

*Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: An Ecological Perspective* (edited by Huib Schippers and Catherine Grant, Oxford University Press, 2016) [book review]

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**Abstract:**

In *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures*, 14 specialists contribute to a tightly woven book illustrating diverse musical practices from around the world using a theoretical framework regarding the preservation of endangered traditions. The volume is the result of a five-year research project (2009–14) in Australia that linked scholars from England, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States. The concepts and concerns stem from international work beginning in the early twenty-first century as formulated in various UNESCO conventions and initiatives regarding intangible cultural heritage. The project has resulted in other publications and an associated website, which will continue the applied ethnomusicology demonstrated so well in the three theoretical chapters and nine case studies of this book. Other research using the same framework will likely follow, both from these authors and others providing comparable examples.

**Keywords:** book review | sustainability | ecomusicology | ethnomusicology

**Article:**

In *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures*, 14 specialists contribute to a tightly woven book illustrating diverse musical practices from around the world using a theoretical framework regarding the preservation of endangered traditions. The volume is the result of a five-year research project (2009–14) in Australia that linked scholars from England, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States. The concepts and concerns stem from international work beginning in the early twenty-first century as formulated in various UNESCO conventions and initiatives regarding intangible cultural heritage. The project has resulted in other publications

and an associated website, which will continue the applied ethnomusicology demonstrated so well in the three theoretical chapters and nine case studies of this book. Other research using the same framework will likely follow, both from these authors and others providing comparable examples.

All case studies follow the structure established in the two introductory chapters. Huib Schippers introduces the project and lays out the 'Five-Domain Framework' that guided the entire project: systems of learning music, musicians and communities, contexts and constructs, regulations and infrastructure, and media and the music industry. Catherine Grant then elaborates on each of those five domains along with the additional area of documentation and archiving. All of the ensuing case studies are organised identically: after a concise overview, a background section provides the basics of the musical tradition being considered (each author organises this section differently as necessary). Thereafter, each case study provides five sections subtitled as per the five domains (and again, each author organises material within the section as necessary). Each domain analysis concludes with a summary sub-section on 'Implications for Sustainability', and each chapter then concludes with a section 'Issues and Initiatives for Sustainability'.

The book would provide for an excellent teaching framework in an upper-level undergraduate or postgraduate seminar in (applied) ethnomusicology. The volume is reliably consistent; one can read the first two chapters and then jump around to any selection of the case studies that are of interest, and one can be confident that each chapter will provide necessary context to get up to speed on the subject. Although the case studies do not reference each other, they all follow the model (but not slavishly) and so are readily comparable. Every chapter is well and accessibly written by either a single author or a pair of authors who bring deep experience with the topics, as represented in their writing style, insights, bibliography and supplementary materials. The publisher has provided a secure website that is referenced occasionally throughout the book (login credentials are provided in the preface). The website is organised by chapter, and each section includes some array of the following: lists of further reading and listening, glossaries of terms, lists of interviews and other research process information, and links to relevant sections of the *Sound Futures* public website ([www.soundfutures.org](http://www.soundfutures.org)). This latter website provides texts summarised directly from and organised according to the framework of *Sustainable Futures*, although some case studies are enriched online with select videos and colour photographs. There is some redundancy between these two websites that could make for minor confusion using them and the book for teaching, especially with some inconsistent titles and different materials included for each chapter. Nevertheless, students would be able to navigate and make use of the materials with advance warning and specific guidance from an instructor, who would probably find more material useful for understanding, teaching and research than students would find for exploration and learning.

The nine case studies offer a great diversity of practices. Despite the cover art of skeleton mariachi musicians (implying loss of tradition via the parallel with *El Día de los Muertos*), most of the musical traditions are not endangered (i.e., according to various UNESCO designations such as the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage). Nevertheless, all case studies offer insights and practices that could help safeguard these and other traditions. James Burns describes the thriving practice of southern Ewe dance-drumming at community events in Ghana; musicians are not paid well and recordings are rare, so the tradition is not

institutionalised and does not get much attention. Schippers considers the well-established tradition of elite Hindustani music in the context of changing practices in Northern India; even with an insightful SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, which is unique in the book, he finds no significant concerns for the tradition. Linda Barwick and Myfany Turpin study the women and songs of *yawulyu/awelye* in central Australia, focusing on the need for inter-generational learning, archiving and documenting an aboriginal tradition threatened by changing community contexts. In the chapter on Balinese gamelan, Peter Dunbar-Hall reports that already in the first part of the twentieth century observers such as Colin McPhee were concerned with the decline of gamelan, but the diverse tradition remains strong (if changing) due, in part, to important connections with religion, Balinese identity and tourism on the island. John Drummond's case study of western opera considers the contemporary global status of the historical European genre. Such a wide scope presents profound research challenges, which he addresses via surveys of and interviews with opera practitioners, students, teachers, administrators and composers from around the world (with some emphasis on Asia, where the tradition is thriving). Drummond observes that opera was born out of seeking to renew something lost (Ancient Greek sung drama) and has constantly faced questions of crisis, with contemporary concerns including funding, education (of performers and audiences), repertoire renewal and new media (such as live streaming). Philip Hayward and Sueo Kuwahara's case study on *shima-uta*, 'island songs' from the Amami Islands of Japan, contrasts productively with global opera by considering a tiny, bounded practice that has spread to broader Japanese culture despite its poetic relationships to local dialect. Keith Howard considers the invented tradition of Korean samulnori, a percussion ensemble and genre that have become iconic since being created in the late 1970s and that have spread throughout Korea and to the diaspora; samulnori is based, however, on historical ensembles included on various UNESCO lists of intangible cultural heritage. Howard addresses the tensions between short history, insufficient threat and promotion that result in debates about official support for samulnori. In their chapter on Mexican mariachi, Patricia Shehan Campbell and Leticia Soto Flores also address the UNESCO listing of a successful yet variegated tradition in changing contexts; given their insightful question regarding 'whose mariachi music will continue' (298), they argue that it is necessary to continually seek out strategies to promote and preserve music. In the final case study, Esbjörn Wettermark and Håkan Lundström address a threatened tradition listed by UNESCO as needing safeguarding: the Vietnamese vocal music of *ca trù*. Suppressed in the mid-twentieth century after nearly a millennium of development, *ca trù* is being revived; given economic and educational challenges, it is not being institutionalised, although the fascinating discussion of 'mindsapes' helps explain different approaches to continuing the tradition. Schippers and Grant's concluding chapter further develops a model to approach music cultures as ecosystems; after addressing the five domains with regard to the case studies, they lay out a comparison with ecology, address various factors developed in Grant's other work related to language endangerment and conclude by emphasising the importance of the community (rather than aural) aspects of music.

I agree entirely with Schippers and Grant's emphasis on the social over the aural. More generally, I imagine that the excellent case studies in *Sustainable Futures* will make lasting contributions to the ethnomusicological literature. Nevertheless, I do hope that the project's framing theory will be revised and surpassed soon. In essence, *Sustainable Futures* addresses challenges and changing contexts for music; while the editors and authors have adopted keywords that could deal with such issues, they have neither engaged these terms appropriately nor deployed them

effectively. The title is merely an extended analogy. I am disappointed at the lack of adequate engagement with the meanings and vast areas of inquiry around the two keywords ‘sustainability’ and ‘ecology’.

Although the introduction defends ‘sustainability’ over ‘maintenance’, the authors then use those and many other terms interchangeably and with no apparent distinction: preservation, conservation, viability, survival, enduring, vitality, stewardship, resilience, safeguarding, adaptation and so forth. It is surprising that the authors of *Sustainable Futures* engaged primarily with Jeff Todd Titon's writings up to 2009 but none of his many works moving beyond his initial human-centred theorising of sustainability as a metaphor for applied ethnomusicological work (Titon 2009). Since then, Titon has offered ‘resilience’ and ‘adaptive management’ as improved sustainability strategies (Titon 2015), and he has made environmental studies and ecological science more prominent in his writing. Sustainability is an extraordinarily flexible and frustrating concept often subject to manipulation. In contrast to a strong form of sustainability, its weak form is merely about maintaining human existence and practices without regard for the planet. (More specifically, strong sustainability does not allow substitutions between natural and cultural areas, whereas weak sustainability allows substitutions; see Theis and Tomkin 2015: chapter 3.) This type of weak sustainability may be used to reference steadily increasing a business's profits—in so doing, it is a concept deployed without regard for impacts on natural resources (the environment) and on humans. Such unethical approaches are decried as greenwashing, similar to the critique levied at the oxymoron ‘sustainable growth’, which is an impossibility on a finite planet (Orr 2010; Titon 2015: 170). Sustainability is indeed related to UNESCO efforts; Article 2, Section 1, of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage states that protections are afforded to those heritages compatible with sustainable development. The United Nations is the key source for the concept of sustainable development, which since its promulgation in the 1980s has flowed into the larger discussions on strong sustainability. That strong sustainability discourse is fundamentally about the relationships between all aspects of human societies (including musicking) and the non-human life, inanimate environment and natural resources that comprise the life support system of Earth: the ecology of all aspects of human societies in relation to the entire planet.

The authors of the *Sustainable Futures* project do not engage with strong sustainability. Moreover, despite the subtitle and theoretical framing of the project, the authors do not engage robustly with ecology. The introduction provides a mere two references to articles by ecologists, one of which is from 1957 when the discipline was quite different. Pointing back to Ernst Haeckel's original definition from 1870 does little to situate the term, and eliding ecology with ecosystems does not help either. As an example of ecology in ethnomusicology, Schippers cites Archer (1964), which is a lecture from the 1962 UNESCO–International Music Council Congress in Rome; Archer argues for studying the social systems around music rather than just ‘the music itself’ and claims that ‘Ecology, regrettably, is a cumbersome discipline’ (1964: 28). Schippers seems to be citing Archer as a justification for using ecology as a mere metaphor and for disregarding that discipline entirely. But why, then, is ‘ecology’ in the subtitle? Ecology—the scientific study of the relationships between living organisms and their abiotic environments—is central to strong sustainability, so it is actually relevant to bring it into the subtitle (‘An Ecological Perspective’) and concluding chapter. Nevertheless, ecology is not just a metaphor for connections, nor is it just about humans. (Even the interdisciplinary study of human ecology is

not just about humans.) Yet *Sustainable Futures* is focused solely on humans without consideration of the environment (a principle subject of ecology)—so much so that this book stands to undermine the very cultural traditions that the well-intentioned authors seek to protect.

Consider two possible examples in which authors could have engaged with actual ecological and strong sustainability issues. Most case studies in *Sustainable Futures* mention natural resources (materials for clothing or musical instruments) and physical places (both humanly constructed and naturally provided) that are central to the traditions. Some authors hint that those natural resources or places are endangered or no longer available. But not one case study elaborates on how, why or what might be the upshot for the musical tradition. The material basis for musical instruments is a physical connection to the natural resources that humans use for cultural activities. The creation of musical instruments themselves may threaten resource availability, endanger other species or contribute to criminal activity, as with elephant ivory or rosewood (Allen and Libin 2014). Some materials for musical instruments may be plentiful or renewable, and their responsible use may not endanger the resources or the tradition. Simultaneously, non-musical pressures, such as climate change, may stress the availability of natural resources and thus threaten or change the tradition. An instructive example comes with the positive and negative impacts on far-flung forests that result from western aesthetics of the violin: while a desire for high-quality spruce soundboards can contribute to sustainable traditional forestry practices in the Italian Alps, the corresponding aesthetics for professional violin bows has caused significant pressure on Brazilian pernambuco (Allen 2012). Regarding place, we could learn from a productive connection Titon (2015: 182–5) made to clarify the environmental aspects that both threaten and provide for human musical traditions: despite the resilience of the musical worship in Old Regular Baptists communities of Appalachia in the United States, their tradition is vulnerable due to their reliance on coal mining. Economically, the communities depend on the jobs that the mining industry provides, but those jobs have been declining due to changes in mechanisation, regulations and demand. Moreover, even as mining continues (albeit with fewer workers), the environmental destruction increases, particularly because of the practice of mountaintop-removal coal mining, which does exactly what the term says—and which wreaks untold havoc on places and people, and therefore on their musical traditions.

One of the four Library of Congress subject headings for *Sustainable Futures* is ‘ecomusicology’. But in its lack of connections between the study of music and culture with nature/environmental issues, I do not see this book as an example of ecomusicology. This keyword is not listed in the index of the book, and there are only two references to ecomusicology in the text. The first comes in the bibliography of Anthony Seeger's foreword (which, in the interest of full disclosure, is citing my *Grove* article on ecomusicology, although Seeger also cites Titon's blog using, curiously, a URL that includes the tag ecomusicology). The second is in Schippers' introductory chapter (5–6), when he acknowledges Steven Feld's work relating sound and nature via acoustemology as well as Mark Pedelty's (2012) and my own work relating music and culture with issues of environmental studies and sustainability. But these concepts are not elaborated and do not return; if the intent of the volume is to disregard them and do something else, then we should be told as much. Schippers seems to disregard them by invoking the idea that there are circumstances ‘outside of human control, such as diseases, wars, or the slow effect of rising sea levels’ (8). While one could argue that disease is something which is both outside of human control and the result of it (consider malaria), it would be impossible to

argue that humans are not agents of war or the cause of current climate change, both of which endanger music cultures. Notwithstanding such occasional yet superficial references, the *Sustainable Futures* project has overlooked the physical resources and natural systems on which human musical cultures rely, has taken a merely metaphorical approach that seems intended to capitalise on the present popularity of sustainability discourse and has failed to engage with the literatures on and meanings of ecology and sustainability.

This book has many merits as a work of extremely well-organised and high-quality ethnomusicological scholarship that reaches well into the public sphere: it is full of interesting examples and insightful observations based on extensive research and field work, and it is absolutely relevant to contemporary music studies. *Sustainable Futures* would be useful in applied ethnomusicology courses if paired with works that theorise sustainability more fully (e.g., Titon 2015) or engage more with the connections between ecology/environment/ecomusicology and sustainability/cultural heritage (e.g., Rees 2016). Despite the keywords of the title (sustainable), subtitle (ecological) and cataloguing subject (ecomusicology), I would not use this book to teach my own ecomusicological, environmental or sustainability classes. I also imagine it would be of limited use to ecologists who work on music and/or sound (e.g., Guyette and Post 2016; Pijanowski and Farina 2011). *Sustainable Futures* is old but good wine in new bottles that requires readers to seek out more adequately theorised work on ecomusicology, ecology and sustainability.

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