



Pan in Poland with UNICEF

by Adam Mold, Ambers Steel Band Musical Director
and Vice-Director of 'Fundacja Ambers'.

"If the Second World War wouldn't have happened, this instrument, possibly wouldn't have existed". It was a statement I thought of on the spot, grasping to connect with the audience I found myself in front of - a hall full of Polish and Ukrainian teens who have been thrust together whether they liked it or not since the abrupt invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As debatable as the claim was, it seemed to have the desired effect of piquing the interest of children and youth in schools across Gdynia for the next 6 weeks of a UNICEF funded project.

Hitting the rewind slightly, as some of you might know Ambers Steel Band is the only Pan movement currently in Poland and since its inception in 2013 has always endeavored to bring people, mainly children and youth to date, together whatever their background to experience music, and not merely learn it. We have always enjoyed a good relationship with the powers that be in Gdynia City Hall, and the end of 2021 saw us being granted a room for our practices in a large local school. We didn't know it at the time, but when war broke out, this school would become a focal point for receiving Ukrainian refugees and arranging places for them to stay. It was from here that children and

teenagers were placed into Polish classes. While the intent was good, it was plain to see that this created new problems over time. The Ukrainian youth didn't understand Polish and so slowed the progress for the rest of the class, many of which were in preparation for final exams. This led to resentment, not only between Polish youth, who had just themselves come out of a global pandemic, and the Ukrainian, but between the Ukrainian youths themselves. Fights between traumatised Ukrainians became commonplace in schools and most teachers were not equipped to deal with the situation, not having had time to prepare for a wave of refugees of this magnitude beforehand.

Our own charity organisation 'Fundacja Ambers' (The 'Ambers Foundation') has been heavily involved since March 2022, headed by my wife, organising Polish lessons for women who suddenly have found themselves in an alien environment. They've had to find jobs and be able to communicate and take care of everyday things that most take for granted. Part of that project was training and equipping teachers and volunteers on how to recognise and deal with trauma, with

the help of a specialised psychologist. An idea had begun to form of a city wide project where a team of specially trained teachers would be sent to every major school in the city which had a large population, not only of Ukrainian refugees, but foreigners from lots of different places.

The aim was to focus on what makes us similar as opposed to different and promote tolerance and empathy. Steel Pan, in our minds is the living embodiment of what we were trying to convey and so after every class in a school would have had their workshops, at the end of the week, the whole school would gather to see a mini concert - my wife and I playing a number of recognisable songs while talking about how Pan brings together communities.

As the project took shape it grabbed the attention of UNICEF who funded the entire project. Come late November the program was in full swing. So there I was, standing there, aware that some of these kids had recently lost everything and seen things I wouldn't wish on anyone. I was also starkly aware that many of them didn't even want to be there. We went on to tell the tale inspired by Kim Johnson's docu-drama 'PAN - Our Music Odyssey' of youths stealing oil barrels from an American airbase after the war and starting the flame of a movement which is now global.

For younger children, we focused on the story of Samuel Mold, our son who dreamed of playing Panorama in London and now dreams of his first Panorama in Trinidad. We would invite the audience to try the instrument out and explain how it's made and tuned. The feedback from teachers and headmasters has been overwhelmingly positive, but by far the most satisfying aspect was the engagement of the children, often distanced at the start but by the end coming up to us and flooding us with questions and often just to say thank you.

Ambers Steel Band celebrates its tenth Anniversary this Spring of 2023 and as we reflect on where we have been and what we have done in this time, a standout moment for sure has been the ability to take an instrument which continues to thrive worldwide and use it to give a slither of hope that something good can come out of conflict whether it be global, or in your own class or workplace. Pan continues to inspire and the healing power of music is undeniable.

