**[Silencing a songbird](https://www.dawn.com/news/1775597/silencing-a-songbird)**

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JUST a few days after the elected president of Chile, his close friend and comrade Salvador Allende, had met a violent death in his workplace, the man described by Gabriel García Márquez as “the greatest poet of the 20th century, in any language” lay on his bed in a Santiago clinic, ailing and distraught.

The poet’s wife, Matilde, had left his bedside to return to their home in Isla Negra to collect some books that Pablo Neruda wished to take with him to Mexico, where he had been invited to retreat by the country’s president, Luis Echeverria. She received a phone call from Neruda, who sounded unusually agitated. She rushed back, fearing the worst.

On doctors’ orders, Matilde had tried to shield her husband from the worst news about the atrocities unfolding in the wake of the Sept 11, 1973, coup. But he could not be denied access to his friends, and when she returned, a highly distressed Neruda informed her: “They’re killing people, they’re handing their bodies over in pieces. The morgue’s full of the dead … Didn’t you know what happened to Víctor Jara? He was one of those they tore to pieces, they destroyed his hands … Oh my God, that’s like killing a nightingale. And they say he kept on singing and singing, and that drove them wild.”

His information was reasonably accurate. Víctor Jara was arguably the most potent symbol of the cultural revolution that had accompanied — and in some ways facilitated — Popular Unity’s ascent to power in 1970. He was an internationally acclaimed theatre director who had, since his deprived childhood, also been deeply immersed in Chilean folk music, and eventually started writing his own songs to supplement the vast repertoire he had imbibed from his mother and his broader milieu.

Two of Chile’s most beautiful voices died with its democracy, 50 years ago.

In 1969, he won joint first prize at the first festival of Nueva Canción Chilena — Chilean New Song — with Plegaria a un Labrador (Prayer to a Worker). It was a genre he had helped to propagate, following in the footsteps of Violeta Parra. The festival was held at Estadio Chile, where Jara returned four years later as a prisoner of the junta that snuffed out with extreme prejudice the very idea of a more equitable and humane nation.

On the morning of Sept 11, Jara bid farewell to his family and drove off to his workplace, the State Technical University, despite knowing that a military coup had been launched. Curfew prevented him from returning home, and the following day Jara and hundreds of fellow teachers and students were marched to the nearby stadium, which was serving as a concentration camp for political prisoners. He was recognised and singled out at the gate, abused in the vilest terms, and brutally assaulted. That was just the preamble to at least three days of extreme torture before an officer blew out his brains, and then encouraged his underlings to fire their machine-guns into the assassinated avatar of an aborted dream.

When his widow located his body among the hundreds of unidentified corpses in the city morgue two days later, guided by a yo­­ung communist who risked his life to in­­f­orm her, it was riddled with 44 bullet holes. Thanks mainly to Joan Jara and her associates in Chile and abroad, eight former military officers were sentenced five years ago, among them possibly the beast who had battered the hands that gently strummed the guitar. The alleged chief perpetrator, however, remains at liberty in Florida.

Goaded to sing after his initial torture, Victor had defiantly burst into a verse of Venceremos, the Popular Unity theme song. And before he was plucked away from fellow detainees for his final ordeal, he scribbled an anti-fascist poem that, miraculously, was smuggled out of the stadium and soon enough rang out in various parts of the world.

Unaware of all this, Neruda died on the eve of his scheduled departure for Mexico. Some evidence has lately emerged to suggest that he was poisoned, but it remains inconclusive and the whole truth may never be ascertained. It’s fairly obvious that an outraged and outspoken Neruda would have been an unpleasant prospect for the Pinochet junta. But whether or not it played any role in silencing the poet, the recent Nobel laureate — unlike Allende or Jara — could not be denied a proper funeral.

As armed soldiers and police looked on, deterred from action by dozens of foreign correspondents, the hundreds of funeral marchers recited Neruda’s verses, then burst into the Internationale, before raising slogans that invoked (and immortalised) not just Neruda but also Allende and Victor Jara.

Half a century later, the outstanding poet’s last journey still reflects both the final embers of Popular Unity and the first sparks of the relentless resistance that eventually thwarted the neoliberal aspirations of the US-backed military clique.

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