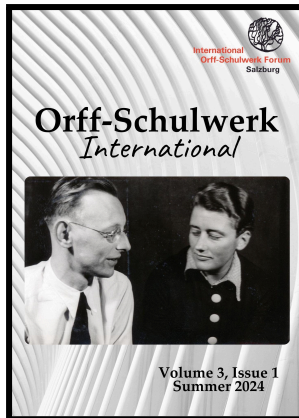




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Elemental Music Theatre with a Mixed-age Group (5 - 16) of Children from Roma Families in Romania

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How we came into contact with Romania

Since 1996, we have been visiting Romania to organise music and movement workshops in Transylvania for teachers and educators from the German minority. During these visits we heard about the social project CONCORDIA near Bucharest. We began our co-operation with this NGO in 2005. Since then, we have visited the "children's farm", 60 kilometres north of Bucharest, every year. A quote from their 2022/2023 activity report: 'Our commitment is based on the conviction that every child has the potential and the right to spread their wings and realise their dreams'.

Later, we also began working with the social project ELIJAH (founded in 2012), which builds a future for the outcasts of society. Many Roma in Transylvania suffer from poverty and neglect. But they need more than just social work: they need hope through education and training, dignity in the community, self-confidence through work, enjoyment of music and play. ELIJAH is named after the prophet Elijah, who risked his life to help the poor and had to flee because he stood up against injustice.

About our projects

Since 2005, we have been offering music theatre workshops for CONCORDIA for 12 children aged 6 to 16, and 12 of their teachers. With these groups of 24 players, we created a performance in four days and presented it to all the other children and adults in the village. Our aim was to enable both children and adults to interact with each other in a playful and joyful way alongside their - often arduous - everyday lives. As a pedagogical team, we also set an example of how these days can be organised in an appreciative and cooperative manner in this extremely heterogeneous group.

With ELIJAH, we needed a different structure. We worked with mixed-age groups of children and their teachers in day centres for just a few hours. For our project *The Song of the Colourful Birds* with the Roma children presented at CONVENTION 2023, we were able to meet them for three hours in the afternoon on four consecutive days (see below for details).

Why elemental music theatre?

Pedagogical and didactic considerations and our main intentions

In the best tradition of Orff-Schulwerk, we focus on the interplay of music, movement, speech and drama and choose a simple story (fairy tale, picture book, etc.) that stimulates and motivates the imagination. We then offer a clearly structured programme and a 'prepared environment' (according to Maria Montessori) and plan all meetings with the group conscientiously. Above all, this means that we reliably try to ensure stable guidance from the

leadership team and some prepared elements (e.g. a song, a rhythm, a dance) as well as competent support for all creative activities from our team, such as

- Making room for the different abilities, wishes and needs of all participants
- For the teachers: Expansion of own behaviour and own experiences
- For the children and young people: strengthening their self-esteem

About the target group of the presented project *The Song of the Colourful Birds*

Roma live on the margins of society in the countries of Eastern Europe. They are poor, have no work, no acceptance in villages and towns *and* they have many children! The social project ELIJAH tries to change this situation and offer help for the families. Priest Georg Sporschill, one of the founders of the project, says:

We are active in four villages, always following a similar pattern: Everywhere there is a social centre where there is a team that accompanies the people, listens to their ideas, wishes and concerns and works with them to find possible solutions. In concrete terms, this means learning with the children, satisfying their hunger, advising the parents and, above all, building houses with the parents.

In September 2017, we offered a workshop with music, movement and theatre. Our four-day stay was fully documented by the young filmmaker Max Shire.

We met children and young people from the village of Nocrich (aged 5 to 16) who regularly come to the social centre (built by ELIJAH) and live in the colourful houses that ELIJAH has built with the help of the families. The children receive lunch there and are supported in their learning by the teachers. We also met three teachers and the head of the music school in the village of Hosman who completed our team of tutors. We prepared them for the three play days and involved them in the planning. They were actors and important links (also translators) between us and the children.

Our project - content, structure and process

We chose the African legend *The Song of the Colourful Birds* (text: Kobna Anan, illustrations: Omari Amonde). Five birds meet every morning at a farmer's house to sing and dance for him. As a reward, the farmer gives them food. One morning, however, all the birds think: "If I fly to the farmer alone, I'll get all the food for myself!" Over the course of the day, all the birds fly to the farmer one by one. But as they only know one line of their song, the farmer doesn't like it at all and chases them all away without giving them anything. So the five birds have to go to sleep hungry that evening. The next morning, they shamefully confess to each other what they have done and decide to fly back to the farmer together and share the food.



On the way to the village



When does it start?

- **First day:** Arrival, planning meeting with the head of the music school, preparation of instruments and materials.
- **Second day:** planning meeting with the teachers, clown performance (with both of us as the duo “Manuschka and Michelino”) at the primary school in Nocrich, including some of the children who will attend our workshop, first afternoon of rehearsals with the children.
- **Third day:** planning meeting with the teachers, second afternoon of rehearsals with the children.
- **Fourth day:** Clown performance in Hosman (social centre), third rehearsal afternoon with the children, performance in front of parents and siblings, debriefing with the teachers.



I play guitar

Problems to be solved and skills to be utilised

Although we had years of experience with the challenging conditions in the two social projects CONCORDIA and ELIJAH in Romania, we were surprised by the emotional intensity of the

reactions of the children and young people resulting from the complex problems in this project. The four most central problems were:

- lack of understanding and unwillingness to follow the rules of the game,
- lack of frustration tolerance,
- lack of concentration, and
- lack of social interaction

Together with the teachers and the music school director, we reflected on and analysed the events of the first afternoon of rehearsals and developed exercises and games for the second afternoon to familiarise the children with the new and unfamiliar challenges and tasks. On the one hand, the children were now better able to follow the rules of the game, such as: waiting in a row before it is my turn; play only your instrument when the director is giving you a sign; and moving in the circle only one place further (and not four places, because you want to play the drum next).

On the other hand, until the end of the project, we repeatedly had great difficulty getting to grips with their frustration tolerance, their ability to concentrate and their social behaviour. Our patience, friendliness, openness and composure were put to the test. However, we were helped by the very special skills that the children were able to utilise with such energy. The four most important of these were:

- the capacity for spontaneous joy
- the ability for intrinsic motivation
- the ability for strong personal expression
- the ability to connect in the present (and not worry about what happened yesterday and forgive generously)



Conclusion

In the end, all the children and young people involved were proud that they were able to present their families with a proper little performance. Even though many of the agreed details were forgotten, the joy of playing and the co-operation of all participants impressed the

audience. In the debriefing, the teachers involved and the head of the music school were also very satisfied with the result and expressed their amazement at what we had all achieved together in just four days. We encouraged the teachers to continue carrying out small projects with the children, even without our support: Our stated aim was to offer our work as a motivational "door opener".

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Further information

www.elijah.ro

www.concordia.or.at

www.theaterausdemkoffer.at

YouTube links "Elemental music theatre - The song of the colourful birds"

German: <https://youtu.be/lrO8R8BeNT0>

English: https://youtu.be/W_dA-DZXOi4

Book

Anan K. and Amonde, O. (2001) *Das Lied der bunten Vögel*. Münsingen: Fischer.

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Manuela Widmer is a music and dance teacher who worked with children between the ages of four and ten along with students at the Orff Institute until 2012. In addition, Manuela remains active in training teachers and educators in Germany and abroad. She is the author of various specialist books for early childhood music education, basic training, and elemental music theatre.

Michel Widmer studied social work with a special focus on music and theatre. He studied Elemental Music and Dance Education at the Orff Institute. He works with children, adolescents, adults, people with disabilities, and families. Michel is also active as a teacher educator at an international level. He performs as a clown in shows for children and families. He is also a member of the "Doctor Clowns" in the children's hospitals in Salzburg.

