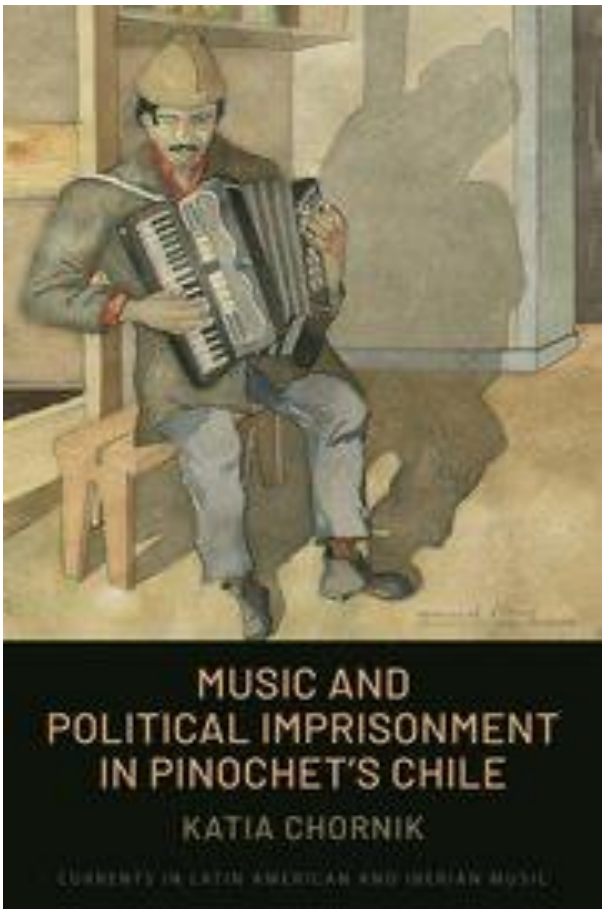
Contrapulso
Revista latinoamericana de estudios en música popular

Katia Chornik. 2025. *Music and Political Imprisonment in Pinochet's Chile.* Nueva York: Oxford University Press, 161 pp.

David Spener
Department of Sociology and Anthropology,
Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, EEUU
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8678-8630
dspener@trinity.edu



https://global.oup.com/academic/product/music-and-political-imprisonment-in-pinochets-chile-9780190052263?q=Chornik&lang=en&cc=us

Katia Chornik's Music and Political Imprisonment in Pinochet's Chile is a vital and timely addition to the literature on the role played by music in Chilean politics and society

from the time of the socialist government of Salvador Allende through the long years of the Pinochet dictatorship. As indicated by its title, the book focuses specifically on how the experiences of political prisoners under the dictatorship were affected by the music they remembered, heard on the radio, made themselves, or were forced to listen to by their captors and torturers. The author is uniquely qualified to write this book as an academically trained researcher; the child of parents who themselves were imprisoned and then exiled for their political activities; and the director of the magnificent *Cantos Cautivos* project, an expansive online archive of prisoners' testimonies regarding the conditions of their imprisonment and the songs that impacted them as captives. Indeed, the book serves as a scholarly commentary on that archive[1] . Although it is a scholarly book, it has the virtue of being written in a style that non-specialists will find accessible.

Music and Political Imprisonment is conceptually well organized into six chapters, plus a "Coda" that serves as its concluding chapter. It begins auspiciously with a prologue by none other than former Chilean president Michelle Bachelet, herself a victim of political imprisonment by the dictatorship, as were both her parents. In other words, she is especially able to appreciate Chornik's book, its findings, and its message. Writing eloquently from experience, Bachelet argues that the book demonstrates how "even in the most oppressive circumstances, music became a form of resistance and resilience" and that "songs hummed under one's breath or shared in whispers acted as acts of defiance, preserving identity and solidarity among prisoners." Such a statement sets lofty expectations for readers, and the book lives up to them.

It is important to note that Chornik not only addresses the question of how music comforted and sustained prisoners during their confinement and torture, but also how the staff of the detention facilities used music to add to prisoners' misery, as if torture and mistreatment were not sufficiently cruel by themselves. One particularly disturbing example of this occurred at Villa Grimaldi, where during interrogation sessions one female prisoner was repeatedly forced to listen to Brazilian pop star Roberto Carlos singing his hit in Spanish "Un millón de amigos," whose lyrics "praise friendship and generosity, imagine a future of peace and happiness, and call to sing together"—a cruelly ironic musical backdrop for torture–. Worse still was the playing of "Gigi el amoroso," a song popularized in several languages by the French Italian singer Dalida, whose lyrics tell the story of "an Italian man who, thanks to his sex appeal and singing talent, has conquered all the women of his town." The cruel irony of this song was that the torture of female prisoners was frequently sexual. Not only that, but Gigi was the nickname that torturers in several detention centers gave to a device they used to administer electric shocks to prisoners. According to the prisoner's testimony, they would sing the song as they came to torture her, apparently because "they loved to feel like they were Gigi."

Chornik's discussion of music as a source of strength for prisoners, as well as a means of punishment for them, illustrates one of the guiding concepts of her work, "memory cacophony," which she uses to "describe the discordant kaleidoscope of testimonial voices, emblematic and non-emblematic memories of musical happenings, music repertoire, and commemorative music practices that have emerged when researching music phenomena." Another illustration of such cacophony is that not all the songs on which left-wing activist prisoners relied for spiritual nourishment were taken from the repertoire of the *Nueva*

[1] *Cantos Cautivos*, a bilingual archive in English and Spanish, can be freely accessed online at https://www.cantoscautivos.org/es/

Canción Chilena, the politicized genre associated with support for the Allende government. In fact, prisoners sometimes expressed their resistance by singing apolitical songs from other popular genres, such as when a man in the Chacabuco prison camp sang the famous Mexican ranchera "Volver." Popularized by Vicente Fernández, the song is well known throughout the Spanish-speaking world and includes a verse in which the singer finds himself on the road to insanity over the torture he feels from the breakup with his lover. The sly allusion to torture in the song was not lost on the prisoner audience. Prisoners in several detention sites also wrote their own songs in other styles that obliquely criticized Pinochet's regime.

Another incident discussed by Chornik that exemplifies memory cacophony was the exceptionally weird visit by the world-famous Spanish crooner Julio Iglesias to sing to a mix of general inmates and political prisoners in a jail in Valparaíso in 1975, around the time he was scheduled to perform at the dictator-approved Viña del Mar song festival. She was told the story by several people, one of whom was the poet-songwriter Mauricio Redolés, who was incarcerated there at the time. Iglesias had many fans among the general inmates, but few among the political prisoners, who assumed he was at least tacitly pro-Pinochet. In the end, after arriving six hours late, Iglesias remarked upon taking the stage that he understood his audience's plight because he, too, was a prisoner of his fame. This grossly offended the political prisoners, who responded so uproariously that the acclaimed singer left without performing a single song. I found the author's account of this incident especially compelling owing to a personal political-musical memory of my own: while taking a course in Spanish at a university in the United States, I was required to read and discuss an article praising Iglesias's performance in Viña del Mar. I was outraged because, as a young student, I had recently learned of the torture and murder of Víctor Jara and had begun to learn to sing and play his songs. To praise Iglesias and laud the warm reception he received in Chile was to make a mockery of Jara's status as a victim of the dictatorship and a martyr of the left.

To her great credit, Chornik wrestles mightily with the thorny ethical and political issues involved in doing the kind of ethnographic and in-depth interview research she and her colleagues carried out to create *Cantos C*autivos and write this book. She takes care to engage the literature on trauma and on how collecting former prisoners' testimonies could cause them real psychological harm, and she discusses the ways in which her data-gathering sought to minimize that possibility by avoiding asking interviewees overly probing questions or interrogating them in such a way as to call into question the "evidence" for their claims.

One of the thorniest challenges the author faced was how to handle interviewing Álvaro Corbalán, the head of operations of the CNI secret police, who is serving a sentence in the Punta Peuco prison for "the disappearances and murders of scores of political opponents" of the Pinochet regime. Nicknamed "Mozart" by the prison guards, Corbalán was and remains a great aficionado of music who has written many songs and given guitar lessons to fellow prisoners serving sentences for grave human rights crimes. Chornik worries that by giving Corbalán a platform to speak about his passion for music she will overly "humanize" him in such a way as to increase public sympathy for his plight as a prisoner. Of course, Corbalán *is* human, one who made a conscious choice to commit horrific crimes, justifying them perversely in his own mind as being necessary to achieve some kind of "greater good." The fact that a criminal has an appreciation for music in no way diminishes their culpability, an issue that the author makes crystal clear, pointing out that "[m]orally flawed individuals capable of appreciating and playing music abound in history—Hitler and Stalin (both enthusiastic music lovers), Benito Mussolini (a keen violin player), and Hans Frank (a keen piano player), to name a few."

One longstanding question about Corbalán that Chornik clears up for readers concerns his close friendship with the singer-songwriter Tito Fernández, "El Temucano," who for a time was recognized as a key exponent of *Nueva Canción Chilena.* When Fernández died in 2023, Corbalán wrote his obituary in the leading right-wing paper in Chile, *El Mercurio*, eulogizing him as "an outstanding folklorist and friend." This point was also of special interest to me. In the early 1980s, I played in a nueva canción conjunto in Washington, DC, that opened a concert by Fernández that we saw as part of the international campaign to end the Pinochet dictatorship. I played charango (poorly) in the band and received some helpful suggestions for improvement from Fernández's accompanist, Roberto Parra. In my youthful ignorance I assumed he was *that* Roberto Parra, i.e., Violeta's brother, of whom I had never seen a photograph. Of course, he was not Violeta's brother, but that was something I only learned in Chile many years later.

Music and Political Imprisonment includes another strong chapter about a community chorus, Voces de Rebeldía, which was born in the Tres Álamos concentration camp in the 1970s and lives on today, singing to preserve the collective memory of the human rights catastrophe that was the civilian-military dictatorship led by Augusto Pinochet. The work of Voces de Rebeldía and others like it, such as Cantores que Reflexionan, continues to be important to keeping alive the memory of so many Chileans who suffered, died, and disappeared for having the audacity to stand against the fascist takeover of their country.

Chornik ends her book, which was published in late 2025, by suggesting that projects like *Cantos Cautivos* might be undertaken to document the role that music played in the political detention centers of the dictatorships in other Latin American countries. She specifically mentions the rise to power of Argentina's president Javier Milei, whose government has sought to minimize or even erase the memory of the crimes against civilians committed by that country's dictatorship. Now, with the election last December of the right-wing politician José Antonio Kast as Chile's president, a similar attempt at erasure may be in store for Chile. Let us hope, then, that the servers for *Cantos Cautivos* are located somewhere *los negacionistas* will be unable to shut them down. And it would be a good thing for Chornik's important book to be translated into Spanish and published in Chile, sooner rather than later.