



PLÁCIDO DOMINGO

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THE TWO FOSCARI

Occupy Used a 'People's Microphone' to Spread Info Through a Crowd. Now There's a People's Mic Choir

By Catherine Wagley

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Courtesy Adam Overton

The People's Microphony Camerata performs at The Last Bookstore.

The Occupy Movement's one-year anniversary is today. This means, nationwide, morning headlines say things like "Why Occupy Fizzed," "Occupy in Disarray but Spirit Lives On" or "Can Occupy Come up with a Second Act?"

Yesterday, a few hundred protesters who returned to Zucotti Park, where the Occupy Wall Street Movement first set up camp in

September 2011, chanted that familiar refrain: "We are the 99%!" They also reportedly carried out longer discussions using the People's Mic technique, where one person says something and those nearby repeat it, amplifying it so that people further away can hear. Even though People's Mic isn't new -- protesters have been using it at least since the '70s -- last year it became almost synonymous

with Occupy.

L.A. artist [Michele Jaquis](#) remembers how key the technique was during the Brooklyn Bridge protests last October. She had gone to New York for a conference at the Pratt Institute and participated in the protest, so she was there when the NYPD blocked protesters' passage across the bridge and arrested around 700 of them. Occupiers used the people's mic to alert one another of police activity.

"I was fascinated by the way information about what the cops were doing down below on the Manhattan side could be relayed to those of us kettled in the middle of the bridge," Jaquis says. She tried experimenting with the technique with her students at Otis, where she teaches Interdisciplinary Studies, but says she didn't have much success. Then this spring, she heard about the People's Microphony Camerata, a choir instigated by artist [Elana Mann](#) and vocalist-performer Juliana Snapper and inspired by the People's Mic. Jaquis joined, seeing it as her chance to experiment more.

She was among those who performed at [The Last Bookstore](#) in downtown L.A. on Friday night to celebrate the launch of the first People's Microphony Songbook. The book, teal and white and printed like a broadsheet, collects compositions by artists, writers and musicians written specifically with the potentials and pitfalls of the People's Mic in mind.

Snapper and Mann had started a group called ARLA along with artists Vera Brunner-Sung and Kristen Smiarowski a few months before Occupy began, inspired by Deep Listening, an approach composer Pauline Oliveros developed where listening is a kind of meditation. They saw Occupy L.A., a locus for people who wanted their voices heard, as the perfect opportunity to practice listening. They organized a few listening parades (we wrote about them in our 2011 article on [art and Occupy L.A.](#)), where participants held big papier-mâché and poster-board ears above their heads and tried hard to focus on all they heard.

Afterward, they would sit in a circle and do listening exercises. Mann recalls experimenting with the People's Mic technique at Occupy L.A. and noticing how the meaning of one person's words could change when the group repeated them. She also noticed that sometimes, like in a game of telephone, words got lost in translation -- people might repeat something slightly different from what the original speaker said, and bystanders might further mishear what the group said. The People's Mic didn't allow for any passive listening and it was entirely vulnerable to human error.

Snapper and Mann put out a call for [People's Microphony Camerata](#) participants in April, then a call for songbook submissions in June. The choir has since grown



Courtesy Adam Overton

Composer Julie Tolentino performing with the PMC on Friday night.

to 25 members who come to bimonthly rehearsals whenever they can. The songbook includes 29 compositions, though few use the People's Mic technique in a straightforward way. The choir performed Daniel Goode's composition *Sob* <> *Laugh* last month at Chalkupy downtown, a daylong event at which demonstrators wrote messages in chalk around Pershing Square, reasserting their right to free speech after police clashed with chalk-wielding demonstrators at the July 12 Art Walk. The choir members and other demonstrators who joined in would start to

laugh, making their laughter more guttural and deep until laughing started to sound like sobbing. They'd do this more or less in unison, and in pictures, the group looks they are all laughing at the

same joke. "We were interested in what happens when bodies come together and make noise," Snapper said Friday night, explaining the choir's fundamental inspiration to the audience.



Courtesy Adam Overton

Audience members hold paper ears to listen while the PMC performs at The Last Bookstore.

Half-way through Friday's performance, the choir passed out over-sized paper ears on sticks to audience members. We held them out, so that we each looked like Goofy or one of the seven dwarfs. Then the choir members grouped off into sets of three. One person would lie on the floor and begin to breathe intently. Another person would kneel next to the designated breather and feel

her diaphragm or chest, or lean close to her mouth to hear her breathing better. A third person sat on a nearby chair, holding out one of the same paper ears the rest of us had, just listening.

This went on for a while, the breathers become more audible and the listeners on the floor becoming more physical. Poet Jen Hofer seemed like some sort of New Age masseuse, helping Mann breathe by placing her own hands and body in just the right places. Composer and performer [Julie Tolentino](#) was, at one point, nearly lying on top of her breather and seemed to be in either a state of ecstasy or distress as she listened.

In the night's final performance, based on the *Body Packing* score by writer Jenny Donovan, the group breathed in the air of a woman named Erin Parry, who had been denied access to the U.S. by customs. Parry had enclosed her own breath into plastic bags, then it had been trafficked across the border. Members of the PMC, who had practiced this piece using inflated balloons, stood in a circle and passed around a bag, inhaling through a straw, then exhaling carefully and audibly.

Singer and actress [Andrea Saenz](#), who performed Friday night, refers to the group as a "'lab,' so to

speak," a place to experiment with others who are interested in really paying attention to each other but also in figuring out how simple acts can have political ramifications. Julie Tolentino sees it at something similar, and hopes the PMC will spread, perhaps becoming "a viral and vital group that pops up in many cities, within many kinds of circles and with many iterations."

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