

## The Cambalache Tango

by Mario Benedetti, 'Buzón de tiempo' (*Suma de Letras: 2000*). pp 33-35.  
Translated by Rohan James Rice.

A football team from the Rio Plata (I'm not going to give more details than are necessary for this anecdote and that includes the names of the participants) arrived in Europe only twenty-four hours before their first match on the Old Continent. They had time for just one brief training session on what was more-or-less a lower-league pitch, its turf in a disastrous state.

When the team finally came to walk onto the actual field of play they were left stupefied before the colossal dimensions of the stadium, the packed and rowdy stands, as well as the merciless, freezing atmosphere of the January winter.

As is habitual, the two teams lined up to recite the national anthems. First, logically, came the local team, which was recited by both players and fans alike followed by a standing ovation.

Afterwards, came ours. The recording was atrocious, with the kind off-key tuning common in the Olympics: not all the players knew the lyrics in their entirety, but at least they sang along to the most well-known verses. However, one player—coincidentally a striker—unable to recall any of the anthem, decided to sing in its place the Cambalache tango: "The world was and will be crap/ that I know/ in five-hundred and six/ and in two-thousand too". They received a small, obligatory applause from the official box.

When that part of the ceremony concluded, and before the whistle (which was in the care of a wrinkled old actor from the world of cinema) the players from the Rio Plata circled around the disobedient striker and reproached him for singing the tango in place of the national anthem. Amongst other epithets, he was called a traitor, unpatriotic, a saboteur, and an imbecile.

The incident had inescapable repercussions on the match.

From the very start, the other players avoided passing to the saboteur. Insofar as to get hold of the ball he had to jog back into the defensive lines, win it himself, and then skip past his stocky opponents before passing it (because he wasn't that selfish) to whoever was better positioned than him to shoot at goal.

The Europeans played better, but with only a few minutes left until the end, neither team had managed to break the deadlock. That is until the 88<sup>th</sup> minute. The renegade striker picked up the ball off a deflection and began a daring run at the opposing goal. He broke into the penalty area and seeing how until now his teammates had squandered the good opportunities afforded to them, he kept dribbling. Passing two defenders with three wonderful shimmies, the goalie rushed off his line in terror to close him down; the imbecile feigned a shot with his right foot, totally throwing off the poor man, before angling the ball with his left into the top corner and out of his reach. It was the winning goal.

The second match took place in another city (again, I won't go into details), in an equally large stadium accompanied by a sell-out crowd. Once again arrived the moment for the anthems: first the home team and then the visitors. Whilst the soundtrack went in one direction, the eighteen players—perfectly lined-up with their right hands over their hearts—sang the Cambalache tango in harmony, all the lyrics memorised.

Although they also won that match, the indignant board members of the team decided to cancel their European tour and without exception fine all the players, accusing them of being traitors, unpatriotic, saboteurs, and imbeciles.