

Ecomusicology

By: [Aaron S. Allen](#)

Allen, Aaron S. "Ecomusicology," *Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2013).

Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press:

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2240765>

© 2013 Oxford University Press. Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Oxford University Press. This version of the document is not the version of record.

Abstract:

Ecomusicology, or ecocritical musicology, is the study of music, culture, and nature in all the complexities of those terms. Ecomusicology considers musical and sonic issues, both textual and performative, related to ecology and the natural environment.

Keywords: ecomusicology | ecocritical musicology | ecocriticism

Article:

Ecomusicology, or ecocritical musicology, is the study of music, culture, and nature in all the complexities of those terms. Ecomusicology considers musical and sonic issues, both textual and performative, related to ecology and the natural environment.

Interest in ecomusicology has paralleled increasing environmental concern in North America since 1970, a period of greening in academia when environmental studies developed in the physical, natural, and social sciences as well as the humanities. The term "ecomusicology" gained currency in the decades around 2000 in North American and Scandinavian academic circles. Early uses of it (e.g., Troup) reflected scientific ecology, i.e. interrelationships among organisms and their physical environments. More recently, however, it is "ecocriticism" that combines with Charles Seeger's holistic sense of "musicology" to form "ecomusicology."

Literary ecocriticism ("ecological criticism") studies cultural products that imagine and portray human-environment relationships. Ecocritical scholars describe such connections and offer interpretive, political, and/or critical approaches: ecocritics read into the subtexts of various media from literature to film to advertising, encourage awareness of and concern for environmental crises, and self-critically subject such interpretive and political positions to scrutiny (Garrard). Music scholarship has a history of drawing on literary methodologies (e.g., gender and sexuality studies), and ecomusicology continues this trend.

The "musicology" of "ecomusicology" is more precisely what Seeger propounded as including what today are historical musicology, ethnomusicology, and other related interdisciplinary fields.

On the one hand, this encompassing sense results in ecomusicology as an implicit umbrella term that may bring together fields that do not usually interact. On the other hand, such broadness allows scholars considerable flexibility to combine diverse disciplines in ecocritical studies of music. “Nature” is one of the most complex words in the English language, and the study of it, as with the similarly contested words “music” and “culture,” can take many approaches.

The label ecomusicology may be applied to a diverse array of scholarly and artistic endeavors. Early concerted efforts to connect human and non-human soundworlds came from Soundscape studies and acoustic ecology. R(aymond) Murray Schafer founded the field with the World Soundscape Project (since 1993 the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology), which spread from Canada to the United States, Europe, and beyond, and which blends approaches from composition, sound design and engineering, acoustics, and general music and cultural scholarship in an effort to understand and manage sonic environments. Acoustic ecologists and sound and soundscape artists take both artistic and activist approaches to represent the world around them and to increase awareness about issues such as urban development, water pollution, hearing loss, and noise pollution. Another interdisciplinary field is biomusic, in which scientists and musicians collaborate to study non-human soundworlds, e.g. of birds or whales, in relation to human evolution and musicality (Gray and others). The development of hydrophones in the 1960s allowed cetologists to record whales, whose songs captured artistic and public imaginations. Recent multi-species engagements have resulted in historical and cross-cultural studies, semiotic approaches in zoomusicology, and philosophical considerations of interspecies musicking.

Ecomusicological approaches to considering human musical systems, traditions, perceptions, and compositions include studies of influence, mimesis, and/or reference of the natural environment using textual, sound, and/or extra-musical means. Such studies have come primarily from ethnomusicology and historical musicology, whose professional institutions reflect this interest: in 2011 the Society for Ethnomusicology established the Ecomusicology Special Interest Group, and in 2007 the American Musicological Society established the Ecocriticism Study Group, which maintains an Internet ecomusicology bibliography. Considerations of place are a common ecomusicological theme, as with Feld’s classic study of Kaluli acoustemology in Papua New Guinea. Ethnomusicologists normally connect sound and place, but Guy has encouraged a more explicitly ecomusicological agenda that approaches the political and critical more than the descriptive and interpretive. Historical studies of places and regions in North America have considered the influence of local environments on music (Von Glahn; Toliver). Sustainability concerns arise when using unique local material resources for global musical instrument culture (Allen) and when considering local and global pop music making (Pedelty). Ecomusicological topoi (birds, the pastoral) are considered in most historical epochs, and the diversity of approaches continues with popular music, gender, opera studies, and Western music theory. The number of German musicological examinations of nature since the 1990s led Rehding to conclude that ecomusicology is not just a “hot topic” of the moment but rather is a serious field well-suited to ask fundamental questions, such as “what is this stuff called music?” (pp.305 and 320).

Indeed, ecomusicology can offer fresh approaches to confronting old problems in music and culture via a socially engaged scholarship that connects them with environmental concerns.

Bibliography

M. Troup, ed.: *Guildhall School of Music and Drama Review* (1972)

S. Feld: *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Philadelphia, 2/1990)

P.M. Gray and others: "The Music of Nature and the Nature of Music," *Science* (5 January 2001), 52–4

A. Rehding: "Eco-musicology," *JRMA*, 127/2 (2002), 305–20

D. Von Glahn: *The Sounds of Place: Music and the American Cultural Landscape* (Boston, 2003)

G. Garrard: *Ecocriticism* (London and New York, 2004)

B. Toliver: "Eco-ing in the Canyon: Ferde Grofé's Grand Canyon Suite and the Transformation of Wilderness," *JAMS*, 57 (2004), 325–67

N. Guy: "Flowing Down Taiwan's Tasumi River: Towards an Ecomusicology of the Environmental Imagination," *EthM*, 53 (2009), 218–48

A.S. Allen and others: "Colloquy: Ecomusicology," *JAMS*, 64 (2011), 391–424

A.S. Allen: "'Fatto di Fiemme': Stradivari and the Musical Trees of the Paneveggio," *Invaluable Trees: Cultures of Nature, 1660–1830*, ed. L. Auricchio, E. H. Cook, and G. Pacini (2012), 301–315

M. Pedelty: *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk, and the Environment* (Philadelphia, 2012)

T.D. Stimeling: "Music, Place, and Identity in the Central Appalachian Mountaintop Removal Mining Debate," *American Music*, 30 (2012), 1–29

Ecocriticism Study Group of the American Musicological Society: *Ecomusicology: Music, Culture, Nature* (n.d.), <<http://www.ams-net.org/studygroups/>>