



The National Anthem

Once a week, students at the British Schools assembled in the gymnasium for a music lesson. It was an old-fashioned gym, with a worn wooden floor and sturdy exercise bars attached to the walls to be scaled by little gymnasts. The music teacher took her place in front of the children, sitting at a black, upright piano that had seen better days.

We were there to rehearse our two national anthems so that we might perform them on special occasions when we had an audience, which usually consisted of our parents and the faculty and a few official people on a mission of some sort. The gym had skylights in the ceiling that filtered daylight into the hall. During rehearsals there were always specks of dust floating in the air, easily visible on bright, sunny days, and sometimes distracting if I let my mind wander. I can clearly remember the thrill of the whole experience: the high notes the girls sang during the Uruguayan anthem, the excitement of the stirring chorus, and the exhilaration of losing myself in the roar of the choir.

The British national anthem is short and to the point. We only sang the first verse, asking God to save our gracious, noble king or queen, and wishing a long life to our victorious, happy, and glorious monarch. The melody is simple and easy to sing, and we never needed to spend much time on it.

The Uruguayan anthem is another story. For one thing, it is among the longest anthems in the world, lasting about five or six minutes, although we only ever sang an abbreviated version. The music was composed by Francisco José Debali, allegedly inspired by one of Donizetti's operas, and the lyrics were written by Francisco Acuña de Figueroa. The piece was officially declared the Uruguayan national anthem on July 25, 1848. It is a dramatic, emotional, somewhat lyrical cry for freedom that echoes the country's motto: Liberty or Death! It explains in poetic words that the cry of Freedom is what saved the Uruguayan homeland; the cry that, in fierce battles, inflamed its valiant warriors

with sublime enthusiasm. Their clamour for freedom on the battlefield and on their deathbed was sure to make tyrants tremble. We all demanded, at the top of our young voices, our homeland or the grave, freedom or a glorious death.

The exact source of the British anthem's words and music is unknown. We are told that it is the oldest official national anthem and has been in uninterrupted use since it was acknowledged as such in 1825. But its origins are even older, having evolved out of a popular patriotic song that had been sung at royal events since the mid-18th century. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, many European countries followed Britain's example and created national anthems of their own. In some cases, these were written specifically for the purpose, and in others they were adapted from existing songs. The themes of these anthems vary, from fervent prayers for the wellbeing and longevity of a monarch to evocations of important battles or uprisings of one kind or another. Of the various styles used, perhaps the most stirring (and famous) is France's *La Marseillaise*, known as the European march.

As in many other fields in the mid-1800s, South American leaders took their cue from Europe and commissioned exuberant, sometimes rather flamboyant national anthems for their recently liberated nations. Uruguay threw off the yoke of Spanish colonialism in 1811, then countered the territorial ambitions of its two powerful neighbours—Brazil and Argentina—and became independent in 1828. Having severed its allegiance to the crown of Spain, there was no monarch to praise, so it is unsurprising that Uruguay's anthem should be inspired by the more militant style to celebrate its long, hard struggle for independence and its commitment to fight to the death to protect it.

Times have changed, and the lyrics of the British and Uruguayan anthems are no longer particularly relevant to the contemporary reality of the countries they represent. But tradition plays an important role in patriotic ritual and ceremony, so I suspect that these songs will continue to be sung on high days and holidays for a long time to come.