to its playing. Calzavara describes the technique as “pure and even virtuosic.”¹¹ He also mentions an account found in an Episcopal archive in the city of El Tocuyo, Lara, Venezuela, and describes the results of a court file in 1625 accusing a priest called Thomás Xuáres of dancing to the music of a vihuela played by Sir Luis Ventura de Villegas at the wedding party of the sister of Sir Luis de Alvarado.”¹² These kinds of accounts show proof of the existence of vihuelas in El Tocuyo. This city is today considered the birthplace of the Venezuelan cuatro, and the best instruments are manufactured not just there, but now across the whole State of Lara.

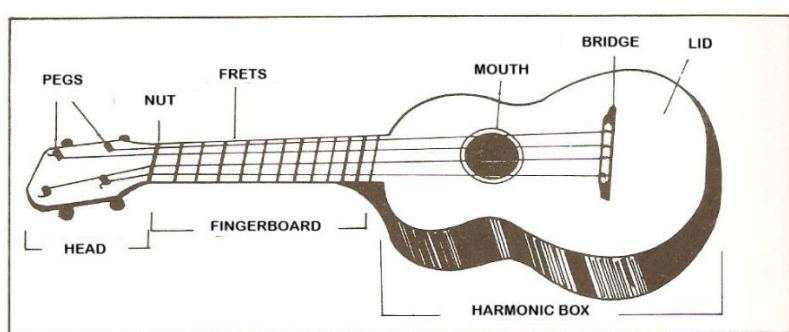


Figure 1. 3: Venezuelan Cuatro and parts

¹¹ Alberto Calzavara, *Historia de La Música En Venezuela: Período Hispánico, Con Referencias al Teatro y La Danza* (Caracas, Venezuela: Fundación Pampero, 1987), 14.

¹² Calzavara, A., p. 15.

The cuatro in Venezuela, differently from Puerto Rico, didn't evolve as much in its construction. The Venezuelan cuatro stayed true to its predecessor and its sounding qualities. For example, the instrument has an hourglass shape, has four strings, and is not played with a pick but rather with different strumming techniques (see figure 1.3). Since the times of Venezuela's independence from the Spanish crown, the cuatro was used to accompany gatherings and popular music. One reason for the cuatro's appeal was its affordability, since luthiers could construct it from an inexpensive type of wood.

In the 20th century, several cuatro ensembles gained national prominence with the advent of the recording academy, the radio, and the television. These technologies had a significant impact on the promotion and advertisement of these musical groups of folk and popular music. Some of the artists that will be mentioned in the next chapter are important figures of the folklore movement and the mainstream media of Venezuela. The support of record labels coincided with the mass production and popularization of genres that were not as popular in the whole nation or even outside of the country's borders.

CHAPTER 2

From Folklore to Mainstream

In the beginning of the 20th century, the cuatro was mainly used for folkloric purposes. Associated with Joropo and music from the plains of Venezuela, the cuatro was part of traditional ensembles that would entertain parties where there would be some celebration that was not necessarily related to religion. People would dance to the music of the ensemble that included harp, cuatro and maracas, as they would drink spirits and eat *Carne en Vara* (beef on a stick, see figure 2.1), a freshly sacrificed animal, cooked over charcoal or firewood on wooden sticks that help turn it around.



Fig. 2.1: Carne en Vara (Venezuela's barbecue from the Plains)

There are several types of cuatro that are used for different styles of music or different occasions. For example, in the State of Lara (previously mentioned as the birthplace of the cuatro

as we know it today) there is a five-string cuatro called *cuatro tamunanguero* (see figure 2.2) due to its association with one of the big folk expressions of the area: the *Tamunangue*.¹³

Dr. Rafaél Casanova has been making contributions on social media through the *Museo del Cuatro Venezolano*, where he mentions the importance of the Venezuelan cuatro in El Tocuyo and the *Tamunangue* traditions of the State of Lara. *Tamunangue* is the combination of music and dance performed during the celebration of San Antonio de Padua on June 12 and 13th of every year in the city of El Tocuyo. It combines the musical and cultural heritage received from indigenous, Hispanic and African roots. Men play the music during the procession, while women take on the dancing. This celebration also includes a large number of cuatros that are different and form a family. These have different sizes and numbers of strings. The Tamunangue cuatro variety includes in the ensemble: one cuatro *requinto*, conventional cuatros (four strings), one Medio Quinto (see figure 2.2) and a Cinco (lower register cuatro of five strings).¹⁴

¹³ José Peñín, and Walter Guido, *Enciclopedia de la música en Venezuela: I-Z* (Caracas, Venezuela: Fundación Bigott, 1998).

¹⁴ Museo del Cuatro venezolano, “Medio Cinco o Medio Quinto larense,” n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5H8L3L-FBs>.

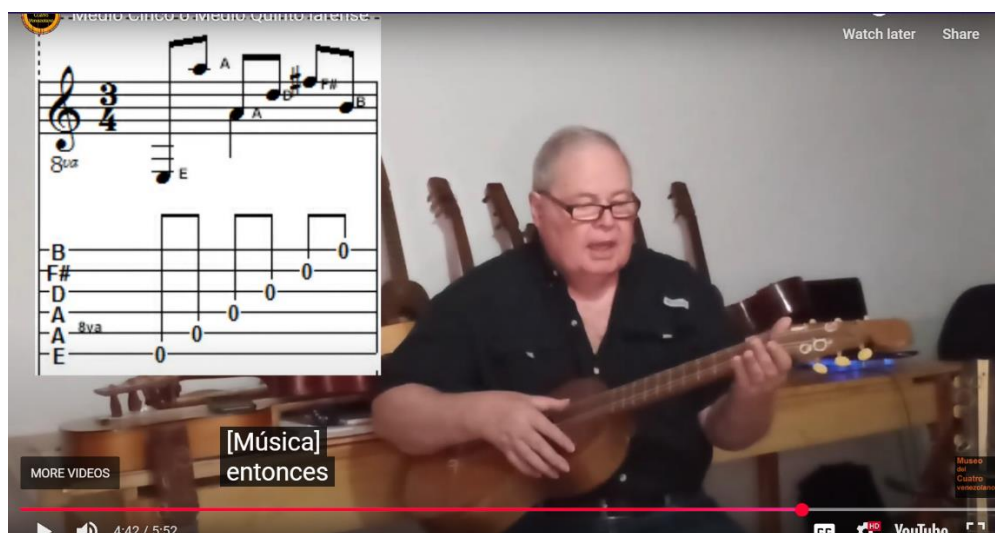


Figure 2.2: Dr. Casanova showing the tuning of the Medio Quinto.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5H8L3L-FBs>.

While the cuatro continues to serve as a folkloric instrument in Venezuelan culture, it has also moved into the musical mainstream. Throughout the 20th century many groups emerged as a response to the already vibrant classical music stage. Some of these groups are references to the movement of Venezuelan music that takes over different stages across the world in our time.

Venezuelan music ensembles in the 20th century

El Grupo Raices de Venezuela was founded in 1976, and its original members were Pablo Camacaro (cuatro), Orlando Moret (first mandolin), David Medina (second mandolin), Leoncio Ontiveros (guitar), Héctor Valero (acoustic bass), Domingo Moret (flute, guitar and mandola.) See fig. 2.3.



Fig. 2.3: Grupo Raices de Venezuela

Upon Domingo Moret's and David Medina's passing, Medina's son, Jesús David, violinist, pedagogue, composer and mandolinist, has taken upon the task of preserving and continuing the legacy of his father for the generations to come. Pablo Camacaro, the cuatro player of the group, is also a prolific composer who has entered several of his songs in the Venezuelan folkloric musical catalog. His song *Sr. Jou* was recently rerecorded by Raices de Venezuela and starring cuatro and singing star, Rafaél "Pollo" Brito. This song had not been recorded by this group with the lyrics until now. The original recording can be found in the album (LP) named "Raices" released in 1980 by the Palacio record company.¹⁵

The second most important musical group that made the path for so many instrumentalists in the future is **El Cuarteto**. This group comes directly from the friendship between the Naranjo and Delgado Estévez families. The members of each family were musicians or had an important role in musical developments both in and outside of academia. The members of this group, Raúl Delgado Estévez, Miguel Delgado Estévez, José Antonio Naranjo and Telésforo Naranjo (see fig.

¹⁵ "Grupo Raices De Venezuela - Raices (LP Info)."

2.4), would often play together at family gatherings, as well as in recital venues where they would play traditional Western European repertoire but end the evening with encores based on Latin American, mainly Venezuelan, traditional music arranged specially for the ensemble. At this point in time, the traditional music ensemble was usually involved with vocals and would only feature traditional instruments. El Cuarteto incorporated some of the academic knowledge they acquired in Paris and applied it in their music and arrangements.



Fig. 2.4: El Cuarteto

Given that several of the members of the group had taken advantage of the Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho Scholarships, sponsored by the Department of Culture of President Carlos Andrés Pérez (first term), through the Department of Planification (CORDIPLAN for its acronym in Spanish) directed (1974-76) by Gumercindo Rodríguez. During this time, Venezuela was in the period that today is defined as the “Venezuela Saudita” (Saudi-Venezuela) due to the nationalization of the Oil and the foundation of the Venezuelan Oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA).¹⁶ In 1978, *El Cuarteto* finally had an official performance at the Aula Magna of the Universidad Central de Venezuela, where they had a sold-out house of 2700 people.

¹⁶ Juan Guzmán, “EN REFERENCIA AL PROGRAMA DE BECAS GRAN MARISCAL DE AYACUCHO,” [www.academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu/89220173/EN_REFERENCIA_AL_PROGRAMA_DE_BECA%20GRAN_MARISCAL_DE_AYACUCHO), October 25, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/89220173/EN_REFERENCIA_AL_PROGRAMA_DE_BECA%20GRAN_MARISCAL_DE_AYACUCHO.

Another important group that changed the direction of the traditional music in Venezuela is **Serenata Guayanesa**. This instrumental-vocal ensemble is focused on the interpretation of popular music of Venezuelan traditional roots. The group agreed that the date of foundation of the ensemble was the year 1971, after the release of their first recording. Its original members were Mauricio Castro Rodríguez (tenor), César Pérez Rossi (bass), Hernán Gamboa (baritone and 1st cuatro), and Iván Pérez Rossi (baritone and 2nd cuatro.) See figure 2.5.



Fig. 2.5: Serenata Guayanesa

Their goal was to perform, research and compose music in traditional styles that would be accessible to the public through mainstream media such as the radio and television. Especially focusing on influencing the younger generations, who may not have been as interested at the time in this type of music, Serenata Guayanesa added a fresh take on the traditional forms of music from the different regions of the country. Some of these are joropos llaneros, golpes guayaneses, Andean airs, merengues, pasajes, aguinaldos and calypsos, traditional children's songs, guasas, fulías bambucos, waltzes, dances and habaneras. In a quote mentioned in the *Enciclopedia de la Música en Venezuela*, Ivan Perez Rossi states: “We are in the obligation of creating a musical

repertoire truly national, one that can serve the children as a protective shield to repel the avalanche of weird models.”¹⁷

They created a strong foundation and influenced many people, especially children who are today dedicated to the Venezuelan folk music genre. In 2016, *Serenata Guayanesa* was declared *Patrimonio Cultural de Venezuela* (Venezuela’s Cultural Patrimony) and very recently celebrated their 50th anniversary with a massive performance in Caracas. This group also collaborated over the years with different musical entities in the country such as *Un Solo Pueblo*, the *Orquesta Sinfónica de Venezuela* (founded in 1930, and the first symphony orchestra created in the country), and another group that is key in the innovation of instrumental folk music in Venezuela: *Ensamble Gurrufío*. The album “*Serenata con Gurrufío*” was released in 2001 and was the fusion that made the path for so many instrumental ensembles later.

Ensamble Gurrufío was founded in 1985 in Caracas by Cristóbal Soto (mandolin), Rayman Seijas (guitar), Asdrubal “Cheo” Hurtado (cuatro), Luis Julio Toro (flute) and David Peña (bass). Their idea was to focus on instrumental Venezuelan music through improvisation and spontaneity, which at the time were resources that were only used by popular music players. The presence of transverse flute and a double bass in the equation was not a limit for these virtuosos that were looking for ways to innovate in the genre of Venezuelan music. In 1998, the group added Juan Ernesto Laya (maracas), and in 2000, Jaime Martinez (oboe) arrived to complete the combo of what would turn (along with other emerging ensembles) into the reference for instrumental Venezuelan music and the inspiration to pursue it in many different stages. (See figure 2.6)

¹⁷ Translated from original text in Spanish. “Estamos en la obligación de crear un repertorio musical verdaderamente nacional, que sirva al niño de escudo protector para repeler la avalancha de modelos extraños.” Iván Pérez Rossi, talking about an álbum for children they had just released.



Fig. 2.6: Ensamble Gurrufío

Gurrufío's cuatro player, Cheo Hurtado, is also the creator and founder of a music festival called *La Siembra del Cuatro*. This festival started twenty years ago in 2004 as a means to justify funds received from the Department of Culture that hadn't been spent on an earlier project, the Camerata Criolla. *La Siembra del Cuatro* has served as a series of performances, workshops, presentations and most importantly, a competition, in which many of the current stars of cuatro playing met and started collaborating with each other.

Since the late 1990s, the political situation of the country started deteriorating but at the same time many new projects emerged, such as **Los Sinvergüenzas** (ca. 1999) who consider themselves receivers of the heritage that Raices de Venezuela and El Cuarteto paved for all musicians interested in producing, composing and distributing the instrumental Venezuelan music

while influenced by jazz and contemporary academic music (see figure 2.7). They have four CDs released called “Bichoneando” (2000), “Desde otro Lugar” (2007), “Sinvergüensuranzas” (2012) and “Raíces” (2013).¹⁸



Fig. 2.7 Los Sinvergüenzas

Another project that starts in the early 2000s, is *Arcano*, integrated by violinist Eddy Marcano, David Carpio (bass), Rafaél “Pollo” Brito (cuatro), Andrés Eloy Medina (oboe) and Pedro Colombet (guitar). There were also other groups that emerged around the same time which influenced the stages internationally, for example, **Recoveco** with violinist **Alexis Cárdenas**, who played a fundamental role in the integration of traditionally inspired music in the symphony orchestras of El Sistema.

¹⁸ Los Sinvergüenzas, “Bio | Los Sinvergüenzas,” n.d. <https://raimundopineda.wixsite.com/lossinvergüenzas/bio>.

According to cellist and composer Germán Marcano, after the creation of El Sistema (of which he is a founding member), José Antonio Abreu, the director and founder of the program, was not fond of academic musicians playing popular music and it was prohibited to take gigs or play at events that were related to non-Western European-based works. One person that somehow got away with it was **Alexis Cárdenas**, since he would play (usually) the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D major with the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra, and then as an encore (just like the beginnings of El Cuarteto) he would play a form of Joropo called “Pajarillo.” Given the good receptivity from the audiences, Abreu started to be more flexible with other members of the orchestra, like Eddy Marcano, who later created his own group to record and tour playing Venezuelan traditional music on the violin.¹⁹

¹⁹ Germán Marcano, phone call with author, March 10, 2025.

CHAPTER 3

Politics, Migration and *El cuatro* as Venezuela's Cultural Ambassador

El cuatro: Venezuelan national instrument

The Venezuelan cuatro is an instrument that means a great deal to this country's citizens. It is taught in elementary schools across the country, and in recent years, the dictatorship of Mr. Maduro has used El Sistema to form folk music orchestras, as well as cuatro ensembles to promote the study of national traditions instead of only academic²⁰ repertoire. Nevertheless, the cuatro was and is still used to play in traditional settings such as an ensemble used to play *Joropo*, a musical style present in the plains and that can be also heard in Colombia. The ensemble includes arpa (harp), cuatro, and maracas, and a singer, either male or female. The lyrics of the music usually refer to the labor done in the plains by the *llaneros* (people who take care of livestock) and who ride on horses and wear similar outfits to the American Texas cowboy.

According to *the Encyclopedia de la Música en Venezuela*, the first written document about a musical instrument in Venezuelan history refers to the vihuela, which in 1529 arrived to the island of Cubagua from Sevilla, Spain.²¹ The current cuatro is directly related to the Spanish Renaissance instrument of four courses. Cuatro also relates to this instrument in its written form, since the guitar was read in tablature, which is common to see in cuatro music, even to this day. The guitar was mainly used for popular settings, playing music of oral tradition in an accompanying role, while the vihuela was used for polyphonic music.

²⁰ The "academic" connotation of music will be used to distinguish oral tradition from written musical tradition.

²¹ Peñin and Guido, *Enciclopedia: A-H*, p. 460.

The cuatro kept that profile of a popular musical instrument until the 1940s, when the schools incorporated it into educational programs. At the same time, method books started appearing and mainly used tablature and the international letter system of music writing (C-D-E-F-G-A-B). In 1948 Freddy Reyna, who's considered the father of cuatro playing in a virtuosic way, explored the cuatro as a soloist instrument. In that setting the cuatro could be used as a melodic and/or polyphonic instrument. Reyna figured out a new tuning for the instrument, which usually is A3-D4-F#4-B3 (commonly known as *Cambúr pintón*), and proposed to tune in several forms for the soloist setting: A3-D4-F#4-B4, OR G3-D4-F#4-B4 because it raises the register and lets the instrument have more possibilities (same as the Renaissance guitar). Today the cuatro is often used as a solo instrument and has several pieces that are considered of academic level.

Political crisis and mass migration

In December 1998, Hugo Rafael Chavez Frías (1958-2013) was elected President for the period 1998-2003, winning the democratic elections by a vast majority. The people of Venezuela were tired at the moment of a bi-partisan pact called "*El Pacto de Punto Fijo*," where the main political parties of the moment (1958)—*Acción Democrática*,²² COPEI²³ (also referred to as the Social Christian Party) and the URD (Unión Republicana Democrática)²⁴—decided to set a governability pact in which none of the parties would hold onto power and have a peaceful transfer of power. The problem here was that these politicians turned very corrupt over the years, leading to several unsuccessful coups during the 1980s. The leader of the "revolution" was Chavez, who

²² Spanish for "Democratic acción."

²³ Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente.

²⁴ Spanish for "Republican Democratic Union."

was an active Lieutenant Colonel in the Armed Forces of Venezuela and wanted to be the counterpart to the right-wing parties previously mentioned.

After winning, he immediately proposed a revision of the Constitution, and the Constituent Assembly of 1999 approved several changes that the new president had recommended. These included several cultural policies that changed the mass media and started a pattern of silencing the opposing TV channels and radio stations.

Cultural policies in Venezuela between 1998 and 2013

The 1x1 Law by CONATEL

CONATEL or the *Comisión Nacional de Telecomunicaciones*²⁵ is an institution founded in the year 2000, with the intention to give the government the power to supervise and control all telecommunications in the country. This institution took into action the censorship of many TV channels, radio stations and newspapers, controlling any language and opinion that may be said on the air against the current administration. If the speaker or presenter said anything that would be considered offensive to the government, they would fine the media outlet with enormous amounts of money in sanctions, would persecute employees of the stations, or as in the case of many radio stations and a very important TV channel called Radio Caracas Television, the broadcasting license to the signal would not be renovated and they would just go off the air. RCTV was closed on May 27th, 2007, leaving many unemployed (technicians, operators, costume designers, talent, makeup artists, janitors and journalists). At midnight on May 28th, 2007, a young and not-as-famous Gustavo Dudamel appeared playing the Venezuelan national anthem, with the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela to inaugurate the new TV channel taking over the signal of Channel

²⁵ Spanish for: National Commission of Telecommunications.

2 (RCTV). The new TV channel is since that day controlled by the government, and it is called *Tves*.²⁶

The same way that horrible violations to free speech happened in the early 2000s in Venezuela, one must accept that there were some positive outcomes. An example of this is the “1x1 Law,” imposed by CONATEL to enforce that for every internationally produced audiovisual show/program playing in their stations (movies, series, songs, etc.), there would be one nationally produced show/program. This was especially imposed to reduce any international cultural references, especially all related to the USA, or as Chavez used to call it “El Imperio” (The Empire). This led to many national emerging artists being known and enhanced the popular knowledge of nationally based music, art, theatre, film and any other industry related to the arts.

During this time period, a significant number of new artists and bands emerged as well, which included bands such as *Los Mesoneros* (rock), *Rawayana* (urban pop), and in the case of traditionally rooted ensembles, groups like *Arcano*, *El Cuarteto*, *Ensamble Gurrufio*, *Recoveco*, and eventually, our main subject of study below: **C4 Trio** (see figure 3.1). C4 Trio started to receive more attention due to the nature of mixing classically trained musicians or jazz specialized musicians with traditional folk music instruments and musical forms.



Fig. 3.1: C4 Trio

²⁶ Williams Perdomo. “Cierre de RCTV: el primer gran golpe a la libertad de expresión.” *El Nacional* (Caracas, Venezuela) May 27, 2019. https://www.elnacional.com/entretenimiento/cierre-rctv-primer-gran-golpe-libertad-expresion_283606/

The more connected and supportive of the government an artist was, the more exposure and funding they would be considered for. This is why in the mid-2000s, and in the middle of massive expropriations deliberately taken by Chavez, the *Fundación El Sistema Nacional de Orquestas Infantiles y Juveniles de Venezuela*²⁷ (formerly known as FESNOJIV) got absorbed and started to be directly financed by the Secretariat of the Presidency during Chavez's second term.

Diaspora, politics and reinvention

As the political situation escalated, and after Chavez passed in 2013, there has been an increase in violence, repression and social issues. In 2014, and as a product of Nicolás Maduro being elected President to replace Chavez,²⁸ a great number of university students from most autonomous public schools started peacefully protesting and unfortunately, many of them died while fighting the national armed forces, who were instructed to attack the people. Many remain detained, died inside the torture facilities, or were compelled to leave the country in exile.

Beginning in 2013 and as a product of so many private farms and industries expropriated by Chavez in previous years, many basic need food and health items started to disappear from the shelves. The economy reached a hyper-inflation that had never been seen and due to all of these situations, the people of Venezuela started to consider moving to other countries.

The migration had already started back in 2002, after the nationalization of the oil company, PDVSA. Similar to what happened in 2007 with the closure of RCTV, many people protested these measures peacefully, and also many of the former employees of PDVSA decided to look for other

²⁷ Foundation El Sistema for National Youth Orchestras of Venezuela.

²⁸ Chavez mentioned in a national address that "if something happens to me at the surgery I am about to undergo in Cuba, please elect "my son" Nicolas Maduro as the president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela."

horizons where their future and their families were not compromised. Others decided to stay and ended up leaving later. Regardless of the situation for everyone involved, the word “reinvention” has been somehow linked to all the stories of nearly nine million people who have fled Venezuela to date. This term started to be used in the late 2010s, to define the process that many professionals were going through during the migration times. Venezuelan journalist, former TV host and podcaster, Erika De La Vega, has explored this concept and discussed her own process of transitioning from TV host and being famous in Venezuela, to arriving in Miami, and not finding a job in her own industry, due to the typical market demands such as demographic ratings based on nationality. She created the podcast “*En defensa propia*” (In my defense) to talk about the challenges of *reinventing* oneself at the professional, spiritual and personal level. A general example is regarding the migrants who started leaving Venezuela massively beginning in 2014. Most of the people who left the country are professionals with at least a bachelor’s degree from accredited universities in Venezuela and were stable in their job positions in companies, corporations, institutions or even had their own businesses. The situation obligated many of these people to leave their comfort zone and those same professionals today are most likely working in the service area (cleaning, rideshare, hairdressers, construction, package delivery, customer service, etc.); others have had the opportunity to start a new business, but these are often unrelated to their area of study or expertise. Many people moved across the globe to study graduate degrees and specialize themselves in their own careers while the situation passed, but unfortunately, the situation has gotten significantly worse as of the beginning of 2025. Reinvention then means to start over, to re-start, to try something else and embrace the change without forgetting where one comes from.

Just like Venezuelans, the cuatro has become also a globalized instrument. C4 Trio has been a perfect example of those artists that migrated and are serving as ambassadors of our culture through music and listeners alike to connect with their roots and honor the Venezuelan heritage regardless of their situation and global location. In the song *Añoranza* (longing) C4 Trio joins Nicaraguan singer Luis Enrique (see figure 3.2) to sing a song dedicated to all those people who decided to be *Caminantes* (walkers).²⁹ C4 Trio was part of the diaspora in the early 2010s. They persisted and kept working around the world, showcasing the cuatro as the national instrument and its versatility in different genres. They have been multiple times to the Latin Grammy Awards, winning on three occasions, have received two nominations to the American Grammy Awards, and have collaborated with several international artists, such as Luis Enrique and Hamilton De Holanda, among others.

Currently, Hector Molina has a web show dedicated to the history of the cuatro and its artists; he is currently based in Miami, Florida, USA. Edward Ramirez, also in Miami, not only performs across the world as a soloist and as a member of the Trio but also offers online lessons on his website. Jorge Glem lives in New York City and is constantly traveling to Miami and across the world for professional engagements with and without the group.

In a personal conversation with the group, they explained that their goal is to take the cuatro to as many stages as possible where it has never been heard. When asked about how the migration and the political situation of the past twenty-five years affected C4 trio, Rodner Padilla, bass player and producer of the group said: “It was a challenging time because everyone migrated to different

²⁹ The *Caminantes* are thousands of people who have fled Venezuela without the possibility to buy a flight or bus ticket, and had to walk all the way to Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Argentina and Chile. Most recently, and due to visa requirements from most of those States, people are crossing the dangerous Darién jungle, walking north with hopes to enter the USA through the Southern Border.

places and the group entered a sort of limbo, but we knew that we wanted to make the project work and then we made the necessary arrangements to keep playing concerts in other countries as well as recording new music.”



Fig. 3.2: C4 Trio and Luis Enrique in “Añoranza”

Concertos for solo cuatro and orchestra

The musical form of the Concerto is something that is often associated with the Western European tradition. In the following section I will talk about two prolific composers and performing artists who have developed the idea of the cuatro as a soloist instrument and combined it, not only with the European tradition, but also explores the traditional elements of Venezuelan music that can be performed on an instrument like the cuatro and accompanied by the traditional symphonic and chamber orchestra settings.

Leonardo Lozano (b.1965)

Born in Valencia, Venezuela, Leonardo Lozano is one of the disciples of that wonderful school of cuatro players that started with both the cuatro and the guitar. He attended the Conservatorio Nacional de Música Juan José Landaeta, where he graduated as professor of guitar performance

studying with Armando Cisneros. In Hector Molina's interview in his web show with Maestro Leonardo Lozano, it is revealed that Lozano may be the first composer to, according to the Maestro himself, "have the disrespect of writing a piece for Solo Cuatro and orchestra for the first time."³⁰ There are four such pieces by Lozano, who has been an advocate for the cuatro as soloist throughout his career. He remains in Venezuela and keeps offering performances in his hometown. Some of his works for Cuatro and Orchestra have not been premiered because of the situation in Venezuela and because two of them are dedicated to oboist Jaime Martinez, former member of Ensamble Gurrufio, former artistic director of Virtuosi de Caracas and currently, resides in Medellín, Colombia, where he acts as the first oboe of the Orquesta Sinfónica de Medellín.

Works list:

Passacaglia for cuatro and orchestra (2002)

Antología Venezolana con Chipola (2005), premiered by Virtuosi de Caracas.

Suite Venezolana para Cuatro y Orquesta de Cuerdas (2015), commissioned by Jaime Martinez for Virtuosi de Caracas.

Double Concerto for Oboe and Venezuelan Cuatro, dedicated to Jaime Martinez but not yet premiered due to the mass migration.

Untitled work for Cuatro and Symphonic Orchestra, finished but also not yet premiered. "It is dedicated to Venezuela and the process that we have experienced in recent years."³¹

³⁰ Héctor Molina, "Hablemos del Cuatro: Leonardo Lozano. La pureza del cuatro - Hablemos del cuatro T3-EP 12," web show (April 17, 2022), <https://youtu.be/5js3ftGdzOg?si=07Kz0SE9YhlqCvG5>.

³¹ Héctor Molina, "Hablemos del Cuatro," T3-EP. 12.

These pieces are not available for purchase online, but some recordings survive from the premiere performances of the works up until 2015.

Gonzalo Grau (b. 1972)

Gonzalo Grau is also a prolific composer and performer based in Boston, Massachusetts. His work has gone from choral music, to record production, to composing and arranging for his band *La Clave Secreta*. He recently premiered *Odisea: Concerto for Venezuelan Cuatro and Orchestra* at the Hollywood Bowl, in the summer of 2022. To date, this is the most recent piece written for the cuatro that features it in an academic setting.

According to its premiere soloist, Jorge Glem, this piece was commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic. It was an idea that was present in conversations between Glem and Dudamel for some time but did not come to fruition until 2022. In my conversation with him, Glem mentioned that the concerto was recorded recently in London, UK, with the Orquesta Sinfónica Simón Bolívar de Venezuela and Glem on the Cuatro, under Dudamel's baton. The composer, Gonzalo Grau, also joined the group for the tour that the orchestra was performing. At the last concert in the Berlin Philharmonic Concert Hall, it was the first time their audience heard a Venezuelan cuatro.

The composer attended the tour that had performances in Paris, London, Luxembourg, Berlin, Munich, Brussels and Madrid. The tour also featured pianist Yuja Wang, who had become a close friend of Dudamel. Even though it is important and really meaningful to have Venezuelan musicians playing, touring and recording the piece *Odisea* throughout the world, it is also important to acknowledge the political reality. The travels and the maintenance of an institution as big as El Sistema—the flagship orchestra of which is the Orquesta Sinfónica Simón Bolívar de

Venezuela—are directly supported mainly by the Secretary of the President’s office, or in a few words, the dictatorship.

Regardless of this situation, I consider it a very important milestone that Grau, Dudamel and Glem have achieved with this work. According to the composer’s program notes available at the LA Philharmonic website, the work depicts the journey from Jorge Glem’s hometown, Cumaná, on the country’s eastern coast, to Gustavo Dudamel’s hometown, Barquisimeto, in the west (and as mentioned before, the “Cremona” of Cuatro making; in fact, this city is known as the “Musical City of Venezuela”). This journey happens through the different traditional music of each area of the country that they are in. The eastern coast (where Glem is from) is represented by a *Polo Margariteño*, the center of the country is represented by a *Merengue Caraqueño* and the west side (where Dudamel is from) is represented by a *Golpe Larense*. The cuatro’s tuning of A-D-F#-B is the glue between each section of the piece, especially at the coda.

Grau describes the journey in his notes:

In all Latin-American culture, it is common to travel short distances and find completely different traditions. I grew up wondering what makes “the cuatro” Venezuela’s “national musical-instrument”, and as I was composing this concerto, I also got the answer to this question. **Our cuatro travels from coast to coast, from tradition to tradition; it changes accents, it blends and accompanies every single song. It proudly represents us from coast to coast.**³²

³² “*Odissea*: Concerto for Venezuelan Cuatro and Orchestra (world premiere, LA Phil commission with generous support from the Esa-Pekka Salonen Commissions Fund),” Hollywood Bowl, accessed February 2, 2025, <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/6204/odisea-concerto-for-venezuelan-cuatro-and-orchestra-world-premiere-la-phil-commission-with-generous-support-from-the-esa-pekka-salonen-commissions-fund>.

With this vision, one could argue that even though Venezuela does not have embassies in many countries due to the latest election results, every citizen out of those almost nine million are ambassadors of that Venezuela that still lives in its nationals. The same situation happens with the cuatro: it is acting as the ambassador of Venezuela's culture and customs. According to Rebekah Ahrendt (2018)³³, an instrument like the viol can be a tool for diplomacy in certain environments. The Venezuelan cuatro is creating a similar role for the power of negotiation and conciliation. Every time a Venezuelan citizen can talk about their country's culture, the most immediate thought is music, in which case, the cuatro is a fundamental part of the idiosyncrasy of said nation.

³³ Rebekah Ahrendt, "The Diplomatic Viol," in *International Relations, Music and Diplomacy: Sounds and Voices on the International Stage*, ed. Frédéric Ramel and Cécile Prévost-Thomas, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan), 93-114.

CONCLUSION

Information about politics and how the lives of so many musicians are affected by political measures is important to address because it does not matter the political tendencies that someone may have—we all recognize that the Venezuelan cuatro deserves to be shown to the world with the intention to help so many migrants who have had to leave all they know to start over in a different land and culture, adapt and process the difficulties of migration.

The Venezuelan cuatro not only represents traditions and values that are present in the lives of Venezuelan migrants and those still at home but also advocates for them by showing the good side of the unfortunate times. In this case, that good side is the globalization of the Venezuelan cuatro to genres of music that may not have been explored if it didn't migrate with the almost nine million citizens that left the country for the past twenty plus years, and who are now all over the world.

Ultimately, through the migration and because every Venezuelan citizen recognizes the characteristic phrase “Cambur Pintón”— “ripe banana,” associated from childhood with the four plucked strings of the cuatro—anywhere, I can consider the Venezuelan cuatro as the real Ambassador of Venezuela. Its significance, however, runs much deeper than politics: far from representing one political regime, it represents all the people affected by the migration, both in and outside of the country's borders.

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