

# Colloquy

## Ecomusicology: Ecocriticism and Musicology

AARON S. ALLEN

Since the 1970s, interest in the relationship between humanity and the natural environment has emerged throughout the academy. Today, professional societies and degree programs exist for environmental fields in biology, chemistry, economics, history, and literature, among many others. These fields have led to understanding the world we inhabit—and to remediating some of the mistakes we have inflicted on the planet. Consider just a few of their contributions: respect for the great webs of biodiversity, with the concomitant realization that much of life on earth is going extinct, quickly; new hybrid technologies and energies that can fuel civilization by the renewable power of the sun; accounting techniques that incorporate externalities, i.e., pollution, into life-cycle costs and the bottom line; connections between physical environments and cultures' past successes and failures; and stories that teach us about humanity's diverse places in nature. Environmental work has burgeoned in the sciences, but all academic fields have been greened, including the humanities.<sup>1</sup>

At least since Ancient Greece, thought about music has considered relationships between music and nature. And as environmental awareness has become more widespread, an increasing number of musicological works have engaged with these subjects.<sup>2</sup> Some of the aims of this new (if not always explicitly named) ecomusicology resonate with concerns expressed in previous centuries—how art reflects, relates to, or relies on nature. Yet as we witness the impacts of climate change, species loss, deforestation, pollution, and resource exploitation, and as we see how so many other intellectual disciplines have contributed to both causes and solutions, we must ask:

1. See, for example, Parini, "Greening of the Humanities"; Collett and Karakashian, eds., *Greening the College Curriculum*; and Rosendale, *Greening of Literary Scholarship*. (For full references, see the combined list of Works Cited at the end of the Colloquy.)

2. Some are cited in the ensuing contributions, and many more are available via the online bibliography provided by the Ecocriticism Study Group (ESG) of the American Musicological Society, <http://www.ams-esg.org>. In 2007, the AMS approved the formation of the ESG, which has provided a forum for many, including all the authors in this colloquy, to engage with ecomusicology.



- Is musicology part of the problem or part of the solution?
- What role does musicology play in the welfare and survival of humanity?
- How does nature inform music, and what can the study of music tell us about humans, other species, the built environment, the natural world, constructed “nature,” and their connections?
- Does musicology adapt us better to life on earth, or does it sometimes estrange us from life?
- Does it contribute more to our survival than to our extinction?
- Is the environmental crisis relevant to music—and more importantly, is musicology relevant to solving it?<sup>3</sup>

Answers will vary with time, place, particular topics, individual scholars, and institutional predilections, but the contributors to this colloquy seek to engage in this discussion for the benefit of the entire musicological community. We cannot offer definitive answers to these questions, but we can clear some ground, provide some insights, and promote further dialogue.

I have been reluctant to define an emerging subfield as yet lacking in consensus, but we must start somewhere, acknowledging that disciplinary boundaries can be changed, redefined, and opened to multiple interpretations. As I explain in a forthcoming entry for the revised (2nd) edition of *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, ecomusicology considers the relationships of music, culture, and nature; i.e., it is the study of musical and sonic issues, both textual and performative, as they relate to ecology and the environment.

The multivalent terms in the above definition provide possibilities for diverse interpretations and applications. *Environment*, *ecology*, and *nature* (and the scare-quoted “*nature*”) are immensely complex words that are rich with contested meanings. For the purposes of this discussion consider the following: *Environment* is the nonhuman physical world, i.e., the natural world with all its living creatures and nonliving objects and natural processes (while useful, this conception can promote a problematic human–other duality). *Ecology*, on the other hand, is holistic, relating to the “eco-” prefix (from the Greek root *oikos*, “household”), and constituting the web of relationships of all living organisms, including humans, with their contextual physical environments. Related to both environment and ecology, architects and urban planners use *built environment* to refer to humans’ manufactured world of dwellings, buildings, infrastructure, constructed landscapes, and urban social spaces, as well as the interactions of these places with each other and humans. In response to the question in the title of her book *What is Nature?*, Kate Soper distinguishes *nature*, i.e., the referent of nature-endorsing ecologists who emphasize the reality of the natural world, from scare-quoted “*nature*,” i.e., the referent of the nature-skeptical postmodernists who emphasize the cultural

3. With these questions, I am building on Glotfelty, “Introduction,” xix and xxi, as well as Guy, “Flowing Down Taiwan’s Tamsui River,” 218–19 and 242–43, who in turn is building on Meeker, *Comedy of Survival*, 4.



construction of nature. Raymond Williams gives superlative status to both *nature* and *culture* as among the most complex words in the English language.<sup>4</sup> Add further the equally complex and contested term *music*, and with ecomusicology as defined above we have the makings of either a philosophical quagmire—or, as I and others see it, a socially engaged musicology that seeks to understand not just music, musicians, and/or musical communities, but also their interconnections in the world, both natural and socially constructed.

Ecomusicology has not sprung forth fully formed from an intellectual vacuum. In addition to important past and continuing work by composers, acoustic ecologists, ethnomusicologists, and interdisciplinary scholars, a primary background is ecocriticism, or “ecological criticism.”<sup>5</sup> Ecocriticism is a field of literature studying cultural products (text, film, advertising, other media, etc.) that imagine and portray human–environment relationships variously from scholarly, political, and/or activist viewpoints.<sup>6</sup> Thus, ecomusicology is not “ecological musicology” but rather “ecocritical musicology.” Ecomusicology continues the trend of music scholarship drawing on literary methodologies: in decades past, philology; more recently, feminist studies.

As gender and sexuality studies have informed and even fundamentally changed the definition of musicology, so too can ecocriticism contribute to musicology.<sup>7</sup> But such influences are not always uniform, mutual, or direct, nor should they be. The authors in this colloquy provide diverse perspectives on ecomusicology in general and on their own specific engagements with it. Daniel Grimley considers cultural geography and landscape studies to contextualize his ecomusicological reading of Sibelius’s tone poem *Tapiola*. Denise Von Glahn engages with women composers’ relationships with the natural world in the context of the complex history of power dynamics that characterize the construction of American national identities. Holly Watkins takes an ecological approach that considers how music intermeshes with imagination, place, and placelessness. Alexander Rehding encourages us to eschew the more typical crisis approach of environmental studies and instead to emphasize nostalgia, which he argues is better suited to music and musicological study. Finally, I consider the potential contributions of and challenges faced by ecomusicology in confronting the cultural problem underlying the environmental crisis. Each author adds his or her own particular research projects

4. Williams, *Keywords*, 87 and 219.

5. Such scholars include Steven Feld, François Bernard Mâche, R. Murray Schafer, Barry Truax, and Ellen Waterman, all of whom defy simplistic scholarly categorization.

6. An excellent introduction is Garrard, *Ecocriticism*. Ecocritics have only recently considered musical topics; the British journal *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* has a forthcoming special edition dedicated to music.

7. Compare the entry “Musicology” in the first and second editions of *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980 and 2001, respectively); in the section “Disciplines of musicology,” the subheading “Gender and sexual studies” (along with the subheadings “Sociomusicology” and “Psychology, hearing”) replaced “Dance and dance history.”



along the way, and, in addition to emphasizing the importance of place, all the contributions seek to bring out the critical and self-critical elements of ecocritical musicology. Together, we hope that the issues raised here encourage thoughtful scholarship in diverse areas, not only in the realm of a self-conscious ecomusicology as subfield but also as a tool in the greater musicological toolbox.

## Music, Landscape, Attunement: Listening to Sibelius's *Tapiola*

DANIEL M. GRIMLEY

Ecocriticism unfolds a complex and variegated panorama of interrelated domains of academic research, critical literature, and political activism. My own ecocritical excursions have been stimulated by the work of cultural geographers and literary scholars, and further by a series of conversations and exchanges sponsored by the Landscape and Environment Programme of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the U.K.<sup>1</sup> During such discussions, I have often felt like an outsider—an awkward and naive interloper, similar to the protagonist in E. M. Forster's 1911 short story "The Other Side of the Hedge." Forster's hero is a rambler (that characteristically English mode of tourism and cultural mobility), who abandons the main highway to discover a green space beyond where he becomes bewitched by "the magic song of nightingales, and the odour of invisible hay, and stars piercing the fading sky."<sup>2</sup> Forster's story is about class and social convention. But the field/hedge model also offers a good starting point for understanding interdisciplinary research of the kind demanded by ecocriticism: as a geometric pattern of interlocking fields of knowledge, seemingly traversed by a network of individual paths which tempt the unwary scholar toward greener pastures on the other side of the boundaries ("hedges") that separate disciplines.

The idea of landscape lies at the heart of ecocriticism, and hence is central to discussions about how an ecomusicology might be developed. I am acutely sensitive, however, to the ideological implications of my metaphor: the landscape of fields and hedges hymned by Forster refers to a specifically European tradition (principally English, but also the French "bocage," whose Old French root "bosc" means "wood"). Since the eighteenth century, this tradition has conceived of landscape as an essentially visual, scopic, regime—as something seen or surveyed. It is a scene or prospect onto which historical events or characters can be projected. As part of this spectacle—the patterned

1. See particularly the seminal collection by Leyshon et al., *Place of Music*; for a more recent interdisciplinary account, see Sanders, *Cultural Geography of Early Modern Drama*. Details of the AHRC program are available at <http://www.landscape.ac.uk> (accessed 25 March 2011).

2. Forster, "Other Side of the Hedge," 29.