

Article

Breaking the Silence: A Narrative of the Survival of Afghan's Music

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Abstract

Humanity currently faces a state of crisis, as it navigates the challenges of a quickly evolving world. The increasing number of conflicts and wars has had serious repercussions on human life, contributing to the displacement of populations and a growing influx of refugees. The high number of children and young people among this group requires urgent action to meet their needs for education, health, and a secure upbringing. Music education provides one platform for unique expression and identity for these age groups. In 2022, nearly a hundred young musicians from Afghanistan were welcomed into the cities of Braga and Guimarães in Portugal. They work to defend their culture through orchestral activity which has achieved international reach, thanks to the work of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM). This article examines how music connects Afghan refugee youth with host communities. It focuses on the role of musical practice in fostering integration within schools and the broader urban context. Using a qualitative approach, based on ethnographic observation of this orchestra's rehearsals, this article explores the concept of affordances. Ethnographic observation was conducted throughout school activities, music workshops, and informal interactions during break periods. Field notes focused on participants' non-verbal expressions, musical engagement, and interactions with both peers and educators. These observations were used to contextualise the interviews and triangulate the data. This theoretical-analytical approach shows that, for these youngsters, music plays a mediating role regarding social actions and experiences, shaping new subjectivities and their externalisations. It is a technology of the self, of (re)adaptation, resistance, and identity re-emergence. The main argument is that ANIM's music in action is a communication tool that, like migratory processes, reconfigures the identities of its protagonists. Music has been demonstrated to function as a catalyst for connection, predominantly within the context of ensemble and orchestra rehearsals, serving as a shared language.

Keywords: affordances; identities; Afghan refugees; youth and children; music in action; technology of the self



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1. Introduction

In August 2021, Afghanistan underwent a profound transformation in its human and cultural landscape. This observation is not solely grounded in the literature or news reports; it is also informed by first-hand accounts from young musicians who lived through these transformative events and generously shared their experiences during interviews reported in this study. Compelled to flee Afghanistan because of their musical practice, these young musicians faced the Taliban's ban on musical expression and the severe penalties associated

with it. Before being forced to leave their country, these students were attending ANIM (Afghanistan National Institute of Music), a pioneering institution under the direction of Dr. Ahmad Sarmast, which stands as the first and sole official music school in Afghanistan. After the school was compelled to evacuate, the students left their homeland and arrived in Portugal in 2022, where they have been living, studying, and working in the cities of Braga and Guimarães. These young musicians were forced to flee Afghanistan due to their musical practice. They faced significant challenges, including a Taliban-imposed ban on musical expression and associated severe penalties. Although this article is centred on an exploratory case-study approach, we acknowledge the complexity of identity construction in migratory contexts. While we have chosen to focus primarily on DeNora's framework of musical affordances, future analyses will engage with key authors in the field such as Giddens (1991), Appadurai (1996), Hall (1992), Bauman (2000), whose contributions are fundamental to a broader understanding of transnational identity and agency. For the purposes of this study, affordances' refers to the ways in which music enables or constrains social action in specific contexts (DeNora 2000). The concept of 'technology of self' denotes practices through which individuals shape their identity and agency, here mediated by musical engagement. 'Sonic citizenship' (Back 2016) is understood as the use of sound and music to claim social visibility and belonging.

2. Identities: Music Is Life

Identity comprises individual characteristics, tastes, and attitudes (Hofstede 2001). It shapes one's sense of belonging through the stereotypes and emotions that inform individuality (Hofstede 2001). Individual identity is not just an isolated phenomenon but a social construction, a consequence of interactions, behaviours, habits, and shared traditions that form a cultural identity, a collective manifestation. In other words, culture is part of the collective just as identity is part of the individual (Hofstede 2001). Music, as a permeable (Guerra et al. 2021) and mobile expression, is a powerful force that accompanies identity and the constant challenges that shape it throughout life; this is reinforced by its cultural dimension, which integrates the individual into the collective and the social. DeNora (2000) reflects on the constant presence of music in everyday life and its power to create meaning and interpret the feelings and emotions of lived moments. At the same time, music builds autobiographical memories and is timeless; therefore, it can be associated with life history and with an understanding of its role in facing changes and challenges.

Identity and memory cannot be separated. As Eyerman (2004) points out, collective memory has a strong influence on the construction of individual identity. Moreover, cultural trauma forces people to create coping strategies to deal with grief and with the abandonment of their homes. In other words, music can be seen as an element that restructures our memories and identity processes. It is a mechanism of dealing with the need to reconstitute identities. According to DeNora, "music can, in other words, be invoked as an ally for a variety of world-making activities, it is a workspace for semiotic activity, a resource for doing, being and naming the aspects of social reality, including the realities of subjectivity and self" (DeNora 2000, p. 40). The author analyses music in the light of the concept of affordance—that is, as a powerful force for mediating social action and experiences. It does so not as a cause, but as a way of interpreting and understanding behaviour, emotions and states of mind. In her research, DeNora (2003) evaluates how music has an impact on individual and collective experiences, as analysed in her conceptions of music as a technology of the self and music in action. Both formulations are relevant to understanding how, in the context of ANIM's children and young people, music promotes self-regulation of their individual experience as refugees and the ways in which it materialises in social life within the host community (Broeske-Danielsen 2013).

DeNora (2000), in one of her most emblematic works, directs and analyses 52 interviews. The life stories collected in this project define the various dimensions in which the power of music manifests itself and plays a crucial role in the trajectories of displacement of these refugee youth and children (Henderson et al. 2017). In our data, the affordances of music emerged when participants described using musical practice to cope with displacement, maintain cultural memory, and negotiate new social roles. Music allows us to examine how human beings create meaning for their lives. In this article, the adoption of the notion of affordances allows us to understand how songs play an important role as arbiters of social relations, showing meanings and triggering social actions through their daily uses by these young Afghan people and children (Acord and DeNora 2008).

The concept of identity is key to future integration in the host country (Guerra 2020). It connects to the maintenance of cultural characteristics, habits and traditions that allow the migrant or refugee to preserve their memory and culture in this process. Societies have witnessed the growth of multiculturalism, with the crossing of various identities in the same space. As described by Habermas (1994), when focusing on the accelerated pace at which modern societies are developing, this motivates cultural transformation and liberation from any impediment to this change (Musgrave 2022). The movement generated by the refugee crisis that has resulted from conflicts, wars and other situations like that in Afghanistan contributes to this situation, increasing the current and global cultural and identity richness. We consider Stokes (2021)'s perspective to be highly significant, in an interconnected way, when exploring three critical dichotomies that structure current debates concerning the reconfiguration of migrant identity and music: creativity vs. survival; mobility vs. motility; identity vs. citizenship. In the first pair, Stokes questions whether research should focus on the most visible and innovative artistic expressions or on the everyday uses of music as an emotional and symbolic resource for resistance and community cohesion. We underline here the strong affinity of this perspective with the work carried out by ANIM's young people, both through their practice as migrant artists in contexts of precariousness and marginalisation, and through their forms of civic participation via music. In distinguishing between mobility and motility, Stokes (2021) draws on the literature on mobility studies to propose a more complex analysis of musical circulation, encompassing not only human movements but also those of objects, technologies and meanings. Motility refers to the individual or collective capacity to appropriate and make use of mobility, as exemplified by the members of the orchestra under study in their tours to various European countries.

Going further, for Back (2016), the discussion on citizenship stands in contrast to classical identity studies, suggesting that music has been gaining centrality in claims for inclusion, rights and recognition. The concept of "sonic citizenship" emerges as an analytical tool to understand how migrants and refugees construct belonging and political visibility through music, often denouncing situations of extreme violence, injustice and discrimination, as occurs in some of ANIM's performances (McBrien 2017). Thus, whether from DeNora's perspective or Stokes's, the approach to music in contexts of migration and displacement should go beyond the mere documentation or celebration of difference. Music is simultaneously a space of survival, creation, identity negotiation and political struggle, and its study entails heightened epistemological responsibilities in a world increasingly marked by inequality, displacement and exclusion. In this regard, the works of Back (2016), Harrison (2008) and Street (2012) are essential. In all of them, musical manifestations are regarded as an autopoiesis of the cultural and artistic expressions of groups and communities. Cultural and symbolic participation enables the development of affective and social bonds that shape collective memories, which can be shared through sound.

3. (Re)constructing Identities

From the perspective of reconstituting identities, [Guerra \(2023\)](#) underlines how music and musical properties, through their physical characteristics (e.g., melodic and harmonic structure), and associated contexts (e.g., love songs, travel songs, celebration songs) can lend themselves to ways of being and doing. However, suggesting that music leads to specific behaviours does not imply causation (see [Street 2012](#)). The sociology of music therefore focuses on how possibilities are created—how the links between music and social life/social experience are forged. It is this idea that music can influence the course of a social action, or embody certain behaviours or emotions, that opens up viable paths for the study of identity reconstitution.

ANIM's mission is largely the result of this idea: that young refugee musicians embody and perpetuate the struggle for the memory and survival of Afghan musical and cultural identity, realising that their own individuality is responsible for building this collective manifestation. Since music “moves through time, is a temporal medium” ([DeNora 2000](#), p. 66), it allows memory to be kept alive through the performance of traditional music, through the inclusive education of the same genre. It does so in line with Western music, as an integral part of the new host context, but without forgetting the past, since music “may thus be seen to serve as a container for the temporal structure of past circumstances” ([DeNora 2000](#), p. 67).

To understand how music can be an artefact of self-regulation and identity reconstitution, it is imperative to situate this idea in the sphere of social action and experience. DeNora creates a path between the two realities by seeing music as a model that

serves as a resource for the generation and elaboration of ways of happening in many other realms. In this capacity it also serves as a means of melding present to future insofar as it may be applied in ways that permit cultural innovation in non-musical realms. As music is seen to be organised, so too can people and institutions be organised. In this sense, music may serve as a resource for utopian imaginations, for alternate worlds and institutions, and it may be used strategically to presage new worlds. ([DeNora 2000](#), p. 159)

Music as the creator of a place of peace and security is one of the strategies adopted by ANIM. The organisation believes its social and educational mission is to promote a new world where musical practice cannot be silenced, despite the reality forced upon Afghan society by the country's ruling regime. Its orchestras and ensembles continue to communicate through the Afghan musical language all over the world, and its activity has not only promoted Afghan culture, but also resulted in extensive social and political dialogue. It draws attention to other social problems, such as the ban on access to school for Afghan women, one of ANIM's great struggles (with the Zohra orchestra, for example) and appeals to the international community not to forget Afghanistan through concerts in strategic locations, such as at the opening of the UN Human Rights Council in Switzerland in 2024 (see [Back 2016](#)).

ANIM serves as an agent of change, embodying DeNora's concept of music in action. This approach views music not only as an event but also as a technology that produces and embraces social life, offering modes of being, thinking, and feeling ([DeNora 2002](#), p. 25). ANIM uses music as a catalyst for social engagement, challenging actions perceived as crimes against Afghanistan's cultural identity. These include bans on musical performance and education, as well as restrictions on women's rights to education. [António Contador \(2001\)](#) underscores how music, alongside other practices, reinforces shared ethical codes and social ideologies, bridging the gap between self-identity and broader societal contexts. This connection resonates with young musicians and their audiences, framing their narrative

within the discourse of human rights and the oppression enforced by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Integration is a complex and exhaustingly bureaucratic process, in which thinking about identity reconstitution can be a secondary issue. This is something our research seeks to highlight by analysing the importance of music as a powerful means of social integration, participation, appropriation of the city environment, identity reconstitution, and representation of symbolic and social resistance, resulting in the acquisition of social, professional, cultural and youth skills—in other words, a source of liberation and identity affirmation (Wood 2010). Such externalisation of the self and the plasticity of cultural identity in the face of new realities allows for the creation of a sense of belonging, of place, which combines local identity with diverse cultural symbols in new ways that represent the local scene. Music is an ideal vehicle for this practice, as it involves other forms of expression (Bennett and Peterson 2004). In the context of teaching, there is no doubt about the ability of formal education institutions to transmit values, behaviours and norms, and by integrating students into different social contexts, enabling them to interact with different groups and identities. However, it is also important to note that, in the context of music teaching, the dynamics of informal instruction emerging from the practice of a music ensemble are significant. This is due to the powerful dialogue among the members and their shared goal of performing a common programme.

In ANIM, the young musicians come from the same country and share similar experiences within the musical paradigm. However, this does not negate the existence of diverse origins and social contexts within their country, illustrating that integration occurs even within the orchestra. In the various Portuguese schools where they study, the student body comprises different nationalities, exacerbating communication challenges in ensemble music (ensembles and orchestras). Language barriers hinder natural conversation, compounded by factors such as shyness, fear or lack of motivation to communicate. These variables, which hinder relationships between students from diverse backgrounds, can detrimentally impact the integration of refugee students, potentially leading to isolation due to a lack of recognition and integration into society.

In this exchange of impressions, music emerges as a universal language and as a cultural manifestation. It is a vehicle for communication, attributing the ability to express oneself socially through a common and democratic language, enabling a person's inner reality to be understood by others and contributing to a healthy dialogue and social interaction (Perkins et al. 2016). This assumes that the non-verbal communication of music is put into practice by society, in general, and that the processes described in the narratives are global in social relational webs (Pardue 2023).

4. The Process of Belonging

Baily and Collyer (2006) define a refugee as someone who is forced to leave their country as a symbol of an immediate abandonment of their origin and physical space with the prospect of not returning. The urgency conveyed by this situation carries the weight of abandoning cultural identity, routines and daily practices. It is important that a force exists that allows the refugee to take with them the symbolism of a life that was left behind, not only to maintain the memory of who they are, but to communicate and deal with the new context in which they will live. Cohen and Hjalmarson (2018) suggest that music makes it possible to establish a powerful means of communication, due to its fluidity and the fact that it is free of symbolism and oppressive control. This proposal gives identity a new dimension of volatility and transmutability to the definition of culture, created from the need to fit into a new reality and respond to the requirements of understanding from and integration into the host country.

According to [Vougioukalou et al. \(2019\)](#), anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have theorised about the fact that music-making practices enhance social bonds on smaller and larger scales. They also argue that there is a tendency to create a group effect, where the benefits of music-making are amplified by collective work.

Reflecting on this growing multiculturalism, [Tia DeNora \(2021\)](#) points out that music is a common language that, with its communicative capacity, is also a refuge for the survival of identity and an entry point to a private world, as well as a form of (therapeutic) coping, an idea supported by [John Baily \(1999\)](#) who, together with Michael Collyer, reinterprets the role of migrant and refugee communities as drivers of plurality. [Baily and Collyer \(2006\)](#) analyse how culture reveals the complexity of social relations in the context of diaspora that are not so easily identified in other disciplines, an idea complemented by the belief that music, like language and writing, is a pillar of migrant communities and a structural and representative component of their cultural identity ([Gavazzo et al. 2016](#)).

[Charles Taylor \(1994\)](#) describes this reality in terms of two forms of recognition that can hinder the integration process: non-recognition or misrecognition. These can distort individuals' experiences and perceptions of themselves, fostering feelings of not belonging or being misunderstood. Such dynamics are prevalent in multicultural communities and schools, where social interactions are concentrated in a confined space, underscoring the importance of fostering cohesion among diverse identities. Artistic music education, which is inherently collective, serves a broader function beyond communication, as [André and Abreu \(2009\)](#) argue. It acts as a platform for managing social conflicts, expressing dominance, enacting resistance, and manifesting tensions and conflicts within communities and societies. It mobilises social cohesion, promotes civic participation, encourages critical engagement, and mediates between individual and collective dynamics ([Bergh and Sloboda 2010](#)).

4.1. Aim of This Research

This research aims to understand the role of music, in its performative and educational dimensions, as a vehicle for the development of an individual identity and integration mechanism into a collective, cultural identity. The study followed closely, through ethnographic approaches, the educational and performative life of young musicians from ANIM in Portugal. Our goal was to understand how music performance and education are means of (re)constructing identity in the context of a diaspora. The main focus of this research was comparing ANIM's activity and the social context in the schools where the young Afghans study, based on their experience and their own management of emotions and reactions to everyday life as a refugee ([Cheong-Clinch 2009](#)). The main questions that led this investigation were how music influences young Afghan refugees in dealing with their internal processes and social interactions, first in Afghanistan and then in the host community, and how it helps them build relationships with others.

4.2. Methodology

This study followed a qualitative methodology, grounded in methods from ethnography and participatory approaches. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants selected from ANIM's children and young people currently studying music in Portugal. The interviews were complemented with observation records of classes and other activities carried out by the association. The choice for a qualitative methodology is grounded on research projects exploring interventions with refugee communities, that have served as basis for this study, namely [Lenette and Sunderland \(2016\)](#). The interview transcripts were analysed using categorical content analysis based on recurring themes related to identity, memory, and community connection. While this article presents only

selected excerpts for illustrative purposes, they are representative of larger analytical categories developed through iterative coding. A summary of these categories is provided in the Appendix A.

4.3. Participants

This study focused on young students who were taking part of the ANIM's project. ANIM was founded in 2010 by Dr Ahmad Sarmast in Kabul and was the first and only music school in Afghanistan to welcome students from all over the country, regardless of their age, origin, ethnicity or status. It had a social aspect, namely taking in children in difficult situations, such as orphans and street workers, and providing free education to women and girls who otherwise had difficulty accessing education. The music school combined the teaching of traditional Afghan music, classical western music, and regular education subjects. After the Taliban seized power in 2021, ANIM took on the responsibility of getting students who were threatened because of their musical identity out of Afghanistan, after a ban was imposed on music in the country. After a brief stay in Qatar, the young Afghan musicians arrived in Portugal in 2022 and were integrated into the Portuguese society and schools in the cities of Braga and Guimarães. They were integrated within the specific context of specialised music teaching at the Calouste Gulbenkian Conservatory in Braga, the Maximinos Secondary School, the Mosteiro and Cávado Secondary School, and the Guimarães Conservatory of Music, with teachers hired by ANIM to provide education in traditional Afghan music.

ANIM is made up of the Afghan Youth Orchestra (AYO), the all-female Zohra Orchestra, and smaller ensembles of traditional instruments and voice. ANIM's groups are all part of its intense international activity, characterised by its mission to travel the world and keep Afghan cultural identity alive through music and the collective expression of Afghan musical tradition and Western classical music. ANIM's most recent tour, *Breaking the Silence*, is a reminder of the reality that Afghanistan is currently experiencing and the violation of women's rights and the banning of music. It is intended to alert the international community to the consequences of a regime that corrupts the identity of a country and its people.

During this study we interviewed 10 young student musicians aged 14 to 24 years old. with five boys and five girls, with the aim of achieving a 50 per cent gender ratio and prioritising the diversity of instruments that make up the orchestra in future interviews. The aim of the interviews is to collect the young people's life stories and thus discover how music manifests itself in this journey from their life in Afghanistan to the present day.

4.4. Procedure

The application of the categorical content analysis method was determined to be the most efficacious approach for the comprehension of the results, given its capacity to facilitate the interpretation of these findings into smaller units or categories. This methodological decision was made with the objective of enabling a more profound and nuanced understanding of the research focus, whilst also ensuring a rigorous and scientific comparison with the theoretical basis.

4.4.1. Interviews

The interviews¹ took place in different places familiar to the students, in ANIM office, school where they studied and in an institution that will remain anonymous and lasted an average of 45 min². Pseudonyms were used to ensure the privacy and protection of the interviewees, following ethical research practices. The choice of this method is based on Nicola De Martini Ugolotti (2022)'s conception that it makes it possible to create a closer relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and at the same time challenge

the researcher's predefined ideas and create new directions and perspectives with a view to enriching the research, with only a guiding intervention by the interviewer. All interviewees were requested to authorise the use of their data, or alternatively that of their guardians/family members. Our goal was to understand how music performance and education are means of (re)constructing identity in the context of a diaspora.

The focus of this research was comparing ANIM's activity and the social context in the schools where the young Afghans study, based on their experience and their own management of emotions and reactions to everyday life as a refugee (Cheong-Clinch 2009). It is important to stress that one of the most important aspects of this research is that music, in all its possible manifestations, was banned in Afghanistan from the moment the Taliban retook power. The young people from ANIM were forced into silence, risking consequences if they did not comply, as they shared in the interviews when we addressed the issue of the Taliban's ban on music and how this new reality had impacted their lives. These youngsters mentioned the shock they experienced and the fear that took hold within their families. The most common experiences among the young people were an urgency to hide/destroy their instruments because the houses were searched and the consequences would be serious if any signs of musical practice and music listening were discovered. Their families quickly asked for silence to avoid repercussions, so the school instruments were destroyed, and the school premises were taken over by the Taliban. Two of the students shared how this time was hard to their life:

Before the Taliban came, we were singing a song, in a choir, because we had an outbreak of COVID. We knew there was a fight between armies and Taliban, so our school decided to sing and record a song about the armies and we recorded the song in that day, in the beginning of August 2021, and we wanted to search our choir to see how it was. We searched the choir and so we went to play it [family] say, "What are you doing? You should go inside. You shouldn't play music because the Taliban took the power of Afghanistan, they are in Kabul." For a second, we wore like . . . I felt I was dying, I had no feeling, my feeling was lost. Zara (fictitious name), 14 years, trumpet player

As we wish to demonstrate, this experience of Zara exemplifies DeNora (2000)'s notion of music as a 'container' for memory: the sudden loss of musical activity disrupted Zara's autobiographical continuity and her perceived agency.

First, when the Taliban came to Afghanistan, I saw them, and my father said: "Today you can't play anymore because of this kind of things" and I said: "Why?" And my father said: "When we play is very difficult, he said you can't play anymore, when Taliban, when they continue the prohibition that you can't see any more tabla you can't play anymore." I think, "Oh what should I do?" and like for five or six months I didn't play tabla,³ I didn't learn nothing I just see the Taliban and I just see the news. Em (fictitious name), 16 years, tabla player

For these young people, music was a constant in their daily lives, a routine practice that they saw annulled overnight and that became a threat to their safety. The feeling they all reported was one of deep sadness, a sense of emptiness in the face of the imposed silence (MacDonald 2013), which reveals how music is a strong presence in their identity, as John Baily recounts from a conversation with Sher Ahmad, the director of International Immigrant Services, who stated, "Music brings unity to the people, old and young together, and helps us not to lose our identity. We Afghans have some differences, but the concerts are the only times when we forget about everything. All people from different parts, different sects, we come and buy our tickets and go to the concerts" (John Baily 1999, p. 12). This perspective expresses the undeniable significance of music in the identity of

and connection between the various social groups (Lenette and Sunderland 2016) that coexist in Afghan society, a reality suppressed by the banning of music, resulting in what some of the interviewees described as a meaningless existence; they said their mission was to re-establish musical culture, with musical education being at the heart of their future purpose and musical performance being their way of breathing freedom. Let us read another experience:

In my opinion, music is like feeling, feeling is like a person, person is like the world. When the world doesn't have feelings, you don't have music, you don't have nothing, like Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, they like music. Music is something that every country has, and music is important, and I know some musicians back in Afghanistan that are in a bad situation, they can't leave Afghanistan, they are at home, they have nothing to do, another job or another thing . . . I hope that I can go back to Afghanistan when there's no Taliban. I want to teach someone, first of all I want to continue my music, I want to finish my music here, then I want to go back to Afghanistan to teach someone that like music, everyone knows there's no music in Afghanistan I know there's persons who like music, but there's no reason they continue music in Afghanistan, there's no school, there's no instrument, don't allow nothing and I want to go back to Afghanistan and teach. Sam (fictitious name), 16 years, violist

Sam's statement, in our analysis, reflects both the preservation of cultural identity and a forward-looking orientation, aligning with Stokes (2021)'s dichotomy of creativity versus survival. Here, music is framed as both a cultural artefact and a strategic resource for future community rebuilding.

They [ANIM] even make the Afghan Youth Orchestra, for us to have, to remember Afghan music, that we should keep it, it's something that is really important, the sound of music is banned in Afghanistan, and it's something really bad, because If music doesn't exist in a country or in a place, it doesn't mean nothing, because people can't be happy, can't celebrate something, is very sad, for a musician or for someone who knows the meaning of music, and then we are continuing with the music and with our orchestra, we have youth orchestra and we have Zohra ensemble, and also we have other groups that are with traditional instruments. Ahra (fictitious name), 15 years, violinist

From this perspective, we interpret that the young people want to deepen their education in Portugal, but with a focus on a future back in their country, free from the Taliban regime. They see their lives in the community in which they currently live as a home for Afghan culture—that is, as a territory where their cultural identity can be manifested without the prohibition experienced in their country of origin. In this way, they can fight for the survival of their culture:

I hope I can go back to Afghanistan one day, with the hope, and then I can see my country again. Also, I really want to show the music for the children, that they want to learn, they want to know about music. Ahra (fictitious name), 15 years, violinist

We save Afghan music, and we play Afghan music here and everyone wants to continue our Afghan music here in Portugal and we always say that we don't allow that Afghan music to die. We always continue our music, and we hope that the Taliban will leave government. I'm proud that I play in ANIM orchestra because I feel I save Afghan music, traditional music and ANIM does everything for us. Sam (fictitious name), 16 years, violist

4.4.2. Observation

From January to March 2024, we observed the dynamics of the Afghan Youth Orchestra (AYO) rehearsals, in a total of twelve rehearsals, which one with the duration of three hours, and those of some of the young people at a Portuguese public school, where we realised that music is a constant in ANIM's day-to-day activities and musical pedagogies. In each week, there are five days of work, between classes and rehearsals—individual, small, and large group. Teaching traditional Afghan music is the main focus, but western classical music is also present, especially in the orchestral activity, and the young people who attend the school experience both ANIM and specialised public school music teaching. Some students play two instruments: a traditional Afghan instrument and a classical instrument.

The orchestra's rehearsals go far beyond the work of preparing a concert repertoire. They provide an opportunity to educate for citizenship, responsibility and mutual help, as well as exchanging traditions and cultural habits. The orchestra's conductor is Portuguese and, as a mentor to the young musicians, he takes specific moments during rehearsals to comment and advise them not only on their behaviour as musicians, but also as members of the community; however, this dynamic is far from one-sided. The conductor also questions the young people about their culture, their routines, and their traditions – not just musical but social—which creates an atmosphere of mutual respect and a very close relationship between conductor and musicians ([Ascenso 2021](#)).

With 50 members, the orchestra is made up of young people aged between 13 and 22 years. Some of the younger students live in institutions, in shared flats under the supervision of a guardian, or with family members who have accompanied them since they left Afghanistan. The group under observation was aged between 14 and 16 years, in the ninth grade, and were integrated into a class with Portuguese students. During our observation of this group, it was possible to note a noticeable separation, with the Afghan youngsters divided into two groups: girls and boys. Interactions between these two groups and the Portuguese students outside of orchestra lessons are limited to greetings. In the context of the orchestra class, it was possible to observe a little more communication between the Portuguese and Afghan students, but it was still very limited.

However, this raised an interesting question, as [Ager and Strang \(2008\)](#) analyse when they mention that:

Refugee children's experience of education is impacted by insufficient support for learning the host-society language, isolation and exclusion (bullying, racism, difficulties making friends, etc.). We observed that some schools provided special language units for refugee children in seeking to meet their needs, but recognised that such provision limited opportunities for mixing with local children.

In other words, the Portuguese language is still an issue. The lessons are given in Portuguese, with occasional indications in English, when necessary, thus avoiding the isolated learning of the language and giving the refugee students a platform to develop their comprehension and verbal mastery of Portuguese. In comparison, the environment of the AYO and the school orchestra does not show much difference in terms of social relationships between the young musicians, as there are similar small groups, usually characterised by the same parameters (age and gender ranges).

In the study of migration and refugees, music should be one parameter to take into account due to its strong influence on scenarios of cultural mobility, social relations and new political and historical paradigms, its transnational, transcultural, translocal, and transglobal versatility, and its strong relationship with the concept of movement. From observing the dynamics of ANIM and its young members, we can understand how, on this long journey to Portugal, they have carried the full weight of Afghan cultural identity through music, without facing any barriers or obstacles to cultivating it and sharing it with

the community in which they now live. Refugees are allowed to maintain and transmit their values and even redefine or strengthen their connection to their own culture and tradition of origin and communicate with the host community through the language of music, with a language that is renewed and appropriate to the context. In fact—and as we saw in a preliminary way through our interviews—once located in Portuguese territory, music-making at ANIM has helped these young refugees to develop individual unscripted performances, instilling confidence in solo performances.

Clearly, inclusion in ANIM has allowed young people who experienced displacement and marginalisation a chance to create music in a safe performative space. No less relevant have been the possibilities that these young people have had to activate their own traditions and memories in combination with sounds of the host society, thus creating innovative cross-cultural pieces. The perspectives of safety and well-being were frequently mentioned by the young people—in short, ANIM has provided a safe and healthy space of inclusion capable of giving meaning to lives in permanent movement and transience.

5. Conclusions

This research has facilitated a more profound comprehension of the intricacies inherent to the process of integration, particularly in contexts where linguistic, cultural, and social divergences can act as impediments to the establishment of connections with the host community. In the specific case of these young people, the school and ANIM emerged as the primary agents of integration into the school community and the cities where they resided, through music, more specifically through ensemble and orchestral practice. The school functioned as a centre for learning and social relations between young people of similar ages, while ANIM served as a context for the reconstruction of identity and the reconfiguration of memories, within the condition of being refugees in Portugal. The young people interviewed demonstrated how music had accompanied them throughout their lives as a means of navigating the private and social spheres, initially in the complex context of Afghanistan and now in the routine of the host community in Portugal. This suggests that ensemble music is the most effective method of interacting with schoolmates. Observations confirmed that during rehearsals and orchestra classes, communication was more pronounced, but outside of these times there was little interaction.

Due to the preliminary nature of the study, access was granted to a restricted group of participants with a privileged relationship with music. Nevertheless, it was possible to understand that musical practice can act as a language of rapprochement and the development of bilateral integration processes, giving both parties responsibility for communication and interaction.

The Future of the Research

This article constitutes a preliminary exploration of the proposed research problem. Its purpose is to open a line of inquiry that will be expanded in future studies, through the integration of broader theoretical perspectives and a more exhaustive data presentation. The current findings offer initial insights, to be refined with the continuity of the fieldwork.

With this article, we intend to begin a long process of research into the ways in which the uses and practice of music in Portugal, in the specific context of ANIM, can serve the purpose of social integration, but also the processes of identity reconstitution that arise from a forced migration. Although the article focuses on the specific case of Afghan children and young people, it and its premise have the capacity to be replicated—theoretically and methodologically—in other contexts and in relation to other artistic practices.

However, the findings must be interpreted with caution. The sample represents a subset of ANIM's students already highly engaged in music, which may overstate the

integrative potential observed. Besides that, language barriers and limited cross-cultural interaction outside the musical context suggest that integration is uneven and context-dependent

Theoretically, our aim was to draw on a range of authors, who could show us the creative and social potential of the arts in action, particularly of music in action. We wanted to create a theoretical–conceptual scenario in which we realised the potential of music as an indelible expression of individual and collective identities, in the sense that it is present in the daily lives of all social agents. Thus, in this article, especially in the section where the speeches of the young people with whom we have worked are presented, we have tried to highlight the ways in which music comes into play in a context of promoting communication dynamics, and consequently social inclusion and integration. We aim to constitute the sonic signatures of these young Afghan refugees in their journey of displacement and integration to Portugal in a framework of identity recomposition (Guerra 2023; Pardue 2023).

However, it is also important to recognise the aspects that still require greater emphasis and further study. On the one hand, our interviewees are on a trajectory of growth and insertion into Portuguese society. This necessarily compels us to explain and understand how their presence and integration into the host society will unfold, particularly considering the mobilisation of their musical practices and their involvement with the orchestra. At the same time, our participation in the orchestra's tours has been progressively deepened through the role of the first author of this article as a music teacher. This position may pose significant challenges in terms of experimenting with a multi-sited ethnography or even an autoethnography, especially since bonds naturally become stronger over time.

Looking ahead, we aim to develop a doctoral project in sociology centred on exploring the multiple dimensions of identity reconstitution, taking music as a starting point. This includes processes unfolding in school, in the transition to working life, in family formation, in places of residence, and within leisure sociabilities. In future studies, we also intend to include perspectives from members of the host community and educators to assess the bidirectional nature of integration, as well as to explore non-musical domains of social interaction. Furthermore, we envisage adopting a comparative perspective by studying other refugee populations in Portugal, notably Ukrainians, with regard to music-in-action.

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Appendix A. Identification of the Categories Used in the Content Analysis

In Afghanistan

Reality experienced in Afghanistan—family, social, cultural, sociability, educational and territorial aspects.

Experience and practice of music in everyday life in Afghanistan.

Connection with ANIM in Afghanistan.

Identification of artistic milestones in the soundtrack of the Self.

After the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan

Reality experienced in Afghanistan—family, social, cultural, sociability, educational and territorial aspects.

Experience and practice of music in everyday life in Afghanistan.

Connection with ANIM.

Identification of artistic milestones in the soundtrack of the Self.

Arrival in Portugal

Reality experienced in Portugal—family, social, cultural, sociability, educational and territorial aspects.

Experience and practice of music in everyday life in Portugal.

Connection with ANIM in Portugal.

Identification of artistic milestones in the soundtrack of the Self.

Views on Portuguese society and how one feels represented within it.

Perspectives on returning to Afghanistan or moving to other countries.

Notes

- ¹ For participants under 18, written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, alongside verbal assent from the minors. Interviews were conducted in non-intrusive settings to minimise stress, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point.
- ² This study is based on a small and specific group of participants and may not be representative of all refugee youth as we know. Additionally, language barriers may have influenced the depth of interviews
- ³ The tabla is a percussion musical instrument widely used in India, usually in devotional or meditative music. This instrument is divided into two drums, a high-pitched one called a *daya* and a low-pitched one called a *baya*.

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