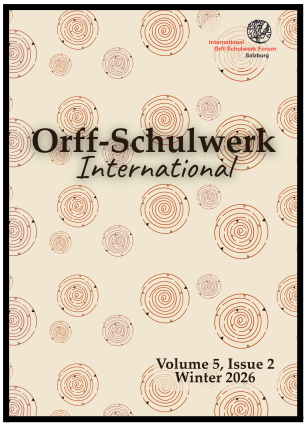
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The Art of Connections in School Musicals

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Introduction

Years ago, as part of my Master's degree at the Orff Institute, we analysed one of Prof. Sonja Stibi's articles with her; she had written it in 2010 to mark the 20th anniversary of the Elemental Music Education programme at the Anton Bruckner Private University. In it, she explores the diverse connections that arise through elemental music education. The connection between people and music, between music and other arts, between people and people, and, last but not least, the connection between a person and their own self. Recognising and facilitating these connections is precisely what makes the Orff-Schulwerk so special. Whilst preparing my presentation on our annual school musicals for the 2026 IOSFS Convention in Athens on the theme of 'Storytelling', I noticed the many connections that arise through the development and performance of the musicals at our school. Before I go into more detail, I would like to briefly introduce the tradition of storytelling through musicals at the Primary School for German-Czech Understanding in Prague.

What do the annual musicals mean for our school?

At the end of each school year, we stage a musical – either written by us or adapted by us – in which the whole school takes part. We are also joined by Erasmus pupils[46] and, every two years, by children from our partner school in Heilsbronn, Germany[47] . Around 280 pupils take part, and whilst this involves a great deal of work and organisational effort, above all it is an expression of a strong sense of community and teamwork. It creates positive, lasting memories, during which pupils often surpass their own expectations. The musical is a shared experience, a collective learning process in which every child finds their place.

With so many people involved, a clear structure is essential, whilst also allowing room for creative freedom. This means that the Year 5 pupils, who will be leaving our school at the end of the school year to move on to secondary school, are given the leading roles. It is their farewell performance before they move on, and it enables each of them to take centre stage and be part of a great shared experience. Sometimes they write their own scenes, help with the costumes or set design, and contribute their own ideas. All the other classes, as well as our groups from partner schools, each rehearse a song, a dance or a scene, which they perform as a group, thereby contributing to the bigger picture. This kind of modular system also offers the opportunity to take up the children's individual and creative ideas during the collaborative development phase and integrate them into the musical. But what specific connections are forged during the process of creating a musical?

Interpersonal connections

I'd like to begin with the connection between people, as it delights me anew every year to see how our school community grows closer and pulls together: between those colleagues

[46] Erasmus is a European Union programme designed to promote intercultural education, youth and sport. In our case, it supports an exchange project between our school in Prague and a school in Berlin.

[47] These projects have been supported for years by the German-Czech Future Fund and consistently enable wonderful reciprocal visits that leave a lasting positive impression.

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who flexibly allow their pupils time off for rehearsals, actively support the creative process by incorporating practice sessions into their own lessons, develop choreography or scenes, and who are always willing to listen, to help solve problems, offering both advice and practical support. On the other hand, there are the connections that form amongst the pupils. They become part of a group that puts something together, with freedom, but also the need to integrate into the shared creative process. It is precisely here that children often have the chance to contribute talents and skills that sometimes remain hidden in everyday school life, thereby also enabling a different perspective on the relationship between teacher and students. The restless and often disruptive pupil in maths may, in the musical, be given the chance to channel their ideas, to contribute their urge to move and express themselves, and thus become an asset to the entire performance. Or the reserved pupil who hardly ever speaks may suddenly reveal a completely different side to themselves. Teachers and students interact on a different level, which can lead to a lasting shift in perspective.

Connection to music

Of course, a musical also involves music and songs. Our school orchestra rehearses once a week throughout the school year and, amongst other things, gradually develops the overture to our production during these rehearsals. This provides plenty of scope for process-oriented and creative expression and, above all, for developing the ability to listen not only to oneself but also to one's fellow musicians. The connection to music is also evident in the songs, many of which are composed by the pupils themselves. They quickly develop favourite songs, which echo through our school hall time and again during break times. This is particularly worth mentioning as we are a Czech school and our musical is performed largely in German. The German song lyrics therefore form a bridge to German lessons, which brings us to the next connection: cross-curricular learning.

Links to other subjects

The theme of each musical is not an isolated project, but is reflected in various ways in everyday school life and in other subjects. It creates space for cross-curricular learning, bringing together music, language, science subjects, art lessons and even the school psychologist. Here are a few examples:

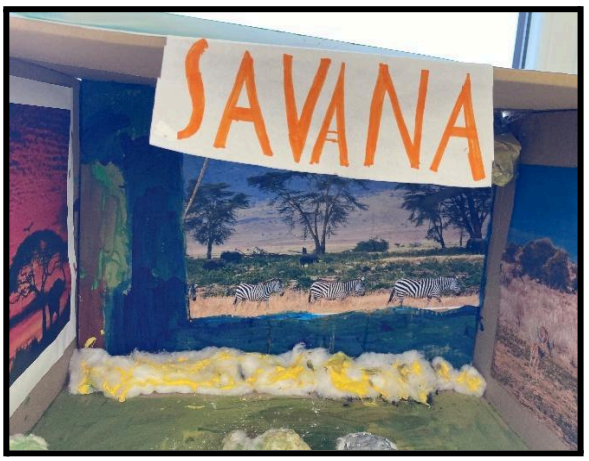
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'*Schiff* Ahoj' ('Ship Ahoy', 2026) A boy's wanderlust draws him out into the wider world. He sets off on a round-the-world trip and returns with a deeper understanding of his roots and a renewed sense of self. In natural history lessons, pupils created models of the Earth's various types of vegetation. In ethics, they reflected on the limits and possibilities of modern technologies.









Examples of the vegetation types created by the pupils, © Ramona Schulz

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"Neboj se" ("Don't be afraid", 2024) A musical about fears and mental health. Throughout the school year, our school psychologist worked with the classes, developing strategies with the pupils to manage anxiety and providing information on available support services. In German lessons, the Year 5 pupils wrote their own scene on media consumption. Every year, the pupils help build the sets and take part in the school-wide competition to design the official poster. From the wealth of posters created in art lessons, a few are then selected for publication for promotional purposes.



Examples of posters created by pupils for *'Schiff Ahoj'* © Ramona Schulz

Connection to one's own personality

The approach of elemental music and dance education always strives to establish an inner connection and provide an opportunity for individual expression, whether through one's own voice, the movement of one's own body, playing an instrument or interacting with various materials. Apart from our musical and the regular choir and orchestra rehearsals, all classes undertake music and dance projects throughout the school year, in which pupils can express themselves individually and creatively whilst being introduced to appropriate working methods. This can be built upon during the rehearsal phase for the musical, and pupils usually find it easy to contribute their ideas at specific points.

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Bringing dance and music to schools, © Kristyna Jindrová

The intensive, playful voice training and the rehearsing of the songs ultimately bring the children into direct contact with their own voices. They usually make rapid progress and realise that their voice matters. This sense of self-efficacy – of being part of something that moves me and others – leads us to the final, but no less important, connection.

Connection to topics relevant to society or to the students

Looking back over the last 12 years, it has become clear that, through the choice of themes for our musicals, we repeatedly address social issues and strive to give the children a language with which to discuss them. They should be given the opportunity to put themselves in the shoes of a character within a story, thereby changing their perspective and developing empathy. Values are conveyed through engagement with a topic that affects the children. Sometimes the suggestions come directly from the children themselves; sometimes they arise from practical considerations in collaboration with our partner school in Heilsbronn; and sometimes they are, so to speak, 'in the air', as they are topical, significant and moving for our entire school community. It is important to us that these themes are true to life and forward-looking. The themes should broaden the children's horizons, connect perspectives and provide them with a message they can engage with and actively help to shape. In doing so, it is particularly important to us that the children do not see themselves as passive observers of the world, but as active contributors. Over the years, a number of thematic areas have emerged:

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Peace and democracy The Animals' Conference; Europe Is My Home; Those Were the Days	**Mental Health and Courage** Neboj se – Don't Be Afraid
Diversity and Inclusion The Grey Planner; The Suburban Crocodiles; Everyone Is Different	**Memory and History** Grandma, Grandad, tell me a story! Those Were the Days
The essentials in life Emil and the Detectives; The Little Prince; 'Ship Ahoy'	

It is particularly wonderful to see and experience when a musical not only has the power to leave a lasting impression on the pupils, our school and the local community, but sometimes also reaches far beyond. In 2016, following the performance of 'Grandma, Grandad, tell me a story', the German Football Club Prague was re-established in response to our musical. The DFC Prague was a club founded in 1896 where Jews, Czechs and Germans played football together. Franz Kafka was a fan of this club, which was disbanded in 1940 due to a ban on Jewish players taking part in matches. The Czechs and the Germans playing there decided they would no longer play without their Jewish friends. In this club, revived in 2016 by a parents' initiative, Czech and German children continue to play football together to this day. These diverse connections and aspects show that, ultimately, this is about more than just a musical performance. When children are allowed to tell their own stories and find their own means of expression through language, music and movement, it is more than just a performance. It is arts education, it is culture.



Scene from "Neboj se" © ZŠNČP

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Reference
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Ramona Schulz was born in Munich, Germany, where she studied piano and music education at the Richard Strauss Conservatory and the University of Music. From 2014 to 2016, she completed a master's degree at the Orff Institute in Salzburg.
She has been living and working in Prague, Czechia, since 2000. She works with different age groups and all levels. In addition to elemental music education, teaching music at the Thomas Mann Gymnasium, and concerts for children, she conducts the school orchestra and leads school-wide musical projects at the Primary School of German-Czech Understanding.

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