



## **Brass for Peace workshop for young musicians in Bethlehem, Palestine – Contribution to peace?**

by Monika Hofmann

This year again, a workshop for young brass musicians was held at Talitha Kumi near Bethlehem from Sept. 14 to 18, 2011. We had four afternoons and a full day for this workshop, at temperatures of around 30 degrees in the shade. Approximately 40 children had registered, which is a good number considering the conditions in Bethlehem area. In the Arab world, registrations are not necessarily binding. But we were positively surprised – on the first day there were even 50 children; the number of participants then remained relatively stable at 42!

Workshop for young brass musicians in Bethlehem? For a start, the persons responsible for the workshop need to make arrangements for getting the children to the event in the afternoon! The public transportation system in Palestine consists of shared taxis and minibuses, but the children do not usually use them alone and few of the parents can bring their children. So we had to organize transportation that picked the children up at different collection points and brought them back there at the end of the day. It can get a bit chaotic when the taxi drivers do not know the children and vice versa. In addition, the children came from the three Lutheran schools in Beit Sahour, Bethlehem (Dar al Kalima) and Beit Jala (Talitha Kumi) and one of the Muslim students came from a state school. Thanks to numerous phone calls by our Brass for Peace volunteer Wiebke Hahn, who arrived recently at Talitha Kumi for this school year, we succeeded in solving the transportation problems for all the children by the second day.

Excitement on the first day was dividing the children into groups – how many already had experience with brass instruments – ah, only about 1/3 of the children, all the others were new? Who understands English? – almost all of them at least a little! Who speaks English? – not so many. Communicating with a group of 50 excited Palestinian children with different levels of concentration and language skills was our next challenge! Fortunately, we had help from an Arab friend who speaks German – Ramzia Sabbagh from Galilee, who is even a member of the association. She was worth her weight in gold as interpreter, co-organizer, question-answerer and problem-solver. She translated important and no-so-important questions with infinite patience. Finally, the groups had been formed and the group leaders (Eberhard Helling, Sami Sharif, Evelyne Wurm, Wiebke Hahn, and Monika Hofmann), some of whom had made a special trip to come, had their own groups.

The first tones are more or less good – just like for young German musicians. But the eyes are different from those of German children! They are as shiny as they can be! And the children never cease to be amazed at what you have to do to get a tone out! Although it was rather exhausting to work with such large groups and getting them to calm down, the



shining eyes and the children's pride are very rewarding. There is no tradition of brass bands in Bethlehem, although the trumpets of Jericho were mentioned in the Bible. None of the parents are aware of what it means for them when a child learns such an instrument! And neither are the children. For them, the appearance of the instrument is important at first, and the case is even more important. Unfortunately, the children do not appreciate the greatest instrument if it's in a shabby case. But we were prepared and had repaired and replaced cases and had numbered both instruments and cases beforehand. And how the children loved the instruments! The instruments were shining and so were their eyes! They don't often see such shiny things here. One boy hugged his trombone and called it "habibti", "my sweetheart".

Gradually, the atmosphere became more concentrated; there were not just noises, but beautiful and different tones. The first rhythms were played in one tone – without the children knowing that it could later be used to play an Arabic children's song. At some point came the time when we could hardly get them to stop. Just like in Germany! But we still had to solve a logistical problem – how could we take a small fee from the children for the use of the instruments (the lessons are free) so that the instrument would be handled with care and be returned at the end of the school year? We decided to hold a small concert at the end of the workshop for the parents, at which the most important things would be explained. For example, that the child would get his certificate at the end of the year only after the instrument had been returned. In our experience, this is the most effective solution.

Although one or two new children came every day, we practiced for a small concert. The first full rehearsal consisted mainly of getting the children to understand that we wanted to play together, not each on his own and louder than the others. And the children grasped this, at some point they succeeded in starting and stopping together. They were willing to put the mouthpiece in their pocket so they wouldn't play. But it didn't remain a secret for long that you can make tones even without a mouthpiece.

The short breaks became a real adventure and we instructors had to be very alert. There were two intentional fire alarms, clothing torn during scuffles, and hotheads who had to have water poured on them to get them apart. Finally, a dead goldfish was dissected by children using their hands and other tools in an unusual way that would need some getting used to before we were able to step in ...

This is when you notice, if you hadn't before, that children here are different. These children have grown up with different kinds of violence. The last war in Bethlehem was 10 years ago – many children can still remember it. The Israeli occupation can be felt in everyday life. Sometimes small things are enough to make the children suddenly react in extreme ways. And what effect does music have?



In a small closing concert, we played 4 pieces all together. One of them was the Palestinian national anthem. The advanced pupils played a 4-part movement and the beginners played a rhythmic ostinato by hand signals. Numerous parents had come to listen. When the national anthem was played, they stood up and sang along. So the children were able to give their parents something!

“Brass for Peace”— and what does the young brass musician workshop have to do with peace?

Peace in the workshop meant agreeing to start and stop together, listening, and learning to listen to each other. Communicating with each other. The first steps toward peace in a small way. Sitting peacefully next to one another, whether Christian or Muslim, even though there was occasional tension and even power struggles between the children from different schools. Peace also means to show overexcited children how to calm down, become part of a group, and deal with others in a better way. The children experienced the community and the uplifting feeling of harmony.

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