

“Ich spiele zum ersten Mal Klavier”:
A Musicking Ethnography

Instrumental Lessons with Unaccompanied
Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Young People

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ABSTRACT

This article shares experiences, considerations, and recommendations from musicking activities with young unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers in Lucerne, Switzerland. I focus on the context of individual instrumental lessons, which the young people sought out or requested. Based on observations and ongoing discussions during lessons, as well as more formal interviews, I examine how teaching, making music, and talking about music with each person offered a glimpse into their lived experiences (both musical and otherwise), while also revealing how music-related issues mirror larger-scale issues such as access to resources, cultural participation, and understandings of empowerment.

Beyond discussing these issues, drawing conclusions about the impact of this type of musicking, and offering recommendations for future directions, I discuss two methodological approaches that define my work. First, I propose a “musicking ethnography” and explain how this approach shifts the balance of ethnomusicology’s traditional participant-observation from participation as a means of observing and understanding musicking, to musicking as the avenue for participation in the lives and stories of my interlocutors. It is therefore an ethnography not *of* but *through* musicking. I also critically evaluate the case-study nature of this work and argue for the benefits of focusing on individual stories within the context of forced migration, drawing on work in prosopography and its application in ethnomusicology (e.g., Shelemay, 2022). These aspects come together to highlight how the way in which one conducts this type of work and how one frames it is as important as the work itself.

KEYWORDS

Musicking; forced migration; empowerment; cultural participation; ethnography

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INTRODUCTION

“Hello everyone. I’m playing piano for the first time right now” begins an audio collage by N.A., a Somali teenager who had recently arrived in Switzerland as an unaccompanied asylum seeker (Zuhören Schweiz: [online](#)). N.A. created her sound collage in a series of workshops during the first part of the “Music as Empowerment” project at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts.¹ The workshops, named “Ohren auf Reisen” – Ears on the Move,² invited young people with a background of forced migration to create and comment on collages of sounds from their new – and possibly their old – surroundings.³ After adding the piano sounds to her collage, N.A. mentioned that she wished she could learn how to play the piano and when I joined the project shortly thereafter, I started teaching her. Over time, other young refugees saw and heard what we were doing and asked to join. What follows is a glimpse into our musical interactions; reflections on methodology; and an examination of issues of access, participation, and empowerment that were brought to light through our time together.⁴

Based on observations and ongoing discussions during lessons, as well as informal written exchanges and more formal interviews, I explore how individual instrumental lessons impact refugee and asylum-seeking young people and show how music-related issues mirror larger-scale issues such as access to resources, cultural participation, and understandings of empowerment. Alongside arguing for the value of these lessons on multiple levels, I propose “musicking ethnography” as a methodological approach uniquely suited to this kind of work, the holistic concept of musicking (Small, 1998) being particularly relevant not only for its breadth, but also – perhaps primarily – for its emphasis on relationships. I discuss how conducting this type of ethnography through musicking offers insights into the ways in which power structures inform music education settings, as well as the mechanisms of sharing, (non)belonging, and inclusion that form some of the thematic pillars of this journal issue.

METHODOLOGY: MUSICKING WITH INDIVIDUALS

This work is an ethnography not *of* musicking (as is the hallmark of ethnomusicology), but rather *through* musicking. Ethnomusicologists of course participate in musicking all the time through one of the field’s main methods: participant observation. However, my work here shifts from participation as a means of observing and understanding musicking, to musicking as the avenue for participation in the lives and stories of my interlocutors. This can therefore best be understood not as a music ethnography, but rather, as a *musicking* ethnography – the emphasis is on the act of musicking. It includes music as we most conventionally think of it– here in the form of instrumental lessons –as well as other

¹ The Swiss National Science Foundation sponsored project “Music as Empowerment: Engaging Young Refugees in Musicking as a Way of Social Immersion” (SNF# 201044) was conducted at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts during the years 2021-2025.

² The workshops were run in collaboration with the organisation Zuhören Schweiz – “Listening Switzerland” (<https://zuhoeren-schweiz.ch/projekt/ohren-auf-reisen/>). On the implementation of Ohren auf Reisen in the context of our project, see Zimmerman (2023).

³ Participants were welcome, but not required to include sonic reference to previous surroundings, whether from their place of origin or from their journey to Switzerland.

⁴ All participants gave permission to be cited and have their musicking experiences described and all chose the way in which they are named in this publication (full name/ first name only/ initials/ anonymous/ pseudonym).

forms of musicking such as listening to sound clips, attending concerts, talking about preferences and experiences, and more. These exchanges and observations comprise the ethnographic source material upon which I base my arguments.

My approach follows along the lines of “walking ethnography” (Aduonum, 2021; Kirschstein and Simonett, 2024), in which walking is both method and content – not ethnography during walking but ethnography of the walking itself. This focus on ethnography through activity is particularly fitting in the case of musicking, given the core of Small’s concept, that “music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do” (Small, 1998, p. 2).

Although my work here does not fall under sensory ethnography, some of Sarah Pink’s (2009) observations in that field are also relevant with respect to my own presence in the ethnographic context:

[O]ne of the tasks of the reflexive sensory ethnographer is thus to develop an awareness of how she or he becomes involved in not only participating in ‘other people’s practices’, but also in anticipating her or his co-involvement in the constitution of places, and to identify the points of intervention of her or his own intentionality and subjectivity (p. 43).

My own role, not only as a teacher, but also –perhaps even primarily – as a mentor, confidante, facilitator, and resource, is central to this work and cannot be ignored. I address it at various points and from various angles below, critically analysing my own potential in perpetuating problematic structures and dynamics, of which I remain acutely, and sometimes uncomfortably, aware.

The other cornerstone of my methodology here is its case-study nature. I focus on only a small handful of individuals. It might thus be argued that this work is neither a representative sample nor in service to a wider population. Yet in this case and in this context, working closely with a few individuals offers valuable insights into the relationship between young people and their musical experiences against the backdrop of forced migration.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to look at individuals to truly understand the impact and roles of music is articulated by Kay Kaufman Shelemay (2022) in her recent book, *Sing and Sing on!* where she writes:

Periods of exile experienced by individuals are rarely perceived by outside observers as anything more than fleeting moments within the larger flow of collective time. As a result, each disrupted existence, devastating for the person involved, tends to be dwarfed from the perspective of what historians have termed the *longue durée*.

Later in the book, Shelemay underscores that “one can understand the dimensions of revolutionary trauma only through a close look at individual experiences” (p. 88). While Shelemay’s focus is on professional musicians, this argument is just as applicable to the experiences of non-professionals. She bases her method on the field of prosopography, which constructs an understanding of population groups based on the experiences of individuals who are part of that group (Verboven *et al.*, 2007). Here I am doing likewise.

Alongside instrumental practice and learning the young people I teach have shared with me their musical preferences, aspects of their day to day lives, and, sometimes, selected details of their experience in their home countries and their paths to and in Switzerland. It is upon these conversations and interactions, these relationships around music, that this ethnography is built.

INSTRUMENTAL LESSONS IN CONTEXT

The project “Music as Empowerment: Engaging Young Refugees in Musicking as a Way of Social Immersion” is an inquiry into the influence of music and dance on the self-worth and self-empowerment of young refugees and asylum seekers (late-arriving young asylum seekers, provisionally admitted persons and recognized refugees). In particular the question of young people’s identification through and with music and musical contexts as well as the role of music in their integration into their new setting.

After the initial phase of sound collage creation described above, the project branched out in numerous different directions, including a community dance offering, a hip-hop workshop, a body percussion programme, and the individual instrumental lessons that are the focus of this article, which began in September 2022.

In addition to 16-year-old N.A., two other young women formed the core of the group: M.N., a 17-year-old Afghan who had been in Switzerland since summer 2020 and R.G., a Turkish woman in her early 30s, who had just arrived in Luzern. M.N. wanted to learn guitar but along the way eagerly tried piano as well; R.G. initially wanted to build on her recorder and kalimba playing skills, but then realised she could fulfil her childhood dream of learning piano and chose to focus on that instead.

The three young women had different goals. M.N. wanted to learn pieces she liked and knew, which we did initially by ear/rote, and to learn to read notation, for which I chose a pop method that aligns well with her experience playing guitar chords. Once her reading advanced, we began working our way through sheet music from various anime films, of which she is a fan, as well as a well-known Persian song, which she was excited to find I had the sheet music for. While she has access to a keyboard at a neighbour’s house, she has not taken up the offer, out of self-consciousness.

R.G. wanted to learn traditionally from notation, for which she had some basis already (mainly treble clef). She decided that Middle C position was the easiest way for her to begin doing this and although this is not my preferred approach, I sourced corresponding teaching materials. R.G. was able to purchase a second-hand keyboard to practice on at home and also used a YouTube channel in Turkish, her first language, to supplement the in-person lessons with me.

N.A.’s goals were more fragmented. While she wanted to learn notation, she sometimes prefers to just play and explore sounds or to practice short motifs from songs she knows –Baby Shark; the opening riff from a popular Somali song (which we used as the basis for an improvisation). After her school sang Jingle Bells at Christmas, she was eager to play it on the piano, so we did, and she happily played it for many months after the Christmas season was over. She has also learned a few highly patterned pieces by rote or by a combination of rote and reading. For the first year and a half, N.A.’s only access to an instrument outside of lessons was at school, but she was not able to practice there because there were too many people jostling to use it in the breaks and she was daunted by the noise and roughness of her – mostly male– classmates. She independently found and began using a piano and notation app and we were finally able to source her a keyboard to enable her to practice at home.

We have met weekly since Autumn 2022, initially at the transit centre where the young people had lived or spent time, and later at the Music Department where my

office is housed, a ten-minute walk away. At the transit centre I ran the lessons variably, depending on the combination of people who came each week. In general, each person got one-on-one time with me as well as group activities either as a whole group or overlapping with the person before or after them. In the one-on-one time we played songs and instruments of each person's choosing, sometimes jamming along to recordings, other times working from notation. In pairs we played notation games to strengthen reading skills, or practiced a piece arranged as a duet. In a larger group we did body percussion activities or arrangements of pieces. Sometimes an individual activity grew to include pairs and then the larger group.

Once we moved to the Music College in summer 2023, the format became more traditional one-to-one lessons, each learner working individually with me on their own repertoire –solo pieces or duets with me– as well as technique exercises and supporting activities. This change to individual lessons was by their request; they felt they got more out of one-to-one time due to their different goals, proficiencies, and musical interests, as well as the lack of noise from having others playing in the room. The Music College also afforded better quality instruments in comparison to the less-optimal set-up at the transit centre, which had involved a small keyboard, placed upon boxes so that it stood at an appropriate height. Lessons also took on a sense of seriousness and legitimacy by being located at a recognised Music institution and following this more typical model.

Despite the benefits of being at the Music College –perhaps most obviously, the better instruments and preferred lesson format– the change in location and structure also merits some critical consideration. This change removed the more community-based aspect that had been present at the transit centre and also made the lessons more exclusive –without visibility at the transit centre, there was no way for other participants to happen upon them and join in. Lessons at the Music School made sense to the individuals already involved, both for the reasons already listed and because none of the three lived at the transit centre by that point. However, this more traditional model also perpetuated the exclusivity we sought to overcome. These considerations highlight the multifaceted nature of access and belonging through musical activities and educational structures.⁵

Part of questioning existing power structures within music education involves adjusting aspects of typical teaching. In particular, I had to reconsider my expectations for practice and progress, to accommodate a lack of access to an instrument, or life situations that otherwise hinder the ability to practice. This included reimagining lessons without a practice requirement and instead incorporating considerable repetition of concepts, techniques, and pieces or passages over the course of multiple lessons, differing from the typical assumption of forward progress in both repertoire and technique from week to week. I also focus heavily on the act of creating music during lesson time. This does not mean a lack of standards but rather working with each student's situation to meet them where they are and best support their success.⁶

⁵ We have recently received a donation of a very good quality E-piano for the transit centre, as part of our ongoing efforts to improve access to and sustainability of instrumental opportunities, in response to high demand from the young people. For the moment, however, this E-piano is mainly envisioned as a practice opportunity; lessons continue to take place at the Music College, even for the young people who live at the transit centre, in part because we are currently finding teachers for them among the music education students at the College.

⁶ For a more in-depth discussion of these and other issues around instrumental lessons with unaccompanied young people, see: Kirschstein and Petersen (2024).

All three young women are dedicated and motivated and show up consistently for lessons. Yet neither the fact that they are eager learners who themselves drive the process, nor the project team's work to increase access to opportunities negates the many ways in which this type of musicking may inherently perpetuate musical and institutional power structures and biases within which they are at a disadvantage, whether demographically, musiculturally, linguistically, economically, or otherwise. Many of these aspects are not specifically due to their experience of forced migration –in M.N.'s and R.G.'s cases, similar structures and formats also exist in their countries of origin. Nor does their existence render invalid the young women's obvious pride in their learning or my enjoyment of their progress as a teacher. It does, however, mean that it is crucial to continually reassess the attendant issues of sharing, (non)belonging, inclusion, and institutional power structures and my own potential role in perpetuating them, whether on a personal or an institutional level. True sharing must be a two-way street, or it runs the risk of being a merely conditional inclusion –whether conditional on the type of music or the ways of practicing it– which is, of course, not inclusion at all, but rather, another form of non-belonging. While I have done my best to avoid this pitfall, including regular dialogue with M.N., N.A., and R.G., it is still an ever-present concern.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH MUSIC MAKING: AGENCY AND SELF-DETERMINATION

M.N., R.G., and N.A. all actively chose music lessons, and are leaders in their own learning in terms of both content and form. I followed their musical interests, which are widely varied, from songs from their places of origin and in their first languages, to different styles, from rap to pop to traditional tunes. When so much of their lives are prescribed and regulated from outside and at the whim of larger powers, having their tastes, interests and traditions acknowledged is a way of being heard. The instrumental lessons were conceptualised as a context of self-determination. Feedback from N.A. illustrated that this was well-received:

You do it really well because you are also understanding. When I say 'no' you say 'ok, no is no.' And 'what do you want?' And not just my decision, but 'should we do this or this?' (Personal communication, 17.7.2023)⁷

The young people were also a driving force in organising the instrumental lessons as individual meeting times, rather than overlapping or group lessons. The preference was expressed by all three learners, who explained that lessons all together in one room were sonically confusing and not ideal for their learning. With this in mind, I structured the lesson time accordingly as soon as it became possible.

Beyond just the content and structure, the very existence of instrumental lessons came from the learners. This was not at all what I had envisioned when I joined the Music as Empowerment project. I had anticipated solo lessons with N.A. to be a springboard for larger scale musicking activities at the transit centre. Yet those larger scale activities did not take off the way we had imagined (see Kammermann and Kirschstein, 2024) and instead there emerged a great demand for individual lessons. Alongside M.N. and R.G.'s regular attendance, there were cameos by a few of the young men from the centre, who stopped in to learn a tune on the piano or a chord on the guitar. In Autumn 2023 A.H.Z., a young man living at the transit

⁷ "Du machst viel zu viel [sic] sehr gut, weil du bist auch verständnisvoll; wenn ich sage 'nein' du sagst 'ok, nein ist nein'. Und 'was willst du?' Und nicht nur meine Entscheidung, aber 'sollen wir so machen oder so machen?' Ja, wenn du sagst 'Nasra, wir machen jetzt da!' [Strenges Ton mit lautem Sound]... oh, ist schwierig, oder?!" Translation from German by the author.

centre, joined to learn guitar and became a regular, although we were then able to transfer him to another teacher who was better equipped than I to teach guitar.⁸

N.A., M.N., and R.G. all feel a sense of ownership of their piano journeys and have repeatedly expressed delight at their growing skills. R.G. told me how proud she was to play at a mini concert I organised in December 2023. M.N. included piano as a hobby in a short biographical video she had to make for a school project. And one day, N.A. spontaneously sent me a clip of herself playing a short motif when she found a piano at a daycare facility where she was doing a trial apprenticeship.

It would be remiss of me to ignore the power relations inherent in the context itself. I am of course acutely aware of the power balance between myself and these three learners – both musically (in my expertise in the skills they want to acquire) and otherwise (in terms of age, ethnicity, nationality, language proficiency, education, and my role as teacher and facilitator in our interactions). This is a large part of why I was initially hesitant about setting up a teacher-student relationship; it seemed more to replicate imbalances and less to focus on participants' existing literacies – one of the goals of the project.⁹

Yet the young people came to me for my own musical expertise in something they wished to learn, which they themselves had defined. While I do my best to follow their lead and their interests and to support their individual goals, and while I make every effort to be sensitive and aware, it is important to remain self-critical. With M.N. and N.A. in particular, I was –and sometimes still am– prone to overlooking the dynamic caused by our age differences. I treat them as adults and follow their lead in their learning. However, while they are certainly capable and independent, and while at over 18 they are legally adults, my position as an older adult in my forties and a teacher may have made it hard to refuse to answer my questions or fully express themselves, even though I did my best to make it clear that any conversation was always optional. (For that reason, I avoided questions that could be potentially sensitive, unless it was in response to something they brought up directly). As a teacher I am also in some ways analogous to their schoolteachers, who are authority figures, despite the different context for piano lessons and the fact that I very consciously wanted to avoid that type of dynamic.

It is also important to realise that this balance of expertise is not as simple once one looks closer. For example, while I am proficient in piano, which I teach in my professional life, I have relatively rudimentary guitar skills. At the very beginning of our time together, M.N. also wanted to learn guitar, which I agreed to help her with, but I was, in many ways, learning alongside her. My general music skills enabled me to more quickly digest and integrate the material and thus allowed me to make it more accessible to her –to 'teach'– but she often outplayed me, and she certainly practised more than I did! When I asked her how she felt about me learning alongside her, she said it did not really matter to her. I believe this acknowledgment of her own literacies was also a form of empowerment and suggests that the relationship and the act of playing together is often as important as the learning of instrumental skills. For these unaccompanied young asylum seekers, empowerment through music making took the form of pursuing their interest; defining their own

⁸ We are working to respond to this growing interest by building a programme to pair the young people with instrumental teachers from among the music education students at the HSLU. For an initial discussion of this initiative and the particular considerations of working with this demographic of learners, see: Kirschstein and Petersen (2024).

⁹ The concept of musical literacies is central to the Music as Empowerment project. See, for example: Mills and McPherson (2009); Philpott (2016).

learning paths; owning their progress; having their literacies and musical preferences recognised; and having a sense of control, self-determination, and individuality which may be less available in other aspects of daily life.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CONNECTION AND CONTINUITY: INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

While preference for individual lessons was largely musically motivated it certainly also had an interpersonal dimension. In solo lessons each person receives more focused attention from me, not just on a musical level, but also more generally. For young refugees, one-to-one focus on their personal interests and needs is rare, beyond their social worker and/or psychologist, relationships which, while individualised, further foreground their identity as refugees.

It is common for instrumental teachers to become trusted figures. This is true for many of my students and was the case for me with one of my own piano teachers, a relationship I cherish to this day. For learners with a background of forced migration, who may have fewer trusted figures to turn to, this type of mentoring relationship takes on a heightened significance – and level of responsibility. In lessons, I found myself being not only a teacher, but also partially a confidante. Outside of lessons, I check in when someone is sick or message mid-week to ask about an exam, workshop, or school assignment in a way that I do not with other students. This closer involvement is, of course, partly a function of the context for these lessons, within the scope of the Music as Empowerment project, which fosters these relationships on various planes, and to a greater extent than typical instrumental lessons. Things like baking birthday cupcakes, forwarding a meme, or remembering a religious holiday was often deeply meaningful. R.G., especially, often explicitly mentioned the significance of this contact, interest, and friendliness, and the positive effect musicking has had on her: “When I meet with you for piano lessons, my daily life is better, because the stress fades away. Without that stress, the everyday becomes a bit easier” (Personal communication, 16.09.202310).

Yet a more critically analytical perspective must again acknowledge the inequalities inherent in these relationships. A palpable sense of my own privilege often led me to hold a certain distance. This manifested largely as me censoring some of what I shared about my own life, when I felt it was something inaccessible for the other person. For example, when talking with N.A. once about our respective weekend plans, I omitted the fact that I would be seeing my mother for her birthday, knowing that she missed her own mother and could not do the same. Likewise, knowing how much R.G. misses her siblings, I had misgivings about showing her pictures of my children playing with their cousins on a recent visit with my brother, who lives nearby. Holding back or questioning what I shared was simultaneously out of consideration for their feelings and discomfort with my own privilege. This sense of caution and vigilance makes these relationships more tentative and perhaps less free than they might otherwise be, while at the same time being much deeper than the typical teacher-student relationship I have with other learners.

The importance of a teacher as a supporting figure became apparent on a number of levels. While the learners appreciate that their needs and interests drive their lessons, they were also relieved not to bear full responsibility for all learning

¹⁰ “Wenn ich treffe mit dir und ich habe diesen Klavierunterricht, mein Alltag und mein Leben ist besser, weil Stress ist weg. Wenn ich habe kein Stress mein Alltag ist ein bisschen einfacher.” Translation from German by the author.

decisions: both M.N. and N.A. said that, within the scope of their chosen direction, they want me just to make decisions and choose things for them to do and work on. Both left their countries of origin in early adolescence. Being alone at a relatively young age and having to make daily life decisions for oneself is draining. These young people are responsible for organising their entire lives, including additional social and legal tasks, alongside all the regular teen and young adult commitments such as school and apprenticeships, all in a foreign language. N.A. once told me “It’s a lot. I have to be like a mother to myself”¹¹ (Personal communication, 28.10.23) Being able to pursue interests while a trusted adult takes care of the logistical details is a welcome contrast.

In a musicking relationship, the musicking itself can become representative of this supportive relationship. The teacher’s role in duets is to accompany and hold up the learner’s part, mimicking the type of safety net that is largely absent from the unaccompanied refugee experience. R.G. mentioned this both before the mini concert when I asked if she would rather play solo or with accompaniment, and afterwards when we talked about how the concert had felt. She said she wanted to and was happy to have played as a duet, because if she made a mistake, she knew I would catch her and help her get back on track. Musicking together thus creates a sense of security not only on a social and organisational level, but also on a musical one.

Beyond one-to-one relationship between myself and each learner, instrumental lessons also created a sense of community between the three. While they all preferred the individual format for lessons, they all enjoyed time spent together and always asked after each other. I fostered this sense of connection by offering activities such as attending a concert together; organising a picnic, which they all reflected on as positive and expressed the desire to repeat; and arranging a mini concert for them to play a few pieces for each other. R.G. also took initiative, inviting us to her apartment for a traditional Turkish breakfast, and her and M.N. delightedly sent me a selfie when they coincidentally found themselves registered for the same German course. My glimpses into their lives suggest that all three were often relatively solitary and their social networks at times relatively small. M.N. and N.A. both commented that they did not really know or feel connected to other students in their school classes, while R.G. mentioned that her entire social network in Switzerland consists of a few Turkish friends, me and the rest of the project team, and M.N. and N.A. Access to lessons thus offered not only individual attention, during the lessons themselves, but also a sense of community among the three young women. Beyond that, they also offered an entry point into other musicking activities and communities: R.G. attended a bi-weekly drum circle and M.N. participated in both a hip-hop workshop and band, the many threads of musicking slowly creating interlocking networks and a social fabric.

Lastly, maintaining relationships and connections and the regularity of weekly music lessons offers continuity in a context where there is often a distinct lack thereof.¹² The transit centre is partially staffed by ‘Zivis’, young Swiss people fulfilling their civil service obligation, which automatically means a high turnover rate. The peer group at the transit centre changes frequently too, with new people arriving and others being transferred to other locations or residences. The

¹¹ “Es ist viel. Ich muss wie eine Mama sein.” Translation from German by the author.

¹² This high turnover rate is by no means unique to the young people we work with. See, for example, Morris, 2020.

changeability of the transit centre and the young people's relative lack of affinity for the place is reflected in the way they refer to it as "Kamp" (camp) rather than "home".¹³ Even beyond the transit centre, once young people are settled in shared apartments, change abounds when housemates move in or out or when they are moved to a new school or class group. Having a regular activity with a reliable support figure is one way to buffer this sense of impermanence. Empowerment through connections and relationships around musicking was thus fostered in the reliable individual support figures, communities of interest, and sense of stability.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CULTURAL PARTICIPATION: ACCESS

Participation in interests like music and arts are crucial for being seen as a full member of society (Lehmann-Wermser and Krupp, 2014; Nationaler Kulturdialog, 2019) and cultural participation is defined as a human right in Article 27 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits." (UN, 1948). The societal importance of cultural participation may be especially true in a country like Switzerland, with its long tradition of recreational associations.¹⁴ Indeed, as mentioned above, M.N. had to include a short discussion of her hobbies as part of an application package that she created as a school assignment in the form of a video. Having a creative or recreational pastime must be thus understood as an important aspect of cultural participation.

While music is what one might call a 'cultural activity', cultural participation is broader than 'cultural' activities and includes "participation in any activity that, for individuals, represents a way of increasing their own cultural and informational capacity and capital, which helps define their identity, and/or allows for personal expression" (Morrone, 2006, p. 51). Cultural participation frames individuals as members of a group defined by interests, rather than simply by immigration status.

Cultural participation understood from these angles can thus be seen as a key component in the empowerment of young refugees and asylum seekers. This perspective ultimately raises critically important issues of access, not only to opportunities such as music lessons in which to participate but also to communities of participation.¹⁵

Working with these young people revealed numerous challenges to access –from material, to institutional, to informational– which reflect the overarching challenges to access that may be experienced by people in the context of forced migration. Material challenges included the less-than-ideal set up we had at the outset – including non-optimal instruments– and finding an appropriate space for lessons at the transit centre. At one point, the battery for the keyboard was misplaced when someone reorganised the room where the keyboard was stored. Instead of playing

¹³ It is important to note that, alongside this changeability, the core staff are relatively constant and are also deeply engaged and caring. And despite the number of differences, traumas, and tensions from homelands, both the transit centre and the schools for newly arrived teenagers are, on the whole, relatively peaceful and respectful.

¹⁴ On the role of recreational associations in Switzerland, particularly in building social capital and social trust, see Freitag *et al.* (2009). For a Switzerland-wide list of recreational associations: <https://www.verainsverzeichnis.ch/>

¹⁵ Here it might be useful to refer to Kay Kaufman Shelemay's (2011) communities of descent, dissent, and affinity as different ways of organising and defining community. My phrase "communities of participation" can be understood as a form of Shelemay's community of affinity.

the piano, we did body percussion activities and practised reading notation that day, which still contributed to learning, but the lack of an instrument was disruptive to the continuity of piano lessons. The absence of practice opportunities is another hurdle which we continue to work to overcome by building a lending library of donated instruments. Informational challenges arose from the lack of access to information networks for young people, or not having information readily available about what musicking opportunities might exist. And institutional challenges include the difficulty of accessing formalised pathways for music education. Subsidised lessons at the local music schools are available to any under-18-year-old registered in the community catchment area, with the possibility of needs-based top-up funding. However, as this is based on parental income, it does not extend to minors whose status is ‘unaccompanied’. There is funding for unaccompanied young people to participate in certain recreational activities, however, instrumental lessons are generally not among these, and while there are cases where an individual has gained access, there is no clear process for doing so –another informational barrier. While some of these hurdles may be specific to Switzerland, the broader concepts of material, informational, and institutional challenges to access are ubiquitous. They abound in daily life beyond the music room, from not understanding how to fill out a form, not knowing how to get documents recognised, or not being able to acquire certain material items, to not being able to pursue a particular course of study due not to academic performance but to immigration status.

In light of these numerous barriers to access, I came to understand myself and the Music as Empowerment team as a resource, not only for musical skills, but also for opportunities and experiences that make up the fabric of musical life. Beyond lessons and other activities arranged as part of the Music as Empowerment project, some of these have included attending a guitar concert and CD release party organised by another team member; free piano recitals¹⁶ by HSLU students; and information about local musical events, from a community singing day across the city of Lucerne (Luzern singt mit: [online](#)), to a bi-weekly drum circle in the rehearsal space of the Lucerne Symphony Orchestra (Luzerner Sinfonieorchester: [online](#)).

These layers of relationships and access are all part of social and cultural networks and connections and might be understood both as examples of, and avenues towards cultural participation and thus empowerment. The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (2002) reports that empowerment must be understood as critical in integration. It can therefore be argued that it is not only in the best interests of the individuals themselves but also in the interests of governing and official bodies whose goal is integration to foster these kinds of activities and connections. Filling the immediate educational needs of language and core subjects such as maths and language arts is commonly seen as the path to becoming a *functional* member of the host society and economy, yet true participation extends far beyond that. Music as a form of cultural participation is about not just the music itself, but also everything that surrounds it. Indeed, the young people themselves understand learning piano as an opportunity beyond the lessons. R.G. told me “I’m not only learning piano, but also Swiss culture and everything about Switzerland” (Personal communication, 16.9.2023). While they did not see me as Swiss (I am, in fact

¹⁶ For an example of the structuring of and conditions for this financial support, see <https://www.musikschule-rontal.ch/storage/a8d97ed3842227b6f0405b282d9f6ddb264a9844d3ae06aea6d19670cee0b829>

legally Swiss, but through naturalisation, and it is very clear that I have multiple non-Swiss heritages), I am embedded in the institutions and work-life context of Switzerland, and thereby represent something of the place and some aspects of its culture. The other members of the Music as Empowerment project team, most of whom the three young women know, are Swiss. Opportunities for cultural participation through musicking also bring with them the language needed for that participation. R.G. said of piano lessons: “It’s also good for my German. I have learned a lot of music words. That doesn’t happen in my German course.”¹⁷ (Personal communication, 12.10.2024). These musicking interactions offered the young people a different relationship with the place and with its structures and institutions. The musicking context of instrumental lessons can thus be understood as a reflection or microcosm of the bigger cultural context in which it is embedded, both in terms of its benefits and of its challenges.

MUSICKING OPPORTUNITIES AND EMPOWERMENT

These experiences, interactions, and observations align with a solid body of literature on how social bonds built through music and dance contribute to integration and empowerment (Griffiths *et al.*, 2005; Beirens *et al.*, 2007; Ager and Strang, 2008; Strang and Ager, 2010) and point towards the need to broaden and institutionalise access to musicking opportunities. While it could be argued that any type of interest-based one-to-one activity would likely be positive and empowering in this manner, music offers a very specific set of potential benefits, including emotional regulation (e.g., Saarikallio, 2010) and simultaneity of communal and personal meaning-making in the form of “floating intentionality” (Cross, 1999, 2014). I am not arguing that everyone should have individual music lessons –indeed not everyone will want to– but that it is a particularly powerful option for those who are interested and should therefore be both visible and legitimately available, which it often is not.

While there is increasing recognition of the important role of musicking opportunities in cultural participation and social well-being, implementation is often lacking. In their statement on integration and accommodation of young people with a migration background, the Swiss Association of Music Schools (Verband Musikschulen Schweiz, VMS) have proclaimed:

The integration of children and young people through music education is a joint task of music schools and schools. Music education promotes equal opportunities, cultural participation, and social integration. Living cultural diversity, learning from each other, and intercultural exchange are added value for society (VMS, 2020, p.7).¹⁸

What is essential is that ideals such as these do not remain hidden in written documents where young people like M.N., N.A., and R.G. will never find them – that they become actions and not mere lip service. Instrumental lessons are very much in demand beyond the three young women I teach, but the young people would likely not have sought them out – or even known to seek them out or how to

¹⁷ “Es ist auch gut für mein Deutsch. Ich habe viele Wörter über Musik gelernt. Das gibt es nicht im Deutschkurs.” Translation from German by the author.

¹⁸ “Die Integration von Kindern und Jugendlichen durch musikalische Bildung ist eine gemeinsame Aufgabe der Musikschulen und der Schulen. Die musikalische Bildung fördert die Chancengleichheit, die kulturelle Teilhabe und die soziale Integration. Die gelebte kulturelle Vielfalt, das voneinander Lernen und der interkulturelle Austausch stellen einen Mehrwert für die Gesellschaft dar.” Translation by the author.

begin doing so – if they had not been explicitly offered through our project.¹⁹ For musicking opportunities to be truly accessible, they must be both visible and viable. For them to be sustainable, change and access must be implemented on a political and institutional level.

Musicking in the form of instrumental lessons is not just beneficial in the sense of advancing specific musical skills but –even more so– in the sense of creating social anchors and possibilities that allow participants to forge the narrative of themselves and their experiences in their new home.

A RETURN TO METHODS AND WHY THEY MATTER

Here we come full circle to methodology and why methods matter –why the way in which one conducts this type of work and how one frames it is as important as the work itself, and, indeed, an integral part of it.

My method was ethnography through musicking. It is thus a *musicking* relationship. Through these musical interactions, I was privileged to share not only the young people’s musical experiences, learning, and existing literacies, but also their lived experiences. I followed R.G.’s German learning journey; shared her joy at acquiring an apartment of her own and her frustrations navigating bureaucracy in a language in which she is not yet proficient. I was able to help her communicate with the person from whom she purchased her keyboard on Facebook Marketplace, and then check in with her to be sure that she was safe after the seller delivered it to her apartment late at night. She also shared other more personal topics and mentioned often how meaningful it was for her to have someone to talk to about them. I got to surprise M.N. with cupcakes on her 18th birthday and celebrate as a group. I was part of the joyous news that her request for asylum was granted, and she later proudly told me when she received the residence permit that would allow her to continue to study, something very important to her. M.N. was occasionally vocal about the conditions that had made her leave Iran, and how her family is now dispersed in various migration journeys. Musically, I watched her grow in different roles within our project, not only piano lessons, but also playing bass in a band, and taking part in a hip-hop workshop, which was especially exciting for her, as she had always wanted to rap. I heard N.A.’s stories about her family and time in Somalia, the social struggles she experienced in her class at school and in her shared apartment, her joy at spending a few days shadowing the nurses at the Luzern State Hospital, and multiple other aspects of daily life.

Sometimes they were more forthcoming than others; at times they had a clear need to talk about heavy things and other times a clear need not to.²⁰ Yet even when not explicitly sharing deep and meaningful stories, the relationship was one of sharing and exchange. Indeed, relationship is also about minutiae. Ethnography through musicking reveals the importance to empowerment and cultural participation, not only of musical opportunities but also of the relationships that surround them.

Like any ethnography, musicking ethnography as a method relies on relationships and trust, built over time. One must be self-reflexive and constantly assess one’s own role(s) and the attendant power dynamics, whether in the researcher-

¹⁹ We are currently searching for ways to ensure that these music lessons both visible and sustainable beyond our project. To date, learners other than the 3 young women I teach have been accommodated with lessons from music education students at the HSLU. For a preliminary discussion of this initiative and its benefits and challenges, see Kirschstein and Petersen (2024).

²⁰ As a rule, I refrained from asking sensitive questions unless in response to something they had offered.

interlocuter dyad or in the friendships that often develop, and of course in this case also the teacher-student dynamic, which is not always uncomplicated.²¹ Being aware and self-reflexive is vital to ensuring that the experience empowers learners and does not replicate problematic situations.

From a pedagogical perspective, working with unaccompanied young people requires a view of teaching that understands relationships as essential to transmitting content. The teacher must also genuinely believe in the value of experiencing lessons, even with no practice or a longer learning trajectory, as discussed earlier.²² Beyond the modifications already described, there is a potentially heightened need for organisational and logistical support, as unaccompanied young people by default have no guardian to facilitate lessons and help manage schedules and attendance. One must be willing to take a flexible approach in general, be prepared to accommodate potential learning differences (in my work these have included motor coordination and memory issues) and be familiar with trauma-informed teaching practices (e.g., a learner preferred quiet or calm sounds over rough louder ones, and I sourced repertoire accordingly). Moreover, it is important to make these adjustments wholeheartedly, without being patronising, and to take these students seriously as instrumentalists. Finally, one should be prepared to make a somewhat long-term commitment, to avoid adding a new layer of upheaval and inconsistency to these young learners' lives. These issues are essential and should be considered by any teacher interested in undertaking this kind of work.

While the case study nature of this report has its limitations, working with individuals also provides important insights. Like music, fieldwork and ethnography are always about relationships, and those relationships are always with individuals, even if they are also with the larger group to which those individuals belong. In forced migration, where people are thrown together based on immigration status, group identity is often based on happenstance. An important benefit of working on an individual level is that it avoids the fallacy of assuming a group feeling or identity among the young people simply because of their shared experience of forced migration. While they may indeed form communities of coincidence in their schools and residential spaces, differences in personal experience between individuals often exist, as do conflicts between different groups from the same place. Working with individuals helps ensure that we take neither solidarity nor shared experience among young people as a given, and offers valuable insights into the details of empowerment, which itself must be understood in a highly individualised way.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The combination of individual and musical interactions granted me, as a researcher, insights and information in a way that I would not have had otherwise. It simultaneously offered the young people with whom I worked new musical skills,

²¹ For considerations of teacher-student dynamics in instrumental lessons, see, for example, Burwell (2023), Gaunt (2011), and Gaunt, López-Íñiguez and Creech (2021), who discuss potential issues of dependency, power struggles, and micro-aggressions."

²² On the didactics of a no-practice approach and its value, see, for example work and ideas from piano educator Nicola Cantan and her team at Colourful Keys and Vibrant Music Teaching: <https://colourfulkeys.ie/teens-piano-practice/> (Accessed on 25.06.2025). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6G4qINN7t4> (Accessed on 25.06.2025). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbfwRudO3Fk> (Accessed on 25.06.2025).

an appreciation of their existing musical literacies, constancy, one-to-one attention, and access to a culture of musicking. In short, cultural capital and a sense of belonging. All three expressed this to me in their own way and their own context.

M.N. told me that when guitar lessons were offered at a camp she lived at in Greece, she found it boring and did not pay attention or slept through the classes, despite having had a passion for music as a younger child and always wanting to learn guitar and violin. When she saw me at the transit centre, she jumped at the chance: “When I saw you [I thought] ‘oh that’s my chance!’ I lost my chance in Greece, but now I can do it again” (Personal communication, 16.09.2023).²³ With this understanding, she boldly approached me, in much the same way she now eagerly accepts and pursues other opportunities that come her way.

In R.G.’s case, learning piano was something she wished she had been able to do as a child in Turkey but which her family could not afford. Having the opportunity to do so in a context where so many other opportunities had been taken away is a poignant example of how cultural participation can be empowering. When I mentioned this article and what I was writing about, R.G. immediately and excitedly began to tell me things she felt conveyed how important piano lessons have been to her experience in Switzerland. She feels empowered by being seen and recognised: “You give me courage. You tell me ‘R.G., I remember when we were in the transit centre, and you couldn’t speak so much or so well’”.²⁴ By being encouraged and supported: “You showed me so many possibilities for my future, for [converting] my diplomas, or for paths I could follow. You gave the courage to start at the university [to supplement the degrees I already have]”.²⁵ By being listened to by someone she trusts: “When I need to talk about personal issues you listen and help to find resources and I am sure that when I tell you something, you don’t tell anyone else”.²⁶ By being accepted: “Despite the fact that my culture is different from yours, I don’t feel that it’s strange to you, for example, when you come to my house”²⁷ (Personal communication, 12.10.2024).

Likewise for N.A., in an interview at the end of her first year of lessons, I referred to her sound collage, where she had declared “I’m playing piano for the first time”. There ensued an exchange about musicking as something newly possible for her:

Me: You also mentioned in your sound collage that in Somalia women do not make music and that singing is also not allowed. But did you still *want* to when you were there, or did it never occur to you?

N: How? When they tell everyone ‘No, no, no, no, no’ and I said: ‘I’d like to but if it doesn’t work, then I don’t want to.’

Me: So, you mean if the environment doesn’t allow?

²³ “Ich wollte immer Gitarre lernen und dann wenn ich sie aber gesehen habe, ‘oh ja, das ist meine Chance!’ Ich habe meine Chance in Griechenland verloren, aber jetzt kann ich es noch einmal machen.” Translation from German by the author.

²⁴ “Du hast mir Mut gegeben. Du sagst mir ‘R.G., ich erinnere, wenn wir in der DGZ waren und du konntest nicht so viel sprechen’” Translation from German by the author.

²⁵ “Du hast mir viele Möglichkeiten gezeigt für meine Zukunft, für meine Diplom oder Wege, die ich gehen könnte. Du hast mir Mut gegeben, an der Universität zu beginnen.” Translation from German by the author.

²⁶ “Wenn ich Schwierigkeiten mit meinem Privatleben habe, ich kann es mit dir besprechen und du findest für mich einen Weg. Ich bin sicher, dass wenn ich dir etwas mitteile, du sagst es niemanden.” Translation from German by the author.

²⁷ “Obwohl meine Kultur anders ist als deine, ich fühle nicht dass du es Fremd findest, zum Beispiel, wenn du zu mir zu Hause kommst.” Translation from German by the author.

N: Yes. If there's no music to learn. Or school. And I thought 'oh I would like to. It would be nice. But there is none.'

Me: so back then you already thought it would be nice.

N: Yes

Me: Did you have friends who would also have liked that?

N: Yes

Me: Then it's nice that you are able to do it here

N: Thank you²⁸ (Personal communication, 17.7.2023)

The significance of musical opportunities can be seen in parallel to other opportunities and challenges in the experience of forced migration, and the words of these three young women illustrate why access to music and musical institutions is crucial to cultural participation and empowerment.

²⁸ Me: Du erwähntest auch in Hörbeitrag that in Somalia machen Frauen keine Musik und Singen geht auch nicht. Aber wolltest du dort, oder ist es dir nie in Sinne gekommen?

N: Wie? Wenn sie sagen alle Leute 'Nein, nein, nein, nein' und ich habe gesagt so: 'ich mag, aber wenn es funktioniert nicht, ich will nicht'

Me: Ah, wenn es in der Umgebung nicht geht?

N: Ja. Wenn es gibt keine Musik zum Lernen, oder etwas Schule. Und ich habe gesagt 'oh ich mag wäre schön. Aber es gibt keine.

Me: aber du hast damals hattest du auch gedacht ok das wäre schon schön.

N: Ja

Me: Hast du Freunde oder bekannten die das auch gerne gehabt hätten?

N: Ja

Me: Dann ist es schön, dass du es hier darfst.

N: Danke

Translation from German by the author.

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