Singers, picketers and strikers

It was May 13 of 2005. This was the second month of my third fieldwork visit to Buenos Aires. I was in line for the opening night of *Don Quichotte* at the Colón, and though only four weeks had passed since my arrival, there was a noticeable repetition in conversations: chatter tended to refer exclusively to the world of musical performances. The line of fans, as much as other informal institutions of the operatic world, seemed to be the locus and support of sociability, a process of pure sociation devoid of significant purposes. Fans didn’t bring their outside problems and obligations. Work and family were mostly left behind in the subways, buses and taxis. Political issues were rarely touched upon and news of the day had no currency while they queued up.

Here and there, other issues would intervene, but nothing I hadn’t already placed within the particular worldview of being a passionate opera fan in Buenos Aires. For
instance, during my second time on the line, a man (who would later become a central informant) was complaining about how bad soccer had been for Argentinean society, how it should be equated to drugs and thought of as a tool created by the English to stupefy and conquer the world. Another time, during the run of *Quichotte*, I discovered that a woman in her early 60s who was always first in line and would race me upstairs, was not a model of heroism—coming time after time to be first—but actually the mother of one of the flamenco dancers hired for the occasion who wanted to “see her daughter making it at the Colón.”

That is why I was thoroughly unprepared for and surprised by a four-minute diatribe that wove together, with the precision and the suspense of a literary short story, the pitch problems of a soprano in Avellaneda—a working class suburban neighborhood that housed the small Roma opera house—with the moral downfall of the country. The storyteller’s name was Eduardo; he was an architect in his late fifties who narrated a highly complex tale that, after I became aware of its existence, would make itself visible everywhere.

Afterward, much like the detective-historian proposed by Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg,¹ I started to inquire into some of the stories overheard on the lines, looking for traces or footsteps of a larger, more comprehensible yet less explicit narrative.²

Eduardo’s story didn’t just make facile connections between one series of phenomena and the other. It wasn’t just the nostalgic narrative of a country that, having lost the power to attract the best singers, wasn’t as good as it once

---


² Carlo Ginzburg (1991) suggests a way of conceptualizing the changing ideas about enigmas and solutions in the late nineteenth century. Ginzburg defines the epistemological model of “symptomatology,” examples of which he finds in Morelli’s art connoisseurship, Freud’s psychoanalysis and Sherlock Holmes’s detection methods. In this conjectural model, “marginal and irrelevant details…provide the key to a deeper reality, inaccessible by other methods” (87). The efficacy of such a key depends on the assumption of depth, and of the existence of a conduit between the surface and the hidden recesses: “Reality is opaque; but there are certain points—clues, symptoms—which allow us to decipher it” (109).