Spoken Paper

Peace Education through Music? Reflections on music projects with refugees in Germany

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Extensive experience with music projects bringing together refugee children with music students and professional musicians suggests that intercultural musical encounters of this kind can have numerous positive effects. These projects show that playing music, singing together, watching and listening to music performed by the musicians, and the resulting reactions of the refugee children trigger a wide spectrum of emotional, nonverbal, mimetic and verbal dynamics which are only possible because musical encounters of this kind build trust and convey empathy. The musical encounter evidently generates variety-rich resonance (cf. Rosa 2016), elicits spontaneous reactions, for example when children open up and talk about their flight experiences or simply verbalise the feelings and longings which the music triggers in them. Singing together, in intercultural and intergenerational groups, often proves to be a powerful tool of “common artefact”. The levels and depth dimensions of the interaction, the understanding of having reached a situation of safety as conveyed through the mode of music, the first traces of living in the present, experiencing traumas as belonging to the past, but also the inspiration of expressing oneself and one’s own feelings through learning an instrument – these are the individual experiences and small, empiric insights which have emerged from these projects to date.
This culture of immediate, interpersonal musical encounters contrasts sharply with the impersonal narratives about refugees characterised by anonymous abstraction and conceptual collectivism. Only a short-lived phase of “welcome culture” in the late summer of 2015 addressed the refugee problem and has meanwhile long since mutated to the theme of the problematic refugees. The discourse has transformed to “securitization” (Baumann 2017: 49), refugees stand for threat, terrorism, sexism or insinuation into the German social systems. Deportation and secure borders are the main topics of the current discourse. In one of his last essays “The fear of the others” the eminent sociologist Zygmunt Baumann named the only effective “counterforce” which can detach itself from the collectively separating and defaming attributions associated with the deplorable confrontation and comparison between “us” and “them”, namely the counterforce of “the encounter”. Following Hans-Georg Gadamer he writes: “The kinds of knowledge horizons engendered by the different languages used in all segments of humanity – knowledge horizons created by languages which the different groups develop and use in order to grasp and understand the world in which they live (their “life world”) –move closer and closer together until they almost coalesce when the different segments encounter and enter into conversation with each other.” (Baumann 2016: 111f.)

The musical encounters between refugees and those engaging with them from their secure perspective generate original artistic forms of expression and help to create counter-narratives which counter the large, abstract mainstream narratives with the truth of the concrete.