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## ‘Die Kinderbrücke’ as a social bridge Musical and creative support for children with refugee backgrounds

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## **‘The Children’s Bridge’ as a social bridge-builder Musical and creative support for children with refugee backgrounds**

Gerhard Hofbauer

The Salzburg Festival Fund awarded the Salzburg branch of the Malteser Hospital Service funding for ‘musical and creative support for children with refugee backgrounds’. This enabled the musical theatre project *Die Kinderbrücke*, based on the picture book of the same name. (Bolliger & Zavřel, 1999)<sup>11</sup>

Assistance for new arrivals, as well as weekly language courses and conversation afternoons for refugees living in Salzburg, have for years been part of the voluntary services provided by the Malteser in the Salzburg region, for which there is also in-house expertise. Whereas previously the majority were people from Syria and African countries, for some time now the focus has been primarily on those who have fled the war zone in Ukraine. There have also been isolated initiatives on an artistic level. Temporary group lessons involving music and dance were organised for children from asylum-seeking families, in each case drawing on external expertise, including from the Orff Institute.

However, the new funding opened the door to a more comprehensive project, albeit with the thematically defined aim of *musically fostering the creativity of children with refugee backgrounds*. Given such resources, ideas were not long in coming. Purchasing instruments and teaching the children to play them – a sort of ‘JeKi’<sup>12</sup> initiative – was one suggestion; group courses in rhythm or in music and dance were another. In both cases, the Malteser Hospital Service found itself, on the one hand, overwhelmed by the organisational demands, and on the other, internal doubts arose as to whether and how such formats would specifically benefit children with psychological stress resulting from their refugee experiences.

After discussing all the ideas, the decision was finally made in favour of my concept: to adapt the picture book story *Die Kinderbrücke* to the situation and set it to music and staging. As a member of the Malteser regional management team, I felt capable of handling this both organisationally – thanks to my experience in elemental music education – and professionally, particularly in the field of polyaesthetics.<sup>13</sup>

### **Fundamentals of observing children’s behaviour**

The distinctive feature of the concept was intended to be that it would make the overall developmental process comprehensible for subsequent observation and analysis. The intention was that this should make it possible, for example, to reconstruct in which play situations and in what observable ways Ukrainian children are able to immerse themselves

<sup>11</sup> The publisher Bohem, based in Münster, was very helpful in allowing us to use the book. Each child received their own copy as a thank-you for taking part.

<sup>12</sup> This is similar to the German projects ‘JeKi: An Instrument for Every Child’.

<sup>13</sup> The author of this article has worked in a wide variety of areas within music and dance education, including several decades in teacher training. For many years, he has headed the “International Society for Polyaesthetic Education”, with which he has been involved since 1981 (see [www.paeb.org](http://www.paeb.org)).

in the action and the shaping of the story, despite the (initially presumed) inhibiting effects of their refugee experience, and to identify any differences compared to other participating children.

When establishing a basis for observation, priority should be given to criteria for which there is already experience from prior studies. Although Hans Hermann Wickel, for example, reports explicitly on ‘music projects with refugees’ (Wickel, 2018, p. 104), the ‘*4th World Vision Children’s Study*’ (World Vision Deutschland e.V., 2018) proved to be a far more relevant and comprehensive source for children. As part of the study, children aged six to eleven were surveyed in 2017 on the topics of family, school, leisure, self-determination and poverty, as well as specifically on the ‘topic of refugees’.<sup>14</sup>

### Methodology

Accessible entry points to the scenes’ content were intended to make it easier for the children to identify with them emotionally. Thus, the creative process began by listening to the children’s musical preferences so that these could be incorporated into the dramatic play, particularly in the form of their songs. I created new elements for the content of several scenes: emotionally charged movement patterns from which choreography was to develop, spoken verses with a distinctive linguistic rhythm, short songs that captured the essence of the content<sup>15</sup>, and, in addition, the entire setting—from the backdrop to the stage lighting—as a vibrant atmosphere in which to unfold expressive dramatic play.<sup>16</sup>

### On the organisational approach

The attempt to bring together a group of 8–10-year-olds comprising children with refugee backgrounds and other local children proved complicated over a prolonged period and ultimately fruitless. This was because the children with refugee backgrounds are spread across a wide variety of primary school classes. Their parents could not be persuaded to allow extra-curricular rehearsals. It was only the Ukrainian Saturday school that provided a workable framework.

The search for a group of local primary school children was no easier. The timetables for class work are too regimented and rigidly structured. Extra rehearsals outside school hours were deemed impossible from the outset. With the involvement of the Education Authority, a Year 1 teacher finally expressed her interest.

Consequently, the Ukrainian school also invited a group of six-year-olds.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> An example from the summary on the topic of refugees: Just under half of all children are aware of refugees in their local area, with children who have experienced poverty themselves or have a migrant background being even more likely to be aware. One-third have “done something together” with refugee children, two-thirds of whom had positive experiences. World Vision Deutschland e.V. (2018, pp. 29–31) Four out of five children state that once they had got to know each other, it was no different from with other children. More than two-thirds mention language difficulties. (ibid., p. 32)

<sup>15</sup> On music as a trigger for expressive movement, see Behrens and Tiedt (2018, p. 174).

<sup>16</sup> For more details on stimuli that promote creativity, see also Meis (2018, p. 50).

<sup>17</sup> For the composition of the group, see below.

For organisational reasons, only six weeks were available in total. The children's differing school days posed an additional problem for in-depth collaborative work: the local school has no lessons on Saturdays, whereas the Ukrainian school is a Saturday school. Consequently, each group rehearsed separately, for an average of two hours a week at their respective school premises, with the assistance of their class teachers. As the rehearsals were integrated into the school timetable, no parents were present. All the children performed and practised the entire sequence in almost exactly the same way.

From the stage rehearsals onwards, all the children were taken to the performance venue and performed together. The groups of children on both sides of the stage were generally mixed from both classes.

The project concluded with a stage presentation in front of invited parents and relatives of the participants, as well as a few additional guests. The audience's interest was enormous.

### **On the children's behaviour during the working processes**

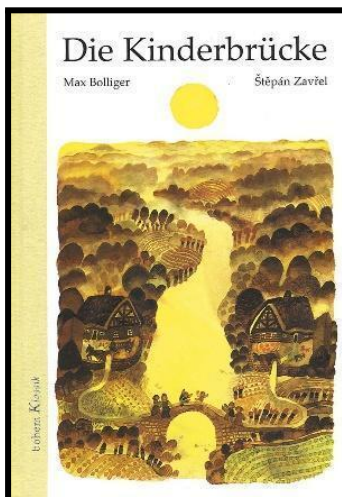
The children's behaviour during the activities deserved a more detailed description than can be provided here. It was striking that, from the outset, the children in the local class showed fewer distractions, hardly any aggressive behaviour towards one another, and very few interpersonal conflicts. The local children were able to demonstrate perseverance and concentration earlier on, whilst the Ukrainian children developed these skills gradually. Consequently, their integration into the game took longer, but was increasingly successful. Some did not want to play at all initially, but by the end everyone was taking part. The regional children also developed a certain familiarity with the songs of the other group more spontaneously. Interaction in mixed groups was never problematic. The Ukrainian children seemed somewhat shyer at first.

### **Paradigmatic moods of some picture book scenes**

The following description of some scenes is intended to make the picture book story comprehensible in terms of content and, at the same time, provide an insight into the material used. First of all: the story contains no content relating to flight. An outline of the paradigmatic moods of some scenes is intended to illustrate why the material nevertheless proves particularly suitable for joint play between the Ukrainian and the local children.

*Separate camps, seemingly peaceful, characterise the beginning of the story.*

Immediately after the stage curtains open, the set reveals the two farms and the river, which, depicted as a blue-green, gathered tarpaulin, divides the stage in two. The playing area for the two groups, made up of a mix of children from both classes, is ready. Image on the right: As agreed, one last chance to wave to each other, then it's off to the game.



The Children's Bridge, cover



Clear the Stage (#238)

We incorporated some of the favourite songs that the children had presented to me during our first meeting into this opening atmosphere. In this way, they were each able to enter the scene with their own songs: from the local children's repertoire with one German-language and one English-language song, and from the Ukrainian children's repertoire with one of their folk songs sung in Ukrainian. Both groups had learnt all the songs and were thus able to sing together.

As the performance progressed, the proportion of new material steadily increased. Each scene was given its own distinctive sound.

### *Peace is deceptive*

A perceived sense of disadvantage fuels resentment and envy. The simple cause is sunshine on one side of the river, and shade and damp on the other.

This was reflected, on the one hand, in the 'sunbeam melody' accompanied by gestures,



and, on the other, the toneless spoken verse, delivered with a sense of revulsion and accompanied by stamping movements.



*Escalating hostility*

Envy and mutual contempt among the adults lead to arguments and sheer rage, which ultimately culminate in violence: they throw stones at one another.

I captured the escalating hostility in the rhythmic line '*Arguments turn to rage, you don't realise what you're doing*', which all the children repeated four times in unison, crouching down, starting in a whisper-soft pianissimo, raising the pitch by one semitone each time until reaching a menacing fortissimo with wild gesticulation, ...



... whereupon the dramatic climax of the story followed, fortunately with a harmless outcome: the stones plonked into the water. (They were, after all, to play a key role in the further course of the story).

Waiting until this point to throw the 'river stones' made of insulation material proved to be one of the most difficult tests of patience for the children.



Da werfen sie Steine...

Da wer - fen sie Stei - ne, die fal - len in den Fluss,  
ein Glück, dass nie - mand lei - den muss.



"All Children Want Peace"

*The sun shines down on everyone...*

The following scene, featuring snoring adults in the shadow of the midday heat and children languishing with a longing for something else, represents one of the greatest contrasts in the dramatic development:

To the slowly rising melody of the song '*Über allen strahlt die Sonne...*' (Kral, Rudlof & Teiner, 1975), the children declare unequivocally in its continuation: '*All children want peace, peace that preserves happiness.*'

*Hop, hop, wobbly stone...*

A prolonged dry spell, causing the stones they have thrown to protrude from the lowered water level, inspires the children to new creativity: with a little skill, they might finally succeed in hopping to meet each other.

The song, sung alternately on one leg to the bass notes in a reggae-like rhythm, forms the basis for the movement and performance of this scene:



Wobbly Stone Reggae

Hüpf, hüpf, Wa - ckel - stein, wir wer - den gleich bei - sam - men sein!

Bass-Ostinato

17

8

*Encountering the world of the others*



First encounter in the middle of the river (#351)



ходить гарбуз по городу (#371)

Is it any wonder that the children in the middle of the river chat endlessly? Authoritative calls from home put a stop to this. Back home, the children astonish their parents with German and Ukrainian songs from the other side of the river.

### *Fatal Turn*

With plenty of vocal action and body percussion, a storm rages across the stage. It causes the water level to rise fatally once more. The fact that the stones have sunk prompts the children to perform a protest rap:

The musical score is presented on a light yellow background. It consists of two staves. The top staff is a vocal line in 4/4 time, starting with a repeat sign. The melody is simple, with notes corresponding to the lyrics. There are two instances of '(Echo)' written above the staff. The lyrics are: 'Die Stei - ne sind weg (sind weg) ach, du Schreck! (du Schreck!)'. The bottom staff is a rhythmic accompaniment, primarily consisting of eighth notes with 'x' marks above them, indicating body percussion. There are several triplets marked with a '3' above the notes. The piece begins with a *p* (piano) dynamic and ends with an *f* (forte) dynamic, indicated by a red wedge-shaped hairpin.

(Echo) (Echo)

Die Stei - ne sind weg (sind weg) ach, du Schreck! (du Schreck!)

Wir kön-nen nicht plau-dern, nicht sin-gen, nicht la-chen, oh Mut-ter, oh Va-ter, was sol-len wir ma-chen?

*p* *f*

### *The Children's Bridge*

Only a brilliant idea can save them from such deep despair. It comes from the children and leads to the final scene: 'Let's build a bridge.' Everyone works together to build the bridge,

...

... constructively and ... actively.



Stone upon stone ... (#409)



this is how we build. (#402)



It must be wonderful to walk over it. (#413)

Musical score with lyrics:

Lasst uns ei - ne Brü - cke bau - en und nach gro - ßen Stei - nen schau - en!  
 Ei - ne Brü - cke für den Frie - den für die Men - schen hier und drü - ben!

Brü - cken - plä - ne zeich - nen wir ... Stein auf Stein, so bau - en wir!  
 Seht das Bau - werk oh wie fein, da - rü - ber gehn muss herr - lich sein!

For the remaining verses, you can march across the new structure at a brisk pace. All the children triumphantly on the bridge they have built themselves – that is how the play ends.



A bridge for peace...

### Composition of the group of children

Zusammensetzung Projektphase			Zusammensetzung Stichprobe (Feedback nach 6 Mo.)		
	Ukrain. Kinder	Regionale Klasse		Ukrain. Kinder	Regionale Klasse
Jungen	3	11	Jungen	3	7
Mädchen	10	9	Mädchen	5	9
Gruppengröße	13	20	Teiln. verblieben	8	16
Insgesamt		33	insges. verblieben		24
			Neuzuwachs	4	5
			Gruppengr. neu	12	21
			Insgesamt nach 6 Mo.		33

Sample / Group sizes

33 children took part in the play: 13 Ukrainian children (10 girls and 3 boys) 20 from the regional class (9 girls and 11 boys). Of these, 24 were present during the feedback session; 9 children had joined the group in the meantime (see Table above). They did not participate in the responses.

### Feedback from the participating children

From previous projects, I had learned that verbal feedback from six-year-olds works well when it takes place in a comfortable, safe conversational atmosphere, ideally in small groups of 3–4 children and with at least 10 minutes of undisturbed time. Then meaningful, transcribable feedback was achieved. This was not feasible from an organisational perspective in this project.

Therefore, the following simplified approach was chosen: using a kind of phenomenological reduction of the current contribution by Sara Hubrich, ‘Musicking and Cultural Work’ (2025, pp. 24–30)<sup>18</sup>, four questions were developed to elicit feedback from the participating

<sup>18</sup> In autumn 2025, the journal *Diskussion Musikpädagogik* published a special issue entitled ‘Music as Social Practice’. Several articles in the issue, such as that by Sara Hubrich. Hubrich (2025), reflect on the situation of refugees from the social context of music-making.

children. The idea of using a single question to gauge the children's acceptance of the other group, in reference to the *World Vision children's study* mentioned at the outset, arose naturally.

The questions were formulated in a child-friendly manner as statements to be completed:

1. I had the most fun when I... (open-ended response as an introduction)
2. When I think about dancing, singing, and acting out the story on stage:  
What I did best was...
3. I remember well... (3 options as suggestions)
  - how I acted myself
  - the other children
  - of various things
4. Playing with the children from the other class was ... (4 options provided)
  - fun
  - exciting
  - annoying
  - I can't remember

After a presentation of the performance video at the start of the new school year in the classes, the children were asked these four feedback questions.

### **Summary interpretation of the children's feedback**

Generalised answers from the children were accepted and not corrected. Open-ended answers were also accepted and descriptively subsumed under the categories provided.

In response to the first question, 'What was the most fun?', the majority of both groups answered 'everything'. The other answers from the regional children concerned 'hands-on' activities. This can be attributed, on the one hand, to the higher proportion of boys and, on the other, to the focus on playing instruments in this group. 38% of the Ukrainian children mentioned 'singing'. What both groups have in common is that almost all of them enjoyed taking part.<sup>19</sup>

In the second question, regarding what went best, the answers paint a similar picture: more nuanced responses came from the regional group, though it is again striking that 38% of the Ukrainian group mentioned 'singing'. Despite two Ukrainian dance songs, 'dancing' was mentioned only by one Ukrainian child. 'Everything' and (also) 'other' were what two-thirds of the regional children considered 'most successful'. This also included things that were not specifically mentioned. The Ukrainian children's answers, on the other hand, are more nuanced, and there were no mentions of 'everything'.

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<sup>19</sup> Six-year-olds make little linguistic distinction between 'fun' and 'joy', which is why the everyday term 'fun' was preferred.

Due to time constraints, the third question could only be asked in the regional class. Self-reference, social interaction and factual reference are almost on a par in the answers of more than two-thirds of the regional children. The high number of multiple answers indicates a vivid memory, even after several months. The pronounced perception of the other children correlates with the data from the *World Vision Children's Study*.

The fourth question, about what it was like to play with the children from the other class, was answered by just over half of the children in both groups with positive emotional memories. The 38% and 40% who described it as 'exciting' can be interpreted as constructive interest in the other children. One child in each group could not remember. This correlates with the 10% disinterest or rejection towards refugee children reported by the *World Vision Children's Study*.

The children in the regional class gave noticeably more detailed and nuanced answers. The Ukrainian children needed more explanations and, overall, more time during the interview, although they were similarly motivated to provide feedback. When selecting answer options, the Ukrainian children showed a noticeable tendency towards multiple answers.

When asked if there was anything else they would like to add, the regional children provided four times as many responses as the Ukrainian children. This is most likely indicative of problems with language comprehension, as mentioned in the *World Vision Children's Study*. One loss of a friendship expressed by a Ukrainian child was particularly striking.<sup>20</sup>

The additional comments from 53% of the children in the regional class suggest a positive self-image in the context of the musical theatre project and allow for a connection to the high level of recall in their answers to Question 3.

Overall, similar trends emerged to those reported in the *World Vision Children's Study*. Reference has already been made above to the wealth of experience provided by the rehearsal videos. An analysis of the artistic and social developments during the production process would merit a separate article.

It was just as clear that music theatre work is very popular with almost all children as it was that the children are interested in one another. Going beyond the other studies mentioned, the feedback from this project also includes responses from the perspective of children with refugee backgrounds, which are almost as positive as those of the children in the regional class.

Another difference from the findings of Andresen's children's study was notable: although, according to the *World Vision Children's Study*, almost one in two children expressed fear of rising xenophobia, nothing comparable was observed at any point or from any group in the musical theatre project. Nor did the Ukrainian adults make any mention of perceived hostility or contempt.

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<sup>20</sup> The child seen in the video, who was a friend, is no longer in the class.

### From the feedback interviews with participants

I asked the two teachers of the groups the same questions in an interview, in order to enable a comparison between the children's groups. For both teachers, the project contributed equally well to their other teaching work.

The teacher of the regional class emphasises: 'Yes, of course, the picture book is about conflict – how can I resolve a dispute, how can I make amends. The idea of peace also fitted in well.' When asked about observable lasting effects, she replies: 'The children spontaneously sing the songs again and again. Or even when arguments break out, I can already hear the sayings during break time: "Arguments turn into anger. You don't know what you're doing."

The Ukrainian teacher highlights the change in emotional engagement: 'I noticed that the children who were somewhat withdrawn during the lessons—that is, during rehearsals—were very open during the performance; they were fully present and took part. And that was really very noticeable.' When asked if anything has had a lasting effect, she says: 'Certainly. Many children were very proud to be on stage, that their parents had seen it all. That they had done [it] together with other children, with another school. And also, that the children from the other school – the Austrian children – sang Ukrainian songs.'

It is not surprising that the issue of acceptance plays a particularly important role for the Ukrainian children. In line with the findings of the children's study, the Ukrainian teacher explains: 'And we don't know everything the children have been through. For example, at home, what fears and worries their parents have. The children sense all of this, even if they don't hear it. They sense [it] anyway and take it all in.'

Nevertheless, the Austrian teacher sums it up, drawing on her extensive experience: 'Children are children, no matter where they're from. It has been confirmed once again that it doesn't matter where they come from. You can work with everyone in the same way.'

The narrator of the performance brings decades of experience in aesthetic education for social professions to the role. He attests to the children's empathetic and caring behaviour:

In the situation where one half of the stage was lit and the other dark: the children in the dark acted out their deep sorrow. Yet the children in the light suddenly joined in and shared in the grief. Elsewhere, it was observed that children helped one another, for example by protecting each other from imminent dangers such as falls or missteps at the edge of the stage.

On the interaction between children and the play leader, he says: 'When the play leader moved very close to the children, they felt more part of a community with him and allowed him to draw a lot out of them. They placed their trust in him.'

This coincided strikingly with my own understanding of the role of a 'facilitator', as Haak-Schulenburg also explains. (Haak-Schulenburg, 2025, p. 31) The 'facilitator' is both able and tasked, provided they have a certain understanding of the children's personal

dispositions, with creatively opening up a space for play and experience that goes far beyond spatial design, in which all forms of artistic expression—such as music, language, dance, mime and gestural performance, and vocal action—become part of the space for play and experience.

### **A brief summary**

It seems the children had managed to put on a successful performance, which they had all – every single one of them – thoroughly enjoyed. In the process, they bonded with one another, even though they had not known each other before and had only spent a limited amount of time together during the project. Regardless of their markedly different everyday social backgrounds, they found a new sense of agency within a newly created reality in which they could ‘set the tone’ together.

Overall, the project *Die Kinderbrücke* can thus be classified as a successful pilot project for the ‘*musical and creative development of children with refugee backgrounds*’, which can serve as a model for further projects with the same aim. It would be interesting to expand the external observation and reflection, provided this could be done with appropriate discretion.

The award of first prize to the work as part of the 2025 Salzburg Children’s Rights Prize was a nice recognition for the author. (State of Salzburg, State Media Centre, 2025)

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Active in professional associations (member of the IOSFS since its foundation) and cultural policy, including the International Society for Polyesthetic Education since 1982, President 2006–2012. Member of the Board of Trustees of the European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, 2018–2023. Initiation of projects for people with special needs at Malteser Salzburg.