

THE RESISTANCE WILL BE HEARD: CHARLY GARCÍA'S WAY OF SINGING AN OPINION

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ABSTRACT The study of music can also be the study of history or revolution. A look at the representation of women in the work of Argentinian musician Charly García illuminates the attitude of Argentina's citizens under a misogynist government from 1976-1983. With this in mind, what are the lessons woven into García's lyrics, and how can they continue to influence people after so many decades? In this essay I will illustrate how García's songs, in a time of oppression for many, were acts of resistance against an unjust and dangerous totalitarian government. In addition to this, I will demonstrate how García, in order to protect himself from the persecution of the dictators, used imagery from well-known stories to talk about issues of life and death.

How do literature, art, and language change politics? The study of music can also be the study of history or revolution. A look at the work of Argentinian musician Charly García illuminates the attitude of Argentinian's citizens under a misogynist dictatorship, the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional ("National Reorganization Process"; 1976-1983). This essay is my interpretation that women in Charly García's songs are a representation of Argentina and the suffering the country has experienced. I will illustrate how his songs, in a time of oppression for many, were acts of resistance against an unjust totalitarian government. Using three songs I will talk about how Charly García's lyrics—a good example of the art of poetry at the service of music—relate to the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, using art and archetypes to communicate a political stance.

Born in 1951 in Argentina, Charly García is a musician who saw many tumultuous changes to the government. The songs that I am going to talk about were written between the dictatorships of Juan Carlos Onganía (1966-1970) to Jorge Rafael Videla (1976-1981). The policies that each put in place did not

consider the concerns of the people. García used music to critique the ways they controlled the people, since he cared about the citizens of Argentina unlike those in charge. If Charly García had directly raged about the injustice of the government, it is not likely he would be alive today. The dictators of the time had their ways of getting rid of anything negative said against them. “Los desaparecidos” (“the disappeared”) is the group name of the thousands of people the government took away.

The threat of death was very real, and if you were dead, you could no longer advocate for people. How did artists get their message to the public? The format in which García tells his tales is very important. Rancière pinpointed the primary component of communication for artists: aesthetics. He called aesthetics the mechanism that conveys the message to our senses, saying that “artistic practices are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility” (13). Through these aesthetics we all partake of the work of art. The three songs I will talk about today are from three different bands García was in. These lyrics delve into hidden messages—allegories. Allegories are a collection of metaphors that prompt the listener to think critically about what is said. In eras of rigorous censorship, mystery protected the authors. The hidden art communicated in the aesthetics of García’s poetry has political importance.

When one starts listening to García’s lyrics for the first time, one may notice how many fictional references are in his songs. If he lived in a time and place without censorship and punishment for free speech, would he be less subtle about his opinions, or is the use of metaphors central to his art form?

The role that famous literature plays in works of contemporary art is the ability to relate it back to something people already know, giving a new light and perspective. Rancière wrote, “[the] distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts.” The use of allegory is both a sword and a shield in the political realm. An exploration of García’s use of symbolism shows that women are an allegory for the country Argentina; García advocated for women's rights in a time when they were marginalized.

García writes his music with clues sprinkled throughout. Someone with experience of Argentina’s struggles understands what is going on, but to an

outsider, it is only a story. That is the secret of all literature; stories are always deeper than first glance. The first song in this disquisition is “Mariel y el Capitán” (“Mariel and the Captain”), by García’s first band, Sui Géneris. The song appears to be about a woman, Mariel, who was tragically killed in a falling elevator. The captain she was seeing died from sorrow. What is it really about? In 1972, the year this song debuted, Onganía was dictator. Juan Peron was exiled, who was the “captain” in this song. Mariel is a reference to “Ariel” (Restrepo Mesa), an important work of fiction for Argentina by José Enrique Rodó which is based on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. In Shakespeare’s story, Ariel is the embodiment of all that is good, pure, and true. The song talks about how the government killed Mariel, everything wonderful about the spirit of Argentina. While Peron is considered a controversial leader, he cared for Argentina, his Mariel. Other clues point to the government, too. The room that Mariel goes to is “C,” on the fifth floor. These are references to the address of La Casa Rosada (Restrepo Mesa), which is the equivalent of the White House for Argentina. These layered references weave a complex story from the resources given to us in literature.

In 1973, Peron returned as the leader of Argentina until his death the next year. Jorge Rafael Videla took charge with the goal to erase sympathies for the Peronists. This new government tried to eradicate any liberal ideas that Peron had encouraged to the lower classes. During this time, García formed a new band, La máquina de hacer pájaros (“The Machine that Makes Birds”). Some ideas about the significance behind this name are how the lyrics gave people knowledge, and that gave them freedom—from there they could take flight. The band was making birds out of the people trapped in cages.

Their 1977 song “Marilyn, la Cenicienta y las Mujeres” has political potential. “Cenicienta” translated means “ashen” and it is also a name; the Spanish equivalent to Cinderella. This beloved fairy tale is a story about the injustice a woman endures, working without reward. In this retelling of the story, Argentina is that woman. The lyrics tell us this is a country without the sun and fire is the only light. People—the women—burn themselves in it. They are ashen, which is where Cinderella comes in. In the traditional story, Cinderella finds a home when she becomes a princess. The country is “a home,” yet “esto no es un juego, loco / estamos atrapados” (“this is not a game, dude / we are trapped”). In this version, the ominous notes from the music make it appear that it is a prison instead.

Cenicienta is not the only woman in this story. The lyrics “Marilyn tomó demasiadas pastillas ayer” (“Marilyn took too many pills yesterday”) is a reference to the actress Marilyn Monroe and the tragic way she died. In Argentina, the government was oppressive for women; the laws were like pills forced down their throats. García looked at the negative the country had, but prompted the people to think about how they could make it better. There is a better place, for example, somewhere “Over the Rainbow.” The beginning of “Marilyn, la Cenicienta y las Mujeres” has the same melody as the famous song from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and so the protagonist Dorothy Gale is implied as one of “las mujeres” (“the women”). “Over the Rainbow” is an important song for the LGBTQ+ community, another marginalized group in Argentina. At that time their rights were nonexistent. García and his bandmates personally felt the oppression they felt when the government tried to kill two birds—pájaros—with one stone by saying the creators behind *La maquina de hacer pájaros* were “just gays” and should not be listened to. This disrespect for both the LGBTQ+ community and *La maquina de hacer pájaros* forms an intersectionality demonstrated in this song. Intersectionality is the understanding between groups that have historically been oppressed. Going back to Cinderella, maybe everyone doesn’t want to become princesses, but they do want to be free. The song ends with a reminder of reality in a chant: “Todos tenemos hogar” (“We all have a home,” the Spanish version of *The Wizard of Oz* quote “There’s no place like home”). Those ending lyrics appear encouraging on paper, but the eerie way the music portrays them tells us something deeper is at work, cautioning us to not get too comfortable. Our imaginations should power us to create reality into something better for all, not something we are trapped in.

García was nearly put into another kind of trap when he wrote the last song I want to talk about. In 1980, Videla was still dictator when García’s new band Serú Girán released “Canción de Alicia en el país.” The translation of the title of this song is familiar: *Alice in Wonderland*. García’s connections between Lewis Carroll’s work of fiction and Argentina were too close for comfort from the government’s perspective and García was almost arrested, as his poetry talks about the oppression really happening. The children’s story is whimsical, and the upbeat melody of this song matches that, but the lyrics hold a sinister angle. “El trabalenguas traba lenguas / el asesino te asesina” sounds so peppy, but the lyrics

mean, “The tongue twister twists tongues / the murder murders you.” “Tongue twisters” are all the government was telling the world, lying about the real conditions and policies they were enforcing, which were oppressive like with “los desaparecidos.” The story *Alice in Wonderland* itself has some undealt-with issues, like the Queen of Hearts. If Ariel is all that is good about Argentina, the Queen of Hearts represents the control of the government opposed to that goodness. Things you find in Wonderland include “un rio de cabezas” (“a river of heads”), because the Queen kills anyone who disagrees with her. García connected this to Argentina as well. The reasoning the government gave the people was, as the song puts it, “los inocentes son los culpables, dice Su Señoría” (“The innocent are the guilty, says their lady”). To keep the lies alive, the people were threatened, and if they acted despite those threats they became “los desaparecidos.” Charly Garcia talked about the government’s commands in this song when he said, “No cuentes lo que hay detrás de aquel espejo, / no tendrás poder” (“Don’t tell what there is behind that mirror, / you won’t have power”). They did not want people to know what was going on *Through the Looking Glass*. For many years that is what the world saw about Argentina: a mirror, an illusion of what was happening, not what people, like Charly Garcia, were feeling. This was a place “ni abogados, / ni testigos” (“without lawyers, / without witnesses”), speaking to the injustice of it all. How much of a “wonderland” is that?

Because of the way García used literature in his songs as a shield from the censors, he built up a following. Fame protected him when he launched his solo career because questions would be asked if a national celebrity “disappeared.” This gave him the freedom to have less subtlety in his lyrics. The changes from the start of his musical career to where he is today are aided by the framework of his poetry. Together literature and art roused the spirits in the people in Argentina to not let the government control them. Literature changes the world in any format it is in, even music.

Works Cited

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