



## Cross-Cultural Collaboration as Community Growth and Integration: Children's Music Projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Scotland

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### Abstract

*This paper constitutes a reflective account of inclusive approaches in two children's music projects, both aiming to foster group creativity alongside cross-cultural awareness and understanding. The first of these projects involved sharing songs composed by children and young people from a special needs school in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, with a primary school choir in Edinburgh, Scotland. The second project, in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, focused on group song-writing and performance involving three groups of children from ethnically separated schools, alongside a choir from a school for children with visual impairments. On reflection, we discuss cross-cultural musical collaboration as an effective means of bringing children together across social and cultural divides in order to share new experiences while building respect for differences. We hope projects such as these may represent the first step towards the ultimate goal of encouraging and nurturing more inclusive friendships between children who might not otherwise have opportunities to interact with each other.*

**Keywords:** interculturalism, children's music projects, song-writing, health, inclusivity, community impact

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### Introduction

In the following account of practical work carried out in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Scotland, we describe our experiences of designing and leading two cross-cultural music projects for children and

young people from culturally diverse backgrounds. We offer a narrative of these experiences while highlighting the aims and motivations that were important aspects of their design and delivery. We also discuss the projects' outcomes and the ways in

which we view these types of musical activities in relation to broader social contexts, particularly with reference to health and wellbeing.

These projects fall within the broader contexts of intercultural music education and socially-motivated community music initiatives which aim to promote both social integration and inter-ethnic/inter-cultural tolerance. Previous practical research studies from the fields of music education, community music and Community Music Therapy highlight the effectiveness of music as a focus for establishing or re-establishing trust and lines of communication between communities across social or geographical divides (Anderson & Shehan Campbell 2011; Jones 2009; Majhanovich & Fox 2010; Oehrle 1996; Procter 2004; Skyllstad 2004; Stige, Ansdell, Elefant & Pavlicevic 2010; Zharinova-Sanderson 2004).

### The projects

The first of the two projects described in this article took place over several months in 2010 (see table 1). It involved the creation of a cultural link between children and young people from a special needs centre in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and a

group of primary mainstream school pupils from Edinburgh, Scotland. The needs of the Mostar group are diverse. While the specifics of their individual needs were not disclosed to us, we are aware that many of these children and young people have been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while others have conditions such as autism, Down's syndrome and brain damage. Over several months the Scotland group took part in music workshops where they discovered aspects of Bosnian music and culture, through learning several songs composed by the Mostar group. Performances of the songs were then recorded for CD release.

The second project took place in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina in summer 2011. Children attending four schools in and around the city created a common repertoire of songs: a new composition and a traditional song re-interpreted in a new style. Three of the four schools involved were located in ethnically divided areas of the city, and the fourth was a school for blind and partially-sighted children. Recordings of the children's singing and playing were edited together to create a collaborative final version.

	Project 1: Edinburgh – Mostar	Project 2: Sarajevo Schools
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building self-pride, mutual respect and friendships across cultural divides</li> <li>• Promoting the idea that children should not be defined by abilities or needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building self-pride, mutual respect and friendships across cultural divides</li> <li>• Transforming existing opinions or expectations about peers from different religious backgrounds and with different physical abilities</li> </ul>
<b>Group participants</b>	Primary school choir of 30 children [Edinburgh] Children and young adults of a special needs centre [Mostar]	Approximately 70 pupils from four schools in Sarajevo. Most aged 11-13.
<b>Timeline</b>	12 weekly half-hour sessions over one school term [Edinburgh]	Two weeks – 5 sessions per school
<b>Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transformed opinions and ideas</li> <li>• Respect built through developing a new shared culture</li> <li>• New musical creations from a process that valued all collaborators as equal</li> </ul>	

**Table 1:** Overview of the two projects

As project facilitators we were motivated by the potential social benefits of creating cultural links through projects such as these. Our approach, as community musicians rather than as music therapists, was not clinical. It involved more free-flowing, exploratory group work. Similarly, while both projects included children with special needs,

we did not focus on, nor seek to address, any specific needs or circumstances of the individual children. Many children and young people in Mostar and Sarajevo, both centres of major conflict during the war period of the 1990's, suffer from the effects of trauma and secondary trauma (Osborne 2009). Music is known to be an effective tool in

treating many aspects of PTSD (Bergmann 2002; Sutton 2002). While we were very aware of how trauma may affect the children's lives and behaviour (e.g., causing increased heart rates, breathing problems, anxiety, disruptive and destructive tendencies, emotional problems and hormonal imbalances), and the ways in which musical interaction offers therapeutic benefits for body and mind, we were not seeking to provide responses or remedies to these particular conditions. Instead, we allowed the groups involved to shape the ways in which the projects progressed, guiding this musically, as necessary. We emphasised the value of each contribution, and worked spontaneously towards our goals of enabling the children to create and perform new music, inclusively. Rather than working from any formal baseline/follow-up evaluations of the participants, we relied on our own observations in measuring the social impact of these projects, which were both carried out on an entirely voluntary basis. For the purpose of this article, we summarise our evaluations of each project's outcomes using the following categories: transforming opinions and ideas, building respect through the development of a newly-shared culture and valuing equal collaborators.

### **Inclusivity**

In both cases, the involvement of children and young people from special education schools was a naturally integral component of the projects' key objective of creating cultural links between groups of children who might otherwise remain separated. Such separation may occur for different reasons - simply because of geographical locations (as in the case of the Edinburgh-Mostar collaboration), or because of ethnic segregation and other societal factors (as in the Sarajevo schools collaboration). Following the conflict of the 1990's, Bosnia-Herzegovina became an ethnically divided country. The consequences of this are profound and complex, especially for the children of Sarajevo and Mostar, many of whom remain isolated from their peers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds (Pašalić-Kreso 2008). Whatever the reasons for such cultural division, however, we believe that through jointly participating in musical activities which promote creativity, spontaneity and communication, children and young people with diverse physical, mental and emotional needs may work together to build confidence, mutual understanding and respect - all fundamental aspects of an individual's health and wellbeing. Our approach values all children and young people, including those with profound special needs, as equal creators of culture and important

collaborators throughout the creative music-making process. This may represent a positive means of challenging and transforming preconceptions and stereotypes that exist due to cultural divides at a local or global level. It is our hope that in setting up opportunities for joint creation and performance of a common repertoire of songs, we may also create a foundation upon which children may begin to develop more inclusive friendships across perceived barriers such as those which exist between ethnic groups or between mainstream and special needs education.

### **Mostar-Edinburgh collaboration**

#### ***Project design***

The Mostar-Edinburgh collaboration took place in 2010 and was inspired by a repertoire of songs composed by children and young people from a special needs centre in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina. These songs have been composed over several years, during annual summer music camps organised for groups from the centre and led by composer Nigel Osborne. The children and young people have varied special needs, including some who suffer the effects of trauma or secondary trauma following the conflicts of the 1990's. Each year, they travel to various locations in the Balkans, including the seaside and the mountains, to relax, socialise and sing and make music together in areas of natural beauty. In preparing for an end-of-camp performance, the children and young people write songs together in smaller groups. This is achieved through a group compositional method of options and choices, in order to first decide upon lyrics, and then to determine pitches and melodic shapes. Rhythmically, the melodies tend to follow the implicit patterns of the lyrical phrases, as spoken. After many years, there is now a rich repertoire of songs that have been composed, with themes ranging from nature and wildlife to Bosnian culture and landmarks such as the Mostar Bridge. As volunteer musicians at these camps for several years, we have witnessed the way these songs have come to hold significance for the children and young people, becoming an important part of their culture and daily lives. Many of the songs are remembered from year to year, and are proudly and passionately reprised by the group every summer.

Being so inspired by the genuine artistic quality of these songs, we wanted to help them reach a wider audience. We designed a music project whereby seven of the Mostar groups' most dearly loved songs were shared with a group of 8-10 year-olds from a primary mainstream school in Edinburgh, Scotland who sang in an after-school choir. The Scottish children learned these songs in the Bosnian language and over the course of a

school term, alongside activities designed to encourage an appreciation of Bosnian culture and musical heritage. These included dancing to our live performances of traditional Bosnian music, clapping irregular rhythmic patterns, and sharing stories and photographs, particularly relating to the Mostar Bridge and its history. We also shared our memories and photos from the summer camps to introduce the Scottish children to the composers of the music they were learning. The project culminated in a recording session where the choir performed the songs they had learned, accompanied by a 16-piece band of musicians. The recording has been released on a CD and is being sold to raise funds for the centre in Mostar. The brief story below describes the delivering of the CDs to Mostar.

*In 2012 we returned to the school in Mostar to deliver several hundred copies of the finished CD, complete with cover-design, packaging and lyric booklet with colour photographs of the Scottish and Bosnian Groups. We spoke first with the new Director of the school, whom we had not previously met. She was effusive in her enthusiasm and appreciation of the Scottish children's work, especially their achievement of singing in Bosnian. She expressed how honoured the school was to have been the focus for the project. We then toured the classrooms to hand out copies as gifts to the pupils. They immediately loved the CD, eagerly studying the pictures and reading the lyrics, remembering their favourite songs and spontaneously singing the choruses with excitement and emotion. We listened through the whole CD several times, each song greeted with great cheer. The children were surprised to hear their well-known and greatly loved songs performed in this new way – accompanied by a large ensemble of musicians. They were fascinated to learn that the singers were children from Scotland and they laughed at the children's pronunciation of Bosnian words in Scottish accents. We were showered with gifts of their hand-crafted wooden flowers and many expressions of affection and gratitude. Many of the young people held onto their copy of the CD with pride for the entire afternoon.*

### **Reflections on project outcome**

From the very planning stages of this project, we were hopeful that it would have a positive impact on the lives of the children and young people, one that extended beyond the (equally essential) enjoyment of their participation. While the initial idea was simply to share the Bosnian songs with children from another part of the world, in doing so we came to realise that the creation of intercultural bonds between young people, even on a relatively small scale such as this, may represent a

meaningful way to foster positive emotions and attitudes, particularly with respect to people from different backgrounds or cultures.

On reflection, we have highlighted examples of such potentially significant outcomes of the project, with particular emphasis on possible benefits relating to the health and wellbeing of the participating children and young people. We will also comment on ways in which we feel the project was able to achieve a broader social significance and interest.

### Transforming opinions and ideas

The Scottish children were introduced to the music and culture of Bosnia-Herzegovina through the process of sharing songs written by children from that country. This personal approach is quite different to the ways in which children might normally learn about other cultures in school. Rather than an introduction which emphasises another culture as 'different' or 'exotic', this project established a personal connection between two groups of people. This naturally stimulated the Scottish group's interest and curiosity about the Mostar group on a more human level and, as a result, generated a more enthusiastic interest and a deeper resultant understanding of Bosnian people's culture and heritage. We feel this is particularly significant in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which has suffered from largely negative portrayal in the media since the conflict of the 1990's (Myers, Klak, & Koehl 1996).

Similarly, by participating in this project, and through the continued distribution of the CD, the Scottish group and school community are demonstrating an active international interest in the Bosnian language and culture. On a personal level, it was a source of great pride and excitement for the Mostar group to hear and see their own songs being valued and performed by children from Scotland. This even created a wider interest from the Mostar community when footage of the choir singing was featured on a local television news channel. The fact that local Bosnian culture is seldom a starting point for an international project is regrettable given the amount of international arts and humanitarian intervention that has occurred in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina (Gizelis & Kosek 2005; Richmond 2009).

### Building respect through the development of a newly-shared culture

As a result of this personalised introduction to Bosnia, it was clear to the Scottish children that the songs were the creative property of the Mostar group and, as such, they relished the chance to share these in a respectful and dedicated way.

Knowing that the Mostar group would listen to the final recordings, the Scottish group were inspired to work hard to produce their very best performances, thus also creating self-respect for themselves as a group. On hearing the final recordings, the Mostar group were delighted with the choir's performances and particularly impressed with their ability to sing in the Bosnian language. Hearing their own songs performed to such a high standard and with lively instrumental accompaniment (including accordion, strings, brass and Balkan percussion), the Mostar group felt a greater pride and respect for their own songs.

We hope that these experiences of building self-pride and mutual respect across cultural divides will have a more general and lasting effect on the way the children view themselves and their place in the world, giving them a point of reference for a more tolerant and open attitude towards people from other countries and cultures.

### Valuing equal collaborators

The project sought to address not only cross-cultural divides, but also the divide created through the separation of mainstream and special education. In setting up this cultural link between children of different educational backgrounds, we were able to promote the idea that children should not be defined by their abilities or needs, but instead be valued as equal collaborators and creators of culture. The depth of creativity demonstrated by children and young people with special needs was highlighted and celebrated by the Scottish children, who viewed the Mostar group as equal partners in the collaborative process, and whose expressive and distinctive songs were the inspirational starting point for the entire project. Again we hope these experiences will have a lasting effect on the children's wellbeing, having emphasised in a practical and personal way the importance of cultivating positive, non-discriminatory attitudes towards people with special needs.

### **Sarajevo schools collaboration**

#### ***Project design***

In 2011 we worked for two weeks in three elementary schools located in separate communities in Sarajevo, each with a strong ethnic and religious majority: one Bosniak (Muslim), one Bosnian Croat (Catholic), and one Bosnian Serb (Orthodox Christian). Prior to the war of the 1990's, Bosnia-Herzegovina existed as a pre-eminent example of a fully integrated multi-ethnic society (Jenne 2009). During this devastating conflict the country's population and infrastructure became increasingly ethnically segregated with over half the population

forced to leave their own communities and homes (Franz 2010). Since the war, the educational system has remained ethnically divided three ways, representing what is believed to be one of the most overt barriers to peaceful reintegration for the Bosnian people, many of whom remain internally displaced and unable to return to districts where their existence as a minority group would be untenable (Baranović 2001; Franz 2010; Torsti 2009). Many community members, such as teachers and parents, are calling out for a more inclusive education system, whereby children from all backgrounds, including those with special needs, are given opportunities to learn together, create things together and, crucially, to form lasting friendships (Hjort 2004; Majhanovich & Fox 2010; Pašalić-Kreso 2008).

In addition to the three elementary schools, we worked in the Sarajevo Blind School with a choir of children and young adults. In Sarajevo, children with special educational needs are similarly isolated, due to a lack of opportunities to meet and interact with their peers in mainstream schools (Pašalić-Kreso 2008).

We embarked on this project in collaboration with, and under the guidance of, *Musicians without Borders* BiH<sup>1</sup>, a Bosnian-based Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) who have designed and implemented many similar inclusive music and arts programmes for the children of Sarajevo. These have previously brought isolated communities of children together in meaningful creative experiences that transform and challenge stereotypes while allowing them to examine their own identities and develop trust for other religious groups.

The purpose of our work was to set up a musical collaboration between groups of children from these four schools, focusing on both song-writing and traditional Bosnian song (sevdah). The use of sevdah was significant – these songs represent a shared cultural, inter-faith, heritage of all Bosnian people. Post-war, however, sevdah is often perceived as an exclusively Islamic, and therefore divisive, art form (Laušević 2006; Longinović 2000; Pennanen 2010; Vidić Rasmussen 2007). In order to lessen any ethnic connotations associated with sevdah, we decided to engage the children in a process of transforming and re-contextualising the song into a new musical genre: reggae. Throughout the project we sought advice and assistance from an experienced local community musician and *Musicians without Borders* employee, our friend Toni Pešikan. Toni is a percussionist with particular experience and interest in African and Afro-

<sup>1</sup> For more information about *Musicians without Borders* BiH, visit: [www.see-mwb.org](http://www.see-mwb.org)

Caribbean drumming styles. This specialism led us to use aspects of reggae music in the project. Reggae rhythms provided a stylistic counterpoint to sevdah, through which the traditional Bosnian idiom could be transformed. We were conscious not to present the reggae musical style to the children out of context, however, and to this end we listened to recordings of various reggae artists and discussed the lyrics and replicated the rhythmic patterns we heard before embarking on applying these to the sevdah song. At this point, the Bosnian song was adapted musically to fit the phrasings and rhythms of reggae. The idea of musical transformation represented a primary theme of this project, demonstrating to the children how musical meaning can change, adapt and take on new significance when shared and performed in new ways. Toni led parts of the initial workshops in each school, introducing the children to reggae rhythms.

We were conscious, throughout the project, of our position as non-Bosnians. Despite having visited the country many times over several years, having studied the Bosnian language and having a profound respect for Bosnian culture, we would always remain outsiders in this process. We maintained a non-issues-based approach throughout with the belief that it would have been inappropriate to make explicit references to the issues surrounding religious segregation while working with the children. Local representatives from *Musicians without Borders* initiated contact with the four schools involved who had all previously expressed eagerness and enthusiasm for their children to take part in inter-ethnic artistic collaborations, with the possible outcome of promoting inter-ethnic friendships. We respected this fact and attempted to use our skills as musicians to work towards these objectives. This was the focus of our work at all times, rather than any attempt to pursue any agenda of our own.

Children participating in our project were aged 11-13, although there were some older teenagers in the choir we visited at the Blind School. We felt this age group would be mature enough to understand the context of their creative work, while also being open to the approach - their perceptions not yet having been established to the same extent as they may have been in an older group. This reflects attitudes commonly attributed to children from this age group, as described in relation to similar inter-ethnic arts and music initiatives (Skylstad 2004).

We led a series of creative music workshops in each of the four schools during which each group first learned a sevdah song in its original, traditional Bosnian idiom, with accordion and viola accompaniment. The children also learned reggae

rhythms which were performed both on drums and through vocalisation. These emphasised the reggae backbeat (the emphasis of beats 2 and 4) and the shuffle (triplet subdivisions of the beat). We asked the children to set the beat using this rhythm, over which we started to sing lengthened or shortened versions of the song's phrases to emphasise a reggae style.

Although the children from the four groups did not meet in person, they composed a new song collaboratively over the course of the two week project. This song, called *Moj Brat, Moja Sestra* (*My Brother, My Sister*), draws lyrically on themes of love and friendship. The song-writing process grew from lyrics and melody composed by one of the groups. This material became the first verse of the song and was shared with the children in the other schools who composed subsequent verses, or built on the existing material (for example, by adding vocal counter melodies and harmonies). This song was also performed in a reggae style, and each verse ended with a refrain from the song *Is This Love?* by Bob Marley<sup>2</sup>.

At the end of the two weeks we recorded the each of four groups singing both the sevdah-reggae song and the new composition. We subsequently edited these recordings together to create a collage-style final version with an added instrumental backing track. CDs with these collaborative edits of the songs were sent to the children. It is our hope that these songs will become part of a shared repertoire of music for children living in the city of Sarajevo. A concert bringing the four schools together again is being planned, to be organised by *Musicians without Borders* Bosnia-Herzegovina.

### ***Reflections on project outcome***

In order to discuss what we consider to be the main outcome of this project, we must first acknowledge that we spent only two weeks in Sarajevo, working on a project which could only contribute in a small way towards the long-term goal of encouraging and nurturing inclusive inter-ethnic friendships for children in the city. It is worth mentioning here that no formal feedback or evaluation comments were collected during the project. The outcome discussed here is based on our experience and reflective notes.

Nevertheless, we were able to appreciate the ways in which creative collaboration could create a sense of togetherness. Despite never having met in person, the four groups worked with a common goal: to compose, perform and record music together. This process involved co-operation, risk-

<sup>2</sup> To listen to the song recordings from the projects, click the link: <http://soundcloud.com/hannahandlewis>

taking and confidence building – key elements of personal growth and wellbeing. We would like to use a similar framework to reflect on what was achieved, offering the same headings used in relation to outcomes of the Mostar-Edinburgh collaboration. While these two projects were very different in design and delivery, they both emphasise creative and enjoyable processes and activities such as group singing and collaborative song-writing, performance and recording. Musical interventions such as these provide children with a safe and nurturing environment that provides them with opportunities to transform existing opinions, build respect for themselves and their peers, and learn to value equality in art and life. We will also look towards the potential impact of continued work in the four schools.

### Transforming opinions and ideas

Musical collaboration gave the children a reason to connect with their peers from other areas of the city, expanding channels of communication between groups from different religious backgrounds, who would otherwise have little or no opportunity to interact. This was a potentially transformative process, in that it de-emphasised perceived differences and set up a positive and meaningful shared experience that challenged negative stereotypes or uncertainty between ethnic groups.

Additionally, throughout the project there was an emphasis on the transformational potential of music. Adapting and re-contextualising music was not only a creative starting point, but was symbolic of a more general transformation of ideas around music, culture and ethnicity. Imagining a traditional Bosnian (sevdah) song in a new style encouraged the children to find new meaning and relevance in Bosnia's shared cultural heritage cross-ethnically, and to separate this musical tradition from its more recent over-association with religion.

### Building respect through the development of a newly-shared culture

The collaborative song-writing activity involved sharing and building on creativity between the four groups; a process which required compromise and respect for all contributions. The children understood that they were working interdependently; all four groups had to cooperate in order for the complete song to come together. We feel this awareness also allowed all four groups to feel shared pride in the final version of their song. At the same time the children were given the chance to build confidence in their own performances, which were recorded separately in the four schools. We encouraged them to respect

the recording process and to aim for their best performance. We believe that allowing the children to rise not only to our high expectations, but also to each other's, built self-respect in all four groups.

As workshop leaders we attempted to reciprocate respect for the children involved by leading much of the sessions in the Bosnian language without the use of interpreters. This added a further dimension of cooperation and collaboration, in that the children at times had to assist us with their elementary English skills when we could not express ourselves in our basic Bosnian.

Music-making provided the children with a context through which to express their natural inquisitiveness about their peers. While exploring and experimenting with musical styles (i.e. sevdah and reggae), the four groups also made steps towards a shared identity. The foundation of this identity is the new shared repertoire of songs that the children created together. The lyrics of the groups' own song describe the importance of friendship and of looking after each other, and may be seen as a lasting testament to feelings of respect, openness and honesty. We hope that these songs will continue to play a part in future stages of the project.

### Valuing equal collaborators

Emphasising equality served as a way of minimising the children's perception of differences, both in terms of ethnic background and, in the case of the Blind School, differences in physical abilities. Creating and recording music with the four groups was a democratic process: all the children involved were able to influence the way the creative work developed, along with all aspects of the composition and arrangement of the musical material. As with the Mostar-Edinburgh collaboration, the Sarajevo project revealed the broader social implications of valuing all the children involved as equal collaborators in a creative community. The togetherness of the project, where all voices are equal, challenges isolation. We feel this represents a first step towards the ultimate goal of encouraging lasting inter-ethnic friendships between children, both from mainstream and special needs educational backgrounds, living in Sarajevo.

### **Conclusion**

Both projects aimed to bring children and young people together across social and/or cultural divides, by establishing creative links and initiating collaborative music-making processes through signing, song-writing, performance and recording. We explored the ways in which this kind of

collaborative, cross-cultural, inclusive approach may potentially address issues relating to tolerance, respect and children's sense of individual and cultural identity in relation to others. Both the projects' outcomes show that the enjoyment and sense of togetherness that music can engender makes it an ideal vehicle through which to foster effective and inclusive collaboration between children who view themselves as different from one another, either because of physical differences (e.g., disabilities) or because of differences in culture or religious beliefs.

By interacting with new people (albeit at a distance), learning new skills and working together in a novel context, children are able to examine previously held convictions, potentially transforming pre-existing opinions and ideas, building respect through developing a new shared culture and learning to value all children as equal collaborators and expressive voices. Ultimately, intercultural music-making can heighten an individual's or a group's sense of wellbeing, through active group experiences that harness music's ability to both energise and focus people in synchronised, enjoyable activities that make them feel good about themselves and others.

This inclusive, intercultural approach may also have a deeper community impact and lasting social significance in offering a starting point in lessening any present isolation experienced by communities of children and young people. This is particularly valuable in areas where children live separately because of ethnic divides, or in the case of special needs children, distanced from their peers by separate education systems. Similarly, in building international cultural links, children can enjoy exploration of music from other parts of the world while developing a valuable and meaningful personal connection to other children.

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**Suggested citation:**

Linklater, H., & Forbes, L. (2012). Cross-cultural collaboration as community growth and integration: Children's music projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Scotland. *Approaches: Music Therapy & Special Music Education*, 4(2), 101-109. Retrieved from <http://approaches.primarymusic.gr>