



# Strengthening friendship and pursuing artist dreams by informal musical practices: Musical agency in a cross- cultural context

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## Abstract

This article builds upon an ethnographic study of how young people growing up in cross-cultural contexts perform their musical agency (Strøm, 2016). The twofold focus of the article concerns the ways in which the pop duo GunnInga perform their collective musical agency as well as how they strengthen their friendship and fulfill their artist dreams through informal musical practices. The theoretical framework of the article builds upon Stones's (2005) strong structuration theory. The analysis is structured using Karlsen's (2011) musical agency lens as a point of departure. In line with Liamputtong's (2010) request to cross-cultural researchers, the analysis also applies a poem as an analytical tool. The term cross-cultural is applied to situate the pop duo in a context characterized by diversity in terms of both nationalities and options when it comes to activities, concerts, projects, workshops and so on, offered by both municipal and private cultural agents attempting to respond to this reality.

**Keywords:** musical agency, strong structuration, informal learning, cross-cultural, friendship, artist dreams

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## Introduction

In the project titled “I’m Not Norwegian, You Know, I’m International’. An Ethnographic Study of Musical Agency Among Young People in Cross-Cultural Contexts” (Strøm, 2016), I explored how the participants experienced resources and challenges as they dealt with music in their spare time growing up in a diverse society. “Cross-cultural” (Salole 2018, Pollock & van Reken, 2009) in this connection denotes the unique mix that occurs when children and adolescents grow up being influenced by several cultures, either simultaneously or alternately. “Musical agency” (Karlsen, 2011) is understood as the ability of individuals to engage actively and make choices regarding their own relationship with music (Strøm, 2016). The theoretical premise of this article is that these choices are made within “the terrain that constitutes the range of possibilities and limits to the possible” (Stones, 2005, p. 122).

The main research question of the project (Strøm, 2016) asked how the participating adolescents performed their musical agency more broadly. The notion of musical agency incorporates various theoretical understandings and is portrayed as a multilayered lens for the analysis of musical actions (Karlsen, 2011). Musical experiences are linked to different musical actions, and learning, musical performance and music used, for example, for self-regulation and social coordination are included in the spectrum of such actions. For the purposes of this article, I focus on how the pop duo GunnInga strengthen their friendship and pursue their artist dreams through their collective musical agency in a cross-cultural context. The broader understanding of musical agency informs the analysis of GunnInga’s actions in different ways as they strive to fulfill their dreams of becoming famous pop stars. The pop duo is formed by two girls, Gunnhild and Inga (fictitious names), both sixteen years old. Gunnhild’s background is Kurdish and Inga’s is Norwegian. In and through composing and performing pop music the girls have built a strong musical platform that enables them to deal with external pressures, for instance from peers who try to separate them and devalue their music. At the same time, they educate themselves musically in an informal way. Consequently, I raise the following questions in my explorations below: How do the girls in the pop duo GunnInga strengthen their friendship through their collective musical agency in a cross-cultural context? In what ways do the girls pursue their artist dreams and build their own music education in informal ways through composing and performing music?

## **Structural resources in a diverse society**

The girls in GunnInga were part of a very active and vibrant music milieu in their home city, whose population is characterized by a huge ethnic and cultural diversity. In the main study (Strøm, 2016), I chose to conceptualize this diversity by framing it as a cross-cultural context. I will return to how this concept has relevance for the analysis in this article more closely in the next section. During the six months of fieldwork, I followed what I interpreted as a group of aspiring young people. They supported and encouraged each other as they took part in a variety of cultural activities run by both private and municipal initiators. I will now give a brief overview over some of the many activities and courses that the pop duo attended. They were able to take advantage of a rich selection of cultural offers to youth growing up in a cross-cultural context.

Located in the city centre is a municipal cultural centre for youth aged 13–20. Here, they can meet friends, play games, make movies, dance, rehearse with a band, join creative workshops or go to a concert. The centre has a cafe, rehearsal rooms, music studios, dance hall, radio studio, film and photo equipment, meeting rooms and a concert scene. GunnInga featured at several of the café concerts at this centre. During the period of my fieldwork, the youth centre hosted a Nordic intercultural exchange project in collaboration with cultural organizations in Sweden and Finland. Each country recruited about 20 culturally interested youth, who, within 10 weeks made their own 15-minute contributions to a performance. After 10 weeks, all the participants met in one of the host countries for a week-long workshop, during which they put together a joint hour-long performance at a local theatre. The theme of the show was “choice and freedom of choice”, and the participants were free to choose how they wanted to interpret the theme and what cultural expressions they wanted to use. During the preparation period, they got to explore music, theatre, poetry, film and dance. The interview with GunnInga was completed by the time they began participating in this project.

Another important arena for the pop duo was a city district festival for youth. The event is a free music festival that invites youth from across the region to experience youth culture, urban music and dance. GunnInga and many of their music friends performed at these annual festivals alongside well-known artists. In addition to participating in these municipal offerings, GunnInga also attended a private intercultural centre for youth. The centre’s goal is to create meeting places and fellowship for young artists and dancers. The leaders of the centre are the first generation to have grown up in “a truly ethnically diverse Norway” (my translation, homepage). GunnInga attended a “how-to-become-a-star” course and received

singing lessons at this centre. They also performed at concerts initiated by the centre, but as these arrangements were open for youth only, I was not allowed entrance. In addition, Gunnhild attended guitar lessons at the municipal cultural school.<sup>2</sup> In these ways, the girls in the pop duo utilized an entire network of formal and informal resources in their endeavours to become famous artists.

### **Agency in a cross-cultural context**

The terms “cross-cultural” and “multicultural” are often used interchangeably in everyday speech. While “multicultural” can “bring associations to easily identifiable parts that can be neatly picked apart” (my translation, Salole, 2013, p. 29), “cross-cultural” denotes, as mentioned, the unique mix that occurs when children and adolescents grow up with influences from multiple cultures either simultaneously or alternately. The participant who stated, “I’m not Norwegian, you know, I’m international,” was actually Norwegian, but he was “interacting with more than one culture in ways that [entailed] meaningful or relational involvement” (Pollock & van Reken, 2009, p. 32).

The theoretical premise of this article is that the agent is at all times situated in different contexts and that the actions of agents are influenced by both internal and external structures over which the agent has more or less control (Stones, 2005). When these contexts are a mixture of various ethnicities and cultures, the individual will have to deal with the similarities and differences between the cultures, and conflicting expectations may arise. At this intersection there will be a mixing so that the individual is influenced by each of the relevant cultures to which it relates. The girls’ choice of pseudonyms is interesting in this context. I encouraged them to choose nicknames themselves, and the Kurdish girl, who has a quite common western name that does not sound particularly Kurdish, wished to be called by the old Nordic name Gunnhild. This may indicate that she did not want to be associated with her Kurdish background and that her self-understanding was not particularly “cross-cultural”. It may also be interpreted as a way of strengthening the bond between the two girls, since they described each other as “non-related sisters.”

Sæther (2008) refers to Eriksen’s (1999) argument regarding the right to be freed from cultural identity: “Eriksen’s view is that many immigrants are victims of a kind of ‘cultural terrorism’. The largest problem for those living in two cultures, according to

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Eriksen, is that society demands that they should present a cultural identity” (Sæther, 2008, p. 33). Despite being perceived as an inclusive term, “cross-cultural” can also seem to be othering, as all forms of categorization can feel like a violation (Strøm, 2016, p. 11). Whether the girls perceived themselves as Norwegian, international, cross-cultural or something in-between is, in a sense, subordinate in this article. Rather, the term cross-cultural is applied to situate GunnInga in a context characterized by diversity in terms of both nationalities and options when it comes to activities, concerts, projects, workshops and so on, offered by both municipal and private cultural agents attempting to respond to this reality.

## **Background**

Research on multicultural music education and musical practice has a long history in which key contributors have discussed how cultural diversity in music should be recognized and implemented in the music classroom (e.g., Campbell et al., 2005; Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Schippers, 2010; Volk, 1998). My study (Strøm, 2016) is one of a number of recent studies on cross-cultural music education and musical practices with an experience-based focus that emphasize, among other things, the importance of young people defining and integrating their “own” music (Sæther, 2008, 2010; Nethsinghe, 2012; Cain, 2015; Heimonen & Westvall 2015; Karlsen & Westerlund, 2010, 2015; Westerlund, Partti & Karlsen, 2016; Karlsen, 2017; Kvaal, 2018; Matsunobu, 2019, Westerlund, Karlsen & Partti, 2020).

One of the important aspects of this article is to explore the ways in which GunnInga educate themselves musically in informal ways. In the article “Formal and Informal Learning Situations or Practices vs. Formal and Informal Ways of Learning”, Folkestad (2006) discusses different characteristics of formal and informal musical learning and how these different ways of learning complement and inform each other. Folkestad believes that formal/informal should not be considered a dichotomy, but rather two poles on a continuum. He encourages music education researchers to include “the full global range” (p. 135) of musical learning within a variety of musical styles and forms of learning in their research. As I have explained in the previous sections, the pop duo were able to exploit both formal and informal resources in their home city. They can be situated in the middle of the formal/informal dichotomy, as they are constructing their own path to stardom by combining available structural resources. Green (2002) investigated how popular musicians learn, and explored how this can be implemented in music education in schools (Green, 2008). She found that the musicians’ most important learning activities were listening, copying and imitating recorded music. By playing with friends, listening, exploring instruments

and working with self-chosen music, the musicality of students is developed, according to Green. These are some of the learning strategies that GunnInga adopts in their quest for a self-initiated music education.

## Theoretical positions

Different sociological theories provide ways of describing human action as the performance of agency. In this article, I use Stones's (2005) theory of strong structuration as a starting point for describing the relationship between agent and structure. Stones wants to preserve the strengths of Giddens's (1984) initial theory while revising it to make it more useable in empirical studies with a situational focus. While Giddens emphasizes the agent's "knowledgeability", Stones claims that there are degrees of knowledge ability whereby the agent has more or less knowledge and critical reflection and has many or few choices with predicted or unforeseen consequences. Strong structuration emphasizes that the agent draws upon a platform of values, attitudes, views of life and interpretations when she acts. Depending on which of the optional value terms the individual agent chooses to give primacy in an actual choice situation, she will either choose to "act otherwise"<sup>3</sup> or she will choose to just "carry on". Stones (2005) emphasizes the importance of realizing that "situated agents with particular frames of meaning [may] feel both able and unable to resist, regulate or control pressures of external structures" (p. 113). The emphasis is on the action-horizon of "in-situ" (p. 84) agents as perceived by the agents and/or by the researcher. Strong structuration introduces a fourfold framework that involves: external structures as conditions of action; internal structures within the agent; active agency, including the ways the agent draws upon her internal structures – and outcomes, either as new external or internal structures, or as actual events (pp. 84–85). The internal structures are divided into two analytical components; situational-specific structures<sup>4</sup> and general dispositions.<sup>5</sup> GunnInga's negotiations and navigations in the field of musical performance are therefore performed as an ongoing process involving both their internal and external structures.

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<sup>3</sup> A notion borrowed from Giddens's (1984) structuration theory.

<sup>4</sup> The agent's situational-specific structures are directed towards the external structures, and these involve the agent's knowledge of the specific action context he or she is in.

<sup>5</sup> The general dispositions involve the agent's skills, abilities and competencies and include the agent's cultural schemata, relational networks, principles of action, habits and gestures.

Eriksen (2001) defines culture as what makes communication possible; that is, culture is the thought patterns, habits and experiences that people have in common and which allow us to understand each other (p. 60). GunnInga's negotiations and navigations are primarily related to global youth culture. According to Eriksen, globalization does not necessarily cause people to become culturally equal, nor does it cause their identities to become equal, that is, that they should feel like world citizens rather than national or ethnic individuals. In a sense, we become more equal and more different at the same time (p. 20). Music is an important part of GunnInga's negotiations in a cross-cultural context because music is associated in very special ways with self-understanding and identity-building processes, and offers a range of functions in the musical agent's life. Hesmondhalgh (2008), however, problematizes a sociologically informed analysis of music (Finnegan, 1989; Frith, 1996; DeNora, 2000) that "sees music primarily as *a positive resource for active self-making*" (p. 3, original italics). He argues that this conception rests on an overly optimistic understanding of music. Further, he argues that this conception "posits a model of social self-making that downplays or even ignores negative social processes" (Hesmondhalgh, 2008, p. 14). This is, in some ways, similar to Thrift's (1996) critique of Giddens's ontology that "over-emphasizes action as individual and never fully considers the ghost of networked others that continually informs that action" (p. 54). Stones's (2005) reply to this perspective is that "the agent(s)-in-focus should always be conceptualized from the start as being in the midst of, as already being caught up in the flow of, position-practices and their relations" (p. 93). The "ghost of networked others" may seem absent from the day-to-day interactions of the pop duo, but they still affect their actions, such as the influence of the pop industry and capitalist interests. In this article, however, I choose to focus on the immediate structural resources and constraints that surround GunnInga by describing how, despite resistance, they struggle to fulfill their dreams through the performance of an active collective musical agency.

Being a musical agent in this context is understood as having the ability to engage actively with music. Karlsen's (2011) lens for analysing musical agency is utilized as the starting point for interpreting the actions of participants as they make use of the cross-cultural musical arenas. Musical agency understood as performative communicative practices, involves an emphasis on situated musical practices that provide the agent with access to a range of both musical practices and learning. Karlsen divides musical agency into two dimensions: individual and collective. Some examples of the categories in the individual dimension are self-regulation, matters of being, self-protection and the shaping of self-identity. In addition, the lens has five analytical filters placed on top of it, which give the researcher ways to adjust the

focus of the lens. These are named as performance, transformation, identity, ability to access learning experiences and empowerment (p. 118). In my own version of this lens, I have chosen to rename these filters so as to be able to focus specifically on sensing, listening, music as a life resource, performing and learning. These are intersecting ways of using music that can potentially enrich the agents' lives. In this article, I will focus on the performance and learning dimensions, which include findings related to performing, composing and informal learning. These are important aspects of GunnInga's collective musical agency and the ways they try to educate themselves musically in informal ways. These are viewed in relation to the other categories in the lens

## Methodology

The project was designed as an ethnographic study that included observations, qualitative interviews and informal conversations. The data were drawn from a wide range of musical practices, as described earlier. In all, the data comprised field notes from observations in six musical practices situated in four different arenas. I conducted 20 interviews with a total of 21 interviewees during the spring of 2014. At the time of the interview with the pop duo, the girls were in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, which is the last year of secondary school in Norway. They went to separate primary schools and got to know each other in secondary school. I attended many of their music-related activities during the six months of fieldwork, such as rehearsals, concerts and workshops as well as their trip abroad with the Nordic intercultural exchange project. In addition I followed their Facebook account for approximately one and a half years (from January 2014 to May 2015).

The empirical material was analysed according to the principles of qualitative content analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) using Transana software. As mentioned, the analysis was structured using my own adapted version of Karlsen's (2011) musical agency lens as a point of departure. The analytical filters placed above the lens – namely performance, learning, listening and sensing – reflect both theoretical and empirical categories. According to Polkinghorne (1995) the function of narrative analysis is “to answer how and why a particular outcome came about” (p.19). As I see it, strong structuration gives the researcher a good tool for answering *how* and *why* results occur in the form of external and internal structures, and as events. Moreover, I used poetry as an analytical tool in line with Liamputtong's (2010) call for researchers with a cross-cultural focus to write “the other” responsibly. Liamputtong believes that traditional writing in qualitative research does not necessarily give us tools for this, so she recommends innovative ways of representation, or what she

refers to as “the serious play of writing” (p. 216). I found that the girls expressed their opinions and views in very poignant and poetic ways, and this inspired me to rewrite some of their quotes into a poem. The poem conveys my interpretation of the girls’ meaningful statements about their musical agency by lifting them up from the data level to a new artistic and theoretical level. In this way, I also wish to help the reader visualize the girls.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data in June 2013. Participants were given information about the research project, and a total of 21 youth signed a consent form to confirm that they understood the nature of the study and wished to participate and knew that they were free to withdraw at any time for any or no reason. Ethical reflections are crucial for an ethnographic research practice to be characterized by respect and care for the people who are part of the research process (Liamputtong, 2010). In other words, it is important for me to write in such a way that I am true to the participants’ stories.

### **Strengthening friendship through a strong collective musical agency**

I met the pop duo early one afternoon at Inga’s home before the evening’s practice with the Nordic intercultural exchange project. We made ourselves comfortable in some armchairs in a room adjacent to the living room. Inga spoke most of the time. Gunnhild didn’t speak as much, but they complemented each other, almost as if this was what they were used to. The conversation went as follows (I: Inga, G: Gunnhild, A: Author):

I: “There isn’t a lot of racism [in our city]. It’s not, but – there’s a lot of oppression at different levels – mmhmm, lots of slang words, against different people, like, eh?”

G: “Yes, say Poles”.

I: “For example, it’s not very popular to be Polish – or a Russian, for that matter.”

A: “Eh, yes, but do you experience it at school? That it’s racism or oppression?”

I: “People are slamming words all the time, but they don’t think it might be racist in a way. There are a lot of people going around saying ‘Oh, bloody CP [sufferer]’.”

A: “Cerebral palsy?”

I: She nods. “It may not be racism that is the biggest problem at school, but it’s a bit more that people don’t accept that other people choose to go their own ways. Gunnhild and I have lost lots of friends at school because we have chosen music. We might have gone from thirty friends to twelve friends now, because there are so many who get annoyed that we have such a strong friendship as ours and that we have actually become a bit famous. They cannot accept this, so they try to split us up, and that’s why we cut them out. We create lots of music and stuff, and when we ask our friends ‘Do you want to come to our concert?’ They go like ‘No, no’. We get the stupid answer, ‘Why should we bother going to a concert with you, of all people? We should get paid to come’.”

G: “There are some small comments as well, which are meant as jokes, but we take it seriously, because we take music seriously.”

In view of Stones’s (2005) theory of strong structuration, the girls had the ability to apply a certain degree of critical distance and reflection (p. 101) in their assessment of how it felt to grow up in a cross-cultural context and also in relation to their former friends. The reason they lost friends, according to Gunnhild, was because they took music seriously, and according to Inga, was maybe not so much because of racism or that they had different cultural backgrounds. Gunnhild’s primary school down on the plain, however, could be regarded as a cross-cultural context with a higher level of diversity than what was the case at Inga’s former school. They had grown up with different external structures (Stones, 2005), with different norms, and thus also different forms of sanctions. Inga left her girl group to become Gunnhild’s friend, and when they succeeded, both as friends and as artists, they were ostracized by the group of friends from Inga’s school up on the hill. GunnInga exercised deviant behaviour in relation to the role expectations that existed in the girl group, in terms of both appearance and who it was okay to “hang out” with. They believed that youth culture in Norway was inspired by American youth culture and that this was one of the reasons why they lost friends.

I: “It’s kind of like living behind large façades. It’s not a small façade, for example, putting on a smile in the morning, even if you’re a bit depressed. Maybe you’re really a hard core rocker, but instead you choose keeg clothing and somehow run that ‘daddy pays’-style. It’s fake. It’s almost like

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high school in the US. You can almost insert people into different categories there.”

A: “High School Musical?”

G: “No, not High School Musical, but like high school groups. They decide everything; everyone has to follow them, in a way”.

I: “It’s like what you see in American teen movies, for example. It’s usually a girl. It’s also a boy, perhaps the boss of the football team. And the prom queen.”

G: “They believe that they’re the boss, and believe that no one can fuck with them, that they run everything. It’s absurd, they want in a way that everyone should follow them, and when we somehow don’t, then they get like, they get frustrated or something. I don’t know. They get frustrated that we actually don’t care that they somehow boss over everyone else. And then, that’s maybe why we’ve lost as many friends as we have.”

They found that this American high school mentality was something new that had arisen as a direct consequence of young people watching American movies and was particularly prevalent in their secondary school. This view can be linked to Hesmondhalgh’s (2008) understanding of how cultural media, including music and film, can offer meetings between individual and collective experiences of identity (“this is who I am; this is who I’m not / this is who we are; this is who we’re not”, p. 2). Although Inga and the leader were no longer friends, they still shared an interest in clothing and makeup. GunnInga benefited from Inga’s extensive skills when creating a pop image. She had lots of situational-specific knowledge (Stones, 2005) in this area. Inga explained:

I: “So, we find it’s lots of fun to be able to impress people with both our music and that we somehow have a cool style. When somebody comes and looks good, and has a cool style and stuff, it catches the attention immediately. They react like – ‘Wow, they’re a bit special, wow, they are *good*’. So, you have to dress to impress.” Gunnhild tries to break into the conversation, and they go on in tandem.

Both: “But we don’t wear”, “to impress, we don’t have a hot style, we just have a rock singlet”, “eh, jewelry”, “fierce pants”, “and always a gleaming

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lipstick”, - “mmhmm, that’s very us”, “usually straight hair and winged eyeliner.”

I: “So we’re in a way, it really is, what is it called again?”

G: “Pretty much us.”

The girls had a certain style; in other words, they had a notion of what was needed to get noticed. They felt it was not enough to sing well and compose catchy songs. In addition, they tried to stand out and make themselves visible. This gave them plenty of “approval values” (Parsons et al., 1953, p. 203) from the young audiences at their concerts. In these ways the girls showed some insight into what was needed to position themselves within the pop industry. During the interview, they were casually dressed in sweat pants, and they told me that “chilling” was also a style. The interview functioned as a way for them to stage themselves as the rising stars they wished to be. It can be argued that the girls were victims of external structures, in this case the pop industry’s demands for what girl artists should look like, but as I see it, they found great pleasure in the sheer joy of experimenting with clothing and makeup in order to observe what effects they had on their own audiences. The exploration of make up and clothing can further be connected to the category “affirming and exploring collective identity” (Karlsen, 2011, p. 118) in the collective dimension of the musical agency lens. According to Stones (2005), situational-specific knowledge can be structures that have been built up over time, and thus they can be shaped long before they are put into use, like the way GunnInga built their “artist performance” with regard to how they might act as world stars, long before they got there. In this way the situational-specific knowledge can be regarded as an action reservoir that the girls adopt as needs arise. It can also be interpreted as the ability to develop music-related skills (Karlsen, 2011).

Song-writing was the very core of GunnInga’s collective musical agency. The girls had in-depth situational-specific knowledge of their ongoing songwriting processes. I will now focus on how they produced their song lyrics. They portrayed their lyrics as powerful weapons in their fight against the girl group. One of their songs included these words; “I’m starting with white pages”:

G: “It’s, in a way, what we do. We start with blank pages. We get out of all the groups in our school; we start with ‘white pages’. The refrain can be interpreted in many different ways. We mean, okay, ‘I’m starting with white pages’. Now I am coming out of this dark place I’ve been in, and now I’m going to fly, with white angels and everything.”

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I: "It's a very depressing song. You just write exactly where you are. I'm here and I can't breathe, I'm not getting out of here."

G: (recites) "*I'm drowning in the river of blood*", sort of. But in the chorus, we say that we are done with it; we are done suffering."

I: (recites) "*We're done shedding our own fears, and we're done crying without tears. Can't you see this life is up to me? We're gonna be what you don't want to see*'."

G: "And that's what it's all about; us and the group of friends and all that. We're gonna be what they don't want to see."

They worked hard to abandon the group's role expectations, and they did so by fighting in and through their song lyrics. This can be understood as the performance of a collective musical agency characterized by creativity, improvisation and innovation (Stones, 2005, p. 101). In these ways, GunnInga created the necessary critical distance to the girl group's "truths". They spoke as if they had started a positive revolution, and they were willing to stand on "the barricades". The lyrics had multiple layers, and they could address several problems at the same time:

I: "There are many things that have happened and big holes that are filled with music."

G: "We don't sing what actually happens, but we sing a bit more indirectly."

I: She nods. "Mmhmm, how it affects you. '*She's been listening to the dark tones*' – that's, in a way, the music. '*She's been singing on the high ones*' – that's, she is screaming and crying, and '*somehow on the middle tones, she lost her crying bones*'."

G: "And then, at some point, you just decide you don't want to bother anymore; you don't want to feel this anymore, so you shut everything out."

I: (recites) "*Don't you think for a second she didn't hear the words you said, 'cause she heard the screaming, and she saw the bleeding*'. That's all about our friends, too."

G: "Don't think we didn't hear what you said, because we heard it and it has somehow influenced us."

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I: “We pretend, we may pretend that we don’t hear it, but when you fling shit about our music, we hear it, and it doesn’t affect us positively.”

They were not insensitive; they heard the criticism, and it hurt. Gunnhild realized that the songs had significance for *them*, and it was perhaps not for everyone to understand what kind of challenges the songs dealt with. They gave me, as such, a privileged access to a small glimpse behind the curtains concealing some of the hidden messages in their lyrics.

GunnInga worked hard to strengthen their friendship while pursuing their artist dreams. They had grown up in a cross-cultural context where they could prosper in an environment characterized by both municipal and private agents that supported them and their musical peers. However, as they explored their identity as prospering artists, they had to defend themselves against the girl group’s values and ideals by choosing either to renounce or associate with their musical and social values. The sense of community and belonging expressed through their musical agency can be considered both a result of their common musical acts and an ongoing process in which their collective identity is under constant pressure from divergent interests and values of significant agents. Musical acts, such as singing, playing, improvising and composing, can provide one of the strongest arenas for the performance of a strong musical agency. According to Karlsen (2011, p. 117), musical agents can fulfill all the other categories in the lens while engaging in musical practices. Hence, the pop duo can explore and confirm a common musical identity, explore their relationship, improve their skills and increase their knowledge of the pop genre while performing music. In this way, musical practices emerge as a result of an active structuration process (Stones, 2005) in which each individual participant is required for the individual and collective benefits of the interaction.

### **Building their own music education in informal ways and pursuing artist dreams**

By “establishing a basis for collaborative musical action” (Karlsen, 2011, p. 118) the girls worked hard to pursue their artist dreams. I encouraged them to tell me more about the actual song-writing process, and they gave me a long and thorough explanation, which I have abbreviated:

I: “We have a structure in all our songs. It’s just like a puzzle, or a picture. You know, like, when children pull the pieces into the right part of the picture on the PC? We start with, chorus comes first.”

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G: (interrupts) “Yes, but before all that, we have all our lyrics on the mobile. Because, suddenly, in the middle of the night, at three o’clock at night, we have a song in our heads, and then all of a sudden, we make a recording in the middle of the night, while Mom and Dad are sleeping.”

I: (blurts out) “We do it in science class.”

A: (surprised) “And sing?”

G: “Yes, I sing, or we sing a tune we have in mind.”

I: “We build up the songs with refrain, verses, chorus, verse, pre-chorus, chorus. We also put pre-chorus again, and then comes a bridge. There should always be a killer bridge. There must always be a bridge that no one expects. Just like, we have a bridge where we rap. *No one* expects us to rap.”

In their circle of music friends there were many boys that were rappers. The fact that no one expected them to rap may have given them certain credentials, or, at least, it may have functioned as a surprise factor in one of their songs. However, Gunnhild’s comment shows a gendered expectation; they were not expected to rap, as this was the boys’ domain. This can be regarded as an external constraint (Stones, 2005, p. 110) that is influencing their musical agency in ways that they might not be fully aware of. Since I could not quite keep up with Inga’s explanations during the interview, I visited their Facebook homepage and listened to a song from one of their live concerts, to get a clearer picture of the structure of one of their songs: Guitar-prelude/verse/pre-chorus/chorus/interlude/verse/pre-chorus/chorus/bridge/chorus. They had acquired significant knowledge (Stones, 2005) about which musical elements constitute a pop song, and they showed the ability to use this knowledge in the production of their own songs. This can be understood as having the ability to use both their general dispositions and situational-specific structures in the production of original music.

GunnInga were quite clear about the fact that they were a pop duo, but not when it came to their listening habits. While the girl group, in their eyes, listened to mainstream music, including pop, the girls listened to rock, and even heavy rock groups, like Avenged Sevenfold. Furthermore, the Norwegian group Katzenjammer were their great role models. They were inspired by the group’s mix of styles, such as indie, pop, rock, country and Balkan music. They reckoned that their own music also consisted of a mix of styles, a kind of acoustic pop with some country and rock genre

features. As such, they related to mainstream music, just like the girl group, at least in the production of their own musical material. The girls further expressed a deep contempt for happy music, music that in their opinion had no important message.

I: "Our music is really a big, dark porridge." They laugh.

G: "It *is*!"

I: "It's like a vicious circle that just goes back and forth over and over again. We never make any happy songs. We made a love song once; we ended up killing the guy's wife." They laugh hard.

G: "We just don't get it. We feel that joy is so cliché to sing about."

I: "I've never really got people who write songs like 'Happy' – because, there's so much *more* in artists like us, people that *work*. Rihanna 'up there' sings about sex. We 'down here' wrote a song about the war in Syria."

In this way, GunnInga tried to position themselves as more significant and "down to earth" than songwriters and artists who topped the charts. According to Inga, those artists focused on unimportant things, like sex, partying and good feelings, while they and their music friends wrote about more important topics worldwide. As a result, in their opinion, mainstream artists did not deserve their fame, while artists like themselves and their peers deserved to be listened to.

They created their songs while Gunnhild played the guitar. Inga said, "We will learn how to play guitar as a duo, but we're no good at sitting down and actually practicing it." Inga probably did not have enough motivation to learn to play the guitar properly since Gunnhild had mastered it well enough for their common needs. As a result, she did not practice a lot. However, the pop duo had high expectations of themselves regarding promotion and performing well at concerts. This can be interpreted as careful organization and prioritization into purpose hierarchies (Stones, 2005, p. 101).

A: "Do you have a dream for the future?"

I: (exclaims) "Yes!" Gunnhild laughs. "We will be famous, really, we will!"

G: "We will move to the United States together."

I: "We are *not* gonna be the ones who had a dream, and gave up, or ended up behind the counter at-"

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G: “-McDonald’s. It’s so typical that someone who sings well thinks like ‘I’m gonna be a star,’ and they don’t even bother trying to do concerts and all that. We sit at home every day, call, and annoy people, just to get to play concerts.” She laughs.

I: “We are firmly pestering, but it helps because we have done plenty of gigs. [...] We think it’s fun. We get worn out. We’re really tired, but we’re doing what we love, and we love rushing around. We are very spontaneous, doing things out of the blue, not even thinking what is going to happen.” (Gunnhild nods.) “We have become very connected. We are somehow soul buddies, soul mates!” They laugh. [...] “But the negative thing was that we brought a song to a studio, and they changed it; cut it and glued it. That dude ruined it and said ‘This isn’t a song with potential’.”

G: “They said we could get it on the radio and stuff. They gave us lots of hope.”

I: “They also told us ‘I don’t think you’re ready to perform on stage because I don’t think you’re ready to accept negative response’.”

G: “But they didn’t even *watch* us on stage. That’s the worst part. They just said it without knowing anything about us. But we stopped working with them.”

I: “Yes, we didn’t bother anymore.”

Both girls appeared to be experienced, persistent and skilled agents. They did not think that they needed a manager because they felt that they managed that job in a better way themselves. Whether their action-horizon is wide enough to actually reach their goals is worth considering, though. According to Stones, this horizon is of central significance, as its designation of the “contexts of relevance” (p. 101) will influence which particular aspects of the relevant structures will be animated by the agents-in-focus. As a music teacher, it felt natural to ask if they planned to seek higher music education, but they did not consider it a necessary resource. As mentioned, the girls took advantage of a wide variety of formal and informal resources in their home city, for example, both girls took singing lessons and they attended a “how-to-become-a-star”-course at the private culture center. Otherwise, they claimed that self-promotion, love of music and hard work would make it possible to accomplish their artist dreams. As a result, they worked hard to endure both

success and what they experienced as adversity from peers and professional agents in order to achieve their goals.

I: “Because we spend so much time and energy on music, we get so tired. We don’t dare to sacrifice the joy and love we have for music in order to go to Music College, and most people who have attended colleges haven’t become famous at all. Most people who take music education become backup singers. Whitney Houston’s mother, she was a background singer. She never was an independent artist, but her daughter, she decided, ‘Okay, I’ll be an artist,’ and then she *became* an artist. It’s people like us, who take the initiative to, okay, ‘maybe I can perform there; call, call,’ who get famous. We just have to perform well every single place we perform so that maybe a person who hears us thinks. ‘Yes, they would fit in here.’ Previously, we were the ones that called; now *they* call us.”

In these ways, the girls argued that you cannot educate yourself to success. As a result, the way I interpret it, they tried to educate themselves through trial and error, thus somehow creating their own informal artist college. This can be interpreted as a way of creating, or even being, their own external structures (Stones, 2005). They developed their music-related skills and established a basis for collaborative musical action (Karlsen, 2011, p. 118) by associating with pop idols who, apparently, were able to succeed without the need for a formal music education. Part of this self-initiated education was related to choosing their target group. They did not envisage peers when they wrote their music – at least not the ones that followed the “mainstream” – and basically, they did not target ordinary people, either. Their music was meant for connoisseurs, “for people with music education,” according to Inga. Although they did not see the benefit of applying for higher music education, they still recognized the ability of educated agents to provide well-founded “approval values” (Parsons et al., 1953, p. 203). This further contributed to esteem values, understood as self-respect and internal recognition of their own efforts and skills. In the poem “Pretty much us”, I have compiled quotes from the interview with the girls as a way to summarize the narrative about the pop duo GunnInga.

### **Pretty much us**

We are firmly pestering  
we are quite spontaneous, doing things out of the blue  
we are nonrelated sisters

we are somehow soul buddies  
we make a revolution  
we're gonna be what you don't want to see  
we are not the people who had a dream and then gave up  
we have straight hair, gleaming lipstick and winged eyeliner, so, it's in a way – pretty much us.

## Discussion

The narrative about the pop duo GunnInga has highlighted various aspects of being a musical agent in a cross-cultural context, and it shows they were able to take advantage of available structural resources in their home city. During the interview I developed a picture of two girls who had chosen to be together, whatever the cost. According to Karlsen (2015), music can be a vital resource for cross-cultural youth in their endeavours to make decisions on how to be, appear and act within complex realities. The music that is linked to the students' ethnic or cultural background can, according to Karlsen (2013), give a sense of belonging and cohesion, as well as material to keep the story of themselves going across geographical and socio-cultural contexts. In the case of GunnInga, it was rather their own original musical material that formed the basis of their ability to keep the story of themselves going in a cross-cultural environment of peers that did not always recognize their efforts to build a strong friendship and pursue an artistic career. By introducing the cultural continuum, it is possible to visualize how individual and collective agents relate to or identify with one or more cultures:

cross-cultural-----monocultural

On the basis of structuration theory (Stones, 2005), it can be argued that there is an interaction between these counterpoints, just as the theory argues that neither agent nor structure can exist without the ongoing duality between them. By portraying cultural orientation in this way, I wish to dissolve dichotomous counterpoints and show that agents rarely choose one or the other side of the dichotomy. As mentioned, the girls in the pop duo may have positioned themselves anywhere between these poles, but the fact that they grew up in a cross-cultural society implied that they were able to relate to structural resources and possible restraints in their immediate surroundings. In my opinion, they were able to utilize musical and other cultural offerings in their home city in active and reflected ways in and through both enriching and challenging meetings between their external and internal structures. This variation can be visualized by the agent-related continuum:

passive agent-----active agent

I have characterized GunnInga as strong musical agents by studying how they draw upon resources, values and norms in the dualistic span between agent and structure in a cross-cultural context. Karlsen and Westerlund (2010) point to the importance of exploring the meaning of music for “the sustainable growth of selves” (p. 237). The pop duo was aware that the performance of their current musical agencies could have great significance for the results of their future structuration rounds (Stones, 2005) on both personal and collective levels. Hence, they worked hard to build, and even to be, their own external possibility structures. They invested time and effort in developing and exploiting their own internal and external structures through intellectual and expressive actions in the present so that the dream of becoming world-renowned artists could be realized, once they were “there”.

GunnInga’s various current and future learning strategies were primarily occupied with performing and the possibility of being headhunted. According to the website “Music Industry – How To” (2020) which targets young artists, there are eight important steps to becoming a famous singer. The website acknowledges, however, that there is no guarantee that you will become famous by following these steps, as much depends on how talented you are and on being in the right place at the right time. The pop duo fulfilled some of the proposals on the list, such as establishing their name in the local area and marketing themselves as singers. Furthermore, learning to sing properly, never giving up and not expecting others to build your career are highlighted as important steps that they worked hard to fulfill. However, three important steps – joining a band, having a unique selling point as a way to differentiate yourself from the crowd and *collaborating with musicians and industry figures that are bigger than you* – would still require more attention from GunnInga if they are actually going to succeed in their endeavour to become famous artists. Hence, it may be argued that they fail to see the relevance of acquiring or deepening musical skills, for example, by developing their guitar skills, applying for higher music education or seeking advice from professional agents in the field.

This article has emphasized the importance of an entire network of internal and external structures for youth like Gunnhild and Inga to be able to follow their dreams of becoming famous artists. In their struggle to educate themselves musically, they relied on both their own internal and external structures in a cross-cultural context, including music peers, music instructors, music festivals, concert scenes, private and municipal culture centres, music in the media and many more. The outcomes of their structuration processes were visible as active musical practices, such as singing,

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playing, song writing, performing in concerts and even singing in science class. The pop duo has, in some ways, already achieved their artist dream, as they write songs, develop their artist image and hold concerts in the present. Whether this current performance will lead to world fame may be regarded as subordinate, precisely because their self-initiated artist education already creates positive results regarding the strengthening of their friendship and the development of active musical agencies. One year after the interview, GunnInga released their first EP album with some of their original songs. On the cover, they are dressed in white gowns, like “white angels.” With mischievous smiles, they give the finger to anyone who tries to “kill their vibe.”<sup>6</sup>

### About the author

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<sup>6</sup> “Don’t Kill My Vibe” is the debut single by the Norwegian singer and songwriter Sigrid.

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