

COMPLAINTS CHOIRS



On a winter day in Finland, artists Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta-Kallainen, pondered the Finnish word *valituskuoro*, meaning a chorus of complaints from lots of people at once. What if they actually formed a choir to sing out their complaints? Could they use the energy of complaining in an expressive way? As well as creating a new form of community art, the rise of youtube.com has spread the choir's complaints far beyond the art galleries they were originally commissioned for.

Living in a traditional red-painted wooden house on an idyllic island in the suburbs of Helsinki, you wouldn't think Tellervo and Oliver have much to complain about. Their young son Väinö gurgles delightfully and their house receives a steady stream of visitors, despite being accessible only by row boat. Oliver grew up under communist rule in East Germany and first went to Finland in 1996. After meeting and eventually marrying Tellervo, they began working together in 2003.

Their first choir started in 2005 in Birmingham, England, and since then complaints choirs have sprung up around the globe, taking the duo to Helsinki, Hamburg, and St. Petersburg. Last November they produced a song with the citizens of Chicago, as part of the Museum of Contemporary Art's Humanities Festival. January 2008 sees Tellervo and Oliver heading off to Singapore for the first Asian choir. Some choirs have also been produced independently – with choirs in America, Canada, Australia and Israel, Tellervo and Oliver can't reach all of them but want the idea to spread.

In each city, the couple uses leaflets and local press articles to recruit singers, who all contribute their own complaints. These are woven into a song which is rehearsed and then performed by the group in locations around the city, creating a film several minutes long. It is essential to the concept that the complaints are written by the singers themselves, so each song is specific to its city. In Helsinki the choir sang that "tram

number 3 smells of pee" and that they didn't like their neighbors arriving earlier than scheduled for the communal sauna. In Birmingham the chorus was "I want my money back; my job's like a cul-de-sac." The complaints of diverse individuals in each choir create a portrait of their city, though not one most tourist boards would want to promote. For Oliver the result is a song that expresses, "This is really our song, this is our city. People have different complaints but they sing together and identify with it."

Common themes occur in different cities: unreliable public transport, intransigent computers, personal rudeness, and tiredness – "I wanna go to sleep but I gotta get up," as they sang in Jerusalem. On the subject of noise, Budapest's singers complained about a folk dancer practicing upstairs, whereas in Chicago they objected to a Jethro Tull tribute band. The children of Poikkilaakso Elementary School in Finland chorused that, "Girls are stupid! Boys are stupid! Santa Claus is stupid!" On a more tragic note, in St. Petersburg the singers bemoaned, "Why do we keep on loving when love is so painful?"

As Tellervo points out, "Complaining can be positive, too – somebody wanting to make a change, noticing problems. It can be the starting point for something important." The complaints in the songs range from "small irritations to existential problems." She continues, "People do put a lot of energy into complaining and in most cases that energy could be put into doing something. The most serious cases don't join in. People who join have some self-reflection." As they sang in St. Petersburg, "Why are we always dissatisfied with something?" But then there'd be no song to sing.

WRITTEN BY ANNA WATSON

For more info, see: www.complaintschoir.org