

ENGLISH

# *sing me in*

collective singing in the integration process of young migrants



## **Singing with groups of young refugees**

Free handbook

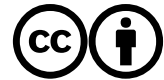
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## **Welcome to “Sing Me In”!**

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Dear reader,

Thank you for taking the time to read this handbook. We really hope it will prove helpful for you and motivate you to set up new musical projects! This handbook is part of a series of four developed in the frame of a European project running from 2016 to 2018. In this introduction, we will shortly present what this project is about, and how it can be useful for you.

### **What is the project “Sing Me In: Collective singing in the integration process of young migrants” about?**

Some young people are confronted with a higher risk of exclusion due to their socio-economic origin, because of the neighbourhood they live in, their migration background, etc. The “Sing Me In” project aims at providing children’s and youth choir leaders and music teachers, or anybody interested, with pedagogical approaches and tools that allow collective singing activities to play a positive role in the integration process of young people at risk of exclusion.

A number of youth organisations involved in collective singing expressed their need and the need of their own members for structured tools to address the issues at hand: youth organisations globally share the same challenges and are only partially aware of solutions developed in other European countries. The partners of the project decided to address these needs at the European level, to ensure that the whole sector and as many young people as possible can benefit from it in Europe.

Eleven musical organisations from ten countries, involved in youth work, joined forces and used their extensive networks to collect good practices in their respective professional and geographical areas. Based on that rich input from the field, and with the support of experts and practitioners, they decided to collectively develop innovative pedagogical contents.

The main outputs of the project are three handbooks and a dedicated repertoire guide, targeting children's and youth choir conductors and teachers: repertoire tips, pitfalls to avoid, examples of good practices, communication strategies, funding tips, guidelines for singer' preparation, etc. The handbooks are available in 11 languages to allow for efficient dissemination and to guarantee a maximum impact across the community of youth workers in Europe and beyond.

To ensure efficient dissemination, we organised a cycle of international and national multiplier events that are part of training events and conferences gathering our target groups across Europe. These events are an opportunity to reach out to active practitioners who will in turn use and spread the methods further.

Based on anthropological findings, the human voice was likely amongst the first instruments used by humans to produce music together, and it helped members of a group to develop their skills, share emotions, organise common life. Collective singing provided a sense of belonging. The "Sing Me In" project thus relies on a millennium-old tradition to look into the future: It offers innovative and effective tools to help young people meet without prejudices, acquire skills and enter a productive and balanced relationship with the community.

### **Why would collective singing be useful for integration?**

Collective singing is a social act: it is about singing together. And singing together can create a strong, emotional and happy connection, even between people with very different ways of life. Based on this shared emotional experience, involving beauty, effort and fun, a new relation can start and grow. Singing in itself is of course only a tool to equalise the status of the participants: while singing, we are first and foremost singers, cooperating to create a shared musical result. It enables a new relation based on equality (we are all singers here) that can be used to overcome perceived differences and enter into a phase of dialogue and understanding. However, this tool is not unique! Collective singing is only one integration/inclusion tool amongst many other wonderful tools (other musical activities, sport, education, work experience, community work, etc.), and can be articulated with many other activities sharing the same aims.

Let us quote Anne Haugland Balsnes<sup>1</sup> here:

*"The singing voice is a part of the body, and closely linked to breathing. Therefore, singing relaxes and exercise muscles, bones and lung capacity, and contributes to a general state of physical well-being. Furthermore, choir singing brings joy and excitability in addition to a general state of mental well-being. Singing in a choir is described as a 'kick', like 'falling in love' or a 'long lasting high'. Experiences such as these are meaningful for health and quality of life.*

*One of the most important things in terms of integration in a new country, is language competence. In a choir one can learn a new language in a friendly and easy environment, by communication at choir practices and through song lyrics. You do not have to speak the native language fluently to be accepted as a full choir member. A choir contributes to social networking, which is also critical for integration.*

*Choir singing is the simplest way of making music, since the instrument – the singing voice – is part of the body. You only need a group of people, a place to be and a conductor, to make a choir. Still, it is not given that the many advantages mentioned above will be achieved. It is crucial that both the social and the musical part of the choir is permeated by hospitality."*

The project title uses the wording "collective singing in the integration process of young migrants". While we discuss each of these terms below, they in themselves clearly indicate that our primary aim is to support processes and projects that help people overcome differences. Consequently, over time, they eventually discover ways to connect on an individual level, creating new bonds, and a sense of belonging to a same group. Young migrants, just arrived or rooted in families with strong migration background, are a part of our European societies. They learn, work, play, talk and move with the rest of their generation, the adults of tomorrow. The way they relate to their environment, and the way it interacts with them, partially defines how our societies will work in the coming years. Although you most likely downloaded this handbook from the internet, we believe that digital networking and virtual

<sup>1</sup> Anne Haugland Balsnes studied the KIA Multicultural Gospel Choir (The KIA Choir, <http://kianorge.no/gospelkor/>) in Kristiansand, Norway, during Spring 2012. The choir is part of KIA – which stands for "Kristent interkulturelt arbeid", or "Christian Intercultural Work". The study was based on participant observation and interviews, and focused on members with backgrounds as refugees.

communities are not an answer to the challenges ahead. We need contact, exchange, dialogue and cooperation in real life.

Collective singing is a very flexible art form, merely defined by a method (singing together), and thus can adapt and adopt new musical and cultural contents. This spirit of togetherness, of peaceful encounter, is at the heart of the European ideal (as embodied by many initiatives, over and beyond the European Union institutions).

#### **For whom is this project?**

- **Final targets:** The project aims to benefit young people
  - living in different European countries and beyond
  - from the culture of the host country and from other cultural backgrounds (migrants and refugees)
  - singers and not-yet-singers
- **Direct targets:** The Handbooks are written to serve
  - professionals in the youth field: conductors of children's and youth choirs, social workers
  - (music) teachers who want to work with children/young people from different cultural backgrounds
- **Multipliers:** To spread the tools developed, we rely on a broad network of
  - organisations which reach out to professionals in the youth field
  - organisations which can present examples of good practices and/or disseminate the results of the project including the handbooks and repertoire guide.

#### **Our contribution: Four handbooks to download**

The result of our work is three handbooks and a repertoire guide that may be freely downloaded from the website [www.SingMeln.eu](http://www.SingMeln.eu)

- "Sing Me In: Singing with groups of young refugees"
- "Sing Me In: Including young people with migrant backgrounds in existing choirs"
- "Sing Me In: Working in a school environment"
- "Sing Me In: Repertoire guide"

Each of the three handbooks is available in 11 languages: Arabic, Catalan, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Norwegian, Spanish and Turkish. If you are interested in contributing to a translation in your own language, please do not hesitate to contact us! If you want to find out if other translations have been provided in the meantime, please check the website [www.SingMeln.eu](http://www.SingMeln.eu).

#### **What results do we expect?**

We hope

- To see our handbooks contributing to more integration projects being launched.
- to see regular choirs welcoming more diverse participants.
- to see pupils and classes benefiting from singing activities (better academic results and classroom dynamics).
- to see all participants and organisers rewarded with fun and joy, shared laughter and music.

To achieve this, we need your help! If you like these handbooks, share them with your peers and friends. And if you don't like them, please let us know what we could improve!

#### **Some explanations on terminology choices**

The English title of the project is "Sing Me In: Collective singing in the integration process of young migrants". Let's clarify these terms:

[...] collective singing [...]

Although most of this project's partners are involved in "choral" singing, we believe that any form of "collective singing" can be beneficial. The traditional choral setup – a conductor, scores and singers singing different voices – is not the only relevant format for this project. Our approach thus covers any shared singing activity, a cappella or with

instruments, unisono or multi-part singing, as well as any type of repertoire or style. Here, the core asset is the very intimate and connecting experience of mixing voices.

#### [...] integration process [...]

We were aware from the beginning that i, the term “integration” may be considered as “old-fashioned” or “wrong” or “politically incorrect”, in some countries, cultures or languages. Our aim is not to decide if migrants should be “integrated” or “included” (or any other term). Our aim is to provide ideas and tools that can be adapted to incredibly diverse contexts, where people from different backgrounds have to coexist peacefully in a geographical, political, economical and cultural space; in which collective singing can be a tool for people to meet and exchange. In short, simply make life better for all parties involved.

Be aware, it’s a two way street: the host culture needs to integrate just like the migrants’ cultures. In our diverse world, everyone needs to integrate.

#### [...] young [...]

The project focuses on young migrants. By “young”, we globally understand people in their formative years, including children (starting with kindergarten age), until the age where they enter adult life. Where we have a specific age-range in mind, this is indicated. Of course, this is an extremely variable notion, depending on the country, the culture, as well as socio-economic situations<sup>2</sup>. You will also notice that we sometimes refer to activities and practices that mix generations, as a tool for integration, or even that we try to learn something from experiences that were developed for adults but from which we can extract useful information to share. Vice-versa many of the tips and tricks mentioned in the handbooks can also be applied when working with adults in a similar context.

#### [...] migrants [...]

According to the UNESCO, the term “migrant” can be understood as: “any person who lives temporarily or permanently in a country where he or she was not born, and has acquired some significant social ties to this country”. This definition includes refugees and asylum seekers.

Our project, however, has a broader scope, potentially including young persons with a migrant background (first, second or even third generation), who may be in need of further integration (or inclusion) into the host culture. We are fully aware of the fact that there are young migrants who are already integrated and will not need support. Furthermore, many of the tips and tricks collected can also be applied to working with young non-migrants who do not have access to culture and are socially or otherwise disadvantaged.

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<sup>2</sup> When no indication is given, we use the following age ranges: Children= 0 to 12, Youth/young people = 13 to 30, teenagers=13 to 18, young adults=18 to 30





Clément Vidal

## **Introduction to this handbook**

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This handbook is for anyone considering or planning to get started on a project involving collective singing with refugees and asylum seekers in refugee and asylum centres, camps or similar accommodations for people migrating or fleeing from war and poverty. This handbook was written and created by partners in the European Union, Turkey and Lebanon, and based on information from sources in these same regions. This specific handbook was coordinated by the Choral Culture Association in Turkey, and Ung i Kor, the Norwegian federation for children and youth choirs.

Various stories and experiences have been collected from all over these regions through two sets of questionnaires. After gathering information about more than 100 different projects involving collective singing and young migrants, the creators of this handbook then approached managers of selected projects to answer more thorough questions related to working with refugees in centres or camps. The handbook's structure was already defined even before this latter part of the research process had begun, and the questions in the second questionnaire were designed to fit into this structure.

In addition to these two questionnaires, more informal interviews and conversations were conducted through the networks of the mentioned organisations, and as was hands-on experience from the different partners involved. Some literature and online sources are referenced, and we recommend taking a look at these for further reading. In addition to our reflection and advice based on the mentioned research, Norwegian music professor and choir expert Anne Haugland Balsnes has also contributed with a short text in chapter 2.

The aim of this handbook's structure and writings is to both guide and – not least – encourage anyone considering working with collective singing and refugees. To achieve this aim, we have designed a structure where we give practical advice in addition to reflections on different sets of challenges and questions our sources have brought up in the research process. The research is based on projects of different forms, sizes and aims, and hopefully our handbook will also be helpful for an equivalent range of projects in many different countries.

While we do provide some clear and tangible advice, we also believe that neither we or others will have the ultimate response as to how to face whatever challenges you may meet in your project. Different segments of participants demand different solutions and designs, and the same goes for different structures of immigration systems and institutions in different countries throughout Europe and other regions. The best advice to start with is to do research, but also dare to get involved with projects, people and places where you may not know the outcome.

To get you started, we have structured this handbook into five different chapters: 1. Organisation, 2. Attitudes, 3. Repertoire, 4. Leading the sessions and 5. Performances. In this way, we have covered a large part of the different subjects you should consider and work on while planning your project.

In chapter 1, Organisation, we provide some simple advice on how to get started and how to deal with refugees, volunteers, employees and others involved in an ever-changing and unpredictable field. We try to guide you through a process that begins with forming your original idea, and then leads you through every aspect you should consider down to the very specifics.

In chapter 2, Attitudes, we deal with questions on how to approach this work. What makes this any different from other singing sessions, and how that affect the work. The chapter examines its topic based on a text by Norwegian music professor Anne Haugland Balsnes about “hospitable choir singing”. How do you create the ideal environment for people of different cultural backgrounds, arriving in a strange new country?

In chapter 3, we deal with Repertoire. How do you find and select suitable repertoire for refugees? What are the factors that determine a programme selection for choral projects with refugees? What kind of genres, difficulty levels, languages and cultures should be used?

Chapter 4 discusses how to conduct the sessions, mentioning details on rehearsal methods and ways to develop a good choral team out of the group. Possible vulnerabilities or traumas the singers may face, have also been taken into account here. This chapter also addresses how to most efficiently organise logistics.

Chapter 5 focuses on the performance aspect of projects. How important are performances for the group? What effect do they have for the success of the project? Is it a must or can it be an option? This chapter also brings together many different opinions on the significance of performances that come along with the work with the refugees.

### **Why you should sing with refugees**

*“We are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. An unprecedented 65.6 million people around the world have been forced from [their] home. Among them are nearly 22.5 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18. There are also 10 million stateless people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement. (...) nearly 20 people are forcibly displaced every minute (...)” (UNHCR 2017a)*

This quote and these figures from UNHCR’s statistical yearbook of 2016, provide some context underlying the major changes taking place and a significant part of the current political discourse in contemporary Europe. While only 17 percent of the world’s displaced people are being hosted in Europe (ibid), the numbers are still staggering, and Germany’s refugee population, for instance, more than doubled in the course of 2016. Yet, the main fraction of refugees is still being hosted in a handful of poor, developing countries (UNHCR 2017b). While states, organisations and institutions work on how to solve this situation, there is no doubt that this will remain a large, global issue for many, many years to come.

As citizens and fellow human beings we often feel the desire to contribute and help those in need, and most of us would prefer to provide in areas where we can implement our best skills and expertise. If you are considering working with collective singing and refugees, you probably have some skills and competence in this field, and also share our belief in the power of song and music as a social mean to bring people together and lift each other’s best qualities. In the following paragraphs we would simply like to enhance your beliefs and encourage you to take the steps needed to realise your vision. So, why should you do it?

### **It works!**

The social, physical and psychological effects of collective singing have been studied far and wide, and there are far too many studies on this subject to be referenced in this text. However, it is definitely an interesting field to dig into if one is interested. In addition to scientific articles, there are many examples of more easily accessible sources online which cite such research<sup>3</sup>. For refugees in particular, the effects of collective singing in terms of expressing repressed emotions and possibly reducing anxiety are very relevant. Aside from proven effects such as these, surely we all agree that singing together is an ideal form of socialising, exchanging different cultural expressions and bringing people together. If your project is developed and implemented suitably, it will definitely be a positive and rewarding experience for everyone involved.

### **It is possible!**

Whether it's NGOs running refugee camps or local centres funded by your government, offers of meaningful and rewarding activities for refugees will very likely be most welcome. There are multiple sources of funding available in most areas, and a well designed project should stand good chances of receiving financing. As an artist, educator or cultural worker, your organisational skills will be useful and usable. Although there are some key differences with other parts of your daily cultural work, and not least many challenges, you probably already have many of the skills needed. Moreover, compared to many other activities, collective singing is highly feasible in spite of the unpredictable and difficult lives of many refugees. It requires few resources and is highly flexible with regards to whatever facilities are available where it takes place.

### **It is needed!**

Many refugees and asylum seekers have lived through highly dramatic and traumatic experiences, and while in transit in a camp or asylum centre, the future is unclear and their daily lives can be very challenging. A social and cathartic experience through collective singing can be not only a welcome distraction from the challenges they are facing, but also a highly rewarding and meaningful activity. In some cases it can be a saviour from deep frustration, depression, loneliness and anger. Indeed, being given a scene to thrive and develop in collaboration with others, should not be reduced to some trivial pastime activity. Your work can seriously improve people's quality of life.

Our hope is that, after reading this handbook, you will feel inspired and even more equipped to take on a new challenge and contribute to something good for people who are facing highly challenging life situations. We also believe, and have seen, that everyone involved in such projects will feel a great sense of reward and self-development throughout the process. Being able to help and do something for others not only feels good, but you maybe also surprised at how new friends and people, who you would think have more than enough to deal with, will be able to give to you!

To motivate you further we will end this introduction with the story of Farah, who found her way into the language in her new home country through songs in her kindergarten.

You can do it and – if you are already considering it – you should! Good luck!

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<sup>3</sup> You will find a collection of links on the website of the European Choral Association - Europa Cantat

## **From song to language**

by Nora Bilalovic Kulset, Post Doc at the Department of Music, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU).

Singing breaks the language barrier and “tricks” the language inside the brain. Read about three year old Farah and the time she broke the language barrier by singing – and why it can happen that way.

*Farah (3 y.o.) is sitting on the bench alongside the others at assembly time. She has attended kindergarten for two months now, yet she has not uttered a single word. Quiet and shy, she sometimes gets to play the baby when the children roleplay. A quiet and tractable baby. For the most part she keeps to herself without really getting noticed by the other children. As usual we sing together at assembly, the same Norwegian children songs we have been practising the whole semester. All of a sudden a new voice is heard, clear and precise. I turn towards Farah along with everyone else. She is singing loud and clear, with perfect pronunciation, knowing every movement and every turn of the melody. I feel myself getting goosebumps as we continue singing, and the other children's faces glow with big smiles. They're saying: "Look at Farah, she knows the song! She knows the song! Hey, Farah, Farah, show it to us!" And Farah stretches and smiles content and proud as she continues to sing along. After assembly it's time for "today's helper" to choose an assistant, in order to create the portal between their arms that everyone must go through to get to the lunch table. Farah has never been chosen to assist. Today's helper is one of the oldest children, with plenty of social capital. Without hesitation she selects Farah as her assistant, and another children's song begins. Farah knows this one too. The other adults and me exchange looks, and we all know that, from today, a new reality has begun for Farah. Now she is on the inside and can acquire further language skills through playing with the other children.*

Singing can be a path into language learning in many ways, and in this short text I would like to tell you about three different ways this can happen:

- It breaks “the double bind”
- We practice without commitment while we sing
- We “trick” the language inside our brain when we sing

### “The double bind” – becoming friends

Anyone who works with children speaking a foreign language are familiar with the situation where the child without necessary skills in the native tongue can be kept out when the others are playing. This is not necessarily a conscious action by the other children, but it is not easy playing with someone who does not understand what you are saying. This is well described by both Kibsgaard and Husby (2014) and Tabors (2008). The problem anyone learning a new language will meet is this: To learn the language, I need access to someone who speaks it. But to gain access to anyone who speaks the language, I must already know some of it. It is this situation we call “the double bind” (Tabors 2008). To break this double bind, so as the child can join in the social interaction, is an important key to obtain access to the language one is learning.

This is where singing comes in. If we sing a lot together in kindergarten – and stick to a repertoire that we repeat a lot, so that the songs will become familiar to everyone – we can break the double bind, like what happened in the story about Farah. For children, singing is different than for many adults. We may see it as an activity, something we know or don't know, something we should do, or something that passes time. For children, singing is a form of communication – a language they use to strengthen bonds. It actually works that way for adults too, but often our thoughts about quality, remembering lyrics and good performance overshadows this. But when we sing together, we increase our level of the love hormone oxytocin in our body. Oxytocin make us more empathic, we like each other better, we trust more in one another, and we think more about fellowship than ourselves (Grape et al. 2003; Keeler et al. 2015; Kreutz 2014). If we put aside thoughts about whether our pitch is correct, or whether the children like the song we are singing, adults can also gain more from these processes. In any case, the children are a part of this, and so they are singing their way into a greater fellowship, into new friendships and new ways of being together. Just imagine how wonderful it is to sit on aligning swing seats and sing a song we both know, even though one of us do not speak the language very well. Yes, it happens.

### Learning without the need to remember

The opportunity to try out the new language without commitment, and without disqualifying yourself because you are afraid of not finding the right words, is also a key to acquiring language, according to (among others) Tabors (2008). We must create situations where the student gets to thoroughly observe children and adults using the language, and then try out phrases and phonemes that are not necessarily being used in regular communicative context, Tabors says. This sounds like ordered results for those of us already researching children, singing and language learning. Is this not exactly what happens when we sing together? The child gets to observe children and adults singing and using the language – and by joining in, the child gets to try out the new language without any commitment. The melody of the song also contributes to intonation and the rhythm to timing of difficult phonemes. Some children's songs may have strange lyrics, but it is still useful language playing. All of this contributes well to language learning.

### **Tricking the brain with song**

Talking and communicating through language, and singing a song lyric, are two different operations for the brain (Sacks 2007). That is why people who have suffered a stroke and lost their ability to speak, still are able to sing songs. Simply speaking, singing songs in a certain language will “trick” that language into the brain. The brain is enjoying the companionship through collective singing, and is not suspecting anything. In the meantime, a lot of things are happening, like the tongue practising every new movement it must exercise in this new language, and phrases and sentences get stuck in the memory. And then one day, you'll hear the child with a foreign mother tongue use phrases from a song to reach out to others. With a familiar song, this will guaranteed get a good response from other children (and not least adults!).

The example used in this text are children in kindergarten, but song as a possible way into learning a new language has no age limit. What is described here will work just as well on people of all ages, so just sing your heart out!

Nora Bilalovic Kulset is a postdoctoral musicologist at the the Department of Music, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). Among other subjects, her research focuses on how the use of song and other forms of music can strengthen affiliations, language acquisition and general well-being for young and old.



## **Chapter 1: Organisation**

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Like any other project, a successful story starts with smart and thorough planning. Working with refugees and the structures and institutions surrounding them requires some extra knowledge about several subjects. In this chapter we will bring you some general advice on how to get started, challenges to look out for, and how to obtain the knowledge, funding and structures needed to go through with your project. In every country, region and town challenges and circumstances will be different, so this advice is simply general. You could use it as a checklist and refer back to it during your own process. How do the general remarks transfer to your specific situation?

### **How to get started**

#### **An idea**

The very core of a feasible project is always a well articulated and thought through idea. As we will discuss further below, working and collaborating with organisations and institutions managing refugee camps and centres can be challenging in a number of ways. This probably means that your initial idea will have to develop and change in many ways, but this just makes the need for a well thought base idea even more important. It is far easier to make modifications to a well thought out structure. So, to get started, you should take a hard look at what kind of starting point your own skills and available resources give you. Should you start out with a specific artistic or musical idea, or a set of pedagogical concepts? The answer is probably somewhere in between: The methods you would like to use are probably closely connected to whatever musical concepts that suit your background and skills. The following steps, and how to tackle those, should always point back to – and probably affect – your original idea in some way. While it is an advantage to start off with a tangible and thought through idea, it should probably not be to complicated, and a design that welcomes and is flexible to adjustments and changes can be critical throughout the process.

## **Research**

In order to create a feasible plan, some research will be required. One aspect is your target group: Are the participants going to be children, teenagers, young adults or older? What are the different countries of origin represented at the actual site? Are there any cultural differences that should be considered in your planning? What kind of activities are already present at the camp or centre? You should also make sure that you are aware of any special rules with regards to visits, whether they are able to leave the centre and also what is allowed with regards to documenting, photos and more. Get in touch with the refugee centre or camp early in your process to answer as many of these and other questions as possible.

## **Partners**

However skilled and resourceful you may be – having supportive and creative partners, if possible from within the refugee accommodation, will always be an advantage. Take a look at your own social and professional network as well: Who could be a good partner to get involved with your project? This could be other conductors, musicians, teachers or even social workers and others involved in public, religious or private organisations you know. If this is your first time working with refugees, chances are you will meet a whole set of brand new challenges, and having someone to discuss and face these challenges alongside you is highly recommended. In the process of searching for partners you should also consider what kind of skill sets and experiences you will need, and which you may not possess yourself. Refugees can come from difficult and traumatising experiences from their journey or from where they fled. Are you able to deal with this? Do you know someone with prior experience with issues like this? Reach out and build a competent team!

## **Funding**

Collective singing is, relative to a number of other alternatives, a fairly low-cost activity. If you can find a reasonable sized room or area and a skilled and suitable conductor, you are pretty much set. But this does not mean you should underestimate the importance of proper funding for your project. Also, depending on different circumstances, you should consider whether you are in need of an assistant during the sessions you will be organising. There are multiple potential sources of funding for cultural activities for migrants. This very handbook is funded by the Erasmus+ program in the European Union, and in addition to such transnational programs you should look for sources in your own country and region.

The most important thing to remember in order to receive proper funding is a budget, timeline and plan for your project, which should be as transparent and detailed as possible. Make arrangements and draft form of letter of intent with your potential partners in advance, and try to plan out every potential cost to make your budget feasible and realistic. Potential sources of funding can be local businesses, government as well as national funds. In some cases the organisation running the camp or centre may have a small budget for social activities. Do not hesitate to get in touch with organisations or people who can help you in your search for funding.

## **Communication**

In order to get partners and collaborators on board, communication is key. Not only should you have a well thought out plan and budget, but you should think about how to present this as well and understandable as possible. It is also important to do some background research and try as best as you can to understand the daily lives of the refugees as well as the volunteers and employees working alongside them. If you can understand their needs and challenges, you will also be more equipped to make a plan and communicate this well to everyone involved.

Another aspect is public exposure of your project. If you are able to communicate your project well to the media, that is a good indication of a good and well thought-out project. However, some refugees may be in situations where such exposure is not wanted, and may also be prohibited legally. If you plan to get public exposure, you should clarify such questions first.

## **Specifics and logistics**

When funding, proper agreements and an initial plan are in place, it is time to get hands on and consider the specifics. Where and how often should you conduct sessions? Are there rooms and facilities available at the refugee centre or camp, or should you take the participants elsewhere? Do you need a piano or other instruments, and if so,

are they available? How does a regular week look for the participants, and how much time is available for your activity?

All of the advice given above is key to finding suitable answers to questions like these, and it is only when you get down to these questions that you will learn if your initial plan will work out or not. If it does not, it is time to look around for possible changes to organising your project.

### **Challenges in an ever changing and unpredictable field**

The number of refugees and the refugee situation in general will always be affected by a great number of external factors. As mentioned above, the number of refugees is at an all time historical high, and climate change, population growth in developing countries, conflicts in several areas and other factors suggest this will not change in the foreseeable future. In other words, the need for constructive and creative efforts to improve the daily lives of refugees and help them in their integration process will most likely be present for a long time.

However, national policies and the infrastructure available to handle the situation can change and develop in a number of ways, depending on where you live and who is in charge at any given time. Refugee camps and centres are often run with a short term perspective, and many of our sources have seen centres move or close down in the middle of a process of getting a project started. This unpredictable situation will most likely affect your work in a number of ways, and not least does it affect the daily lives of the refugees and the working life of those involved with the centres.

This is where the need to stay flexible comes in. What do you do if the refugee centre closes down, and you still have funding and time available to get through with your project? Or maybe the demographics of the participants changes drastically? There are no easy answers or solutions to such challenges, but while working in this field, you should always be prepared for such events, and be creative in the process of figuring out new paths and solutions for your project.

Not only does this affect the structure and organisation of your project, but it also affects the day-to-day collaboration and communication with staff and participants. The Norwegian musician Igor Dunderovic summed up this subject well in his text about conducting workshops in refugee centres: "I can now honestly report that not one workshop has gone as planned" (Dunderovic 2017). His experience was a result both of the organisation of the centres, at every level, in general, but also the unpredictability in terms of participants: Will they show up? Will they show up next week? Are they used to singing? What grade of musicianship should you prepare for?

Such subjects will be discussed further in chapter 3, 4 and 5, but when it comes to organising your project, the ideal way to prepare for such challenges is to plan out for different outcomes. Does the structure of the sessions you have planned fit both large and small groups? What if you have only one participant? Be ready to improvise and change your plan as you go along. The worst thing you can do is to give up because it did not pan out as you imagined. If there are only two participants, it can still be highly valuable for them! If the refugee centre disappears, there can still be other refugees who can benefit from your initiative.

The structure of the centres and camps, and not least the life situation and the traumatising experiences many of the refugees have gone through will affect your work in a number of ways. You can only be prepared for this to a certain extent through the planning process of your project. But just as important as your ability to plan and structure your work, is how you face, handle and react to these challenges. This is why we have named the next chapter "Attitudes".





## Chapter 2: Attitudes

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Our introduction ended with Nora B. Kulset's story of Farah in kindergarten, and in this chapter about attitudes, we would like to start you off with the story of Louis and "Hospitable choir singing" by professor Anne H. Balsnes. These stories represent some of the best outcomes we have found from collective singing with refugees and migrants, and should work as an inspiration to put your musical skills to use for people arriving at our doorstep. Balsnes' text, however, also points out important aspects you should consider while planning your project. Aspects that are less tangible than thorough planning and budgeting, but no less important. Namely, how you should prepare yourself mentally and what kind of attitudes you should implement throughout the entire process of your projects. Below the story of Louis we will further discuss some of these aspects.

### **Hospitable choir singing**

by Anne Haugland Balsnes, Norwegian professor of music.

*Louis survived the genocide in Rwanda, but lost his entire family. He fled and made it to Norway. Life was tough, and he felt alone. After a while he joined a multicultural choir. The choir changed everything, he says. Having choir practice to look forward to made life more meaningful. He was asked to teach the other singers a song from his homeland which became popular in the choir, and he was also given soloist parts. He started to see himself as something more than a refugee – a choir singer and soloist – someone who could contribute. To sing with his choir friends gave him courage. The choir became his new family. It helped him integrate in a new country and to achieve a better life.*

*What does Louis' story tell us about choral singing in general, and for refugees particularly?*

*Choir singing is about collaboration, community and togetherness. Friendships are developed and networks created. The choir can become a social hub that counteracts isolation and loneliness – all of which are particularly important for refugees in a new country. It can become a place where one belongs and is expected – it simply becomes a new family.*

*Many refugees miss arenas where they can feel important, and in many well meant efforts they become passive receivers of help. In a choir everyone contributes to creating a collective sound. One learns new songs and develops skills. Choir singing gives experience of mastery, which furthermore contributes to increased self confidence and the sense of being someone of importance and a resource for others. Just like Louis, one can feel like something more than a refugee.*

*Everyone needs regular appointments in life and events to look forward to – not least refugees, who often live in an unpredictable state in a foreign country. Involvement in a steady, valuable activity, contributes to a more meaningful and connected life. Many refugees are also familiar with choir singing from their homeland, and consequently the singing makes a connection with life before the flight. Choir singing can give a strong, tangible and aural experience of togetherness and being part of something bigger than oneself.*

*The singing voice is a part of the body, and closely linked to breathing. Therefore, singing relaxes and exercise muscles, bones and lung capacity, and contributes to a general state of physical well-being. Furthermore, choir singing brings joy and excitability in addition to a general state of mental well-being. Singing in a choir is described as a 'kick', like 'falling in love' or a 'long lasting high'. Experiences such as these are meaningful for health and quality of life.*

*One of the most important things in terms of integration in a new country, is language competence. In a choir one can learn a new language in a friendly and easy environment, by communication at choir practices and through song lyrics. You do not have to speak the native language fluently to be accepted as a full choir member. A choir contributes to social networking, which is also critical for integration.*

*Choir singing is the simplest way of making music, since the instrument – the singing voice – is part of the body. You only need a group of people, a place to be and a conductor, to make a choir. Still, it is not given that the many advantages mentioned above will be achieved. It is crucial that both the social and the musical part of the choir is permeated by hospitality.*

*The choir Louis is part of contains both native Norwegians and people from many different countries. Everyone is greeted with a handshake or a hug, and "Welcome, so nice to see you, hope to see you again next week!". Some of the singers receive extra follow-up, like a text message with a reminder of the practice, or maybe a ride from where they live.*

*The breaks are important for socialising. In addition, there are often gatherings outside of practice, like supper or football matches. The choir practices are relaxed. They do not always start on time, and people do not always leave the room when the time is up. There are no forms of registration or a members list, which means members come and go. The instructors make an effort to speak a 'simple' form of Norwegian to help new members understand the information that is given.*

*Anyone can join the choir. Their philosophy is that "anyone can sing" – it is just a matter of time and practice. It is more important to sing with 'power' than singing 'beautifully'. Mistakes are allowed, and there is a lot of laughter.*

*The choir sings easy three part-arrangements. They never use sheet music, but sound files are shared online for practice at home. Because of the ever changing member base, some more regular members are required in each voice group.*

*The conductor of Louis' choir sums up its purpose: "To get together, where everyone has the same purpose, everyone is equal, and you meet in a warm fellowship, which singing is". When a choir is made up by social and musical hospitality, it can give valuable experiences and fellowship, and contribute to empowerment and a meaningful life. A hospitable choir can promote integration, health, well-being and quality of life – simply a better life – for people in a new country.*

Anne Haugland Balsnes (b. 1969) is professor of music and manager of research at University of Agder and Ansgar University College at Kristiansand, Norway. She is also a practising conductor and singer.

Balsnes studied KIA Multicultural Gospel Choir (The KIA Choir) in Kristiansand, Norway, during Spring 2012. The choir is part of KIA – which stands for “Kristent interkulturelt arbeid”, or “Christian Intercultural Work”. The study was based on participant observation and interviews, and focused on members with backgrounds as refugees. Two of the choir’s directors and five singers from different countries were interviewed. One of them was Louis, whose story is told here.

### **What’s the difference?**

Why would we assume collective singing with refugees requires a handbook like this? Is it not just like any other choir or form of collective singing? Is it not strange to assume that collective singing with refugees is any different than singing with anyone else? These are important questions. Not only because we should not fall into the trap of diminishing people to the label “refugee”, but also because you should take a look at what makes the difference.

People all over the world presumably share the same dreams and hopes for their own lives, but their starting point and path towards those goals can be very different. Most likely, an important difference between you and the people you will get in touch with during your project, will be the road that led you to wherever you meet. After experiencing a hazardous journey and fleeing far, far away from your home, you would probably have some different perspectives on several parts of life. You would also be in greater need of a friendly face, a hug or any warm welcome wherever you are.

That is why Louis’ choir conductor developed this specific philosophy and the routines for his choir practices, and that is the reason why you should consider some different aspects in terms of your own attitude, preconceptions and knowledge while working with refugees.

There are also some potential differences in terms of culture, tradition and the participants relationship to music and singing in general, and also how such activities are organised. This may affect both your practical approach and how you should approach the work in terms of pedagogy as well as your general attitude when organising and conducting your project.

Some advice regarding key aspects you should consider will be further discussed below.

### **A warm and friendly fellowship**

As we have already discussed, working in refugee camps and centres can be an unpredictable and challenging process. In addition to preparing for this when organising your project, you should consider your own ability to deal with unpredictable working situations. How do you react when your project derails from the initial plan? You should prepare mentally for challenges in terms of the participants ability to focus, and you most likely will meet challenges with regards to punctuality and a regular commitment from the participants.

Our best advice would be to stick to your schedule and convey as best as you can your expectations from the participants. If you allow too much flexibility in your schedule, chances are it will obstruct your work. On the other hand, when we look back to Louis’ choir, you should always keep an open door, and keep a friendly and warm approach in your work in order to keep the participants coming. The challenge here is to keep a suitable balance between these two aspects.

Several of our sources mentioned about cultural differences as well. This can be related to the participants earlier experiences, or lack thereof, with collective singing. The entire activity may be unfamiliar to some, and well known to others. The challenge, and most important factor, is to find an approach that can include everyone regardless of their previous experience. In some cases there may also be cultural differences with regards to how children and perhaps women are treated.

The main key is still to try and keep an open door policy, however we should also remember not to act judgemental when such issues do arise. Listen, and try your best to understand where the different participants are coming from, and why they feel the way they do. If you are able to keep an open dialogue, you will also have a better chance of making arrangements that will work out for everyone, keep them coming and feeling welcome.

So what can you do to prepare yourself and create the best possible environment for your sessions? While you should always be prepared to deal with unforeseen situations, you can also do research and prepare yourself for meeting different people and situations. If you are able to learn about the demographics of your participants before meeting them, this could be an advantage. Where are they from, and what age, gender and life situations are represented?

Once you have obtained this information, then you should consider learning something about the countries and cultures represented. What are the main cultures, religions and peoples from any given country? What are you able to learn about the journeys they have been through?

If you are able to relate, understand and show that you already know and share some references about their culture and country of origin, chances are you can make a pretty good start. This will also prepare you and make you able to understand and respect whatever differences may surface during the sessions.

This kind of research could also make you take a look at your own background and possibly deconstruct the main aspects that constitute your own cultural references and your relationship towards organised, collective singing. What are your own preconceptions, and where do they come from? Are there any aspects in your own culture that may seem strange to outsiders? Does it make sense to change your approach? Maybe there are interesting elements to pick up from other musical cultures?

To summarise: Be respectful, humble and open to whatever may occur and what differences may surface. The best way to make this happen is to increase your own knowledge, and also take a critical look at your own culture and what you represent. If you succeed in this, you should succeed in creating a warm, open and friendly fellowship where magical musical meetings can take place.

### **What is your aim? Process, not product**

Another aspect which is critical to reflect on is your goals and aim for the project. A pitfall that has been mentioned in several areas of our research is the danger of “instrumentalising” refugees. If you aim to create a project with a given artistic result, and even ambitions of media coverage or other attention from the public, chances are you can lose track of what your focus should be in this kind of work.

This issue is quite precisely summarised by Tania Cañas, Arts Director of the Australian organisation RISE: Refugees, Survivors & Ex-detainees, in a text about 10 things to consider in artistic work with refugees (Cañas 2017). The entire text is concise and accessible, and highly recommended reading, but the main issue we will point out here is this:

*“Critically interrogate your intention. Our struggle is not an opportunity, or our bodies’ a currency, by which to build your career. Rather than merely focusing on the ‘other’ (‘where do I find refugees’ etc.) subject your own intention to critical, reflexive analysis. What is your motivation to work with this particular subject matter? Why at this particular time?” (ibid)*

While there are potential issues that could very well be constructively treated as an artistic starting point, and also a lot to learn and grow on as a musician or artist in this kind of work, your intent should always be to create the best possible, creative and open environment for the participating refugees. The issue of performing publicly will also be discussed further below, but one thing to remember in terms of your attitude towards this work is that your focus should be on the process. How will your project contribute to the quality of life of your participants, and what are they gaining from taking part? Artistic work with refugees is not an arena for you to show off your own artistic brilliance, and you must stay aware of how you approach the refugees. Avoid making them “props” in some form of art project. In short: Focus on the process of collective singing!



## **Chapter 3: Repertoire**

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For a choir of young refugees, the choice of repertoire might be even more important than any other choir. The songs to be sung will have a huge impact on the sense of belonging of the refugees to the choir and as a result, on the success of the whole project. There are a number of criteria to be considered about how to choose the repertoire for young refugees. It can be a challenge to choose the most fitting songs considering all the inherent factors such as age, profile, cultural and musical background, and the experience of being a refugee. And even before that, it can be more challenging to find enough resources to choose from.

In this chapter, we will provide you with some ideas and best practices that were graciously shared by choir conductors of various refugee choirs. Hopefully with these ideas you will be able to deal with some of the challenges you might face when it comes to choosing a repertoire for young refugees.

In the scope of the "Sing Me In" project, we collected and organised repertoire resources. The repertoire handbook was designed as a tool for you to start expanding ideas into various directions to develop your repertoire with refugee choirs. You can download the dedicated handbook, "Sing Me In: Repertoire Guide", from our website [www.SingMeIn.eu](http://www.SingMeIn.eu).

### **How to decide on a repertoire**

#### **Creating an initial pool**

Having done preliminary research and having gained information about the choir members, you can start by creating an initial pool of songs to begin with. The age range will be a determining factor for choosing songs. If you'll be working with refugee children up to the age of 12, then you can look into children's choir repertoire that is easy to learn and repeat. For young adults on the other hand, you can add more songs with a bit more complex use of language. It's also important not to limit the repertoire to a few languages. Using multiple languages in refugee

choir repertoires is very beneficial, as every other language helps the singers open up to the world and the cultures within the songs.

We strongly suggest to start with rather easy, lively and cheerful songs. Most refugee choirs use children's songs and traditional folk songs from all over the world. The priority of the refugee choir is for the singers to have a good time in the choir, to get them to socialise and share inspiring musical moments with each other. Therefore, as much as a set repertoire, a pool of improvisation activities should also be considered as part of the musical content of the choir.

It's quite important not to use complex foreign language pieces. Many refugee choir conductors report that they try to choose easy pieces regarding rhythm and melody, with a predictable harmonic structure, and easy language. Singing without any proper language, for example only with syllables or vowels that have no real meaning is another possibility. Some conductors choose to include pieces with rather "easy English" or songs having a lot of repetitive words, phrases and hooks.

A refugee group leader from Turkey pointed out that such projects start more smoothly with melodies that are well-known to the refugees. It may not be very easy to find a common denominator for everybody, but try to at least select simple melodies. In countries where western musical notation is not commonly used, the songs should be easy enough to learn through repetition. Also for many non-western cultures, the conductors should be patient enough to divide the choir into different voice groups, since these cultures may used to singing monophonically. Another suggestion is to use songs with accompaniment which allow for faster progress than a cappella pieces.

Once you have constituted your initial repertoire, you can start using it for your first rehearsals. You can revise it later on based on the feedback you get from the choir, by removing the songs that do not fit for them or adding new ones depending on the approach of the group. Although in a standard choir, it would be appropriate to plan a whole season's repertoire from the start, with refugee choirs the important point is to step into the project and be flexible on the way.

### **Choir participation in the repertoire**

Mr. Betzner-Brand who created the [Begegnungschor Berlin](#) said in one session at the chor.com that they let the singers participate in the choice of repertoire. There is a "repertoire group" that searches for songs through the internet and suggests ideas to the conductor who then checks if they can be sung, if he can find scores or somehow arrange the song. This encourages democratic participation in the choir and gives a more stable sense of belonging to the singers, since they can impact the choir's artistic decisions. Nevertheless, an important point is to let the conductor / artistic director have the final say on the repertoire.

Another common practice among refugee choirs is for the choir members to bring their own songs in their native languages. The suggested songs bring a variety of languages and moods to the repertoire. The singers could even teach these songs to the choir, depending, of course, on the skills of the relevant singers. But they can at least sing a version of the song for everybody or for their peers. If they don't have the means to communicate to the choir, the conductor may introduce the songs to the group by getting help and input from the sources. This practice is one of the most effective because it strengthens the sense of belonging among choir members. They gain the opportunity to share their identities, their culture, their language through music in the foreign country to which they are trying to adapt. Having songs that they recognise and sing easily within the repertoire make them feel more at home and confident with what they are doing.

### **Choice of language**

It's very important to have songs in the native language of the singers within the repertoire. Including songs from the host country may also help them adapt to their new country through the choir. Using songs in a "neutral" language, i.e. a language not spoken at the native level by any of the singers, can also create a sense of belonging since everyone shares the same degree of familiarity with the songs, for example songs in an African language for Syrian refugees in Germany. Furthermore, do not assume that western pop is well-known by everybody. For example, it is quite possible that a Syrian refugee choir would not be familiar at all with a Michael Jackson song, as a western choir most likely would be.

There are many innovative ways of using language in your choir sessions, from writing stories that include all the members of the group to combining songs with stories or -especially with children- combining language with movement. As discussed later, signs and gestures are really a fundamental tool to communicate to the group. If these gestures can be combined with specific words and meanings, both the rehearsal period and the content of songs can be delivered to the choir more easily.

### **Level of difficulty**

With a refugee choir, almost all best practices encourage the use of a rather easy repertoire. It's important to examine the level of the choir and in turn set the repertoire level accordingly. Don't forget, the main aim of this choral project is social inclusion through musical achievement. When the choir is functioning well both in terms of attendance and the sense of belonging, then you can bring in some more demanding songs to try out. The main point, at first, should be to create an atmosphere of 'singing together' rather than setting a high musical aim.

Moreover, what may be considered as 'easy' in western terms may be very 'hard' for other cultures. For example, for a singer who is used to listening to monophonic songs it may be a shocking experience to try out polyphony. Practical solutions to palliating this may include adding ostinato parts, dividing the sections into physical groups in the room, etc. Try polyphony at a later stage. On the other hand, what may sound strange to western ears, maybe very familiar to someone from another culture, for instance, the microtonal maqams or ornamental singing techniques for a Syrian refugee. These differing skills can also be added to the choir's toolbox, allowing the refugees to showcase some of their own expertise as well.

It is recommended to use songs without words first. Alternatively, songs with some easy words but no phrases can be utilised. Examples include the canons 'Hello', 'Fruit Canon', 'Tumba', 'Nimba' and such. Replacing the original lyrics with words from another language is also an option. You can find these types of canons in our repertoire handbook.

### **Creativity and improvisation**

In a refugee choir, there is always room for improvisation. Some, perhaps even many, singers may never have read a score in their life. So, they most probably learn by ear. In this process, improvisation can play an important role, especially in getting the group ready to breathe and feel together. One of the surveyed projects mentioned that a conductor of a refugee choir brings his Indian 'harmonium' to rehearsals. Musically experienced students or he himself perform an improvisation on the instrument or sing songs to the choir in the sessions. There are also conductors who utilise improvisation games or icebreakers especially in the warming up phase of the rehearsal.

Get your group into the musical rhythm by actively involving them in improvisatory passages. This may be more successful with a steady pulse for the whole group where individuals or small groups improvise on it. A musically inexperienced group may find it difficult to make free improvisation, but a controlled and directed improvisation will enhance the creativity of the group by making singers more active.

### **Resources**

Resources for a repertoire can be found through various channels.

Online resources include comprehensive websites like Musicanet<sup>4</sup>, CPDL (Choral Public Domain Library) or IMSLP (International Music Score Library Project). But for the specific songs we are looking for in refugee choirs, the "Sing Me In: Repertoire Guide" may prove very helpful. Many conductors have also stated that they are finding practical ways to get scores through their friends from different countries. As stated before, a widely accepted way of finding new repertoire is to ask choir member for songs. They may not be able to bring the sheet music of the song, but could provide an idea for where to look for the new music.

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<sup>4</sup> Musicanet, a partner of the "Sing Me In" project, have referenced repertoire related to the project. Use the keyword "singmein" in the search field!



## **Chapter 4: Leading the sessions**

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Sessions with refugee choirs will be totally different in character from a regular amateur choir. This may become visible in various ways, for instance, whether the refugees have voluntarily come to sing or not. Normally in a standard choir setting, singers come to the choir rehearsal of their own desire. This may not be the case for all refugees. Unlike regular choirs, the singers here may not volunteer to sit and sing in a choral environment. This may lead to a school environment where students have to take a choir class whether or not they want. The decision may be made by the director of the refugee centre to send them to a singing event as part of their social life. Another factor that may influence the character of your choir is that some singers may have a religious distance to singing. These cases should be approached carefully and much time has to be spent for creating a basic motivation for singing.

In other cases, refugees may voluntarily take part in the project. But again, unlike the standard choral setting, the singers may have limited or no experience in singing in a choir. Therefore, the conductor has to concentrate on how to design the sessions most effectively so that good results can be achieved in a short time. The general rule for this type of choir is that probably nothing will pan out exactly as planned, since there are many factors that cannot be controlled by the leader. These may include working hours, motivation, availability and skills of the singers, etc.

### **Preparation for the sessions**

As always, the first step is to find a good venue to rehearse. Most refugee centres probably do not have perfect facilities for a musical rehearsal. Nevertheless a decent room with a stable temperature, good lighting and enough chairs for people to sit should be a good place to start. As mentioned in the repertoire section, songs with accompaniment bring quicker musical results. If the musical leader decides to use accompaniment, it is crucial to communicate with the accompanist beforehand. The leader also has to consider logistics. For example, if the



accompanying instrument is a keyboard, the leader should check if one is available or if it needs to be brought. In some cases, electric cables or extension cords may even be an issue.

With regard to rehearsal logistics, after finding a good venue the next step is to create sustainable circumstances. Food and drinks may play an important role here. Providing nourishment could be a motivating factor for some. It will also help to create stronger group dynamics if the locals bring some drinks and food to share. Social time should not be seen as a waste of rehearsal time. Instead, a good amount of social time should be valued as a good investment for the newly emerging group.

### **How to start**

Many conductors stated that they get good results by starting their sessions with ice-breakers. The group will probably be loose in their organisation and concentration. So, it's a good idea to bring their attention together before starting with the music. Alternatively, attention can be focused by starting directly with the music, but then the piece should be easy for the refugees to sing. For an advanced group, this may be a song that they have sung in the last sessions or for starting groups it may be a song that they know very well from their own culture. Non-musical ice-breakers also bring very good results, as long as the directions for the icebreaker are very clear to follow. Because of the language problem, it is quite possible to get lost within complicated instructions. So, if initiating a standard choral icebreaker is too complex, break it down to easier parts. The point is to focus the group on the rehearsal before starting with the musical content.

### **Ensuring appropriate content**

It is crucial to consider vulnerabilities when using symbols and symbolic explanations. This is another reason why the repertoire should be double-checked, to see if there are any unforeseen psychological side-effects in the content. For example, let's consider a very simple and innocent song about ships on the sea that could be a very nice fit for the choir's musical level. However, if many of the refugees have spent long and difficult nights on the sea, maybe lost their close friends or relatives on a ship, then this song would not be the most appropriate. So, in preparing the content, the leader should be very careful in dealing with possible trauma.

### **Creating common language and gestures**

Many case examples revealed that refugees are not used to western gestures for conducting. That's why it may not be wise to stick to a classical conducting technique. Rather, a common and maybe a new language should be created within the choir to communicate. Some projects have also found that creating this language together with the choir has positive outcomes such as strengthening the sense of belonging.

A common gesture list is a must, especially when working with children's choirs. This functions as a shortcut in rehearsals. Examples include: da capo, bar number X, with/without text, with/without movement, jump to the end, repeat after me, etc. Considering the language barrier in refugee choirs, it may be very wise to start with the common gestures very early in the sessions so that people get used to understanding what the leader really means. This will save much time that may be spent trying to explain what is what in different languages. At last, the rehearsal should be run efficiently to keep everybody awake and motivated.

### **Conducting technique and rehearsal**

As mentioned before, the common gestures will result in a specific conducting technique for the choir, which may be different with each project but has the same aim: clear communication. Many conductors recommend flexibility, don't insist on one specific technique. There are many cases where imitation -as a rehearsal tool- may be very helpful. When using the call-response method stick to straight-forward by keeping the beat using hands, feet or piano. Clapping the rhythm of the melody while singing could also be helpful in some cases. Many conductors use movements to help remember the text as well as the melody.

## Language

If the group is more or less homogeneous in terms of language, it may be a good idea to take the time to translate the songs' verses during the rehearsal. Cases in Norway have suggested that translating a song from Norwegian to the mother-language of the refugees has always strengthened the ties with the music. Of course, when translating songs, try to ensure that a native speaker is writing the lyrics in the foreign language to avoid mistakes or misunderstandings.

As mentioned earlier, you don't have to speak the same language to be able to communicate. One comment from the collected projects reminds us that music is a universal language. Nevertheless, even this conductor asked for an interpreter at times because there are many practical details that may be better communicated through translation. In general, this is not a big problem since most of the projects in the study claim that there is nearly always one of the refugees who can translate, whether through English or directly into the local language.

In some cases, language can also be a really difficult matter. One of the projects in Norway mentioned that they had a young group in the choir with seven different native languages and poor Norwegian/English skills. These people had lived in Norway for a maximum of three months and some of them had just arrived. Clearly, it was not possible to communicate with them through a common language. The conductor's solution was to use 'echoing' as the main teaching method and use as little speaking as possible in the sessions, resorting to as much body language as possible.

## Cases with challenges

In leading a choir of refugees, some other unexpected challenges might appear due to cultural differences or disconformities within the group. For example the conductor / leader of a refugee choir in Tarlaşa Toplum Merkezi (Society Centre) in Istanbul talks about the difficulties arising from differences in musical background, as such:

*"Most of the kids don't have a developed musical ear. I'm trying to teach them to act together; to listen to each other and to produce sounds in a harmony. Sometimes I teach them basic musical knowledge, like teaching them the names of the notes or different rhythms. I practice on the piano for them to differentiate the sounds, we improvise and play games. I use games and rhythmical exercises for them to watch me. Now they are used to warm ups and breathing exercises. Our repertoire consists of children's songs and simple choral exercises with nice melodies that don't include any political, religious or national elements. They are able to sing simple canons more or less with the correct rhythm but unfortunately not always in tune, even in the case of monophonic melodies. For some choir members it is quite easy, but for others it's challenging."*

Some unexpected challenges can occur for conductors while working with people from different cultures. In another case of ARCAM (The Research Centre on Asylum and Migration) for example, the female conductor explains: "In the beginning of the rehearsals, they didn't accept me as a choir conductor since I am a female." Or in another case with an Afghan youth choir, the concept of punctuality became an issue. The conductor expected the choir members to "be on time"; as the choir had a completely different notion of being on time, they were late. The rehearsal could never start on time because choir members were just starting to arrive at the settled time of rehearsal, as this was the usual practice within their culture of origin.

In another case of an Afghan boys choir called U18, there were a couple of boys who always caused problems and disruptions during rehearsal. The conductor narrates the issue as follows:

*"In another one of my projects, where I taught a group of about 20 Afghan boys under 18, a couple of boys had what you could describe as a stereotypical "bad ass" attitude and a strong need to be the "alpha" of the pack. This was a challenging setting for teaching music, and as a leader I was constantly interrupted and the music had to come second. This was a different dynamic than what I was used to and I had to adapt my style of teaching to match the criteria of the group, such as more physical (involving movement), more short breaks, etc."*

When confronted with such unique cases, it is important for the conductor / leader to be creative, positive and constructive towards the whole group. They might need to be courageous and try to find innovative solutions for these problems. It is also the job of the conductor to generate harmony within the choir and to manage the differences in such a way that in the end they become the richness of the choir. Conductors can seek inspiration for

such leadership in different resources such as looking for similar cases both in their own social circle and in the literature on conducting. It is important to remember that you as a conductor are not the only one experiencing such difficulties within the group. Keep calm and start looking for solutions, talk to your colleagues or just google it.

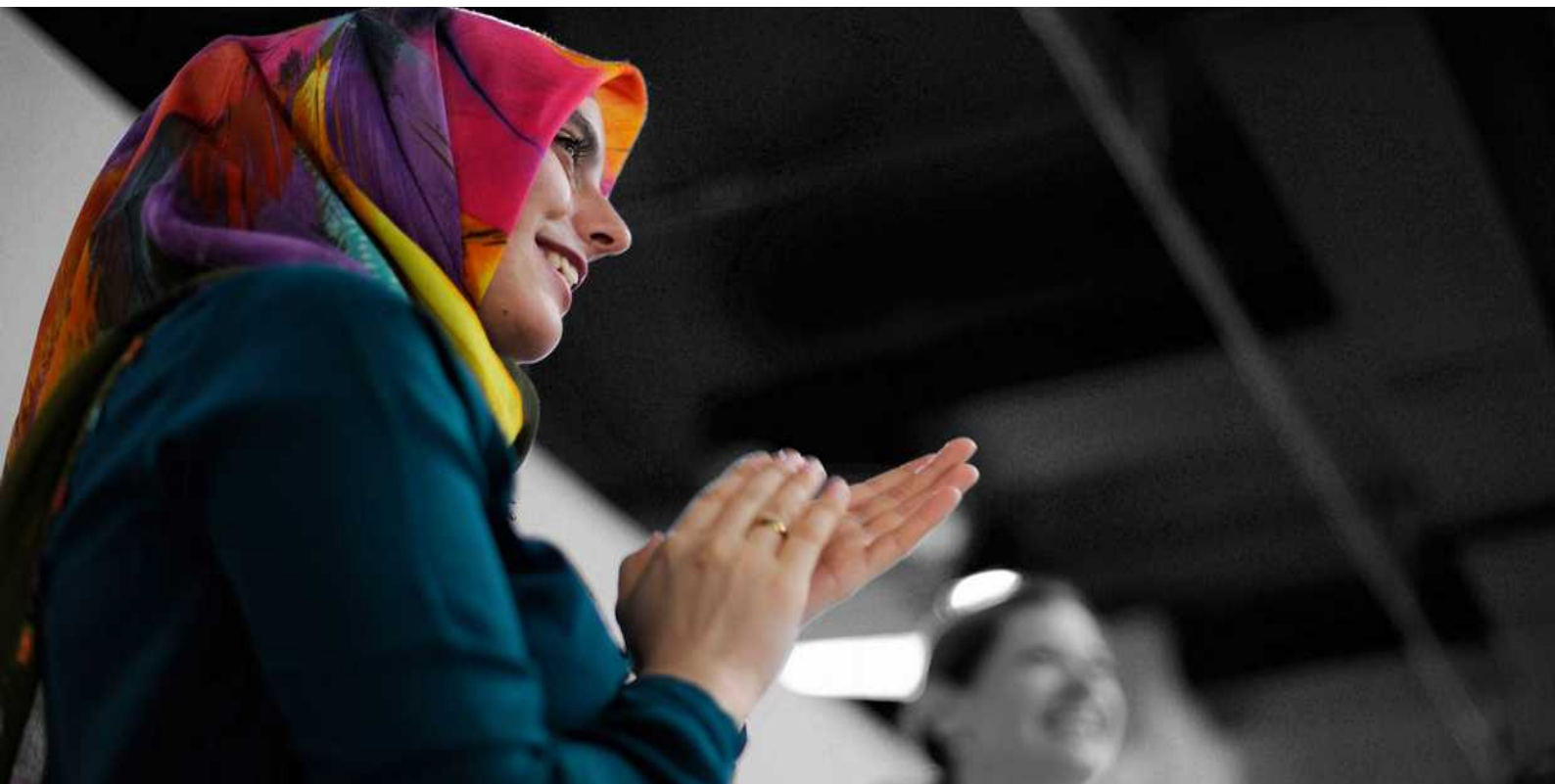
### **The role of the conductor**

Conductors have to wear many hats in refugee projects. They are not only the musical director of the group but also their leader, organiser, motivator, team-builder, sometimes even just a good 'listener' for their problems. The musical part of their duty may sometimes be a very small detail compared to the other practical stuff they may have to deal with.

Many conductors report that their daily work in the refugee centres consists mainly of organisational issues. In that sense, the conductor acts as the group leader, more than the artistic director. The conductor of the Ankara Refugee Choir points out that her basic routine in the choir includes a big amount of logistical work, to make it possible to bring the choir members together in the first place. When asked about her role in the rehearsals, she mentioned that as a conductor she spends a lot of time on basic discipline in the choir. In this experience, the refugees may tend to be aggressive towards each other sometimes and therefore the conductor figure needs to be strong in character.

Different experiences demonstrate that choral projects are more successful, when the members have an emotional connection to the conductor. Since work done with refugee choirs is not purely for musical purposes, the artistic character of the conductor tends to play a secondary role in the projects. Instead, his/her ability to bring the members together as a group, his/her skills in making them believe that music can be a means for reconciliation play a more important role.

Some projects also mention that the conductor at times has to spend more one-to-one time with the choir members than would be needed in the usual choral environment. The reason of this can be that the refugees may have more personal needs to share with the conductor or simply they may need to share more logistical or psychological issues with the leader of the group. Therefore, conductors of refugee projects should be ready to listen more to the members of the choir than a standard choral group.



## Chapter 5: Performances

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The significance of performance for refugee projects varies a lot from case to case. Many approaches consider performances unnecessary, instead the process of bringing the choir together is itself the aim. With this in mind, it is thus not crucial for young refugees to perform on stage in front of an organised audience. Regular or irregular rehearsals, workshops or sessions are enough to fulfil the needs of the project. Some suggest that performances are important to refugee projects. For these projects, performance is an inseparable part of the process and has its own benefits.

### **Is it necessary?**

Projects which do not consider performances as a crucial point, suggest mainly that their primary aim is to facilitate the platform for collective singing. When young refugees come together to sing, they have the chance to escape their traumatic past experiences, at least emotionally. There may not be a need to finish that collective singing platform with a concert. Some project organisers claimed that this is a loss of energy and time. Others stated that in this context, with small children, performance is not important. One project leader in Mysebu mentioned that they could not work towards a performance, because they would not know for how long the young people would still live there. Without a guarantee of continuity, a commitment to a performance can be very hard to make.

On the other hand, projects which prioritise performances claim that it has its own advantages. According to many practices, concerts create stronger group motivation. Working towards a performance focuses the choir more, since they have a specific aim that they share. Individuals in groups will have more self-esteem and self-respect after fulfilling the process of rehearsals and a decent performance. The primary feeling here is 'accomplishment'. Moreover, considering that the performance will probably involve other refugees in the refugee centre, they will also have shared what they have been working towards with the other refugees. This may also be seen as a gift given to their fellows and families, which would result in an uplifting experience for non-members of the choir. It

may in the end even increase the number of choir members. If the audience includes other parts of society, the performance would also raise awareness of the refugees and their experiences.

Some experiences stated that performing on stage builds more pride for the children and the applause they get may be the first applause experience in their life from an audience. This can be a groundbreaking moment for many people. They may also feel more respected after having performed for an audience.

### **What are the challenges?**

The main challenge towards working for a performance is that there may not be a solid group of people following the rehearsals on a regular basis. The fundamental needs of the refugees and the nature of refugee centres may result in varying groups in different sessions. Some members may not even be able to come to the concert on performance day because they have to deal with other practical issues. It is also quite possible that most of the members may not have experienced choral singing before, and thus may not be familiar with western concert practices. Going on stage and coming off stage, standing in front of an audience, bowing after the performance and stage fright are all topics that have to be dealt with one by one as they arise.

It is also important to note that a performance will increase the costs of a project. Depending on the elements of the performance (instrumental players, costumes, technical needs, venue, etc.) the budget may be seriously affected. A performance always needs an audience, which is another issue to deal with.

### **How to solve them?**

Some practical challenges related to the singers can be solved in creating a concert atmosphere in rehearsals. For example, a part of the group can perform one song for the other members of the choir who are the audience. This generates the performance setting and familiarises the singers to the psychological state of being on stage. It is also totally understandable if the performance has poor musical aspects to it. This is a natural part of the working process and nobody expects the performance to be a perfect musical output. The leader of the group may not have any influence on some challenges, for example nobody can change the fact that suddenly a member may not come to the performance because of practical reasons. These facts have to be accepted as they are.

Budget-related challenges are to be treated carefully. Since the aim of the project is not to generate more money and spend more, the leader has to find clever solutions to the budget problem. An affordable possibility is to offer a performance to the other members of the refugee centre. Another way is to get in touch with the political or private institutions that support the refugee centres and ask for their logistical support.

### **Where to perform?**

The venue for the performance should above all be a place easy to access, where the choir members feel comfortable. Organising a concert in a church is not feasible if the Muslim choir members express strong reservations. In such cases, 'neutral' venues such as culture centres or schools can be used. The venue should not be very far away from the refugee accommodation, for transportation purposes and because people from the refugee centre may want to attend the concert. The refugees may not want to travel far from their temporary homes either. It is important to organise decent means of transportation for the refugees that is free-of-charge. A venue that requires no transportation is even better. Many cases have used schools, cultural centres, small concert halls but also different places like libraries or charitable organisations.

### **Recruiting an audience**

The most simple and straightforward way of finding audience for performances is to invite fellow refugees. This is both an easy-to-reach group and a significant means for valorising the work they have done by sharing it with their peers. Performing in their refugee centre or accommodation also keeps costs in check. Another possible audience are the people living in the neighbourhood. The main aim here is to create warm communication between the

locals of the home town and the refugees. Inviting local authorities to the performance helps with project recognition and may help trigger support from the decision-makers.

### **What to expect from a performance**

The end result will most likely not be a conventional performance. The musical outcome may vary according to the many factors discussed above and should not be a criteria to judge the success of the concert. Yet, one of the motivating factors is to work together towards quality..

One conductor explained that discipline combined with compassion and understanding are the main elements of a successful performance in the end. With all these challenges, it is not easy to prepare a group for a concert. Many projects ascertain that some members are always missing in the rehearsals, it is hard to get them to sessions regularly, sometimes people suddenly come back again and this may undo the plans that have been already agreed upon. Sometimes members don't show up on the day of the concert. So, don't expect too much from a concert, rather just enjoy the human experience itself.



Marina Velasquez

## Resources and references

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Download the three other handbooks of the “Sing Me In” project from our website:

- “Sing Me In: Including young people with migrant background in existing choirs”
- “Sing Me In: Working in a school environment”
- “Sing Me In: Repertoire guide”

### **IETM in collaboration with CAE and Culture21:**

Developing narratives around Migration

<https://www.ietm.org/en/publications/creation-and-displacement-developing-new-narratives-around-migration?platform=hootsuite>

Mapping Creation and Displacement

[Mapping "Creation and Displacement: developing new narratives around migration"](#)

With Annex – list of projects

[Annex listing 141 artistic projects and initiatives dealing with refugees and migration](#)

**Cañas, Tania.** RISE 2017. “10 Things You Need To Consider If You Are An Artist – Not Of The Refugee And Asylum Seeker Community- Looking To Work With Our Community” <http://riserefugee.org/10-things-you-need-to-consider-if-you-are-an-artist-not-of-the-refugee-and-asylum-seeker-community-looking-to-work-with-our-community/>

**Dunderovic, Igor.** Ballade.no 2017, “Musikk i mottak og danser med ulver” <http://www.ballade.no/sak/musikk-i-mottak-og-danser-med-ulver/>

**UNHCR 2017a.** “Figures at a Glance – Statistical Yearbooks”, <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

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