

The NYC Chapter of the Complaints Choir is Here

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The Chicago crew, airing their grievances

If there's a group of people you don't want to keep waiting, it's a chorus of New Yorkers assembled to whine about things. "This place is a little fancier than the Bulgarian bar we met at last time," remarks one member of the New York Complaints Choir, waiting at an East 20th Street Greek bistro for the party room they've reserved to finally open. A waiter apologizes for the delay, sets out a tray of cheese and olives, and offers free drinks all around.

"No, thanks," a middle-aged woman moans. "I just had dinner."

Marc Nasdor, an organizer for the New York Complaints Choir, is also sitting at the bar, kvetching about the quality of Hungarian beer. Then he switches to the subject of sister choirs around the world: "The other ones seem almost too nice." In Hungary, for example, the choir sang about the misuse of the word "goulash." Here, we have bigger gripes.

The project is the brainchild of Helsinki artists Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, taking literally the Finnish expression *valituskuoro*, which denotes mass disgruntlement as a "chorus of complainers." The first Complaints

Choir was organized in Birmingham, England; groups have since convened in 20 other cities around the world, from Budapest, Jerusalem, Singapore, and St. Petersburg to Chicago and Philadelphia.

New York's own chorus of catharsis was put into motion by composer Charles Morrow, who contacted stalwart experimentalist Alan Licht to direct. Licht has a long interest in innovative choral music: His "Digger Choir" performances at Issue Project Room have used the audience as an ensemble, having them sing Yoko Ono songs and scream louder than the audience on Bruce Springsteen bootlegs. "I sang in choir growing up," Licht says. "It's a basic musical experience, if you grow up going to church or temple. It's a socializing construction, and it feels good doing it. To me, this fits in with the Diggers. No one is the star—people just show up."

Licht and Nasdor started with over 600 complaints covering doctors, cabbies, mass transit, and the

media—surprisingly, Licht says, there were few about politics— submitted online and by choir members at the initial, pre-rehearsal meeting. Entries were pared down as Licht developed phrasing and cadence, during which he decided on a '50s rock 'n' roll feel: "The music, like Dion and the Belmonts, the Brill Building—that's real New York."

After more than half an hour, the room at Kellari's finally opens and the singers file downstairs. They warm up with a few rounds of ascending and descending "bell-y ach-ing," and then Licht plays through his 15-minute anthem of angst. Among the verses crafted for the venting vocalists are "Please wear longer shorts to the gym/I don't want to know you all that well/Men, please close your legs in the subway/So others can have some space to sit." Nasdor suggests slowing the tempo. "But New Yorkers are fast talkers," Licht counters. "That's kind of the thing."

The rehearsal draws 22 people, ranging from elementary-school kids to possible AARP members, all but five of them female; the goal is to have at least 50 singers by the time they film the piece for ComplaintsChoir.org. Videos from other countries are already up and also appear as part of the *Arctic Hysteria: New Art from Finland* show up at P.S.1 through September. The New York branch may also perform live at P.S.1 or organize some other "surprise" appearances in the fall. "I think it's a perfect time," Nasdor says. "There's a lot of complaining going on. I call 311 all the time. There are a lot of things not to like about Bloomberg, but this 311 thing is one of the most empowering things I've ever seen. People have had this shit for seven years, and now they can let go. This is going to be a vehicle for letting go."