

An Instrument for Every Child

by Hortensia Völckers

“Change through culture – Culture through change”. Essen and the entire Ruhr region with its 53 cities and communities used this motto for its successful bid to become the European Capital of Culture 2010 – a title it will share with the Hungarian city of Pécs and Istanbul. The cultural “beacons” of the Ruhr region – theatres, museums, the Ruhrfestspiele, Triennial, Short Film Days, Zeche Zollverein, countless major and fringe events, socio-cultural projects and multi-cultural institutions – will soon experience explosive growth, heralding the decline of the old Ruhr region, demonstrating the struggle and splendour of its transformation and presenting its plans and visions for the future.

A capital of culture? Is this hype really necessary, sceptics ask. Don't we already have enough spectacles, festivals, glitzy events and long museum nights? Do we really need more subterranean adventure landscapes, floating cultural islands and coalmines converted into concert halls and art studios? When the show ends, what will remain behind, what will continue to strengthen culture in the long term? Let me respond with a dream:

One summer day in 2010, the Ruhr region's largest football stadium will be packed with students from the first four grades of primary school. Every last seat will be taken, the playing field will be covered. Parents and local dignitaries will have a hard time squeezing in between the masses of children sitting on the bleachers, the stairs, in the aisles. Opening their canvas bags and instrument cases, they will then perform the premiere of piece they had prepared for three years. A rhapsody for 200,000 children, a melange of etudes and improvisation, a demonstration of what they learned from talented, imaginative teachers in three years of music classes. A suite of etudes and improvisation based on the world of childhood experience – songs sung to them by their grandparents who came from Italy, Spain, Kurdistan, Anatolia, or who immigrated to the mining cities from Galicia more than a century ago. Also the popular music of today, radio schmaltz and immigrant a cappella, Turk rock and classical snatches, Shakira and Grönemeyer, the latest teen rap and the rock 'n rock their parents grew up with. The songs they sang together in preschool and the strange melodies

they invented themselves. Along with these, they will chirp, whistle, rattle and sing the sounds of their daily lives – the honeyed violins in the TV commercials, the rising cheer of a football game, traffic noises, cartoon sounds, music they hear from the apartment next door, police sirens, rumbling machines demolishing the last factory in their neighbourhood, shouts on the playground, ship whistles on the river port, shopping mall Muzak, plopping tennis balls and screeching tram wheels, the subtle hum of a church organ and the calls to prayer from the mosques. All of this mixed together into a collage of sound based on traditions, classical and pop music, order and chaos. It will truly be a concert like no other, a gigantic *fête de la musique*, an event that will continue to resonate in the region for a long time, as the preparation alone will have taken all of three years.

This is a dream, my dream, but it could turn out differently. The two hundred thousand children might decide to perform at all the public spaces and parks in the Ruhr region, thousands of small groups, performing their piece on one day at the same moment, or perhaps over a period of days, self-organized and decentralized. Nothing is set in stone. They can decide for themselves.

The dream has become a project – and is almost fully financed. An instrument for every child in the Ruhr region – an undertaking so immense that most people can't believe their ears when they first hear about it. Not only because of the 50 million euros the project will cost in the end. This project has already created logistic, legal and didactic problems which pose a serious challenge to cultural agencies, primary schools and music schools. Where are they supposed to find that many qualified music teachers? Who is going to convince parents from so-called “educationally weak” social classes that their small monthly contribution to this project is well-invested? How can we expand the range of instruments to include the foreign sounds familiar to the immigrant population? How do we gain the support of school directors who are faced with even more organizational problems and how can we motivate teachers to spend extra time during their day to work with trained instrumentalists from the music schools? Do we need to launch a promotional campaign for the parents and neighbours who will have to endure the musical mania of their children's trumpeting, horn-blowing and fiddling for three years – and hopefully longer?

My dream of a musical “social sculpture” stretching across an entire region would have dissolved into a series of smaller nightmares had we not known it was indeed possible. For this dream has a history. It began five years ago when Manfred Grunenberg, the director

of the Bochum Music School, walked into the meeting room at the “Foundation for the Future of Education”, a project established by the “Community Bank for Loans and Gifts” (GLS) which is one of the pioneers of ethical-ecological banking in Germany. He was trying to collect a half million euros for the project *An Instrument for Every Child*, which, as he put it, was “a counterpart to the Deutsche Telekom’s plan to provide all primary school children access to a computer by 2006”. In cooperation with the city’s music schools, Grunenberg hoped to offer all children in primary and special schools the opportunity to learn an instrument of their choice. He was able to secure the half million euros. Bochum, though strapped for cash as all German cities are, agreed to fund the expansion of the music schools, and since then, the musical network has been rapidly expanding thanks to a coalition comprised of municipal agencies, the Foundation for the Future (which purchased all the instruments with the proceeds acquired from the sale of privately donated Stradivari), the children’s families who contribute 15 or 25 euros per month, and last but not least, the primary school teachers who participate in the first introductory year of musical instruction. The cooperation between governmental institutions and the citizens functions well, yet anyone who has been involved in a similar project knows how difficult, time-consuming, and potentially conflictive such constructions can be. But the network is stable and growing.

And now the plan is to expand the network across the entire Ruhr region. How did this come about? Let me at least tell my part of the story. Last spring between March and June, my colleague Antonia Lahmé and I made several reconnaissance trips to the Ruhr region. We wanted to find out if the Federal Cultural Foundation could contribute anything worthwhile to the “Ruhr Cultural Capital 2010”. We met with cultural department heads who have dreamed of a “systematic approach to cultural education” for years and spend their time after work singing in a choir. We drove through Essen-Katernberg in a police car, not because it was dangerous, but because the officer who was assigned the area knew all the kids by name, even those whose names were difficult to pronounce. We walked through closed coal mining areas decorated with modern artworks and listened to the quips of a nostalgic taxi driver who described it as “artificial respiration” for a place he and his colleagues used to work, suffer and live. We stumbled across disputes of professional competence while walking down the linoleum-lined corridors of a brick-Gothic cultural affairs department. At the university, we learned that 800 children from 46 nations receive free instruction from students. Beneath the obsolete winding towers at the Carl Mines, we met with a pastor who grew up next to the windmills along the Lower Rhine. For the last twenty-five years, he has devoted his life

looking for work for young people– and has no intention of stopping anytime soon. We spoke with a school director who hopes to instil a “new religiousness” in children. Together with theatre directors, he cooperates with volunteer street workers to get kids off the street and develop a secular, theatrical “Canon for City Inhabitants”. At the Philharmonic Orchestra in Essen, we sat among nervous parents whose children – Italians, Russians, Turks, Germans – could find their way through the backstage labyrinth with their eyes closed. We visited a reconstructed mining floor at the mining museum and went to street in Duisburg-Marxloh, where one can find everything one needs for a Turkish wedding and where a handful of extremely active women have collected enough money to fund the construction of Germany’s largest mosque. Standing in front of a half-constructed glass palace in Duisburg, we asked ourselves whether this city was the right place for “Germany’s largest casino”. And sitting on a plastic sofa in an old roundhouse, we were told that the architecture in Mülheim is as mixed as its population. That’s why it’s so difficult to develop a cultural programme that appeals to everyone.

We spoke to approximately 200 people during our search for a project. And somewhere along the way, we fell in love with the Ruhr region – a place still attached to so many clichés. We loved the jumble of drab cities with the remnants of their industrial past, the green islands of the cities to the south with their new middleclass joggers and the rundown quarters in the northern cities with their quaint sayings (I think my fontanel’s gonna pop!), the patchwork garden communities and the kiosks on every other street corner, the warm-hearted frankness at the counters. But above all, we were impressed with the diversity of the civil interest groups, foundations and community centres which were established in more prosperous times and have survived the hard times thanks to the tremendous dedication of many. We found what this country of complainers is constantly demanding. Excellence. We found it in schools in which 80 percent of the students have an immigrant background, all of whom speak excellent German. We encountered it in libraries equipped with the most modern technology and run by friendly and helpful staff. We recognized it in theatre and orchestra directors who were dedicated to their art, felt privileged to do what they do, and saw it as their duty to “give something back”.

This is when we came across *An Instrument for Every Child* in Bochum with its amazingly well-functioning cooperation between the city and its citizens, patrons and musicians, a model of collaboration that continually generates long-term renewal. *An*

Instrument for Every Child in the entire Ruhr region – it would be an impossible undertaking without cooperation. It could only be realized with political focus and the necessary funding, the cooperation of schools and municipal politicians, as well as the support of state agencies and sponsors. According to its statutes, the aim of the Foundation is to support and initiate innovative artistic and cultural projects, at best, in an international context. But is it the task of a national cultural foundation to devote itself to the musical literacy of a region? Nobody thought of this when the Foundation was being planned. Strange – or perhaps not. Everyone knows that the great cultural traditions and “national treasures”, the cultural beacons that shine far beyond our own borders – the Theatertreffen, the documenta, the music festivals – and the many institutions and places which carry the “World Cultural Heritage” logo are useless if we don’t support the legatees, if the beacons don’t shine beyond the suburbs, if we don’t continually “re-mould” our treasures to fit to the times. We’ve heard it said again and again – culture is the place where we talk about, describe, sing and surmount the barriers of the world we live in. Culture is the place we ask the question “how do want to live together?” – a question discussed and decided on by politicians, and ideally, with everyone. However, in order to participate in this discussion about society and its potential, we as a society have to learn to speak the language – the public and political language – and also the language of the arts.

Perhaps this is the most extensive and costly innovation we have to support – working on the aesthetic “basics”. The Federal Cultural Foundation has already taken steps in this direction with a wide range of smaller and large projects, including the *Dance Plan Germany* (in cooperation with community, state and federal institutions) and the *New Music Network*. Even with the “PISA shock”, Rütli Oath and the *Rhythm is it!* euphoria behind us, we still have a long way to go to ensure that all children in Germany are integrated into our fractured, multi-dimensional, national and globalised culture, that they are aesthetically educated to the point that they know what’s coming out of their iPods and PCs, that they can analyse and evaluate the symbols being used to influence them, that they know how the sounds, images and stories they encounter in their daily lives are produced, and that they learn how to produce them themselves. Zoltan Kodály, the founder of the Hungary’s great kindergarten and school music tradition, once claimed “Not being musically inclined is something you learn”. And indeed, it takes tremendous effort to prevent children – and adults – from singing, from wanting to learn how to play an instrument, from using their imaginations and creating something with others instead of playing *Second Life* all by themselves.

We teach our children to read and write so they can express their will and communicate with others. We teach them mathematics and science so they can understand and shape the world. No one questions this, people call for more optimisation and the politicians attempt to follow through. However, musicians, painters, writers, cultural policymakers and parents have to constantly provide reasons why aesthetic education is important to our children. Do we always have to justify what we know – from Book III of the *Politeia*, Rousseau, and the reform pedagogues of the 1920s and 1970s – that culture and art are elements of public life, as indispensable as politics, economy and architecture? Do cultural policymakers have to defend what has been common knowledge since biblical times? According to the book of *Genesis*, the first city required four professions: a developer, peasant, forger and singer. Apart from bearing children and cooking, the bible names all the areas of human activity that each individual and society at large must master in order to survive and live: building, agriculture, industry – and culture. Culture involves learning about our origin, envisioning the future, cultivating feelings and celebrating community. These are things we have to learn and practice. Throughout the course of history, they have become as varied, complex and difficult to master as molecular biology, systems theory, the uncertainty relation and computer science. The scientific revolutions sparked by the theory of evolution, astrophysics and psychology with its counter-intuitive discoveries have become the basis of our civilization. They necessitate a lengthy learning process. And the same applies to art – its liberation from cultural affairs, the weakening normative power of idealistic systems, images and sounds, the specialization of “autonomous” art and its departure from the mainstream. And on the other hand, the increasing possibilities of technical reproduction that have led to the commercialisation of those images and harmonies, the growing perfection of the cultural industry. We must train our eyes and ears to recognize and process all of this. And we require complex learning processes. However, it all begins with learning how to read and write. And democracy means no one is left out.

Things have changed since PISA in this respect – or so we’re told. But only “since PISA”. I welcome the educational alliances which are currently being formed in many places in Germany, such as efforts to include dance training in school curricula, influenced by the inspiring film *Rhythm is it!*. And it doesn’t hurt that brain researchers are proving with colourful CAT scans something we’ve known all along – that performing music is one of the most complex challenges for our brains (and bodies!). A musician reads the music, transforms the notes into neural commands to a myriad of organs, muscles and tendons, pays attention to

the instructions from the conductor or the lead guitarist, listens to the other players and simultaneously adjusts his/her performance within a fraction of a second. This is an extreme form of multitasking involving the brain, fine motor skills and perception. In Manfred Spitzer's book *Musik im Kopf* (Schattauer 2005), inspired by his love of music and an inexhaustible thirst for knowledge, he claims that music is the only process that literally engages the entire brain: the cerebral cortex, limbic system, hippocampus and the brain stem.

Music-making increases one's IQ, social skills and math grades – these are the kind of neuro-physiological findings that gradually make it into the newspapers. Taking young people and motivating them to participate in an ambitious community project strengthens their team spirit, willingness to work and self-confidence. Getting children to sing in a choir – as the touching blockbuster *The Chorus* demonstrates – is a powerful integrative tool for re-socializing ghetto hooligans. Dancing at work is beneficial – and may well be introduced in the German corporate world before long. BMW and RWE have shown their managers *Rhythm is it* (motivation!), and Mercedes sent its customers thousands of copies of *Sacre du Printemps* – a symphonic cultural event featuring dancers from Neukölln.

It is good to hear that a humanistic education is the soundest foundation for becoming a well-rounded person even in a computerized society of knowledge. But did we really need consultants and managers to tell us this? Children who make music are well-balanced, have better social skills and a higher IQ – this is true and important. Above all, the language they speak is universal. The oldest flute ever discovered by palaeontologists is as old as the first cave drawings and rudimentary tools. Music is probably older than language and its fundamentals as the most physical form of communication that penetrates the very cells of our body and resembles the animal-like sounds of desire and combat. Its rhythm is anchored in the movement of our body and its instinctual sense of time. In contrast to the fine arts and more so than theatre and poetry, music is the only activity with which we can transcend ourselves – into our deepest emotions and in harmony with others. It is the most abstract art form that creates the strongest connection – because of its physical effect and its expression in performance with others, the act of making music together. Music cannot make us better people. It is simply a way of perceiving the world, transporting ourselves into the world. It is both exhilarating and exploitable which is why Plato warned rulers about it and why the music industry is one of the largest branches of the economy. Music can excite and soothe, heal and sedate, it can be a catalyst for social emancipation (“We shall overcome”) and an

apocalyptic hymn (“... until the world lies in ruins”). And for this reason, too, we should learn its alphabet, semantics and grammar as thoroughly as we learn to read words and numbers.

But let me return to the school children who will soon be carrying their bulky guitar and trombone cases to school. The assortment of instruments at their disposal is impressive – the violin, cello, double bass, trumpet, trombone, flute, clarinet, French horn, guitar, mandolin, accordion, recorder – in combination, everything is possible: children’s symphony orchestras, string quartets, jazz bands, punk rock groups and folk music ensembles. We are currently working on expanding the range of instruments to include those from other cultures, such as the Turkish long-necked lute *saz* or the Russian *balalaika*. From past experience, we can expect that *An Instrument for Every Child* – Ruhr 2010 will produce its own group of young stars – and in following with the typical bell curve, there will probably be a great number of children who never make it further than “Dona, Dona” or the “House of the Rising Sun”. The same applies to “conventional” reading and writing. Some children are destined to write poems all their lives while others write SMS messages, some read Joyce and others read the *BILD* newspaper, or not even that. Musical instruction will inspire some to explore the high individuality of Beethovenian quartets, others to compose the eternally recycled harmonies of pop music, and others to experiment with sounds, combining traditions and styles to create new musical worlds.

Two hundred thousand school children will soon discover that it is possible to perform together, which is something many will realize is not possible in *Second Life*. The curriculum in 1,000 primary schools will be expanded to include an additional activity which cannot be learned using a machine, but only through individual and group practice. A medium with which six-year-olds who haven’t yet mastered the basic vocabulary, can communicate, an “art” that one can learn and perform simultaneously. A sound we enjoy hearing as we pass by these strange buildings where our future is being formed. In the past five years, there hasn’t been a project I have treasured more than *An Instrument for Every Child*.

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