

THE CONVERSATION

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Sweden performs in the 2017 Eurovision grand final. EPA/SERGEY DOLZHENKO

Fireworks, feelings, and fraught relations at Eurovision 2017

Published: May 14, 2017 5.57pm AEST

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For one week in May, the bleary-eyed in our workplaces are not the sports fans following northern hemisphere leagues, nor are they the new parents. They are Eurovision fans. And we are legion.

The Eurovision Song Contest offers its fans glitz (or at least glitter), glamour, politics, intrigue, increasingly limited lessons in how to count in French and, of course, music. This year's contest, hosted by Ukraine in Kyiv, offered up these elements in spades with music, in the words of Portuguese winner Salvador Sobral, proving to be the ultimate victor. As he effused in his acceptance speech,

This could be a victory for music, with people who make music that actually means something. Music is not fireworks, music is feeling!

The winning performance of Salvador and Luísa Sobral from Por...



Portugal's reprise performance after winning Eurovision 2017.

Indeed, it was the charm and emotional intensity of Sobral's performance of *Amar Pelos Dois* at both the first semi-final and the grand final that won over both popular and jury voters. The gentle, lyrical jazz/pop ballad was written by his sister, Luisa Sobral, a graduate of the esteemed Berklee College of Music in Boston, and is Portugal's first win.

As Salvador suffers from a heart condition that requires frequent rest and medical attention, Luisa took his place in the rehearsals throughout the week. Fans were finally treated to her own singular vocals when she joined her brother on stage for the victor's reprise.

Pop politics

Portugal's victory was a surprise to many – and several expressed displeasure at how Sobral's acceptance speech derided pop music and by extension his fellow contestants. It was an upset for Italy's Francesco Gabbani who had led the bookmaker's favourites until Saturday afternoon.

Italy's Francesco Gabbani performs the song *Occidentali's Karma*: he had been the bookies' favourite. Gleb Garanich/Reuters

But odds are never a sure thing. Last year's favourite Sergey Lazarev (Russia) led the odds, only to come in third to Ukraine's Jamala and Australia's Dami Im.

It also signals the first non-English language win at Eurovision since Serbia's Marija Šerifović in 2007. While there are currently no rules about the language used in submissions, from 1966 to 1999 (with the exception of three years), it was a requirement that songs be performed in one of the official languages of the country. These days only a handful of artists perform in their own language each year, preferring to sing in English.

Sobral celebrates the win. Gleb Garanich/Reuters

Still, the tide could be turning on the popularity of English lyrics at Eurovision. While the number of entries has not necessarily increased, their popularity has. All non-English acts qualified from the semi-finals - Portugal was joined by crowd favourites in Hungarian and Belarusian – and France, Spain and Italy sang in their own languages. (Croatia also warrants a mention, as [Jacques Houdek's](#) My Friend includes operatic Italian lyrics.)

With the exception of Germany, which placed second-last, the Big 5 (France, Italy, Spain, Germany and the UK) performed solidly. These are the biggest financiers for the contest, and in return qualify automatically for final.

Brexit at Eurovision

Eurovision and the UK have had a bumpy relationship, and at least one survey suggests a [British vote to leave Eurovision](#) would have the same result as the EU referendum.

Over the past decade, the UK has done notoriously poorly at Eurovision. Hostility from Eurovision audiences toward the UK is primarily based on the opinion that they do not take Eurovision seriously, withholding quality performers and songs. On occasion the UK has defended itself, citing politics for its poor performance. In 2003, both BBC commentator Terry Wogan and performer Chris Cromby responded to the no-score result for Jemini's off-key performance by accusing Europe of [post-Iraq backlash](#) against the UK. There may be some truth to this claim (Jemini's dressing room was allegedly vandalised).

This year's entry, [Lucie Jones](#) singing Never Give Up On You (penned by Danish Eurovision-winner Emmelie de Forrest, Daniel Salcedo, and Lawrie Martin), was doubtless a concerted effort by the UK to reverse this view, and was seen by some as a post-Brexit apology.

UK's Lucie Jones performing Never Give Up on You. Gleb Garanich/Reuters

"I'll never give up on you," Jones belted beautifully, "You're the one that I'm running to/Just give me your hand and hold on/Together we'll dance through this storm."

As many of the economic and political ties between Europe and the UK are dissolved, cultural connections like Eurovision will become even more important to sustain.

While the UK is staying in the contest for the time being, [Israel sadly announced its departure](#) from the competition live on air during the voting. Israel's public broadcaster IBA closed down this week. Its replacement channel, Kan, doesn't satisfy the requirements of Eurovision membership.

Bloc voting remains a key characteristic of Eurovision, but the trend hit a sour note with the punters this year as the crowds booed obvious vote-swaps between Greece and Cyprus during the jury vote.

Solid performance from Australia

And how did Australia fare in its third time competing? Former X-Factor winner [Isaiah Firebrace](#) still needs some time to find his comfort zone on the stage, but his grand final performance of Don't Come Easy shed the problematic notes of the semi-finals to place ninth in the final tally.

Isaiah Firebrace's song for the 2017 contest.

Speaking of Australia and bum notes, viewers were mortified at the sudden appearance of an Australian flag-clad man baring his derriere during last year's winner Jamala's performance of her new song, I Believe In U. The good news (well, for Australians) is that the flasher has been revealed to be Ukrainian serial prankster, [Vitalii Sediuk](#).

Russian-Ukrainian tensions

The Ukrainian hosts ended the show on a political note. Their closing declaration - "We are a tolerant, open, and modern country" - seems a pointed response to the criticisms and controversies that have courted Ukraine and the Kyiv production in the lead-up to this year's competition.

Ukraine's O.Torvald performs the song Time in the final. Gleb Garanich/Reuters

Ukraine's 2016-winning song 1944 referred to [Stalin's deportation of the Crimean Tartars](#), and was interpreted by many – certainly by Russia – as commentary on the more recent annexation of Crimea. This prompted speculation about whether Russia would submit an entry at all in 2017.

Next, staff from Ukraine's broadcaster walked out of the organising committee. Finally, Russian-Ukrainian tensions over Crimea reached boiling point (again) when Ukrainian authorities banned Russian contestant Yulia Samoylova from entering the country because a 2014 visit to the Crimea violated Ukrainian law. The European Broadcasting Union offered two solutions that would enable Russian participation, but Russia elected instead to withdraw from the contest.

With this in mind, Portugal offers a fairly benign respite from the political turmoil of 2016-17 - Sabrol's challenge to pop music notwithstanding. I look forward to seeing what they, the rest of Europe and, of course, Australia have to offer. See you again at 5am next May.