Creating Spaces of Music Asylum in Ethnically Divided Contexts
Young People’s Accounts from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sri Lanka

Gillian Howell and Solveig Korum

ABSTRACT: This article explores the ways in which arts experiences in conflicted and territorialized settings may invite a heightened engagement with space, and what this suggests about creative experiences as a vehicle for transforming space and the (re)construction of one’s presence and place in the world. Presenting ethnographic data from two youth music projects established after the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sri Lanka and argued from the perspective of musician-practitioner-researchers, the authors examine how musical interaction, improvisation, and performance creation enabled processes of exploring, reconfiguring, and expanding the participants’ identities and sense of place in the surrounding world. Using Tia DeNora’s conceptualization of “music asylum,” the article shows how strategies of removal and refurnishing created creative and safe spaces in which alternative lives and more complex identities could be rehearsed and conflict narratives could be revised, fostering a temporary transformation of space that is captured in metaphors like bubble, refuge, and sanctuary.

KEYWORDS: Bosnia and Herzegovina, identity, intercultural music-making, inter-ethnic, music asylum, peacebuilding, space, Sri Lanka

When reflecting on their experiences of music engagement in postwar contexts, young people participating in our research often used spatial metaphors. These metaphors (e.g., bubble, refuge, sanctuary) were intended to refer not only to physical structures, we wish to argue, but equally to a quality of experience, one that suggested the suspension of everyday life, of being apart or delineated from their everyday life experiences in ways that seemed to support important experiences of security and well-being. These metaphors warranted closer examination, not only because of what they suggested about the protective quality of the interlocutors’ music experiences but also because they were called forth by participants in two very different cultural contexts, postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sri Lanka. They prompted our consideration of how spatial metaphors of music experiences might be understood as a response to the young people’s lived experience of an environment that had been territorialized and effectively segregated between ethno-religious or ethnolinguistic groups. In such settings, did something in the creative experience afford participants the chance to reconfigure their presence and place in the world?

In this article, we explore this question through analysis of empirical data from music activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sri Lanka. We argue that key approaches to the music activi-
ities play a critical role in changing the participants’ experience of the space and that creative agency within the music activities is a critical mechanism for the potential for transformation of space. Our explorations reflect the perspectives we bring as musician-practitioner-researchers, and our relationships with the two case studies predate our scholarly interests in them. Before entering academia, we had each established professional practices in the music development and musical-social fields: Gillian Howell as a community musician and cultural development practitioner, and Solveig Korum as a cultural development manager.

We begin the article with some brief remarks on the different ways in which space as a critical element in music-making has been framed in scholarship from the fields of community music and music sociology. Next, we outline our research methodology, noting our entwinedness with the case studies we have studied, and introduce the contexts for our data, as well as the content of the projects in question. We then present empirical data from the two sites organized under two themes: music-making as a space of refuge, and music-making as a space of experimentation.

Our discussion section brings our ethnographic material and analysis into dialogue with the theoretical and empirical insights of Tia DeNora (2013). We conceptualize our findings around music as a form of asylum, and we show how the music activities observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sri Lanka can be understood as important spaces for exploration of identity and the imagined reconfiguring of worlds. Through musical interaction between non-like-situated and non-like-minded participants, we argue that the music projects became spaces where alternative lives could be rehearsed and conflict narratives revised.

References to Space in Community-based Music Activities

Space is an important but slippery consideration for arts projects with social goals. It has multiple dimensions, referring to the physical space in which the activities occur and to the boundaries (temporal, social, aural, and embodied) created by the activity itself and through the interactions and subjective experiences of the people taking part (Levesque and Ferguson 2020). In settings where populations are segregated into ethno-religious-linguistic groups across many aspects of daily life, space is further complicated by territorializing practices and artifacts. This can include visible markers (e.g., language on signs, presence of national emblems or flags, or political graffiti and street art) or through the capacity of a physical space to index traumatic events that are etched in collective memory (Carabelli 2018; Howell et al. 2019; Hromadžić 2015; Kappler 2017).

Perhaps because of these complex relationships, writing that conceptualizes music-making as having spatial properties or affordances is often found in relation to music activities that take place in settings such as postconflict contexts, segregated sites, or intercultural collaborations. Writing about music-making in a highly territorialized postconflict space, Howell (2015) proposed that music participation could expand what she conceptualized as a participant’s “life-space,” comprising of physical, social, and psycho-emotional dimensions. Arild Bergh and John Sloboda (2010) found that music engagement in a multiethnic refugee camp in Sudan facilitated the creation of distinctive spatial experiences, such as demarcating a socially acceptable space in which to freely show one’s emotions or respond positively to the music of the Other without appearing to appease existing intergroup grievances. Bergh and others (e.g., Mantie and Risk 2020) embrace Victor Turner’s (1974) concept of liminality, a temporary and transient “in-between” space where the normal rules of society can be suspended, noting how a musical space can encourage a temporary relaxing of performances of a particular self-identity. Caitlin Nunn (2020: 2) argues that participatory arts-based research projects involving refu-
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ggee youth in music-making constitute “exceptional spheres of belonging . . . giving rise to new, transformative possibilities.” And Marsh (2019), writing about cross-cultural music exchanges involving Australian music students and recently arrived refugee youth and adults, suggests that music-making that supports the cocreation of shared meaning can constitute a dialogic space where empathy and reciprocal care can grow. Each of these examples hint at the potential for music-making to foster a space that is endowed with transformative potential.

Beyond literature concerning postwar and conflict-affected settings, one of the most thought-provoking writers in the music sphere for the topic of the spatial affordances of music is music sociologist Tia DeNora, in particular her conceptualization of “music asylums.” Writing from the field of music sociology and building on Erving Goffman’s (1961) influential examination of Asylums, DeNora conceptualizes music asylums as spaces of safety that accommodate wellness, social connection, and aesthetic experience. This concept conveys an understanding of the asylum not as a “total institution,” enclosed and separated from the outside world, but as a space (physical or ephemeral) that offers “ontological security, a sense of at least partial control, opportunities for creativity, pleasure, self-validation, a sense of fitting comfortably into some space, scene or milieu, flow and focus” (2013a: 55).

In this conceptualization, the asylum is understood as a space for respite and escape, for removing or distancing oneself from a wider, hostile environment. It is also a space for play, exploration, discovery, and design, “a room in which to remake features of one’s world, to play in ways that foster changes in that world” (47), “so as to make those environments more conducive to being (a self) in the world” (48). DeNora labels these processes as “removal” and “refurnishing,” respectively, and they can be understood concurrently as strategies for creating asylum and ways in which asylum is experienced. We will return to DeNora’s work in the final section of this article.

Methodology

The article presents interview and observational data from two separate research projects, one in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Howell) and the other in Sri Lanka (Korum). Both project sites were cases or subprojects within our respective doctoral studies into internationally sponsored music development interventions in conflict-affected contexts (see Howell 2017; Korum 2020a). Those larger PhD studies were grounded in post-development and postcolonial theory and produced new frameworks for engaging critically with music interventions and music cooperations between the Global North and South; here, we contain our interest to the participants’ metaphorical representations of the music-making space, in order to better understand the quality of the music-making experiences and what they may afford in relation to space, time, and relationships in the aftermath of armed conflict and division.

Howell’s interviews were conducted in October and November 2013 in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, during research into community music education initiated in contexts of postwar reconstruction. The study examined the work of the Pavarotti Music Centre (PMC) in its first two years of operations, 1997–1999. While the PhD study drew on a purposive sample of contrasting perspectives (Miles and Huberman 1994) that included 35 interviews and two focus groups and spanned program participants, observers, local staff, international staff, and international initiators, those quoted in this article were all young music participants in the PMC’s first two years of operations, aged between 13 (Ines) and 21 (Elvir) years old when the PMC first opened.

Korum conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Sri Lanka for five months between October 2017 and March 2019, engaging with a total of 34 informants connected in various ways to the
Sri Lanka Norway Music Cooperation (2009–2018) and taking part in some of its activities as a participant observer. In this role, she attended three out of four University Musical Meeting Spaces (UMMS), the initiative that will be discussed in this article. Korum also used online ethnography, tracing social media posts and public comments by participants of the initiative. These data were supplemented with three online interviews in 2021 with two UMMS participants (one student, 24 years old during UMMS; and one young lecturer, 31 years old during UMMS) and one local organizer (aged in her mid-40s during UMMS) who were each invited to reflexively recall and evaluate their UMMS experiences. Data were also gathered from social media posts. This process followed a new consent protocol beyond that used for her PhD studies, reaching out to the authors of relevant posts to ask permission to use their words and thus include them as informants in this study (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 129).

The two case studies were never designed to be in dialogue, but we juxtapose them in this article as a way of weaving a narrative between the two. The PMC was a physical building, while UMMS was a program; the PMC offered “hangout” and “drop-in” spaces, while the UMMS was a series of workshops for a selected group of participants. The PMC represents activities in a single site, whereas the UMMS moved strategically between locations. Their commonality lies in the organizers’ belief that creative and collaborative art-making could be a fruitful site for the forging of connections among divided young people and help them start to repair the broken social fabric that characterized the lived environment. Commonality also lies in the ways in which the participants verbalized their experiences in these projects. In what follows, we examine the latter: how participants across the two cases expressed how these art initiatives for them forged spaces for escape, social exploration, creative experimentation, and the expansion of new norms.

The next section introduces the two case study sites, and the contexts and events within which they came to exist. The scope of our article dictates that these contextual summaries are necessarily brief; we confine our focus to those factors and forces that shaped the context and content of the projects themselves.

**Case Contexts**

**Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The city of Mostar in southern Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of Europe’s “divided cities” (Calame and Charlesworth 2006). Its main highway, the Bulevar, which runs through the city from north to south, had been the front line when hostilities between Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims (Bosniak) broke out in 1993, in the context of the wider Bosnian War (1992–1995). This war-within-a-war placed the east side of the front line under siege (Bose 2002). When a ceasefire in Mostar was negotiated in March 1994, the former front line became a de facto internal border separating the majority Bosnian Croat community on the west side from the majority Bosnian Muslim (Bosniak) community on the east.

The former front line functioned (and continues to function) as an “invisible wall” rather than a physical barrier. Crossing between the two sides was first prohibited and then heavily proscribed and laden with risk. Schools, media, essential services and infrastructure, and institutions of state and municipality functioned in parallel (Bose 2002; Makaš 2006). In such a divided and dysfunctional environment, ethnic identity became the sole aspect of identity that mattered, and young people from the different sides lived parallel lives, highly unlikely to ever meet.
A wide array of international government and nongovernment agencies and civil society organizations established operations in postwar Mostar, working to rebuild the city and reintegrate its population, infrastructure, and services. War Child, a small humanitarian organization established in 1993, was among this group of international actors. War Child prided itself on remaining independent of political funding (David Wilson, cofounder of War Child, interview, February 2016) and positioned music, arts, and young people as key contributors to the city’s reintegration and cohesion. With financial support from private donors and stars of the global pop and opera scene, War Child built a large community music and arts center in Mostar’s east side, opening in December 1997. They named it the Pavarotti Music Centre, in recognition of the financial support of the main donor, opera singer Luciano Pavarotti.

While it was located on the eastern, Muslim-majority site of Mostar, War Child aimed for the PMC to be a space in which people of any ethnicity would feel welcome and included. For those living on the western side of Mostar, coming to the PMC meant crossing the “invisible wall” of the former front line. Several of the participants in Howell’s research (e.g., Ines, Kenet, Alma, Haris) were of Muslim or mixed-marriage backgrounds and lived as minorities on the western (Croat-majority) side of Mostar. Their daily movement between home and the musical world of the PMC required them to confront and navigate both the war-imposed territorialization of their city and their “othered” status as minorities and anomalies (Bringa 2003) in postwar Mostar’s social order. Such navigations continue in the present: in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s power-sharing, ethnically constituted version of democracy, these minority groups often find themselves forced into the cracks between ethnically demarcated spaces (Conrad 2019; Hromadžić 2012).

War Child also designed the PMC to be a place of healing for young people who had lived through the horrors of the war. For the research participants, these lived experiences included the constant fear of expulsion to the other side of Mostar, discrimination from teachers at school, persecution and imprisonment of male relatives, living under bombardment, extreme hunger, deaths of loved ones, and terrifying interactions with soldiers and neighbors from the majority ethnic group during the war period and its aftermath (experiences that correspond with those of many children in wartime Bosnia and Herzegovina, as described in Smith et al. 2002). These experiences are useful to bear in mind when considering the metaphors the research participants chose to describe their music experiences.

**Sri Lanka**

In Sri Lanka, the UMMS took place within a broader frame of the Sri Lanka Norway Music Cooperation (SLNMC), a program initiated at the end of an almost three-decade-long civil war on the island,1 where the UN estimates a loss of lives between 80,000 and 100,000 people (Charbonneau 2009). From 2009 to 2018, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) annually invested $235,0002 in the SLNMC. This investment must be seen in the light of Norway’s overall engagement and specific peace diplomacy in Sri Lanka since the early 2000s. The Norwegian MFA contracted Concerts Norway, a Norwegian governmental music organization, as the implementing agency, who then subcontracted with the local partners in Sri Lanka.

Focused on reviving, celebrating, and strengthening Sri Lanka’s diverse folk music traditions, the SLNMC offered training workshops, concerts, and strategic investments in music sector infrastructure. The project rationale was that a strong music scene was a necessary foundation for a vibrant and creative Sri Lankan society, in addition to the assumption that music offered a viable space for the reconstruction of peaceful relations between previously belligerent groups. This rationale was challenged by several competing values and interests among the various stakeholders. While artistic practices had promising compatibility and complementarity with
social goals such as reconciliation, the accommodation of political interests, donor agendas, and domestic pressures often made for a compromised, diluted, or confused approach to reconciliation, particularly in the latter years of the cooperation.3

Young people in Sri Lanka were dramatically impacted by their wartime experiences. Those directly exposed to militarized violence—particularly in the North (e.g., Jaffna) and East (e.g., Batticaloa) of Sri Lanka—may have experienced serious human rights violations and the physical destruction of their surroundings during the war and postwar period. Many communities were displaced multiple times, disrupting community and cultural continuities.4 During the war years, random violence (e.g., terrorist attacks, suicide bombings, disappearances) could occur in any part of the country; all young people became accustomed to checkpoints, and many would have engaged in strategies such as avoiding public transport or particular public buildings at times of heightened threat (Subramanian 2014).

The University Musical Meeting Spaces initiative was launched in the last phase of the SLNMC. It was a direct consequence of an external evaluation report into the SLNMC (Fernando and Rambukwella 2014) in which the evaluators recommended a vision of reconciliation activities as regular *meeting spaces* between citizens. The UMMS was conceived as a meeting space for students of traditional performing arts from four universities, where they would collaborate to create new performance works across four weekends a year. Enacted from 2017, 24 undergraduate music students took part. The “meeting space” moved with each iteration between Jaffna, Batticaloa (Tamil-majority areas), Kandy (Sinhala-majority area), and Colombo (the capital). Each host university was responsible for facilitating the meeting space and accommodating the students, while the SLNMC provided all the funding. Each meeting space comprised lectures and a joint creative workshop based on a selected theme. The students were given ample time to socialize in between the work sessions and each weekend included excursions, picnics, and impromptu opportunities for social music-making (for more information on the UMMS, see Korum 2020b: 57–60).

When the UMMS was launched, reconciliation was a major political concern. A separate Ministry of National Integration and Reconciliation had been established, and other initiatives to enhance national unity proliferated both in public and nonpublic sectors. Yet for many, the term reconciliation lacked legitimacy. Harshana Rambukwella (2018) describes how official Sinhala authenticity politics dominated public (and cultural) life. Asoka Bandarage (2011) points to the public distrust of governmental and nongovernmental peacebuilding initiatives post-war and the international assistance offered to the Sri Lankan civil society. By 2017, one could observe a general cynicism in the population toward the reconciliation label. Given this context, the UMMS organizers did not brand the UMMS as a “reconciliation” initiative, even if this was in fact the goal, and “meeting space” was chosen instead. With the contexts and goals of the two case studies now established, we now present empirical findings from the two sites, focusing on themes of escape and refuge and then, agentic subversion of established norms.

Music-making as a Space of Refuge, Sanctuary, and Escape

When asked for one word to encapsulate the experience of the PMC, Ines offered a word in her mother tongue (Croatian-Bosnian): *utočište* (refuge or haven). For Kenet, it was “a bubble of safety,” a circumscribed space that enabled him to feel “normal in a not-normal situation.” Almira described it as “a sanctuary for all young people who were thinking differently, who were outsiders” (interviews, November 2013). Each word indicates an experience of retreat and escape, and of psychological safety to be oneself.
Perhaps there was a material aspect to this existential dimension, as the PMC was a new, purpose-built edifice standing tall among ruins and rubble and hastily patched dwellings. At the time, it represented the largest construction project in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Nickalls 1997), and for many people living on the east side of divided Mostar where it was located, it was “a big thing . . . really impressive, [to be] built in that time” (Elvir, former participant, November 2013). Yet when asked to consider the role of the physical building in creating a feeling of sanctuary, Kenet expressed ambivalence. More important, he said, was that it was a dedicated, purposeful space, “a place where people can come, even if it’s under a tree . . . and where other people can see that and ask themselves, ‘What’s going on, can I be part of it?’ And then engage.” (November 2013).

For those who wanted to play music, the PMC provided that necessary dedicated space. Several interviewees described their earlier efforts to find a place to play music without bothering others, practicing in a bedroom stuffed with pillows to muffle the sound, for example (Kenet), or repurposing a disused Cold War–era basement bomb shelter for rock band practice (Haris). These spaces did not feel like refuges or bubbles. For Kenet, a sanctuary-like space for music needed to be “an environment that is not what surrounds you,” (interview, November 2013), distant in some way from the challenges of daily existence in Mostar at that time. How did the PMC create this experience, beyond the physical space it provided? The musical sounds and musical direction were part of that experience of distance:

[I remember one] incredible workshop. Every one of us had a djembe, and we were exploring rhythms and playing with rhythms and just clapping our hands, and—incredible. It was so inspiring and so elating. You would come out of it feeling like your lungs were bigger and expanded and you were breathing a different air . . . [Another time], there was a bunch of guys in town from I think England or the US, and they were drummers. And we were in the Pavarotti Centre courtyard, and they started playing music, and they said, “OK, now we’re going to play how they play in Brazil.” And we got this sense of this kind of call-and-response—da da da, du-du, d-dah! . . . We basically created in that courtyard what I would now call Carnival atmosphere in Brazil, in Rio. It was so intoxicating, the music was so intoxicating . . . I remember being carried and feeling completely kind of buzzing from music! I felt like I was on a cloud. I just remember it, it sticks in my head as an event, when I realized why people do this. There is something amazing about music, that it can carry you like this. (Kenet, interview, November 2013)

In this account, the musical activity not only created a new environment (a carnival in Brazil), but the music transported the participants there; it carried Kenet so that he felt like he was on a cloud. The musical experiences he described were participatory and spontaneous. They created powerful feelings of synchrony through intense rhythmic drumming, supporting among other things a freer respiratory function (“breathing a different air”) and other psychobiological benefits (Osborne 2009). Drums arranged in a circle represented a gathering place, within which all participants could face each other and affirming connections could be forged (Skeef 2006). Research participants associated the drumming activities with the PMC’s “international” and cosmopolitan atmosphere and focus on healing and care. These more informal and participatory pedagogies were a clear point of difference with the municipal music schools, which offered formal music education in Western classical music.

For Alma, connection with a wider world was more important than transportation to a different place. Interactions with the PMC’s international staff was one way this happened (she recalled one British staff member bringing her copies of teenage girls’ magazines after a trip home), but the PMC’s CD Listening Library (which was just a couple of comfortable chairs in
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the foyer, a CD player, headphones, and lots of CDs) “was one of the best things actually. At that
time, just after the war, you couldn't get CDs. Now you have internet and YouTube, but at that
time, this was the only window through to see what’s going on in the world” (Alma, interview
November 2013).

Ines also experienced the PMC as a portal to a different world, but hers was constituted
through the access to “difference” that the PMC provided:

Do you remember the story of Narnia? . . . You know, you live in your closet and then you
just open it and you enter another world. It was like that for me. It was that feeling that every-
thing around you was very much screwed up, but entering there, with completely different
people and different minds and different topics, and different—you know! Everything was
just “mind-resting” [i.e., a rest for your mind]. Something where you just forget about all the
daily things that you listen about, or that worry you. You can just leave that all behind. (Ines,
interview, November 2013)

The reassurance that Ines, a self-described “child of a so-called mixed marriage” who lived on
the west side of Mostar, found in different people, minds, and topics is significant. She herself
was Other and “different.” She described the many internal struggles and external injustices
that arose from her consequent incompatibility with postwar Mostar’s prescribed categories
of ethnic belonging. “Difference” was where she could relax and feel safe, where she could “leave
all that behind.”

Turning now to Sri Lanka, the multiple venues of the UMMS invite us to consider the other
critical mechanisms for creating this same sense of a safe space, namely the role of facilitators
and organizers, and their efforts to surround the activities with a wider ethic of hospitality and
welcome (Higgins 2012). When the first iteration of the UMMS took place, the students had
some feelings of apprehension about the project and its expectations. Familiar with hierarchi-
cal and transmission-based pedagogical approaches in their mainstream schooling and formal
arts training, they wondered if these might combine with war legacies of interethnic tension to
create a stressful working atmosphere: “On the day we started the project, I was a bit impatient
and stressed. I did not know what we were going to do . . . Little by little, we became friends,
and that teacher-madam who guided us, really guided us well. She was kind and helped us
a lot. Her personality was really inclusive and good” (Shashikala, UMMS participant, online
interview, January 2021, referring to a teacher from a different ethnic and religious group to her
own). Other participants similarly recalled teachers who were inviting and “much kinder” than
they had anticipated (Manoj, junior lecturer, online interview, February 2021; Korum, fieldwork
journal, December 2017).

In the UMMS, care was similarly taken to create a welcoming, safe, and inclusive space for
the young participants in each of the four workshop locations by decorating and illuminating
the space with candles and permeating the air with the fragrance of incense. Each session started
with an oil lamp–lighting ceremony, a common tradition to Tamil and Sinhalese communities,
where a candle was carried from one participant to the next and then onto a bigger oil lamp that
kept shining throughout the session. As such, distance from the outside world was also created
through rituals that were intended to cleanse the space, metaphorically releasing it of the bur-
dens of the past. A physical removal of the old was done by sweeping the floor and taking out
the furniture that normally belonged to the workshop room and replacing it with flowers, bird
decorations, and other elements that the participants intended to inspire the creative exchange
of the UMMS. These gestures helped create a physical space where participants would feel safe,
welcome, and held (Figure 1).
Thus, both case studies suggest that the musical spaces offered a sense of refuge or a bubble of safety through multiple means. Venue was certainly key, but more important was the sense of welcome, inclusion, and kindness that was experienced, rituals that helped “cleanse” the space of past usages, and the way that musical participation and musical sounds had a “carrying” quality. Absorption in music enabled participants to place a buffer between themselves and the actual environment, and even gave a sense that they were traveling elsewhere. But it is Ines’s focus on the importance of experiencing and living in “difference” that offers a doorway into the next consideration. Thinking about music activities as spaces for constructively exploring and experimenting with difference and breaking the current rules and entrenched conflict narratives invites consideration of how this might help with the task of reconstituting the world and one’s place in it, and thus its transformation.

**Music as a Space for Exploring, Experimenting, and Subverting the Current Rules and Narratives of Conflict**

Let us return to Almira’s use of the word sanctuary to describe the PMC experience. It was, she said, a sanctuary particularly for those youths that “were not thinking like the others,” who were social outsiders. She elaborated, “You were an outsider if you weren’t thinking like that [i.e., nationally].” For Almira, the quality of sanctuary was created through the acceptance of
others, and the overriding of the deterministic power of ethnicity and religion that prevailed elsewhere in Mostar at that time. Such things “[aren’t] that important. What’s important is actually the quality of the people, and we don’t look around [i.e., with suspicion or mistrust] like others do.” In Mostar at that time, any place that enabled different ethnicities to mix was a threat to the forces that benefited from ethnic division. The rules were clear: “the groups cannot mix” (Almira). This was reiterated within families, at school, in religious institutions and by politicians. Those who were minorities on their “side” or in their school (as Ines, Kenet, and Alma were), described feeling like “you are wearing some mark on you that you are not aware of, but everyone around you is” (Ines).

Thus, the PMC offered its participants not just the possibility of breaking the current rules and experimenting with whom they could befriend, but respite from the relentlessness of a life where “nationality is the main thing, the main principle of who you are” (Ines). The PMC’s welcome of all nationalities, including those from outside the Balkans, invited exploration of the multiple layers of one’s own identity, which was significant for participants because “in such a closed society . . . there is no other identity that you can explore” (Ines, emphasis shows expression). In the process of exploring more complex identities, they learned that “everything [the authorities] were saying was not actually true; the kids can hang with each other normally [i.e., without conflict] . . . here was the proof” (Almira, emphasis shows expression).

Experimentation and rule-breaking extended beyond the rejection of the wider politics of division and nationalism. Interviewees described the PMC as more musically and pedagogically free than the East Mostar Music School, the municipal music school housed within the PMC, which followed the formal education curriculum and had a teacher-centric learning culture. This “was not [a style] that encourages you to go and explore” (Ines). In contrast, the PMC was more informal and created its programs (a more appropriate word than “curriculum” in this context) in response to participant interests and curiosities (Elvir, Ines, Kenet, and others, November 2013).

PMC participants felt encouraged to create their own projects and events, to innovate, and to collaborate with others. It provided a space for experimentation with new creative ideas, and infrastructure (specialist staff, rooms, electricity, printing for marketing and publications) for their realization. As a result, the sanctuary also functioned for some as a space of “self-actualization”:

I don’t know if it was a musical skill that I obtained, really. For me it was also about exploring being social and working with other people. And making something together, trying something together, exploring something together. So, when I say it changed my life in a way, all I mean is, it gave me an idea that things can be different. And that you yourself can drive that. [Pause] Which is a huge thing for someone to learn” (Kenet, interview, November 2013)

These accounts reveal the role that choice, improvisation, and freedom to explore and experiment can play in creating a space for the exploration of self, other, and agentic action in social contexts where such spaces have arguably been felt to have been shrinking as a consequence of conflict. At first glance, it might appear that this was facilitated by the fact that the music genre was somewhat flexible and unconstrained by local tradition and cultural expectations. However, the UMMS example shows that even when the genres are somewhat predetermined (Sri Lankan folk music cultures and classical expressions from the Hindustani and Carnatic traditions) and practiced within an established aesthetic culture, there can be a similarly improvisatory approach to the development of the artistic and social experiences.

The improvisatory approach at the UMMS stemmed from a desire among the project organizers to share ownership among all the participants. The young participants and their teachers
were encouraged from the start to make the UMMS “their event” (Kaushi, Sri Lankan Project Director, 2017), and this was communicated through use of playful exploration of both familiar and new materials, and the progressive transfer of artistic responsibility to the students and local teachers from each university. During the first iteration of UMMS in Colombo, one of the Tamil students declared: “I don’t like this pure Carnatic music, because I need to do more creative things. I love to play the keyboard, I love to use the microphones and everything, but my lecturers . . . do not allow” (Korum, field journal, 2017). This statement was later recalled and discussed by junior lecturer Manoj (interviewed in January 2021). Manoj believed that possibly one of the most important outcomes from the UMMS was that it explored ways of innovating with traditional musical expressions, that is, Sri Lankan folk music cultures and classical expressions from the Hindustani and Carnatic tradition.

These are musical traditions with long-standing, respected lineages, and status is afforded to those artists that demonstrate a profound understanding of their vocabularies (Sykes 2018). Several teachers held viewpoints about the (non)suitability of “fusing” elements from different practices into one performance, and Korum noted in her field journal the resistance that some lecturers showed toward including nontraditional instruments such as keyboards (October 2017). But for the students, these creative experiments could feel liberating. In his role as a tutor, Manoj saw the fusion elements as offering a foundation for the students’ postdegree musical lives, a new world of possibilities offered to them within the frames of the UMMS: “They have to have a creative platform . . . This program was a good exposure [to these contemporary approaches and possibilities]” (February 2021).

The progression from the first two iterations of the UMMS to the third and fourth (which took place in Batticaloa and Jaffna, respectively) was noteworthy for the increasing space that was allowed for new experimentation. As the local teachers (i.e., not the artistic directors appointed by the SLNMC) and students assumed greater control of the artistic content, the musical expression progressively involved a larger range of instruments and more crossovers of genres. This adoption of cross-genre materials was also accompanied with other outward signs of relaxation of social rules or expectations. For example, in the first UMMS iteration, Korum’s field notes observed the formal, relatively conservative dress (predominantly sarees) of the female Tamil students from the Jaffna and Batticaloa universities. By the third workshop (six months later), this was much less the norm. Perhaps this choice reflected individual physical comfort, but perhaps it was also a reflection of their embrace of this more informal space and its acceptance of individual choice and preference. Junior lecturer Manoj also observed this transition: “I saw a big evolution. Initially, [the students] were very shy, especially the girls. Afterwards, interactions between different groups seemed more relaxed, and many girls had switched their sarees for jeans” (interview, January 2021). Dinusha, a UMMS project coordinator, added that by the third workshop, “for the first time, you began to see the circles of the universities [being] broken. Now, they were sitting in larger circles to eat in. You could see the beginning of something [more integrated]” (online interview, January 2021).

The social aspect was of great importance to the participants, who highlighted campfire moments (Manoj) and rich “get-togethers” (Shashikala) with conversations and laughter lasting into the night (Dinusha) as some of their most significant experiences (online interviews, 2021). Traces of these social highlights can also be found on Facebook, where participants continue, several years after the final UMMS event happened, to share photographic memories and comment on each other’s posts.

Exploration of new social rules, ownership over the project content, and an accompanying willingness to move into more experimental aesthetic terrain can also be traced through the themes of the four UMMS workshops. The first and second themes, “Lifecycles” and “Fes-
tivals,” were proposed by the organizers and represented factual and uncontroversial topics. However, for the third workshop, the students were asked to choose the theme, and they nominated “Love.” In their depiction, this subject matter became a vehicle for engaging directly with political tensions and social taboos. They told the story of “a Sinhala household family and a Tamil household family and how the two children had this affair and the parents just rejected it . . . then all the parents came to accept this theme for themselves” (Dinusha, UMMS facilitator, interview, January 2021). In Sri Lanka, cross-ethnic marriages are not very common (Premawardhena et al. 2020), but in performance work, they became possible and celebrated. Thus, within the Love storyline, the process of art-making and the workshop itself offered a space for rehearsing and experimenting with an alternative social reality. In the creative act, the participants experimented with an alternative, perhaps riskier social narrative, and artistically explored what divided and united them (and all of humanity) as human beings. While this was not necessarily the most controversial or risky subject matter (compared with, for example, a theme that critically explored caste injustice), it nevertheless can be read as an indicator of the group’s willingness to enter emotional and psychological spaces together, and to write an alternative narrative in which a shared value (in this case that of romantic love) could override the dominant conflict narratives and norms of segregation and mistrust.

Thus, across both cases, the music activities engaged the participants as creative makers and explorers, not just as learners and recipients of teacher expertise. Once engaged within these safe spaces, the actions that participants made on a space helped reconfigure it and make it more habitable and pleasurable. In both cases, reduced hierarchy and intergroup equality were important mechanisms for bringing young voices to the fore and enabling them to reauthor the space. Revised social and artistic rules created space for the exploration and restructuring of identities and traditions. Through social and artistic experimentation with music, language, and enactments as alternative ways of knowing and being in the world, the young people were able to (temporarily) reorder the social status quo and rehearse alternatives to it. They discovered that the space and their lived experiences in it were theirs to author and shape. To further discussion and comparative analysis, we will now bring our data into conversation with the theoretical and philosophical insights of DeNora (2013a).

**Discussion**

With these accounts from the Pavarotti Music Centre and the University Musical Meeting Spaces, we have highlighted experiences of transportation (being carried away), absorption, ritual releasing of the past, the subversion of musical and social rules, and authorship as a form of self-determination as suggestive of the alternative temporary worlds and narratives that were forged within the music activities. Considered together, these experiences constituted what was for many participants a transformation of space that some depicted through use of metaphors like bubble, refuge, and sanctuary.

Here we seek to propose that DeNora’s conceptualization of music asylum offers a nuanced explanation for these descriptions of experience. DeNora uses the term asylum to depict “situations, moments or environments that, albeit fleetingly, permit individuals to flourish, to have respite from a troubling world and to have space . . . that can be appropriated for self-development” (2013b: 262). Music asylum is constituted through two distinct strategies: removal, where the music experience provides respite and ontological distance from the wider distressing surrounds; and refurnishing, where the music experience invites a reconfiguration of space, a way to change it to make it more to one’s liking.
Removal has an evident spatial dimension, as it indicates an intentional separation or cessation of proximity. With the example of the PMC, we might assume that the building was the primary mechanism for facilitating asylum through removal. However, the multiple venues of the UMMS invite us to consider other critical mechanisms for rendering a place a “space of removal,” such as the relational, interpersonal dimension. In both the PMC and UMMS, we saw the important role that facilitators and organizers played in embedding the musical activities within a wider ethic of hospitality and welcome (Higgins 2012). Teachers were described as offering openness, patience, encouragement, and a willingness to transfer authority to learners in ways that subverted the dominant teacher-learner hierarchies that, according to research participants, were the norm in other education settings in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sri Lanka.

Removal was also facilitated by the music-making experience. Absorption in music can transform how participants experience time, what DeNora refers to as “the recovery of personal time and rhythm” (2013a: 55). This deep absorption may also facilitate a sense of being transported, as in Kenet’s description of being transported to another world through his music experiences and of his feeling that he was “breathing a different air” during some of his most intense collective music-making experiences, or Alma’s experience of using her music listening to connect to a wider world.

The metaphors such as “bubble of safety,” “sanctuary,” and “refuge” further underscore the participants’ experience of distance from a distressing lived environment. Metaphors are a fundamental way in which humans make sense of the world; they have both conceptual and communicative function, depicting structural similarities between unrelated “kinds of things” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 232). These structural similarities also indicate an underlying logic that can reveal the limits of an experience. Metaphors like “bubble,” “sanctuary,” and “refuge” suggest a temporary respite, rather than a permanent transformation of space. Bubbles, for example, can burst with the slightest contact (Arrese 2021). Similarly, refuges and sanctuaries are constituted through the protections they offer, yet their sanctity remains intact only with the agreement of all parties, including the hostile forces. Thus, any kind of incursion of the hostile external world into the refuge or sanctuary can mean that it ceases to exist as such. Music activities are always vulnerable to these kinds of incursions. Two PMC participants (Alma and Haris) described how they ended their regular participation at PMC after hearing a local staff member using divisive, nationalistic rhetoric about who the PMC was “really for” (interviews, November 2013). For these two, both of whom lived as minorities on the west side of Mostar, the sense of safety the PMC had offered was constituted by its explicit rejection of nationalism and exclusion. Once this was no longer assured, it ceased to be a place of refuge. Thus, while metaphors communicate the experience of asylum as an experience of removal from a distressing wider world, they also offer insights into the limitations of this.

The second of DeNora’s two strategies for creating music asylum is refurnishing. Refurnishing refers to how music can be a technology for acting upon and within a (conceptual and physical) space, changing it in some way to make it more pleasing or suitable, “whether alone or in concert with others” (2013a: 47). Refurnishing thus renders the musical space as a space for the self. It is bound up in identity—its exploration and navigation—and the presentation of the self to others, and in the work of forging new collective identities (2013b: 262). The participants’ reflections indicate some of the factors through which this became possible, with parallel musical and social processes that involved the rewriting of established rules and norms in both spheres. These created space for the exploration and restructuration of musical traditions and complex identities. Music was likely central to this: DeNora suggests
that musical spaces enable participants to pass from one identity (here, a narrow, politically enforced version of identity, bound up in ethnicity and religious belief) to something more complex, and that the experience of presenting and exploring the self through music “provides resources for the forging of these pathways” from one version of the self to another (266).

This increased the participants’ confidence as well as social connection and identification with the group: these creative enactments were something they were doing together. But equally importantly, the (re)furnishing of the musical space “in turn distributes materials, resources . . . in ways that afford opportunities and possibilities for action, experience and relation to others.” These resources and interactions produce “by-products” including “new identities, skills, culture, capacities and much more” (DeNora and Ansdell 2014: 7). In these ways, the focus on group creativity, agentic action, improvisation, and reinvention that was common to both case studies supported the project space to function as “a medium of world-making, the creative making of self, other and situation, now, again and later” (DeNora 2013a: 42). Through practices of care, inclusion, and foregrounding of participant agency and creative authorship, the PMC and UMMS created music asylums that supported participants to reconfigure, remake, and (re)construct their presence and place in the world, and thus experience a transformed self, and through that, resources for transforming the world.

**Conclusion**

Our goal with this article was to explore what was happening in the music activities that was creating and transforming space for the participants. While the projects we observed were designed in dissimilar ways and took place in very different contexts, they both sought to bring together young people from the different “sides” of recent wars, using music as the basis for building social connections and creative collaborations. Our empirical material from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sri Lanka has shown the common threads of participant experience between the two projects: the analysis has documented how the music participants embrace spatial metaphors as a poetic conceptual vocabulary for depicting changes in the physical, affective, temporal, and imagined dimensions of space and experience that took place during these activities. It furthermore shows how creative arts experiences supported young people to recast and reconfigure spaces in two different postconflict contexts, even if only temporarily, and in conditional ways.

By interweaving data from both projects, we have shown that the experience of transformation of space was neither merely a story of the physical space nor a story of music as such. It was rather about how the musical activity, enacted with care and empathy, generated resources for the exploration of selves and the potential, temporary recreation of worlds. The gestalt of the music, the people, the intentional framing of the activity, the approach to teaching, learning, and participation, the freedom to act upon one’s own ideas rather than simply receive the wisdom of elders and teachers, all taking place within a wider context of entrenched division and lingering conflict, together supported the transformation of space and of worlds. And in remaking the world within the boundaries of the project, the young people could remove (i.e., find distance from) those aspects of their world that were distressing and limiting and instead create, through refurnishing it musically and socially, a space in which alternative selves could be rehearsed and conflict narratives revised, according to the participants’ terms.
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NOTES

1. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a Tamil militant organization founded in 1976, waged a secessionist nationalist insurgency from 1983 to create an independent state of Tamil Eelam in the north and east of Sri Lanka. This claim led to a civil war that lasted until May 2009, when the LTTE was eventually defeated during the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa (Sorbo, Goodhand & Klem, 2011).

2. Norwegian kroner at rate 9.2 to US dollars. The total amount invested by the MFA between 2009 and 2018 was 14,500,000 kroner.

3. Further discussion of these tensions and negotiations of interests in the SLNMC are outside the scope of this article but are critically discussed in Korum and Howell (2021).

4. For more detail about the history and evolutions of the conflict, see Daniel (1996); Kapferer (2012); Thiranagama (2011).

5. While an intersectional analysis considering class relations was not possible with these data, the observation of a shift toward a more relaxed presentation of self does offer an opportunity to speculatively consider what might have prompted this, as we have tried to do here.
REFERENCES


