

Anthropocentric and Ecocentric Perspectives on Music and Environment

By: [Aaron S. Allen](#) and Jeff Todd Titon

Allen, Aaron S. and Jeff Todd Titon. “Anthropocentric and Ecocentric Perspectives on Music and Environment,” editorial introduction to *MUSICultures*, vol. 46/2 (2019): 1-6.

Made available courtesy of The Canadian Society for Traditional Music:

<https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MC/article/view/30487>

© The Authors. Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from *MUSICultures*.

Abstract:

In both French and English, the word “environs” means near, in time and/or in space: be it an approximate amount of chronology, some roughly measurable distance, or a place near a specific or general location. This idea of being “around” or “circumscribing” is fundamental to the term “environment,” which is the topic of this special issue of *MUSICultures*. Environment is context — context for someone, some thing, or some place. The environment constitutes the physical surroundings that contribute to the person, thing, or place’s existence, characteristics, and growth (or lack thereof): not only food, water, and oxygen, but also nurture, stimulation, and protection. The environment is physical and cultural, random and ordered, safe and perilous. For humans, the Earth is our environment, and the Earth contains countless environments and relationships between them. Even as it is impossibly vast for a single human to grasp as a singular context, and even as the Earth is too immeasurably complex in its workings for one person to understand, we still exist only in nearness — to each other and to the Earth, its other life forms, and its abiotic features. It may seem simplistic, but it is nevertheless worthwhile to emphasize the following: without the Earth near, we humans don’t exist.

Keywords: ecomusicology | environment | ecocentrism | ecologies

Article:

***Note: Full text of article below

INTRODUCTION

Anthropocentric and Ecocentric Perspectives on Music and Environment

AARON S. ALLEN and JEFF TODD TIRON

In both French and English, the word “environs” means near, in time and/or in space: be it an approximate amount of chronology, some roughly measurable distance, or a place near a specific or general location. This idea of being “around” or “circumscribing” is fundamental to the term “environment,” which is the topic of this special issue of *MUSICultures*. Environment is context — context for someone, some thing, or some place. The environment constitutes the physical surroundings that contribute to the person, thing, or place’s existence, characteristics, and growth (or lack thereof): not only food, water, and oxygen, but also nurture, stimulation, and protection. The environment is physical and cultural, random and ordered, safe and perilous. For humans, the Earth is our environment, and the Earth contains countless environments and relationships between them. Even as it is impossibly vast for a single human to grasp as a singular context, and even as the Earth is too immeasurably complex in its workings for one person to understand, we still exist only in nearness — to each other and to the Earth, its other life forms, and its abiotic features. It may seem simplistic, but it is nevertheless worthwhile to emphasize the following: without the Earth near, we humans don’t exist.

Scholars of music and sound are increasingly taking an interest in this fundamental relationship. It should be obvious, of course, given the absolute necessity of the Earth to our existence, but most humanist and social science scholars are anthropocentric: focused on the human, often at the expense of non-human life and of the abiotic. Scientists have long taken an interest in the non-human and abiotic, and it has fallen primarily to the academic discipline

of ecology to try to grasp some of the vastness and complexity of the Earth given the social turmoil (war, hate, exploitation, etc.) and environmental crises (biodiversity loss, pollution, climate change, etc.) currently threatening planetary health, including of course the health of human societies. Ecologists consider the relationships between organisms and their biotic and abiotic environments. That may seem similar to what musicologists and ethnomusicologists do in studying the relationships among humans and music/sound, but for too long we musicologists and ethnomusicologists have excluded or minimized the abiotic and non-human biotic environments in scholarship on music and sound. Humanists in general are subject to a similar critique, but thanks to movements such as posthumanism and the environmental humanities, we are increasingly coming to realize that such anthropocentric myopia undermines our work, the objects and subjects we study, the relationships we hold dear, the sounds and ideas we enjoy, and even our very existence. Publications, conferences, and conversations are reminding us to listen up, look around, feel more of our world, and not just focus on the human. The recent special issue of this journal on *Ecologies*, which we edited and for which we provided an introduction and afterword, is but one instance among many showing that we scholars of music and sound are broadening our perspectives as well (Allen and Titon 2018).

Confronted with 55 proposal abstracts for the *Ecologies* special issue that could at most contain about a dozen articles, we realized it would be inevitable that some excellent proposals would have to be left out. We alerted journal editor Heather Sparling to those we thought were promising but for various reasons could not be fit into the special issue, and she invited some of them to consider contributing to a future environmental issue, one that she would edit and for which we would write an introduction but not be involved in the editorial process. Each of the five articles in this issue relates in one way or another to the environment, sometimes literally and always metaphorically.

In situating DelCiampo's and Dettman's articles, it's helpful to recall pioneering ecocritic Leo Marx's tripartite division of literature's depiction of environment into civilization, pastoral, and wilderness (Marx 1964). Both of these articles consider music and environment in terms of pastoral, a literary genre traceable to Hesiod, Theocritus, and Virgil that depicts the pleasures and virtues of country life in harmony with nature, in contrast with the corrupting artificialities and commercial impulses of cities, and also with the stark reality of a wilderness where nature is at best indifferent and at worst hostile and dangerous to human survival. Dettman's article is set quite literally in the pastoral, where sonic and other expressive connections between Angolan herders in the province of Cunene and their cattle are explored. Sunmin Yoon's

article in the *Ecologies* special issue explores such sonic connections between herders in Mongolia and their animals in detail from an ecological perspective.

DelCiampo's "cabin in the woods" raises the pastoral to the level Marx considered to be cultural mythology, a recurring desire expressed by a society's writers and artists to leave urban civilization behind and live for a while closer to nature. Thoreau, as Marx pointed out, not only wrote about pastoral simplicity but, in the mid-1840s, also lived it for two years in a tiny house (to use today's terminology) that he built near the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts (Titon 2015). Periodically this urge for pastoral gives North Americans nature walks, forest bathing, vacations in the countryside, summer camps for youth, and the greater commitment of taking up a new life (homesteading, going back to the land, organic farming). A similar periodic movement for renewal based on going back to origins may also be found in such practices as constitutional law and religious reformations. For musicians, it involves a desire to discard complex production values associated with artificiality and return music to an earlier state of purity and clarity. Indeed, because the legend of Thoreau's withdrawal is so well known even to musicians who have only a superficial acquaintance with Thoreau's life and writings, his retreat functions as a myth for the move away from the corrupt, compromised world of commercial music-making to a cleansing environment in a barn-studio or cabin, close within the natural world. There a simpler music is made; the album is recorded and brought back into the civilized world again as a signal of a powerful restoration that, paradoxically, is intended to ensure virtue-intact success, albeit within the very same world of commerce from which the musicians withdrew to purify themselves. Thoreau's critique of commercial values in *Walden* was so contrary to industry-driven Euro-America, however, that despite his ambitions he failed to achieve widespread recognition as a writer until many decades after his death. Indeed, most of his townspeople regarded him as an idler and a crank, a common fate for like-minded cultural critics even today.¹

In response to the environmental crisis, numerous composers and performers have made music intended to raise environmental consciousness, to protest the anthropogenic activities contributing to global warming, and to call for political action. Indigenous peoples throughout the world have made especially strong contributions here in response to the enclosures, desecrations, and destruction of life-giving, sacred spaces and places. Stévanice and Lacasse explore the sonic details of a contemporary artistic production in which a throat-singer imagines herself to be the body of Earth undergoing the torture of fracking, and in response moving her body and uttering sounds that witnesses to the performance understand as expressions of great pain and grief. In this

way Tanya Tagaq transforms the traditional practice of Inuit throat-singing, with its evocations of sonic expressions of living beings, into a contemporary environmentalist statement, the artist herself becoming a symbolic embodiment of Gaia, the living Earth, in agony while being fracked.

The cultural and physical landscapes of Iceland provide the environmental context for Vlasis's consideration of the various local and globalizing forces that whirl together around *rímur* societies: modern social organizations that continue a long historical tradition of singing poetry and that represent the complex frictions inherent in Icelandic identity. Vlasis draws on anthropological work on globalization as well as ecomusicology to consider the role of place when considering the music of Iceland. Place, and hence the environmental context, has had a prominent role in the consideration of music in other Nordic countries, as, for example, with Juha Torvinen's article on Finnish composer Outi Tarkiainen in the *Ecologies* special issue.

As we discussed and as many authors illustrated in the *Ecologies* special issue, there are many approaches to the term ecology, including valid and intellectually rigorous ways that ecological scientists would not recognize as ecology and ways that dispense entirely with ideas of environmental crises. Kaur's article furthers this point by deploying "affective ecology" to explore an ethnomusicology of multisensorial integration in Sikh sonic worship. Kaur is emphasizing the cultural mediation of perception, hence focusing on the human and excluding, as she put it, those "natural ecologies or evo[cations] of harmonious nature." Human perception and relationships of course happen in an environmental context, and in that sense Kaur's anthropocentric focus is most closely aligned with the ecological psychology developed by James Gibson. Randall Harlow's and Daryl Jamieson's articles in the *Ecologies* special issue also connected with Gibson's approach to understanding human perception in complex environmental contexts.

Paradoxically, the mainstream of the modern Environmental Movement has been anthropocentric — concerned with the physical environment, yes, but as a context for human life. Thus, the Movement's most important task has been to protect the environment for humans. To be sure, the Movement has included such goals as protecting endangered species, preserving biodiversity, and sealing up the hole in the ozone layer. But most of the science, the money, and the policy has gone toward doing things that benefit us: cleaning up the air we humans breathe and the water we drink, protecting places for human enjoyment, making us safe from atomic radiation, and so on. As long as the field of environmental humanities retains the word humanities, then by definition the environment must be understood chiefly in relation to human beings. Ecological science, on the other hand, developed as an effort to understand the functionality and

dysfunctionality of whole environmental groupings and systems within nature — i.e., ecosystems, which of course include humans as but a part. Therefore, ecology is ecocentric, not anthropocentric. This distinction presents the scholar of music and sound with rich possibilities.

Interested in the relationship of human music to the environment, the scholar may work as a humanist or posthumanist and produce scholarship that is rightly considered environmental. Or the scholar may adopt an ecocentric framework, one that privileges the environment. The ecocentric music scholar is interested in the environment for the sake of the environment, and human music in relation to it. So, for example, whereas the environmental humanist may study the effects of noise pollution on humans, the ecocentric music scholar studies the effects upon the environment of the enormous amounts of fossil fuel energy used to power everything from the loud noises made at live concerts and by jet planes taking musicians on world tours, to the digital delivery of music over the internet. The one aims to prevent environmental harm to humans, the other aims to prevent humans from harming the environment. Or, the ecocentric music scholar studies the conservation of endangered species used in musical instrument manufacture such as certain species of spruce, or Brazilian rosewood, or pernambuco. Ecocentric music scholarship breaks down the hierarchy that would have the human being atop a teleological ladder. Ecocentric music scholarship de-centres the human: the environment is no longer regarded merely as context, but as “the thing itself” that includes the human along with everything else, the biotic and abiotic. Ecocentrism in music studies is a revolution in perspective, not dissimilar to the Copernican turn from the geocentric to the heliocentric. Ecocentric music scholarship includes such fields as bioacoustics, zoomusicology, and studies of animal sound-making and communication. The music scholar may study music and the environment by adapting and adopting the methods of ecologically inflected fields outside of the biological sciences, such as cultural ecology, ecological economics, ecojustice, and so on, operating on a shifting middle ground that may be anthropocentric, ecocentric, or some particular balance between the two.

Environment is both a context for study and a focus of study. The former may be anthropocentric, while the latter may be ecocentric. Neither is correct or better; both are necessary. But it is worth emphasizing that, previous centuries of practice notwithstanding, scholars of music and sound are capable of doing both. This multiplicity is evident in the term “ecomusicology,” particularly in its formulation as “ecomusicologies” (Allen and Dawe 2016): the term may be interpreted as “ecological musicology” and take (with influence from ecological science) an ecocentric approach, and it can also be understood as “ecocritical musicology” and take (with influence from literary studies) an anthropocentric

approach. As with comprehending the vastness and complexity of the Earth, these are not simplistic binaries but are rather nodes on a continuum, momentary categories we humans create to understand our nearness to each other, non-human life, and the myriad aspects of our abiotic surroundings: in other words, the environment. 🍀

Notes

1. Wendell Berry, who has made a career of farming and writing about the virtues of farm work, titled a collection of his essays *Another Turn of the Crank* (Berry 2011).

References

- Allen, Aaron S. and Jeff Todd Titon, eds. 2018. *MUSICultures* 45 (1-2). Ecologies Special Issue.
- Allen, Aaron S. and Kevin Dawe, eds. 2016. *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Culture, Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Berry, Wendell. 2011. *Another Turn of the Crank*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.
- Marx, Leo. 1964. *The Machine in the Garden*. New York: Oxford.
- Titon, Jeff Todd. 2015. Thoreau's Ear. *Sound Studies* 1 (1): 144-154.