#MMLPQTP Politics: Soccer Chants, Viral Memes, and Argentina's 2018 "Hit of the Summer"

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Abstract

Note: all translations of quotations from linked media are the author's own. In early March, viewers of the Argentine public television cooking show Cocineros Argentinos were treated to a jaunty bit of live interstitial music as the program returned from a commercial break.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Crowds, Cultural Studies, Digital Media, Internets



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In early March, viewers of the Argentine public television cooking show *Cocineros Argentinos* were treated to a jaunty bit of live interstitial music as the program returned from a commercial break. In keeping with the day's Italian theme, a small band consisting of an accordion, violin, and sousaphone played a lively but simple minor-key melody in a brisk tarantella rhythm. "Those boys can play anything," one of the hosts remarked approvingly. The other observed, "It's the hit of the summer!"

These sixteen seconds of seemingly innocuous instrumental music on a government-sponsored television program sparked a minor firestorm in the Argentine press. One channel wondered whether they were deliberately "picking a fight with [President] Mauricio Macri," while another categorized the musical selection as "polemic." Social media voices in support of the embattled president called for *Cocineros Argentinos* to be cancelled. Ultimately, the program's directors apologized to the public for having "bothered or disrespected" their viewers with "ingredients that do not belong in the kitchen."

https://youtu.be/pZN1H4qFbUs

How could a bit of instrumental, pseudo-Italian kitsch cause such an uproar? Understanding the offense – for the musical selection was indeed intended as an obscene insult to the nation's president – requires a bit of a dive into the history and culture of Argentine politics, protest, and sports fandom. The "hit of the summer" of 2018 in Argentina is not a pop song, but a chant that started in a soccer stadium, and has become a viral sonic meme, multiplying across social media and fragmenting into countless musical iterations. By early March, listeners in Argentina heard a clear meaning in this melodic sequence, and no singer was necessary to hear the words it invoked: *Mauricio Macri, you son of a whore.*

The melody comes originally from a source that expresses quite a different political sentiment. In 1973, after eighteen years of forced exile, ousted populist president Juan Domingo Perón was allowed to return to Argentina, and was shortly thereafter re-elected president. Perón died in office ten months later and was succeeded by his vice president and third wife Isabelita. Isabelita's reign would soon devolve into an infamously brutal military junta, but in 1973 populist national fervor was running high in the country, and the airwaves were full of catchy, simple patriotic marches:

https://youtu.be/GYmRf8gVEgo

"*Es tiempo de alegrarnos*" ("It is time for us to be happy"), by Raúl "Shériko" Fernandez Guzmán, is full of optimism for what Perón's return means for the country. The second stanza celebrates: "I see that my people returns once more to laughter / It's that my country has begun to live again / Pain and sadness are left behind / The days of happiness and bliss have returned."

It's a sentiment that would be difficult to find today in a country where political discourse is polarized and acrimonious. Macri was elected in November 2015 on a platform that was largely about undoing the policies of the decade of Peronist administrations that preceded him (his party

itself is called "*Cambiemos*" [Let's Change]). Since coming to power, Macri's party has pursued a neoliberal agenda that has been increasingly unpopular with the working and middle class. Cuts to state subsidies have made the cost of utilities and mass transit skyrocket, and groups from truck drivers to teachers have organized large-scale protests in response to the austerity measures and budget cuts to the public sector. In response to these increasingly fervent protests, Macri has even authorized violent police repression of crowds. In short, as of the beginning of 2018, he's politically embattled and a target of widespread criticism from a wide range of sectors.

Yet the "hit of the summer" is not merely an ironic repurposing of an old bit of patriotic musical fluff in a time of unrest. In fact, as the phenomenon first went viral, most Argentines were unware of the music's original source, which had been a fleeting fad. Instead, the melody had lived on and been transformed through the great repository of popular musical memory that is Argentine soccer culture.



https://youtu.be/8z1Wo3efJms

Soccer fandom in Argentina is a full-throated affair. As Kariann Goldschmitt has observed in the case of Brazil, the soundscape of mass gatherings in the soccer stadium, and the affective charge of crowds experiencing the collective pain of loss or the exultation of victory, is a fundamental ingredient of popular identity in Argentina. But it is not the commercial, mediatized end of what Goldschmitt calls the "sports-industrial complex" that is primarily influential here.

Rather, *hinchadas*, or fan clubs, pride themselves on being able to sing loudly throughout the match, arms extending in unison, typically accompanied by *bombos* (bass drums), trumpets, and other loud instruments. Fan clubs pride themselves on the variety and creativity of their *cantitos* – the 'little songs" that repurpose popular melodies with new lyrics that praise their own side, and insult their opponents' lack of fortitude. Any memorable melody is fair game: for example, fans of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Bad Moon Rising" might have found the *cantito* that Argentina embraced during the 2014 World Cup vaguely familiar. In the decades since its release, "*Es tiempo de alegrarnos*" had been used periodically by the clubs of several teams, in variants whose

unifying factor was the use of the obscenity "*la puta que te parió*" (literally, "the whore that birthed you") for emphasis.



Hinchada Argentina – Copa do Mundo Brasil 2014 – Estádio Beira-Rio – Porto Alegre, June 24, 2014, Image by Flickr User Felipe Castilhos

It was San Lorenzo's fans who gave the *cantito* a new life in politics, during a match against Boca Juniors. The connection between Boca and President Macri was obvious for fans of both teams; Macri began his political career as the president of that team. When San Lorenzo fans felt they had been the victim of biased refereeing, the song began: "*Mauricio Macri, la puta que te parió…*". All four phrases of the melody repeated the same words.

https://youtu.be/RBHLlWt8Ho0

Unusually for a soccer *cantito*, the chant was soon picked up by the fans of another team, River Plate, who used it in similar circumstances when facing Macri's Boca Juniors, their archrivals. Even more unusual, though, is the life that the chant has since taken on outside of the soccer stadium, where it is directed at the President not due to his association with his former club, but because of growing discontent with his political career. In the last weeks of February the *cantito*, now popularly known by its initials as "MMLPQTP" was heard in concert halls, basketball stadiums, and even in a crowded subway station (where, despite fare prices that have risen at eight times the rate of inflation, service remains irregular and delays are common). Journalists covering the phenomenon began to refer to it as "*el* hit *del verano*," or "the hit of the summer."



"Suena en las canchas, suena en los recitales, suena en el subte... Ahora también suena en los celulares!!!" Click to download an Mp3 Ringtone of "MMLPQTP"

Using the English-language "*hit*" made clear that the allusion was not merely to the season (February is, of course, summer in the southern hemisphere, and a popular vacation time for Argentines) but to the seasonal nature of pop music consumption. The popular music critic's thinkpiece seeking to define the essence of the summer song, celebrate it or lament its banality is almost as much of a trope as the phenomenon of the hit summer song itself. The sonic zeitgeist of summer 2018, these journalists suggested, could best be defined not with a breezy club banger, but with the hoarse and irate voices of a nation embroiled in an economic crisis that would make idle days at the beach unthinkable for many of its citizens.

There were attempts to curtail the spread of MMLPTQTP: the national referee's association debated suspending future soccer matches if the chant broke out, characterizing it as potentially "discriminatory" speech (some *cantitos* do traffic in racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic epithets, and referees have suspended games in the past to control them). In the end, no such suspensions occurred, perhaps because soccer fans and other musicians alike had already realized that the MMLPQTP chant had re-signified its melody so strongly that the lyrics were no longer necessary. One political cartoonist pointed out the referees' conundrum perfectly: "They're not singing the lyrics, sir, just humming the music," the referee observes, asking, "should I suspend [the game] anyway?" Faced with the specter of censorship, Argentines embraced the full expressive potential of non-linguistic sonic signifiers, and the democratic possibilities of virally distributed, user-created content. A sonic meme was born.



The term "meme" was coined by Richard Dawkins, who used it to mean a basic unit of information analogous to a gene, only for information or ideas. I use the term here, though, in keeping with the more contemporary popular usage, to refer to user-generated humorous content – generally captioned images — shared online. Meme sharing sites often provide templates to help users easily generate variations on a theme. In this case, the structural template was a melody and two simple chords (which musicians helpfully transcribed and shared, both in standard Western notation and instructional video formats).

Musicians of all backgrounds flocked to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to riff on MMLPQTP. In a catalog too long to list in its entirety here, a greatest hits compilation might include solo versions for piano and charango, covers in popular genres from blues to cumbia to metal. Argentines with a strong sense of national identity might prefer tango, but Brazilian-style Carnival samba also made an appearance (playfully invoking the possibility of censorship with Spanish "subtitles" that replace the offending phrase with "la la la"). And thus finally, scandalously, the hit song made its way to national television on a cooking show, where despite its transformation into an Italian-style instrumental ditty, the sting of its insulting words was still clearly heard.



https://youtu.be/eVvQIBXsHYc

The viral success of instrumental versions of MMLPTQP is a prime example what ethnomusicologist Anne Rasmussen has recently called "the politicization of melody." In music's potential to comprise and thus link simultaneous linguistic and non-linguistic codes lies its ability to render those linguistic codes superfluous. These linkages provide the potential to signify political messages through melody alone, opening up possibilities for protest that are more difficult to prevent through legal means (broadcasters' obscenity clauses, for example), or easier to circumvent through technological means (amplified instruments). It would be easy to overstate the durability or pervasiveness of such linkages, however. One need only look back to that same melody's entirely differently politicized origin, which is today largely forgotten or seen as a curiosity, to imagine that the linkage between the melody to "Es *tiempo de alegrarnos*" and its current manifestation of partisan abuse might one day fade from popular memory like the one-hit wonders of summers past.

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Featured Image: Screencapture from "Monumental MMLPQTP"

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