

Prefigurative Performance: A Music School in Oaxaca as a Liminal Enclave

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Abstract: Through the story of Santa Cecilia—a community-led music school located on the outskirts of southern Mexico’s Oaxaca—this article examines the interface between the enclosed urban settings where collective “music-making” processes take place and the broader urban and social realities within which these processes are embedded. After introducing Santa Cecilia’s history as a cultural infrastructure that shapes the social and material lives of the communities supporting this initiative, I engage Victor Turner’s concept of “liminality” alongside the political notion of “prefiguration” to explore the extent to which urban infrastructures like this music school function as performances that both detach from and influence the realities that give rise to them, creating liberatory futures for participants in these collective processes. This analysis invites reconsideration of how cultural initiatives on the world’s urban peripheries can foster deeper transformations in prevailing political and cultural orders.

Introduction

In this essay, I revisit the history of Santa Cecilia Music School, a community-led initiative on the periphery of Southern Mexico’s Oaxaca, to discuss how collective cultural initiatives located in peripheral urban settings operate at the hinge—at a “liminal” (Turner 1986) space-time—between the world where they are born and the *worlds* where their participants aspire to live. Specifically, I argue that Santa Cecilia, like other community cultural projects in peripheral contexts, not only enriches the lives of the local communities who participate in and directly benefit from its musical activities, but also creates a

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self-contained environment where participants, by becoming active performers of and within such a creative setting, reimagine their daily realities and envision alternative life paths for themselves that would otherwise remain out of their reach. I further explore how localized collective performances like Santa Cecilia can end up spreading across wider contexts and contribute to building fairer social and material realities beyond the urban settings in which they emerge.

First, I provide a succinct overview of the music school's achievements, illustrating its social and material significance and explaining why it is accurate and analytically useful to conceptualize it as a "cultural infrastructure" (Bain and Podmore 2023a; Moya-Latorre 2023; 2024b) that is shaping the urban environment in which it is located. Second, I introduce the concept of liminal performance to highlight this cultural infrastructure's potential as a self-contained environment, operating between real and aspirational realities, and extending its relevance beyond the local urban setting. Third, the article discusses why viewing liminal enclaves of this sort as *prefigurative* performances is crucial for understanding in what specific ways these cultural initiatives on the peripheries may be liberatory for their co-performers.

Overall, this article intends to reconsider cultural initiatives like Santa Cecilia beyond the very tangible needs and aspirations that give birth to them in the first place—that is, beyond their local "infrastructuring" (Heil 2021) potential to shape local urban environments. By reinterpreting the notion of urban cultural infrastructure in terms of prefigurative performances that connect current and alternative realities, I seek to increase our understanding of how these collective urban initiatives may help to steer the world towards the fairer urban, cultural and political realities that we deserve.

A music school on the periphery: an urban cultural infrastructure

The first orchestra rehearsal after the students returned from France felt different. Minutes earlier, children and youth were running around, speaking loudly, and greeting instructors and passersby with excitement—they looked thrilled. The rehearsal itself was more intense than any of our previous practices. The young musicians played their instruments fearlessly and with energy, as if everything was fine as long as we made music together. Something had changed in them, and it showed.

Escuela de Música Santa Cecilia—hereafter, Santa Cecilia—is a community-led music school located in Vicente Guerrero (Figure 1), a self-built settlement established in the 1980s around Oaxaca's largest landfill, in southern Mexico. In August 2023, twelve years after the music school was conceived and the first lessons took place, the community achieved a long-awaited

milestone: the participation of 40 students in a two-week classical music festival in Normandie, France. This event marked the school's first large international appearance. Sending so many students from a music institution lacking official recognition in a settlement without formal administrative status would have seemed impossible a decade earlier. To make it possible, hundreds of people from across the world collaborated over many years. The experience became a turning point in the lives of these students, the Santa Cecilia community, and the overall history of Vicente Guerrero.



Figure 1. A street next to the center of Vicente Guerrero (photo by the author, March 2023)

Santa Cecilia was founded in 2011 by four young women from Vicente Guerrero who were concerned about the lack of cultural activities for the youth in their area. With the support of the local priest, Father José Rentería, the group organized a series of artistic workshops that took place after Sunday mass. Shortly after, this initiative evolved into a music school project because the music workshop garnered the most attention from Vicente Guerrero residents and because the founding women found an instructor who was committed for a longer period.

In the early stages of the project, creative fundraising strategies were employed to compensate the music instructor, purchase musical instruments, and

rent a space. The founding women began organizing *tequios*¹ to engage more neighbors. As founding resident Ángeles Ramírez nostalgically recalls, they did not mind selling *tamales*, *memelas* and *elotes* every Sunday after mass to collect funds. These exhausting self-organized *tamalizas* were effective in getting the music school off the ground during the first few months.

The school project was consolidated thanks to the support of Isabelle de Boves, an Air France pilot whose aunt was a nun residing and officiating in Vicente Guerrero for over two decades. During a visit to her aunt, Isabelle was introduced to Santa Cecilia and offered to bring donated instruments from France on her next flight to Mexico. This initial material donation cemented what would become a fruitful partnership between the Air France Foundation and Santa Cecilia, which continues to this day. This partnership has been crucial for the music school, transforming it into a cultural institution that is now central to the social and material lives of Vicente Guerrero residents (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. Group picture taken before students' trip to France
(photo by the author, August 2023)*

¹ *Tequios* are communal forms of organizing in Oaxaca based on neighbors' voluntary participation in activities expected to bring about collective benefits.

Santa Cecilia's history is full of milestones and hardships. Current and former participants recall memorable experiences that left a profound mark on their lives. One such event took place in 2018, when the Santa Cecilia Symphony Orchestra performed in Mexico City with the Air France Choir at the Centro Nacional de las Artes. As viola instructor Margarita Barrientos remembers, this concert—the first performance outside of Oaxaca state—provoked all sorts of emotional reactions among students and the audience:

We all got together in the dressing rooms, around Father José, and we prayed... The whole *banda* [wind ensemble] and the orchestra were crying, not of sadness, but of joy... After the concert, I approached Armando [a tuba student] and congratulated him. And I said to him: '*hijole*, how have you played, congratulations!' He was trying hard not to cry. He was shaking when I hugged him. And I thought: 'Oh my god!'²

Santa Cecilia's participation in the festival in France in August 2023 has so far been its most ambitious cultural exchange. It was particularly rewarding for co-organizers who had been sustaining the project for over a decade. For Vicente Guerrero residents, watching their kids perform under the Eiffel Tower and be treated as special guests in a music festival in Europe filled them with pride. For the students themselves, the experience was "lifechanging," as they expressed during a reflective collective session upon their return.

On a regular basis, the music school offers unique opportunities for the youth in the area to grow, cultivate their musical talents and explore new avenues to navigate the world around them. Two dozen of them have chosen to professionally pursue music to make a living, and for most others music is now an integral part of their identities. Most of these young musicians have already met numerous artists and volunteers from all across Oaxaca, Mexico, and several countries around the world, who regularly visit Santa Cecilia to collaborate with its community. Remarkably, most of these exchanges continue to occur in the very peripheral context of Vicente Guerrero, far from the world's mainstream cultural circuits.

This short walkthrough illustrates why it is accurate to define Santa Cecilia as an "urban cultural infrastructure" (Bain and Podmore 2023a)—a concept that has gained traction over the last few years, building on urban studies' "infrastructural turn" (Lemanski 2018). The task of "cohering and defining urban cultural infrastructure" is, as Bain and Podmore acknowledge, not straightforward, considering that there is no consensus yet on whether culture deserves the status of infrastructure (Bain and Podmore 2023b, 15). For this

² Interview with instructor Margarita Barrientos, 25 March 2023.

paper's argument, we can distinguish cultural infrastructure as "the many networks of arts and cultural creators, producers, presenters, sponsors, participants, and supporting casts embedded in diverse communities [along with their] complex interdependencies that shape the demand for and production of arts and cultural offerings" (Markusen et al. 2011, 8). Along these lines, a city's cultural infrastructure consists of the entrenched web of cultural spaces, actors, and practices that constitute a cultural ecosystem that is unique to each city. It follows that the richer a city's variety of spaces (venues, studios, theaters, public spaces), actors (artists, curators, sponsors, community organizers, audiences), and practices (performance, rehearsals, screenings, presence on social media), as well as the more fruitful and cohesive the relationships among them, the more robust and generative this city's cultural infrastructure will be (Moya-Latorre 2024a).

In peripheral and materially precarious urban environments like Vicente Guerrero, however, a cultural infrastructure rarely exists because the cultural spaces, actors and practices hardly form an articulated web. Certainly, Vicente Guerrero, like other peripheral neighborhoods, is characterized by a myriad of cultural expressions, which shape their residents and artists' individual and collective identities. As the young local artist Joel Cortés puts it, their art is primarily a response to strengthen their neighbors' sense of place in creative ways:

Here in Vicente Guerrero, there is really a lot of talent, a lot of energy, a lot to transmit and a lot to say. To transform all of that into arts or into music is a form of liberation that can give your life a lot of meaning, right?... There are many young people like me with a [conflictive] record. And so, the only way to contribute to a change is to make something different... If I wrote lyrics, I would talk about everything that happened to me, about the beauty that exists here, about community work. Many young people [in Vicente Guerrero] want to share their reality through their art.³

As Joel explains, many young artists are willing to tell their story through their artistic creations. Therefore, when cultural initiatives like Santa Cecilia emerge from within the community, they may end up functioning like actual urban infrastructures themselves thanks to their potential to articulate existing cultural elements. Indeed, this music school serves today as an urban infrastructure in Vicente Guerrero through its physical infrastructure (the school's facilities) and social infrastructure (the participants and stakeholders that sustain and are brought together through it), which help enact other urban changes in the area.

³ Interview with artist Joel Cortés, 6 March 2023.

Events like the so-called Peace Concerts⁴ on top of the dumping ground that originated the Vicente Guerrero settlement, or the urban art festival commemorating the death anniversary of one of the community's most respected rappers,⁵ gathered hundreds of participants from Vicente Guerrero, Oaxaca, and beyond. These events not only reveal the youth's dedication to their community's cultural life, but also how they rely on the music school to bring communities together around issues that are meaningful to local residents. As cello instructor Lucy French acknowledges, since she started teaching at Santa Cecilia in 2018 until now, Vicente Guerrero's atmosphere has become increasingly celebratory thanks to the cohesive power of the music school. Today, streets around Santa Cecilia look much more vibrant.⁶

Moreover, the school's facilities frequently operate as the headquarters for organizations like Techo, which works on the improvement of Vicente Guerrero's water infrastructure, and the Tash Foundation, which has been actively supporting the community of waste-pickers who used to make a living from the dumping site next to Santa Cecilia. The school also served as the base of operations for the church to deliver basic supplies during the pandemic and has been used by healthcare squads to provide settlement-wide medical check-ups on a regular basis.

By 2016, Santa Cecilia had already grown enough for Vicente Guerrero's authorities (back then still considered a *colonia*) to leverage the project's significance in their pursuit of the settlement's administrative upgrade to an *agencia*.⁷ Indeed, the fact that this solid pedagogic project had been contributing to the neighborhood's development was a very persuasive argument for residents to request a more formal status for Vicente Guerrero.⁸

In other words, Santa Cecilia Music School has turned into a socio-material infrastructure in Vicente Guerrero. Quite symbolically, this bottom-up organization has ended up representing not just Vicente Guerrero, but Oaxaca and Mexico in formal events across the country and abroad, which is equally telling of this institution's reach beyond the original scope of the music school project. Based on its path so far, we can expect that Santa Cecilia Music

⁴ The second of these concerts was creatively documented by French YouTuber Sév on Voyage: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdM5aозukoY>

⁵ This event was organized by local graffiti artists, skaters, rappers, and martial arts practitioners: <https://www.instagram.com/pozolazodelhiphop/>

⁶ Interview with instructor Lucy French, 4 October 2023.

⁷ The legal status *agencia* is given to self-built *colonias* that have grown large enough, but do not meet the administrative requirements to be considered *municipios* with their own government and budget. Vicente Guerrero became an *agencia* in 2016 within the administrative boundaries of Villa de Zaachila.

⁸ Interviews with president Modesta Hernández, 1 July 2021 and with instructor Lucy French, 4 October 2023.

School will continue expanding its influence as an infrastructure—one of a cultural nature—that is shaping, and improving, the social and material life in Vicente Guerrero.

Cultural infrastructures as liminal performances

As I have summarized in the previous section, Santa Cecilia's accomplishments are quite remarkable on the ground.⁹ By articulating previously scattered cultural spaces, agents, and practices, this music school has turned into an urban cultural infrastructure that is meaningfully contributing to the development of the local urban setting. As a consequence, its participants, especially the young music students, are directly benefiting from this institution on a regular basis, and several of them are even planning their life paths around this collective project.

There is room, however, to also examine arts-based urban processes like Santa Cecilia through their potential to *go beyond* their effects on local urban realities. Inspired by the literature on socially engaged art, which interprets artistic performances as opportunities to unleash interventions in the real world beyond the artwork (Boal 2014; Cohen-Cruz 2010; Finkelpearl 2013; Olsen 2019), in this section I portray this community-led music school as a *liminal performance* that is contributing to reimagining our current reality.

I felt the need to re-conceptualize Santa Cecilia beyond its role as a cultural infrastructure because of the dual feeling that this music school evoked in me while I actively participated in the process during my year-long fieldwork (Moya-Latorre 2024a). On the one hand, I was well aware that the co-performers of the music school can hardly ignore the material and social realities of the urban setting where it is located. As a self-built settlement whose story has been conditioned by the dumping ground around which it has grown over the years, Vicente Guerrero experiences all sorts of material and social hardships. These range from unpaved roads and a lack of drainage to extremely low incomes, a lack of full administrative recognition, and stigmatization by surrounding populations. These challenges directly define the daily lives of its inhabitants, including the Santa Cecilia community.

On the other hand, however, I directly experienced how this cultural initiative seemed capable of providing a self-contained environment for participants to temporarily detach from those hardships and focus fully on the collective performance when they gather around music and other cultural and social activities. In other words, as I will further illustrate, Santa Cecilia

⁹ I extensively document Santa Cecilia's history and infrastructuring properties in my dissertation (Moya-Latorre 2024a)

appeared to be itself a collective performance operating at an interface between the real world and an alternative one.

Victor Turner's notion of "liminality" elegantly encapsulates the meaning and the possibilities of performance as such an intermediate space between worlds. As Andrews and Roberts note, "liminal" has spatial and temporal connotations, as it denotes both "a boundary, border, a transitional landscape, or a doorway" and "the initial stage of a process" that can mark "the beginning as well as an end" of other processes (Andrews and Roberts 2012, 1). That is, "liminal" refers both to something, someone, or a stage located in a transitory state between two realities, as well as to such a transitory state itself. Along these lines, Turner defines the term "liminality" in the context of collective human rituals and performance as the intermediate phase of a three-stage process:

Rituals associated with passage from one basic human state or status ... to another are divided into three stages: [first], separation from antecedent mundane life; [second], liminality, a betwixt-and-between condition often involving seclusion from the everyday scene; and [third], reaggregation to the quotidian world (Turner 1986, 101).

That is, Turner conceptualizes liminality as a passage enabled during a ritual or performance from one reality to another. Such transition occurs when humans engage in a collective performance before which they must detach from the "mundane life" and after which they return to it. However, we could argue that, if such ritual or performance has been meaningful enough for their participants, the "quotidian world" to which they are "reaggregated" afterwards (to use Turner's words) is not exactly the same as the one that existed before the performance, because those who return will have undergone some sort of internal transformation and will therefore navigate the realities that they re-encounter somewhat differently.

To illustrate this idea, let us think about artistic experiences that have been meaningful to us. Who has not attended a concert or a theater play, or watched a movie, even a vibrant sports match, that they still remember with excitement? Speaking for myself, I can recall the intense emotions I experienced at a handful of classical concerts that I was involved in as a listener or as a player. While I was immersed in these musical performances, I felt completely detached from the outside world, and even *after* they were over, I could sense how the excitement continued for hours, sometimes even for days, as if something had transformed within myself forever. Even though I was not always capable of articulating what exactly had changed, these cathartic experiences altered, even if mildly, my interactions with the outside world *from then*

on. In Turner's language, it is accurate to state that I had undergone a stage of liminality.

This example illustrates how liminality is not simply a moment of disconnection from and reconnection to the real world, but a self-contained stage of modulation conducive to *re*-creating—to creating again, or differently—the external social realities of those who transition through such a stage. Remarkably, liminality is a time-space in which collective creativity can blossom (again, who has not felt inspired to do something creative after one of these thrilling performances?). During this passage, the collective performance is not constrained by real-world norms and logics and therefore can unfold according to the behaviors set by the co-performers. As Soyini Madison argues, Turner's liminal states are unique opportunities to reinvent human systems:

Relatively free of norms, guidelines, and requirements, liminality, for Turner, is the space of greatest invention, discovery, creativity, and reflection. It is in this state of liminality where we are at the threshold of systems, not stepping into the system to the right, nor the system to the left, but reflectively, creatively, or ceremoniously assessing both (Madison 2012, 158).

Many of the cultural events and concerts that the Santa Cecilia community organizes are inventive experiences of this nature. It is not surprising that, when they are asked about milestones in the school's history, its participants bring up memorable events with much excitement. As Father José Rentería recalls, the musical debut of Santa Cecilia students at a children's hospital in 2013 was an early turning point in the school's development due to its emotional significance:

A lot of people cried. They were processing so many emotions. And how not to! We were watching so many marginal people singing and playing together. We were processing personal emotions, happiness and hopes, but also the many frustrations we carry with us, because we have always been marginal.¹⁰

As Rentería articulates, the school's first public performance became a powerful display of emotions that went beyond the music played. This has since been a recurring theme: every performance of the Santa Cecilia orchestra outside of Vicente Guerrero turns into a whirlwind of feelings that keeps their performers—both the players and the facilitators of those events, as well as the contemplating audience—enthusiastic over time. The most significant ones, like the concerts at Mexico's Palacio de las Artes or under the Eiffel Tower, even leave a lifelong mark on all involved.

¹⁰ Interview with Father José Rentería.

Moreover, as a cultural infrastructure that both is built on and facilitates such emotional experiences, it is appropriate to think of Santa Cecilia Music School—the *whole project*—as an ongoing collective performance itself. On the one hand, the school facilities constitute a bounded space that is embedded in, but simultaneously detached from, Vicente Guerrero, where students, instructors, and passersby make music together while they are within its boundaries. On the other hand, the school, as an institution, extends the reach of this collective space to the venues where their musical ensembles perform, such as Oaxaca’s zocalo, Mexico City’s Palacio de las Artes, and Paris’s Eiffel Tower. As the school’s former president Modesta Hernández reflects, all these musical commitments are influencing other aspects of people’s lives:

The music school, I feel, has been growing a lot because it is not simply a music project, but a space where the youth interact and coexist, as well as their parents. They have learned how to express themselves and to create relationships. Now even the youth defend the project when all of a sudden, we deal with complicated situations. More than a music project it is a cultural project that has sensitized the human side and especially the communitarian side, and so now the youth are not just interested in what they can learn from this project, but also in what they can do for their community.¹¹

This quote and many other thoughts that the Santa Cecilia community shared with me reflect why stating that the music school transforms its participants is not rhetoric or exaggerated. Both the specific cultural events that participants cherish in their memories and the project as a whole meaningfully influence them. These experiences contribute to defining how they interact with the “quotidian world” outside of Santa Cecilia and Vicente Guerrero every time they “return” to it. In short, Santa Cecilia Music School is a *liminal* cultural infrastructure, which, by transforming its co-performers, has the potential to alter the real world in which it is situated.

From liminal to prefigurative performance

Why further conceptualizing this liminal infrastructure as a *prefigurative performance*? Because the notion of liminality does not necessarily speak to the emancipatory character of peripheral cultural initiatives like Santa Cecilia, which emerge in materially and socially very challenging contexts and help to open up life paths for their performers that would otherwise remain out of their reach. Turner’s concept is broad enough to encompass *any* kind of rituals that individuals and communities go through to recreate the world that they want to live in, which does not have to be fairer, more inclusive, or more

¹¹ Interview with president Modesta Hernández, 1 July 2021.

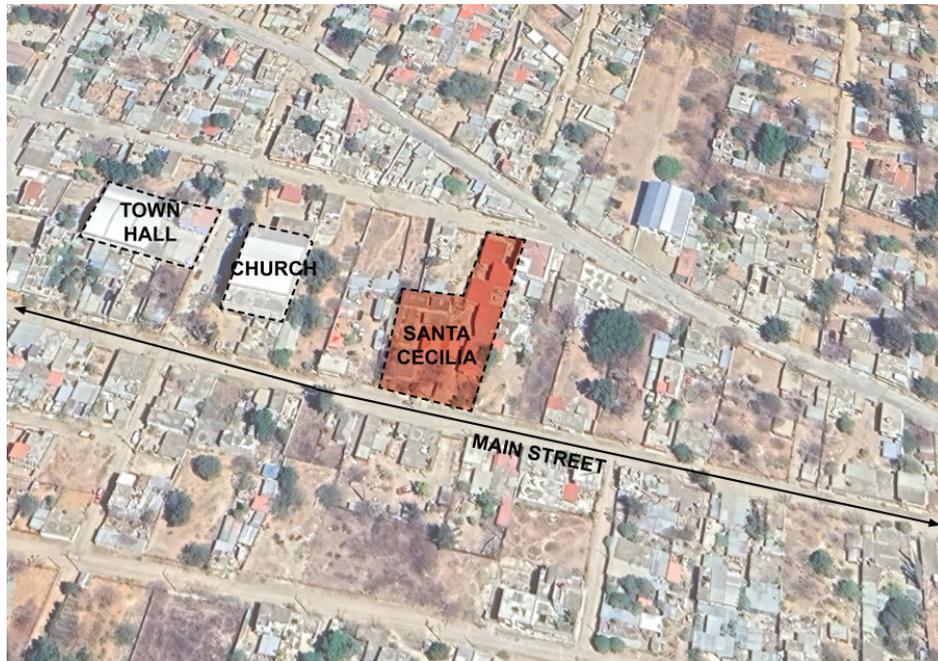
democratic than the existing one.¹² The notion of liminality is helpful as a starting framework to illustrate how peripheral cultural infrastructures can function like intermediate settings between real and possible worlds, but it says little about what those possible worlds can—and should—look like.

The concept of “prefiguration”, on the contrary, embodies the idea of a more equitable future—one that we should strive for. Emerging from the anarchist movements in the late 19th century in contexts of acute social inequalities, prefigurative politics have since widely captured the attention of social movements and political theorists, who have experimented with horizontal and fairer political systems that can pose an alternative to the ruling ones (Franks 2018; Yates 2015). Generally imbued with a utopian aura, prefigurative politics encompass an array of practices that are loosely related to each other by their shared goal to overturn current capitalist systems and erect anti-capitalist societies where extreme social and material inequalities are overcome.

Prefiguration has also been criticized for its lack of a concrete theoretical-practical formulation. Like the abstract notion of liminality, the concept of prefiguration risks becoming a buzzword or “empty signifier” (Laclau, 2005) referring to virtually anything that sounds like a political alternative to the status quo without specifying what exactly would make the alternative system fairer and more desirable.

To retrieve the original appeal of prefiguration as an emancipatory ideal, here I propose juxtaposing this once-anarchist concept with the notion of liminality to appreciate how cultural infrastructures on the peripheries are leveraged by their co-performers to materialize more promising realities for themselves in a very tangible manner. Spatially, prefigurative enclaves are well defined infrastructures anchored in their urban areas, like the music school facilities in Vicente Guerrero (Figure 3). Temporally, these enclaves stage a rich variety of activities that convene diverse participants during predefined periods, like the concerts performed by Santa Cecilia Symphony Orchestra and the many community events that take place at the school. Combined, these prefigurative enclaves function like bounded space-time settings where their protagonists put into practice their own collaborative social orders.

¹² For instance, extremist groups make use of their own liminal performances to deepen into structural forms of oppression and segregation (i.e., patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism).



*Figure 3. Location of Santa Cecilia in the heart of Vicente Guerrero
(source: Google Earth Pro).*

Participants arrive at these liminal spaces from a real-world context and find themselves in the middle of a generative performance alongside a rich variety of actors—students, instructors, staff, and volunteers from Oaxaca, Mexico, and foreign countries. After acting as co-performers of and in such spaces, they carry the experiences they lived, and the lessons learned, during the collective music-making into their daily lives. For students like Joaquín Bollo, who is now pursuing a professional musical career in Mexico City, Santa Cecilia expanded his understanding of the real world:

For me [Santa Cecilia] is another family ... The music school felt like a shelter to me [after my father's passing]. As time went by, teachers and the entire community took me in ... [If Santa Cecilia didn't exist] I would have been someone else. When my mother took me out of the school for a while, my life kind of suffered an emotional downturn... Without Santa Cecilia, I would have become a very closed person, with many blindfolds, which the school allowed me to take off, seeing all the things that exist in the real world.¹³

Joaquín's account is representative of the liberating power that Santa Cecilia has upon the local community. But the lessons of Santa Cecilia often

¹³ Interview with student Joaquín Bollo, 18 July 2023.

travel to far-away locations, too. When asked about what people across the world can learn from projects like Santa Cecilia, Isabelle explains how each participant experiences their own transformations in unique ways:

We have learned a lot. Each volunteer who has come to Vicente Guerrero tells me, ‘I have not taught, I have learned!’ Here, we learn how to organize things collectively. In our countries, everything functions individually... But here, people do not expect anything from anybody, and they self-organize. And I had not seen anything like that, such a strong community force and self-management.¹⁴

Clearly, Isabelle was impressed early on in her relationship with Santa Cecilia by Oaxacans’ collective organizing power (i.e., Goertzen 2010). As it turned out, over the years, this French pilot has coordinated large collective events across France and Switzerland to gather resources for Santa Cecilia, and more recently, for a new music institution in La Havana.¹⁵ These activities would never have taken place if Isabelle had not become a central player in the music school and experienced firsthand how the Santa Cecilia community self-organizes to get things done.

We can infer that the music school project, as a prefigurative performance, offers opportunities for individuals and groups from diverse cultural realities to co-perform, learn from each other, and carry their learnings around the world. The cultural exchanges that occur at and through Santa Cecilia permeate the living realities of those who take part in its cultural activities as musicians, instructors, volunteers, or audience. In other words, these realities end up being influenced by what occurs in Vicente Guerrero:

The music school plays a fundamental role in the eastern area [of Oaxaca’s metropolitan area]; it changes lives, it changes families. I often tell people, ‘Look, you are investing in a school, in a project. You are investing in a boy or a girl but trust me that what they do will not solely affect the life of that boy or that girl. It will impact their entire family, and then their community.’ Why? Because a kid who plays music has another perspective, another way to see life, they are more organized, more disciplined, more sensitive, more human. [These kids also learn to] project into the future, communicate, socialize better... And if they socialize, they will begin thinking about and analyzing their community and they will say, ‘What can I contribute?’¹⁶

This quote by the school’s former president eloquently reflects why our co-performance of and at cultural infrastructures like Santa Cecilia becomes a portal between our past and future lives, and consequently also between the

¹⁴ Interview with Isabelle de Boves, 28 February 2023.

¹⁵ <https://www.labandademusica.com/en/welcome2/>

¹⁶ Interview with president Modesta Hernández, 1 July 2021.

past and future lives of those who surround us. Needless to say, the fact that Santa Cecilia's president is explicitly aiming to cultivate human qualities like being "more organized, more disciplined, or more sensitive,"¹⁷ does not mean that *all* community-led cultural projects on the peripheries must pursue these liberatory values in particular. Indeed, each collective performance will be built around and yield a unique combination of principles and objectives. Rather, this reflection evokes that in Santa Cecilia's case, the community has chosen to cultivate in their participants the idea of an alternative and better future (one among many possible) by making them co-performers of that future *today*.

More generally, we could argue that the performers of these prefigurative enclaves are reimagining their identities in novel ways. Particularly, young artists from the peripheries like those who set up and sustain Santa Cecilia do not merely hope to join society as it is, nor to be recognized within existing social parameters. Rather, they aim to create different futures for themselves by actively *performing* the elements of those futures within current possibilities.

For example, Santa Cecilia is not a "classical" music school where the youth exclusively learn European music from the 18th and 19th centuries. It is also not an institution where they only learn Oaxacan and Mexican music. Rather, the Santa Cecilia community has chosen to pick from and merge both traditions to create their own *unique* music pedagogy, which cannot be found anywhere else. This music-based initiative embodies the concept of a prefigurative social and material setting where diverse groups of individuals and communities can begin to imagine future cultural realities that represent who they are more fairly and that are more bearable than the societies where they grew up.

As prefigurative urban performances, cultural institutions on the urban peripheries like Santa Cecilia create opportunities for their protagonists to go beyond resignation and critiques of existing social systems and cultural standards to enunciate, through collective performances in liminal settings, alternative social and material scenarios. These performed realities challenge widespread conceptions of urban poverty, underdevelopment, and human misery recurrently associated with peripheral communities (Araújo and Cambria

¹⁷ This quote may come across as judgmental. Modesta affirms that those who engage in collective musical activities (among other possible activities) expand their human capabilities, but the opposite should not be inferred—namely, that those kids who do *not* play music are less human. It is important to not forget that Modesta is referring very specifically to Vicente Guerrero, where Santa Cecilia is the *only* cultural institution accessible to many.

2013; Moya-Latorre 2022) and, instead, project images of more promising futures for residents of the urban peripheries onto the world.

Figure 4 shows how prefigurative performances like Santa Cecilia take place at liminal enclaves between our current world and hoped-for worlds. Whereas the world we live in, which gives birth to materially and socially challenging urban peripheries like Vicente Guerrero, can be deafening and dissonant (to stick with the musical analogies), the worlds envisioned by the co-performers of music-making initiatives like Santa Cecilia are characterized by a relatively consonant coexistence of diverse groups of people from across urban contexts and cultures in their shared goal to give a chance at life to the youths born and raised on the peripheries.

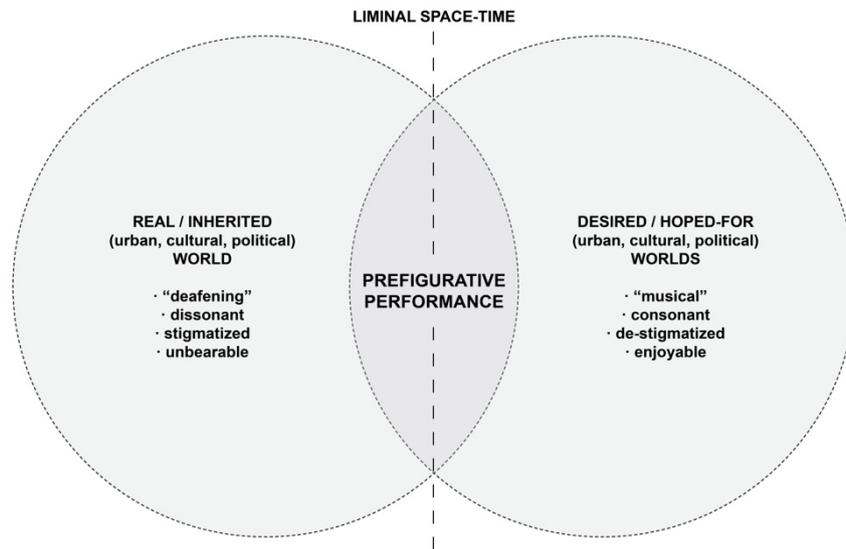


Figure 4. Liminal space-time setting performed between the real and the desired worlds

In essence, Figure 4 represents how cultural infrastructures like Santa Cecilia operate as prefigurative performances at the interface, or the liminal space-time, where the real and the hoped-for worlds meet. These infrastructures do not deny the harsh social and urban realities of their co-performers nor propose unreachable utopian futures. Rather, they allow experimentation with the worlds-to-be through everyday collective performances—which, in Santa Cecilia’s case, range from music lessons and rehearsals to concerts across Mexico and beyond, as well as other cultural and social activities hosted at the school’s facilities—at the intersection of both sets of realities.

Conclusion

This article has adopted an imaginative lens to consider the wider influence of cultural initiatives like Santa Cecilia as liminal prefigurative performances that exist in an intermediate setting between current and possible worlds. After revisiting the notions of liminality and prefiguration and juxtaposing both concepts to highlight their emancipatory meaning, I have argued that cultural infrastructures located in peripheral urban enclaves operate in a space-time between the urban realities we come from and the fairer ones for which we strive.

This analysis could be further explored to study how cultural infrastructures are contributing to shaping the new urban identities of the world's peripheral citizens. To do so, future research could look into the synergies that already exist or that can be established between localized prefigurative performances across peripheries in different urban, political, and cultural contexts. As the world seems to be falling apart due to the current geopolitical context, such research could offer glimpses of hope for how to cement alternative political and cultural orders where the majorities of the world, and especially those on the peripheries, can thrive individually and collectively.

For now, in this essay I have scrutinized how humble cultural initiatives on the world's peripheries like Santa Cecilia Music School are already shaping the social and material lives of their co-performers, locally and beyond. Following this article's reasoning, interpreting Santa Cecilia and other cultural infrastructures not as isolated projects but as varied instances of larger cultural and political processes that enrich, and make more livable, our cultural and urban lives can be a helpful visualization to plan and implement practices, strategies and policies that *amplify the music* of the world's peripheries. It is my hope that conceiving of collective music-making initiatives of this nature as prefigurative performances can inspire other urban, cultural, and political processes—and the study thereof—that enable the construction of fairer (urban) worlds.

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