



Newsletter #1 **singing as activism**

A newsletter on collective singing, solidarity, and political imagination

You are receiving this newsletter because you have been part of the collective world of singing activism - as a choir member, activist, colleague or friend - from which the book [*Socialism Now: Singing Activism after Yugoslavia*](#) emerged.

I would like this newsletter to continue the conversations, encounters, and questions that accompanied the book. I see it as a space for sharing news about various initiatives and collectives, performances and protests, past and ongoing research and publications, archival notes and sources, recordings, and reflections from different geographical and political contexts. Some of these will be closely connected to collective singing; others may open onto related questions of solidarity, commons, and collective life.

I hope this newsletter can become a living archive of practices and a shared space for choir members, activists, researchers, and others engaged in collective singing to exchange experiences, ideas, envision possibilities, and support collective struggles.

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1. Topic in highlights: Serbian student protests

Milica Pekić: Our Art Is Our Struggle! Our Works, Our Voice!

*This text is a summarised version of a previously published the article: Pekić, Milica. 2026. "Our Art Is Our Struggle! Our Works, Our Voice! Transformative Art Practices in the Current Student Protests: The Case of the 'stUUdenti' Exhibitions." *Philosophy and Society* 37(1): 31–56.*

The student protests in Serbia emerged after the collapse of the concrete canopy at Novi Sad railway station on 1 November 2024, a disaster that ultimately claimed sixteen lives and triggered demands for transparency and institutional accountability. Student-led blockades began in late November and rapidly spread across universities throughout the country, organized largely through student assemblies (plenumi) as the main form of self-organization and collective decision-making. What began within universities soon developed into a much wider social mobilization, combining blockades, marches, commemorative silences, and other forms of collective action. At the same time, the plenumi became more than an organizational device: they emerged as one of the defining political forms of the movement, structuring decision-making through horizontal forms of self-organization (for retrospective on the protests see:

["One Year Since the University Blockades in Belgrade and Novi Sad: How It All Began"](#))

In late December 2024 at the Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, and in February 2025 at Gallery Kula in Belgrade, students from all four faculties of the University of Arts jointly organized two exhibitions under the shared title stUUdenti. Created within the first three months of what became the largest and longest student protest in the country's history, the exhibitions shape, mediate, and share the experience of the protests and university blockades through the lens of students' self-reflection and self-representation. While the first exhibition explores the events that led to the student movement and the nature of the system they rose up against, the second points to the lived reality of the struggle, the risk, endurance, solidarity, imagination, and playfulness it entails, situating the current protest within the wider tradition of student rebellion and establishing continuity with the 1968 protests in Yugoslavia and anti-Milošević's protests in Serbia in 1996.

Acting as an interdisciplinary collective, the students employ diverse tactics and skills, from design, handicraft, and choral singing to video and sound installation, site-specific installation, and ready-made, to share the lived experience of social transformation as a domain of artistic practice, reopening the question of the boundary between art and life. Street actions, blockades of traffic junctions and public squares, and public commemorative silences are presented through a series of installations, pointing to collective acts of resistance as a field of aesthetic experience involving endurance, openness, vulnerability, imagination, playfulness, and risk, shared in solidarity among all who take part.



"We are in this together"

Exhibition stUdenti, Gallery Kula Cetinska, Belgrade, 2025. Photo: Milica Pekić

Sound is an important tool students use to navigate new collective experience. The student choir, which became a recognizable feature of many public actions and protests, performed at both the opening and closing of the first exhibition. Alongside the international student anthem "Gaudeamus Igitur", the repertoire included Yugoslav children's songs: "Lako je prutu", "Deca su ukras sveta," and "Zakleo se bumbar." Through a repertoire recognizable across generations, the students demonstrate an almost nurturing care for the audience, claiming the space of childhood, freedom, and play equally for themselves and for society as a whole, while honoring the Yugoslav tradition of children's music and poetry.

Simultaneously, the commemorative sixteen-minute silences have emerged as a defining gesture of the protests. In these moments, people gather in complete stillness to commemorate the victims of the canopy collapse. The practice reshapes the city's acoustic landscape and produces a shared experience of openness, risk, and collective demand for change. It is often followed by an eruption of sound, whistles, trumpets, and DIY instruments, transforming silence into a forceful expression of dissent.

Beyond introducing the experience of social transformation as an aesthetic experience and the domain of artistic intervention, students also introduce a new organizational model in the very production of the exhibitions. Employing the horizontal logic of plenums, they replace the authority of the 'genius' author with collective decisions shaped through debate, discussion, and voting, opening the field of art to fellow students from other faculties and to citizens with whom they share the work of social change. Collective authorship is assumed by the students of the University of Arts, without individual attribution or signatures. It is precisely within these strategies - the disruption of established hierarchies, the redefinition of authorship and the role of the audience, the development of alternative modes of production, and the fostering of new forms of collective experience grounded in solidarity, care, and self-organization - that the transformative potential of the stUdenti exhibitions resides. Through these strategies the students also establish continuity with a tradition of artistic practice developed on Serbia's independent cultural scene, one that persistently questions hierarchies within artistic production, expands art into community and public space, and reactivates neglected formats such as choirs, handicrafts, workshops and collective action.

Note on author: Milica Pekić, PhD, is an art historian and curator based in Belgrade. Her research focuses on avant-garde artistic practices, collective authorship, collaborative artistic production, and institutional transformation. She is the co-founder of [Kiosk Platform for Contemporary Art](#) and has been actively involved in the independent cultural sector in Serbia and the region for over two decades.

2. News: *Radio, LeZbor and ZborXop*

Anti-fascist Songs on Radio - [Listen here](#)

In a recent episode of the New Zealand public radio programme "Nine to Noon," musician, ethnomusicologist, and music commentator prof. Dave Wilson, affiliated with the Victoria University of Wellington, talked about the continuing relevance of WWII anti-fascists song repertoire in contemporary cultural and political life.

Drawing on the research on post-Yugoslav political singing and the work of Ana Hofman - Wilson explored how WWII anti-fascist resistance repertoire have moved beyond their initial historical context to become the basis for imagining alternative political futures across European societies. Contemporary recuperations of the songs such as the Italian "Bella ciao," the Spanish Civil War song "¡Ay, Carmela!," and the Yugoslav partisan song "Bilećanka" becomes a tool for building solidarity, fostering collective action at protests and rallies, and responding to new forms of inequality and repression. Wilson also reflected on the mobilizing

power of collective singing in public spaces and its importance for contemporary social movements.

This episode highlights how amateur and non-commercial forms of music-making can function as political practice in its own right.

Zagreb's Le Zbor celebrates 20 years of activism and solidarity through song

On June 12th, the Zagreb-based feminist and lesbian choir [Le Zbor](#) celebrated its twentieth anniversary with a concert and community gathering. Founded in 2005, Le Zbor was the first feminist lesbian choir in Southeast Europe, and remains one of the region's most visible examples of activist musical practice.

Over the past two decades, the choir has combined artistic practice with feminist, anti-fascist, and LGBTQIA+ activism, performing at protests, Pride events, commemorations, festivals, and other public actions across the former Yugoslav region and beyond. Their repertoire brings together partisan, folk, workers', protest, and covers of the contemporary pop songs, using collective singing as a way of expressing political stance while addressing locally specific as well as globally relevant present-day struggles.



Le Zbor performing at a protest on Marshal Tito Square, Zagreb, 2017. Author HINA. Courtesy of Julijana Lešić and the Le Zbor archive (in Hofman 2025, 136)

Beyond on- and off-stage performances, the choir has participated in films, theatre productions, exhibitions, literary events, and numerous collaborative artistic projects. In 2018, Le Zbor organized [“Sve u jedan glas” \(“All in One Voice”\)](#), a festival of post-Yugoslav activist choirs that became an important space for collaboration, exchange, and solidarity among singing collectives united by a commitment to collective struggle in the region.



Street singing at the closing of the third festival of activist choirs, Zagreb, 2018. Author Ivan Maričić, courtesy of the Le Zbor archive.

ZborXop releases *Partizanske* – Open album

This spring, another Zagreb choir that performs ethno and anti-fascist folk music from Balkan region, [ZborXop](#), released “Partizanske,” (Partisan songs), an album dedicated to the impressive tradition of Yugoslav partisan songs from the anti-fascist resistance during WWII. The name ZborXop combines the Croatian or Slovenian word *zbor* and the Serbian word *hor* - both meaning “choir” - emphasizing the collective’s sentiments of inclusiveness and unity. Presented as part of marking the anniversary of Zagreb’s liberation from fascism, the album brings together eight songs drawn from the musical heritage of the People’s Liberation Struggle.



Cover of ZborXop's *Partizanske*, Bandcamp 2026.

The repertoire includes well-known partisan songs from different parts of former Yugoslavia such as “Crveni makovi” (“Red Poppies”), “Konjuh planinom” (“Across Mount Konjuh”), with an emphasis on the partisan folk songs “Oj Kozaro, ne treba ti kiše” (“Oh Kozara, You Need No Rain”), “Golem merak imam, mamo” (“I Have a Great Desire, Mother”) and the Dalmatian “Oj Mosore, Mosore” (“Oh Mosor, Mosor”); as well as songs foregrounding women’s participation in the partisan movement, such as “Mila majko, spremaj meni torbu” (“Dear Mother, Pack My Bag”).

Released at a time marked by ongoing genocide, wars and injustices, the escalation of social inequalities, and the resurgence of far-right politics across Europe and beyond, the album asks what meanings we can assign to partisan songs in the present. As the choir members write: “By singing partisan songs, by singing about the pain and heroism of ordinary people, we invoke the power of solidarity and collectively declare: hatred and violence shall not prevail” (see: [Partizanske | ZborXop](#))

3. Listening note

Crveni makovi

For this issue’s listening recommendation, we invite you to listen to “Crveni makovi” (“Red Poppies”) in two interpretations, by Le Zbor and ZborXop. The song was composed by Nikola Hercigonja in 1936 for a rural youth choir in the village of Mlada Mlaka, near Zagreb, Croatia, to verses by the peasant poet Mihovil Pavlek Miškina (1887–1942). In the song lyrics, the everyday rural landscape becomes a symbol of the centuries-long oppression of the peasantry and the injustices of class society, but also a symbol of resistance and a signal of revolutionary change to come.

Le Zbor - Crveni makovi

ZborXop - Crveni makovi

4. From the archive

Silvije Bombardelli - a vignette from the musical life during Yugoslav partisan struggle

The Split-born composer and conductor Silvije Bombardelli (1916-2002) joined the Yugoslav Partisans in 1942. Like many musicians who took part in the anti-fascist struggle, he experienced music-making not as an activity separate from the struggle, but as something carried quite literally through marches, offensives, moments of rest and combat.

In his memoirs, Bombardelli describes the extraordinary mobility of musicians active in the partisan units and the demanding material conditions of making music under wartime conditions. His account follows musicians moving across mountains, rivers, towns, and front lines, carrying instruments and musical archives on foot while also assisting supply units, standing guard, carrying wounded fighters, and, when necessary, engaging in combat themselves.

“We thus learned that the entire band from Klis had gone ‘into the woods.’ Soon afterwards, another piece of news arrived: the village band from Žrnovnica had moved to Mosor. It therefore seems that the oldest partisan band was the one from Klis, which became the band of the First Dalmatian Brigade. It suffered heavy losses on the Piva during the Fifth Offensive.

The Žrnovnica band, initially the band of the Second Dalmatian Brigade and later of the Second Assault Corps, was about a month younger than the band from Klis. It consisted almost entirely of peasants and workers from the immediate surroundings of Split and Šibenik: Žrnovnica, Trogir, Vodice.

This band went through all the ordeals and hardships experienced by a large part of our army. To cross Kozjak, Mosor, Moseć, Svilaja, Dinara, Prenj, Čvrsnica, Durmitor, Sinjajevina, Romanija,

Maglić, Golija ... to cross the Cetina, Neretva, Drina, Piva, Tara, Lim, Krivaja ... to cross the Sutjeska and pass through Zelengora.

To move from central Dalmatia into southwestern Bosnia, through Livno and Glamoč; into Herzegovina during the Fourth Offensive; into Montenegro during the Fifth Offensive; into eastern Bosnia; to cross the Ozren mountain and reach Sandžak; to reach the borders of Serbia and then return once again to Montenegro, Herzegovina, and southern Dalmatia.

To pass through so many towns - Muć, Livno, Glamoč, Duvno, Imotski, Jablanica, Prozor, Kalinovik, Žabljak, Šavnik, Boan, Kladanj, Olovo, Goražde, Trnovo, Kolašin, Pljevlja, Prijepolje, Nova Varoš, Priboj, Andrijevica, Berane, Bijelo Polje, Nikšić, Trebinje, and others - and, in addition, to cross countless villages, forests, mountains, roads, and paths.

They crossed all of this on foot, carrying instruments and the archive - one has to imagine a bass trombone being carried through the forests of Zelengora, or a clarinet and a bass drum over mountain Durmitor - while helping the supply units, providing security and guard duty for units that needed it, assisting hospital staff in difficult moments by carrying the wounded, and, in the most critical situations, taking up positions at the front.

All of this was not simply 'musical work'; it was the path and part of the task of this musical formation."

Silvije Bombardelli, "Od mora do Durmitora. Skica za partizansku (auto)biografiju, fragmenti iz bilježaka," in Andrija Tomašek, ed., Muzika i muzičari u NOB: zbornik sećanja, Belgrade, 1982, pp. 36-59.

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