Sounding the Future

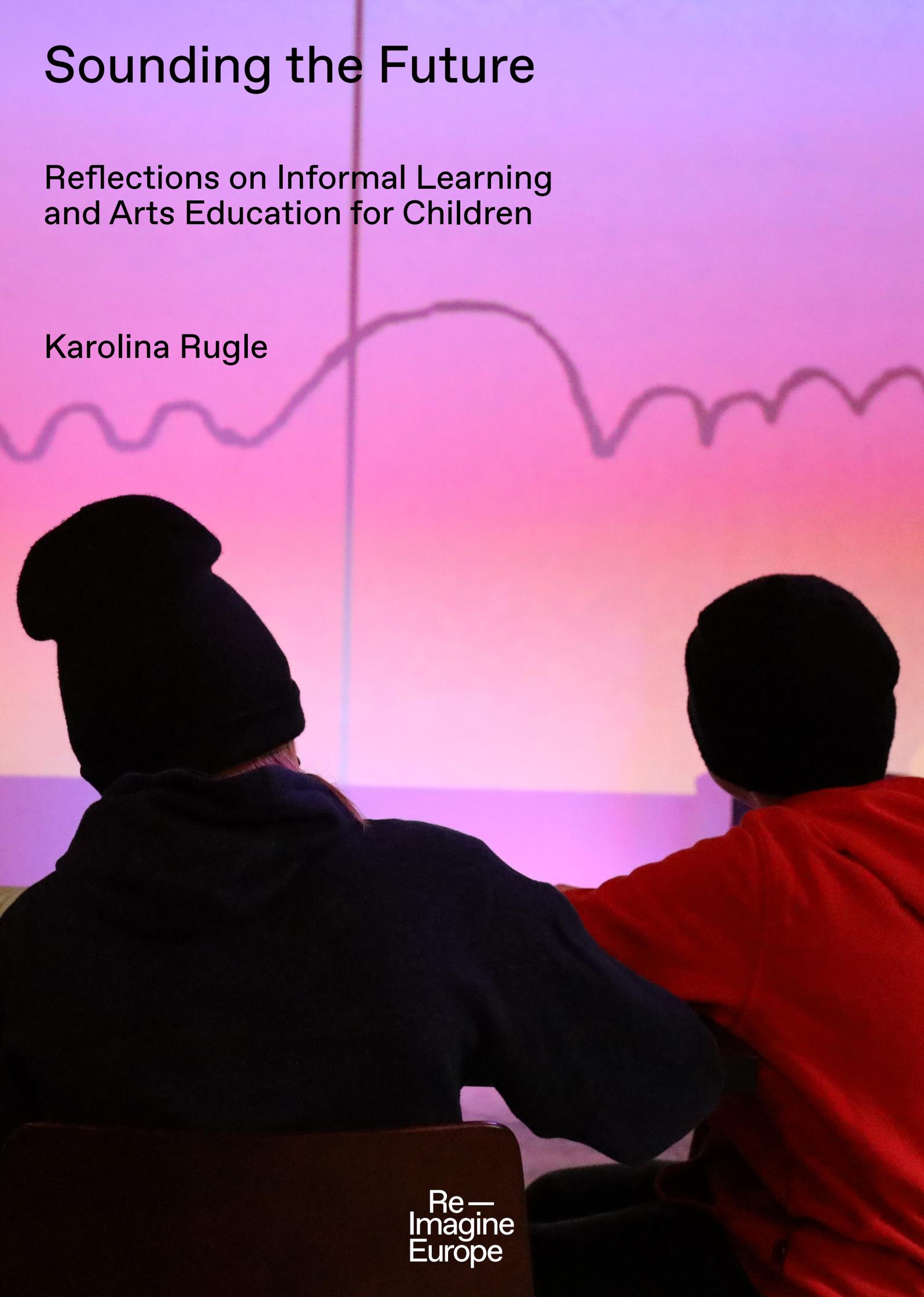## Reflections on Informal Learning and Arts Education for Children

Karolina Rugle

Re—
Imagine
Europe

Interviewed by Karolina Rugle, the artists Rian Treanor and Jiří Suchánek, as well as Slávo Krekovič and Ľudovít Nápoký of A4, reflect on two workshops they organised for children. They share approaches, feedback, their thoughts on art, informal learning, and the relationship of education and the arts, and map some of the different perspectives and possible directions for the re-design of arts education.

Cover photo
Inter-Symmetric Workshop 1: Drawing Sounds To Make A Graphic Score, workshop led by Rian Treanor at A4, Bratislava, 2020. Photo by Ľudovít Nápoký

Re—
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Experimental Music, workshop led by Jiří Suchánek at A4, Bratislava, 2019. Photo by Charlotte Schröder

A4 organised a number of music-making workshops in 2019 and 2020 as part of Re-Imagine Europe. The first workshop — in December 2019 — took place *in situ*, and was led by the musician and pedagogue Jiří Suchánek. The focus was on creating experimental musical instruments from found materials and objects, simple motors, and contact piezo mics. Using a hammer, a saw, or a screwdriver, the children turned everyday objects into unconventional musical instruments. In November and December 2020, A4 organised two so-called Inter-symmetric workshops, in collaboration with British sound artist and DJ Rian Treanor, for a group consisting of five ten- and eleven-year-olds. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, both workshops led by Treaner were done remotely, with Treanor leading them via Zoom from the UK. The children in Slovakia worked and performed at A4, with a mentor-mediator who facilitated the communication between Treanor and the children, translating from and to English. Treanor's first workshop took place in November 2020 and focused on a series of listening exercises and musical activities. The children were invited to playfully respond to their sonic environment, creating drawings which became graphic scores. For the second part of Treanor's workshop, participants drew on the graphic scores to create a new group composition, based on making connections between, for instance, shape, colour, texture, movement, pitch, timbre and velocity.

Karolina Rugle: What was the idea behind your project? What was your point of departure? Did you already have specific issues you wanted to address, or did the project shape the goals as you went along?

Slávo Krekovič: In the context of the whole Re-Imagine Europe collaboration, we wanted, on the one hand, to focus on new artistic approaches that were interesting from both an aesthetic and a technological point of view. On the other hand, we felt a need to expand our usual audience and also to work more closely with children and young people. We believed that this could lead to the development of a future community around our cultural space, with people who would hopefully become our future audience or even artists. One of the motivations was also the idea of trying to develop a strand of training and educational activities to fill in the gaps in official arts education, for instance, the lack of experimental music and creative coding. We also wanted to foster creative thinking in music education, with an emphasis on interesting tools and aesthetic concepts such as live coding.

Rian Treanor: I was thinking about how to create participatory work. A lot of my work involves making drum machines and pattern-generating devices on a computer. I spent time developing ways to link people up to play those devices remotely. I discovered there are many things you can do. Once it got to the point where people could connect and play together in real time, I became more interested in exploring forms of interaction. It made me question previous ideas about the role of the performer and the audience, and things like the singular venue and stage became redundant for me.

Jiří Suchánek: My main goal is opening peoples' ears to everyday sounds produced by normal objects and understanding them as potential musical material. This is done through a process of building and constructing instruments from easily available and simple things (nails, plates, washers) and basic electronics. A second goal is developing technological skills and strengthening creativity through giving one's ideas a functional form by working with the materials.

Experimental Music, workshop led by Jiří Suchánek at A4, Bratislava, 2019. Photo by Charlotte Schröder

Karolina Rugle: Who were the workshops intended for? What did you have to take into account when addressing the group?

Slávo Krekovič: We were thinking of children from different age groups, also youngsters and young professionals.

Ľudovít Nápoký: The workshops were designed for children who could already play an instrument in some way, but also for children who couldn't play an instrument. We thought the workshops could be an interesting addition to the classical approach of music-making, by creating a non-conventional instrument, or by making music using a laptop, algorithms or a simple programming language. They can learn to create music using a tool already familiar to them, like a laptop, and this can increase their interest in music. When we were organising the workshops, we mostly chose Slovak- and Czech-speaking lecturers, to eliminate the language barrier. The pandemic forced us to find an alternative approach, so we did one series of two workshops with the English-speaking Rian Treanor, because we really like the concept he's working with. To make this happen there was a mediator who translated and helped the children at the workshop. Rian was present through a video connection from England. When we were selecting concepts for the workshops we tried to choose ideas that would appeal to a broad audience. For example, by working with free software and equipment or technologies that most of the children already have or at least have access to. During the practical workshops the participants built their own instruments from free or cheap materials.

Rian Treanor: Il've never hosted workshops for trained musicians. To an extent I'm excited by not fully understanding what I do. Discovery is an important part of creativity. That's why I like to work with people who have no experience or who have different abilities. It makes you encounter your practice from a different angle and can lead to more insightful directions.

Jiří Suchánek: I always like to know the age of the participants and the size of the group. I adapt the workshop depending on who it's for. The methodology that I follow is almost always the same, but the way I explain things differs.

Karolina Rugle: In what way do the workshops organised by A4 go beyond traditional arts education available to the young people in the places where they live?

Slávo Krekovič: Arts education in Slovakia is, indeed, very traditional. This is the case for all stages and age groups and it's especially valid for the field of music, where for decades the main focus has been on imitating existing music – although this is probably the case almost everywhere. Fortunately, at least in larger cities there are a few exceptions at several primary music schools with teachers who are also improvising composers, but this is quite rare. Primary music schools are mainly teaching the basics of theory and how to play traditional instruments; there are no electronics or performances or intermedia aspects involved. Because of this, we focus on more contemporary practices.

Inter-Symmetric Workshop 2: Drawing Sounds To Make A Graphic Score, workshop led by Rian Treanor at A4, Bratislava, 2020. Photo by Ľudovít Nápoký

Karolina Rugle: The most recent challenge in artistic practice has been the remote mode of working. Could these networked processes enable new forms of musical performance?

Rian Treanor: The entire context around the pandemic (restrictions, inability to travel, remote activities) is a situation that needs much problem-solving. The workshops I designed during that period were a response to that and aimed to rethink what we do. Online events often seem to mimic the functions of the venue. That's totally missing what working remotely really means. For instance, I could make a patch that could function like a receiver. That way, I could make music here and other people could receive it somewhere else, and every single one of the receiver points is like a venue. It's a very different paradigm. That way it is relatively simple to interact with the content. It opens up exciting opportunities to explore networked interaction, and as it isn't just one person presenting something on stage, it completely changes the notion of authorship and ownership. The idea isn't to recreate earlier systems. Other options might be more interesting now, and I don't think they will be redundant afterwards either.

Karolina Rugle: What artistic practices did you choose to work with and why? How are the children directed to engage with art creatively?

Slávo Krekovič: We encourage the kids to learn new creative techniques and to develop tools and skills useful in real-time music performance, for instance creative (live) coding, collaborative music-making and improvisation with digital tools, building experimental electronic instruments from scratch, and creating and interpreting digital graphic scores.

Ľudovít Nápoký: We chose these artistic practices, firstly, because they're not offered in formal arts education. The second reason is to demonstrate that computers can be used not only as a medium, but also as a tool for producing, which is actually the original purpose of the computer. We also want to show the children contemporary ways of music production and thereby educate and influence our possible future audiences or artists. During the workshops, children were not asked to repeat sounds they'd heard before, or play a specific song from a score. They were asked to express things they hear and see in an unconventional way within the framework offered by the workshop leader using software or physical materials. The results of the workshops were always unexpected and very different. We repeated some workshops with different participants, and every time the outcomes were completely different. The children were often surprised by what they actually created/ produced. Sometimes they realised that they could enrich the music that they were already playing before the workshop. For example, there was a group of children who have a band, playing conventional instruments, and they said that this is a nice and interesting way to enrich their music.

Rian Treanor: For every workshop I consider which sounds will steer the children towards particular ways of drawing (these are later used as graphic scores). I give no instructions or input in terms of what they should aim at when making music. If I explained everything in advance of the workshop, it would be like me drawing outlines and asking them to colour inside them. Ideally, I'd like to work with no reference point at all. You don't have to understand something theoretically to engage with it or have interesting or enjoyable experiences.

Jiří Suchánek: My goal isn't to turn my workshop participants into musicians; I just want to open their senses to some new types of sound and new structures in sounds. The workshop isn't so much about music itself, but a process of building things. It doesn't matter what direction you take later on; the approach can be applied to many different situations.

Karolina Rugle: What approach did you choose as artists-mentors, and how did this relate to the different backgrounds of the participants?

Jiří Suchánek: From an artistic point of view, it's very interesting to see the spontaneity of the children, how they view the new tools that they relate to during the workshops, and how open they are to combining and manipulating things in a playful way. Every group is different, depending on the constellation within the group and the participants' background.

Rian Treanor: Because I don't play an instrument, I'm more interested in designing systems that can work or sound good, regardless of how they're played. That approach can also work for people who aren't classically trained musicians.

Karolina Rugle: How did you succeed in presenting innovative artistic creation as something interesting to the younger audiences?

Rian Treanor: To be honest, if I were a teenager, and someone gave me a drum machine to play on, I'd be thrilled. I've never actually considered that they won't love it – it's music, why wouldn't they want to try making it! I'm into popular culture, youth culture, popular forms of music. One of the reasons why I like working with children is that it's a kind of collaborative process. There's a dialogue that makes you rethink what you do and question the directions you're taking. Also, one of the reasons why they're interested in those activities is because they're 'hooked' on technology and enjoy creating sounds as a part of it – be it noisy or chaotic.

Jiří Suchánek: They're just naturally interested. I show them works by artists from the older generation who made music using unconventional instruments and principles, to open them up to the idea that this is a serious way of approaching art, and that they can make music using any type of object. Moreover, usually only a few participants are into the purely technological aspect of the work.

Experimental Music, workshop led by Jiří Suchánek at A4, Bratislava, 2019. Photo by Charlotte Schröder

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Karolina Rugle: Do you incorporate your musical styles into the workshops? Do children learn about particular techniques or sounds specific for some artists, do you talk to them about poetics in sound art and music, or is the work purely sound-focused?

Jiří Suchánek: I play them music by composers like Edgar Varèse, Pierre Boulez, or Iannis Xennakis, music that is based on sound masses, densities, spectrums, trajectories, or clouds, rather than pitches and steady rhythms. It helps them to understand music differently and hopefully more freely. I don't really separate my own practice from the approach at the workshops. A certain subjectivity and preference, or a certain aesthetic, always plays a role in the presentation. And of course, I do have some tricks that I can't show to the children at the workshop because of time constraints, or because they are too complicated.

Rian Treanor: The first time I did a workshop, one of the parents came to me after the performance and said he thought they were performing my music. I think my ideas about music are implicit in some of the choices I make in terms of instrument design. The direction of the workshop leans on what I usually do and what interests me.

Karolina Rugle: What were the biggest challenges and how did you tackle them?

Slávo Krekovič: One of the biggest challenges was to actually get children to participate in the workshops. Since this kind of content is a bit unusual, it took a while to find the best communication and promotion channels. It turned out that, unsurprisingly, personal connections worked the best.

Ľudovít Nápoký: There is only a limited number of people who are active in experimental music, who can lead a workshop, and who speak Slovak or Czech. So finding suitable workshop leaders was a challenge, as was dealing with the language barrier in Rian's

workshop, plus the fact that he wasn't physically present. The moderator had to translate and also interact with the children. But eventually, this worked out fine: there was a great atmosphere between Rian and the children and the communication went well.

Karolina Rugle: What were the challenges you encountered as artists-mentors? Have these led to a methodology or working principle?

Rian Treanor: One thing I find difficult to balance is the outcome. What do the children really get from the workshop apart from an unusual and exciting experience? Maybe it makes them think about the materials in a different way? When you work with teenagers, making club music is something they find meaningful. But when you're making 'weird' music with kids, the question is what they gain from it. To be honest, I don't know. Saying that, I'm interested in how you make complex systems with number patterns or general kinds of algorithmic processes. How can you simplify complex systems in a way that people can have fun and interact with them in ways that could be an intellectually stimulating experience. As a kid I never thought that, by learning music, I would become interested in mathematics, geometry, algorithms and that kind of stuff.

Jiří Suchánek: During the workshop, the children's interest in and relation to sound changes. The best practice for musical thinking was to have them close their eyes for ten minutes and just listen to the sounds of their instruments, the others and themselves. They could focus more on the sounds in the dark. It's interesting to see how they deal with the 'concert pressure' of the final presentation, the performance. They don't talk about it, but you sense that they aspire to be better at playing the instruments they built during the workshop. After they try using contact microphones on everything, the initial feeling of discovery is gone, and they need something more. Processing sound, using effects, using motors: all of this is addressed in the various stages of the working process, building on what they tried and learned previously. This layering takes time, but they learn from using the tools, by practising with them. There are children for whom most of the tools are new. Most adults think that having them work with unfamiliar tools is inappropriate, but older people often don't understand the tools that they use. It's important that children learn to use tools by building something, and not just by passively using something that already exists, like an iPhone. For society it's important that, from the very start, they see the value of being a creator — not just a user — of tools.

Karolina Rugle: What are some of the overall values transferred in the process? What is most important to you as educators, artists and stakeholders in culture?

Slávo Krekovič: WWe believe in creativity, artistic freedom in both individual and collective work, and playful and exploratory experimentation with various artistic techniques, new technologies and tools, which includes life-long learning. We try to apply these principles and values to our curatorial thinking about both performative and educational programmes.

 Jiří Suchánek: Listening to each other is one of the key things we learn. It's much more natural to do this in informal spaces than in traditional schools with their rigid atmosphere, the constant evaluating, the high pressure to acquire skills, and so on.

Inter-Symmetric Workshop 1: Drawing Sounds To Make A Graphic Score, workshop led by Rian Treanor at A4, Bratislava, 2020. Photo by Ľudovít Nápoký

Rian Treanor: Making something that opens the children's eyes to the fact that there are other ways of doing things: this is very important to me. How to make something that is weird, but exciting and meaningful for people? This makes you think about the choices you make in your own practice.

Karolina Rugle: How successful were you in reaching a wider audience?

Slávo Krekovič: The production and dissemination of online videos with documentation and interviews have been a big step forward for us. In general, we think that in the future we need to be more systematic and long-term oriented, including perhaps cooperation with schools.

Ľudovít Nápoký: The production and dissemination of online videos with documentation and interviews have been a big step forward for us. In general, we think that in the future we need to be more systematic and long-term oriented, including perhaps cooperation with schools. didn't, came to the workshop together as a group to have fun, and continued to make music together. That's something we consider a success. It's a result of creating a safe environment and being able to involve people who aren't musicians. Less successful was that we mainly targeted the existing A4 audience. In the future we could do more to reach people who don't know about A4.

Inter-Symmetric Workshop 1: Drawing Sounds To Make A Graphic Score, workshop led by
Rian Treanor at A4, Bratislava, 2020. Photo by Ľudovít Nápoký

Karolina Rugle: *What did you learn from the project, from an educational perspective, an artistic one and, also as an organisation?*

Ľudovít Nápoký: It was very clear that the children were interested in the proposed topics and activities. It looked like they appreciated the workshops and they were keen on participating. So the workshops proved to be relevant. They learned about contemporary music from different perspectives, and realised that there is so much more than the music you hear on the radio. We managed to break down those preconceptions. They also learned about ways in which music can be made in a more detailed way. As an organisation we learned that it's a challenge to get them sign up for a workshop.

Karolina Rugle: *What draws you as an artist to this type of work?*

Rian Treanor: I find it inspiring to make something together with people who are untrained. My aim is to find new ways to approach creativity. Training, orthodoxy, all those things lead to formulaic responses to materials. Kids are less dogmatic in their approach and I find that exciting. I prefer creating something with children and people who don't usually make music, rather than just making music with people who are already in that headspace.

Jiří Suchánek: I really miss connecting to people with similar interests. For me, the workshops were mostly about the social aspect rather than about learning skills. The group creativity is very inspiring and I learned that the music I make on my own is less complex compared to the results of group work. Musical structure quickly becomes more intricate when you play as a group. I can layer structures in a solo performance, but that isn't the same. The workshops always make it feel more active and creative.

Karolina Rugle: Taking a wider perspective, to which local or national contexts and urgencies do these workshops respond? How does this project address the need for social and political changes today?

Slávo Krekovič: There is a need for a major shift in our arts education, from traditional ways of thinking and making to newer, more creative and playful learning approaches. We also think educational projects of this kind will help stimulate future makers, artists, and audiences to explore creative and challenging forms of art and music.

Rian Treanor: The discussion around art is usually about the artist's intentions and what artworks represent, while music training is focused mostly on learning how an instrument has been played in the past. There are many more ways of enjoying art and music. People don't feel confident enough to have an opinion about art and music and that needs to change, so it's very important to work on inclusivity as well.

Jiří Suchánek: Workshops should be an equal part of education. In the Netherlands I've seen some good school programmes that include that.

Karolina Rugle: Do you think developing these types of learning structures should remain an alternative to the general educational system or should such examples of good practices be embedded in the overall system?

Jiří Suchánek: I work at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Brno, where we have a lot of workshops throughout the year. We've also established the Svitava association that presents programmes like this for an interested public rather than within the obligatory school programme. Such workshops always bring out the authentic interests of people and connect people who are really interested in a certain topic.

Rian Treanor: The Western education system emphasises language studies, maths and science. In the UK, you don't learn anything about the environment, emotions, or more holistic approaches to people's general well-being. We need to start by answering the question: what should we emphasise in education?

Slávo Krekovič: The official educational system could maybe take some inspiration from the educational activities run by independent cultural operators that are better connected to cutting-edge artistic production, as well as to the rapidly evolving international contexts. This connection with the practical side of making art, together with curatorial open-mindedness and courage, makes them a source of good practices to be developed and integrated in schools and state-run educational institutions.

BIOGRAPHIES

Karolina Rugle graduated in musicology at the University of Zagreb. In her work she focuses mostly on contemporary and experimental music, as well as interdisciplinary and performance practices. Apart from producing, organising, and curating music festivals, she has a weekly radio programme, makes music documentaries and writes reviews. She is active in advocating for human rights through the international work of the non-governmental organisation Are You Syrious.

Jiří Suchánek is a Czech sound and media artist, musician and multimedia experimenter who focuses on building permanent audio-light installations that are usually interactive and placed in natural or public spaces. In his works he connects sound, light, sculptural objects, electronics and code with carefully chosen spaces to explore the relationship between nature, technology and durability of the electronic media. Currently he has a fellowship at the Institute of Sonology in The Hague; he teaches at the Department of Audiovisual Technology of the Faculty of Fine Arts at Brno University of Technology. He is also a PhD candidate at Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts.

Ľudovít Nápoký is a project manager currently working in the independent cultural centre A4 based in Bratislava. He has five years of experience with project management, event production, coordination of artist residencies and working with international and local volunteers.

Slávo Krekovič is a musician and sound artist, musicologist, contemporary music and new media art curator and cultural organiser/nonprofit activist. He is the organiser and curator of series of experimental music and multimedia events, including the annual NEXT Festival of Advanced Music (since 2000) and Multiplace new media culture network festival (since 2002). In 2004 he co-founded independent cultural centre A4 – Space of Contemporary Culture in Bratislava, where he holds the positions of Deputy Director and Music Curator.

Rian Treanor is an artist and producer based in the North of the UK. His sound practice re-imagines the intersection of club culture, experimental art and computer music, presenting an insightful and compelling musical world of interlocking and fractured components. Drawing upon his study with Lupo at Berlin's Dubplates & Mastering, plus years spent curating the Enjoy artspace in Leeds, Treanor's sound uses off-centred rhythmic arrangements, referencing the dynamics of garage and techno as much as Fluxus and Dada cut-ups. Since 2015 Treanor has focused on his solo sound works, developing musical environments for improvisations within his live performances.