

Prospects and Problems for Ecomusicology in Confronting a Crisis of Culture

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Abstract:

The environmental crisis is not only the fault of failed engineering, bad science, ecological misunderstanding, poor accounting, and bitter politics. It is also a failure of holistic problem solving, interpersonal relations, ethics, imagination, and creativity. In short, the environmental crisis is a failure of culture.¹ Humanist academics (particularly philosophers, literary scholars, and historians) work to understand the people, cultures, and ethical situations that created, perpetuate, attempt to solve, and face this crisis. In that context, musicologists have perspectives and insights to offer, especially because of the ubiquity of music, the importance that most people accord to it, and the communicative and emotional powers associated with music and the communities who make, enjoy, and consume it. There are good prospects for ecomusicology to contribute to the larger humanistic endeavor of understanding and addressing this crisis of culture, but such possibilities are tempered by problems and challenges. Although a longer list deserves to be enumerated, and numerous examples and lacunae could be proffered, I will outline just a half dozen items.

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Article:

The environmental crisis is not only the fault of failed engineering, bad science, ecological misunderstanding, poor accounting, and bitter politics. It is also a failure of holistic problem solving, interpersonal relations, ethics, imagination, and creativity. In short, the environmental crisis is a failure of culture.¹ Humanist academics (particularly philosophers, literary scholars,

¹ Donald Worster was an early exponent of this now largely common understanding. He acknowledges the many accomplishments of science in understanding the scope and problems of the environmental crisis (*Wealth of Nature*,

and historians) work to understand the people, cultures, and ethical situations that created, perpetuate, attempt to solve, and face this crisis. In that context, musicologists have perspectives and insights to offer, especially because of the ubiquity of music, the importance that most people accord to it, and the communicative and emotional powers associated with music and the communities who make, enjoy, and consume it. There are good prospects for ecomusicology to contribute to the larger humanistic endeavor of understanding and addressing this crisis of culture, but such possibilities are tempered by problems and challenges. Although a longer list deserves to be enumerated, and numerous examples and lacunae could be proffered, I will outline just a half dozen items.

The primary aspect of most scholarly endeavors is *understanding*. Musicologists can provide insight on how composers, musicians, and others react to and communicate about environmental problems in their works, performances, and communal music making; and we can consider how listeners and audiences react and respond to such experiences. Furthermore, we are particularly well equipped to study how sound worlds and musical practices can reflect, inform, create, and structure societies.² Embarking on such research needs to happen in effective and sustained ways; a further challenge is communicating it beyond disciplinary boundaries.

Second, out of scholarly considerations come practical applications, and for most musicologists this means classroom teaching specifically or, more generally, *education*. A generation of students is being brought up reducing, reusing, and recycling; questioning modern consumer practices; and working to reconnect with the natural world. And this generation is musically engaged.³ National organizations such as the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education and Second Nature have long advocated for the teaching of sustainability and environmental awareness throughout the curriculum, not just in balkanized departments of environmental studies. David W. Orr's many writings on ecological literacy elaborate on the cultural-environmental crisis that education both causes and should address: "The crisis we face is first and foremost one of mind, perception, and values; hence, it is a challenge to those institutions presuming to shape minds, perceptions, and values."⁴

Ecomusicological topics in the classroom have the potential to reach both music and liberal arts students interested in environmental issues as well as environmental sciences/studies students interested in music. Potential topics range the gamut from popular and non-Western musics and

27), but goes on to say that scientists have failed to understand the "why" questions, which are rooted in culture: "Natural science cannot by itself fathom the sources of the crisis it has identified, for the sources lie not in the nature that scientists study but in the *human nature* and, especially, in the *human culture* that historians and other humanists have made their study."

² In addition to the accompanying contributions to this colloquy and the online bibliography at www.ams-esg.org, see the heuristic example provided by the analysis of the preservation/conservation divide in early twentieth-century American environmentalism in Toliver, "Eco-ing in the Canyon." Pedelty's forthcoming *Popular Music as Environmental Communication* explores the complex and often contradictory environmental messages conveyed in popular music; see also his "Woody Guthrie and the Columbia River."

³ Amidst the permaculture garden and wood paneling made from harvested campus trees at the EcoDorm of Warren Wilson College, one student resident says, "The same people who are interested in living in a building with solar panels and composting toilets like to play [acoustic music]"; Wilson, "When Your Dorm Goes Green and Local." Furthermore, as Holly Watkins reported in this colloquy, narrativization of place is important in the music of young people.

⁴ Orr, *Earth in Mind*, 27; see also his *Ecological Literacy* and *Hope Is an Imperative*.

soundscapes, to medieval and Renaissance works with pastoral texts or imitations of birds, and to instrumental evocations of nature in the common practice and modern periods of Western art music, not to mention the texts and contexts of all the above. The challenges with such education are multifarious: carving out space in an already full musicology curriculum, creating new syllabi amidst busy schedules, obtaining curricular approval for interdisciplinary courses that combine fields that may be poorly understood, linking responsibly studies of sound/music to issues environmental and ecological, developing instructor competence and confidence in ecomusicology, and finding appropriate teaching materials. I am aware of a modest handful of academics who teach modules within classes or dedicated courses on ecomusicology (I do both). These concerns are not insuperable, depending on the institution, student body, course design, and instructor. In addition, work is needed on ecomusicological pedagogy, not only regarding materials such as texts and course materials but also regarding interdisciplinary and collaborative teaching methods that can help break out of the binary of either specialized courses (i.e., for majors) or cursory appreciation classes.

Third, *interdisciplinarity* has long been fundamental to musicology, and it is no different with ecomusicology. Diverse fields contribute to musicological scholarship: paleography and archival studies, organology and lutherie, music theory and performance, history and politics, literature and poetry, and many others. In addition to the reliance on literary studies and environmental history, as well as related fields such as cultural geography and gender and sexuality studies, ecomusicological approaches include biomusic, zoomusicology, and acoustic ecology.⁵ These fields draw on subjects not normally represented in music scholarship, and as such, they are excellent examples of bridging the dichotomized “two cultures” of the sciences and humanities that C. P. Snow reified a half century ago and that his respondents have problematized since.⁶ Interdisciplinarity is no end in itself; rather, it is a means to improved depth, connections, methodologies, and understandings, as well as to effective education and diverse forums of communication. Ecomusicology stands to create a more relevant musicology both by engaging with the concerns of diverse audiences and by reaching out to other disciplines rather than just drawing on them. At the same time, however, institutional structures, professional (read: specialized) training, disciplinary silos, and the very real intellectual hurdles involved with synthetic and truly interdisciplinary work all present challenges. Climate scientists refer to “anthropogenic variables” as a large swath of cultural factors that contribute to climate change but are difficult to quantify; opening up dialogues between the arts, humanities, and sciences can play a role in understanding that black box.

The methods and objectives of science have led scientists to couch their own findings and critiques in tentative terms that typically downplay the urgency and danger of the environmental crisis; essentially, they seek to maintain their objectivity and try not to come across as activist, with the unintended result that nonscientists misconstrue their arguments. Whether or not

⁵ Biomusic is a longstanding research collaboration between neurologists, biologists, anthropologists, and music researchers in cognition, education and performance, among other areas; see Gray et al., “Music of Nature and the Nature of Music.” Zoomusicology is the musicology of animals, or “the aesthetic use of sound communication among animals”; see Martinelli, “Introduction (To the Issue and to Zoomusicology).” Acoustic ecology is a melting pot of composers, ecologists, and ethnographers who both make and study soundscapes, the art and study of which, according to Cummings and Miller (“Editorial,” 1–2), are intended “to make explicit the patterns and changes in our sounding world, and to raise awareness about the state of the world, as revealed through sound.”

⁶ Snow, *Two Cultures*.

musicologists are actual environmental, social, or political activists, ecomusicology is likely to be perceived as such (if for no other reason than because of the connotations associated with prefix “eco”). This leads me to my fourth and fifth items: *activism* and *perceptions*.

Some musicologists and ecocritics have acknowledged an important facet of intellectual work: that all scholarship is inherently activist. As Philip Bohlman argued in 1993, musicology’s historic resistance to politicization was itself a political act; by not grappling with music other than the Western European canon, musicologists made implicit statements about the value and relevance of other musics and the superiority of classical art musics.⁷ Ignoring the cultural/environmental crisis in musicology would send a similar message: we would fiddle while the earth burned. How different is advocating for sustainable forestry in the harvest of musical-instrument wood from advocating for faster tempos in Renaissance motets? Both involve activism, which is to say well-founded scholarship that argues a point based on facts and evidence (which are, by and large, “objective”) and aesthetics and values (which are more often “subjective,” even when there is evidence of such opinions from others). Explicitly activist are *all* initiatives to broaden the scope of musical materials and contexts worthy of musicological study, including the incorporation of music of women, minorities, and other cultures beyond the confines of contemporary and historical Western traditions. That ecomusicological scholarship, or its practitioners, may advocate certain contested positions within and/or beyond the musicological community should be no different from such other musicological, or even general scholarly, activist sentiments. Concomitantly, of course, ecomusicology should not be excused from high standards of scholarship; in fact, ecomusicological work must be good scholarship in order to make meaningful contributions and not be accused of intellectualism *de rigueur*.

The perception issue is a communication problem at its root: ecomusicological arguments must convince audiences of all kinds (lay, academic, scientific, humanistic, musical) that the approach is worthwhile and not just new-age tree hugging or “green-musico-philia.” The term “ecomusicology” can conjure skepticism (I myself have been publicly critical of the now useful moniker), but so can “musicology.” How often do colleagues in other disciplines react quizzically, even with hostility, when they hear you are a musicologist and you do not conduct an ensemble or teach an instrument or perform with the orchestra or front a band, even if many of us do those things? Why is it that there is no dance-ology or theater-ology or art-ology but yet there is a musicology, even as many musicologists are in schools or colleges that combine those visual and performing arts subjects? While these perceptions beyond the musicological community deserve to be addressed, I cannot address them here. Yet given such views from without, there are still those musicologists who sneer at the very idea of ecomusicology.⁸ In response, I shrug and say: So be it. We must carry on and do good work. Observe a lesson from social organizing: don’t be zealous, but instead use the powers of research, reason, and communication to build a solid case and convince those who are willing and open. Don’t worry about the naysayers’ sneers. But at the same time, don’t settle for facile connections between

⁷ Bohlman, “Musicology as a Political Act.” Other scholars who have recognized this situation include the musicologists Philip Brett and Nancy Guy and the ecocritics Greg Garrard and Jonathan Bate. Alex Rehding also discusses this issue in this colloquy. Recent musicological scholarship on and in politically charged areas has proliferated, as evidenced by the journal *Music and Politics* and work in related fields, such as applied ethnomusicology; for a recent example see Van Buren, “Applied Ethnomusicology and HIV and AIDS.”

⁸ Gore, in *Our Choice*, argues that the climate crisis threatens the status quo in many ways. Does an ecomusicology that engages with such crises threaten musicology?

sounds/music and environment/nature; push further for sophisticated models that are supported with good arguments and communicated eloquently.

Finally, regardless of whether you believe that art imitates life or life imitates art (or both), ecomusicological approaches have the possibility to offer new *social critiques* about the intersections of music, culture, and nature—and, in general, about the world around us. Debates about the roles and relevance of literary criticism have long characterized that field (musicology is no stranger to such debates either); one recent public dialogue reaffirmed that literary criticism can provide insights on and reflections of society.⁹ Ecomusicological criticism must bridge media, sound, and text, and add the complicating element of nature—essentially using words to critique and explain sounds about and influenced by actual nature and symbolic nature, all of which are infused with subjective emotions and contextualized in time, place, and power structures. The challenges are not only intellectual and theoretical but communicative as well; they involve pushing musicology beyond the comfortable confines of the concert hall and library and into an often messy, definitely polluted, world of existential threats and complexities.

One of my current research projects illustrates the dual nature of the prospects and problems for ecomusicology. The violin family is fundamental to the sound of Western art music in its most elite traditions: string quartets, operas, symphonies, etc. Considering the material construction of such instruments provides insights about sustainability and the influences and impacts of musical cultures. Western art music, itself seen as a threatened heritage in need of sustaining, contributes to both threatening and sustaining the unique resources on which it depends.

Professional instruments of the violin family require two endemic natural resources: Brazilian pernambuco and Italian spruce. Bows are made from wild pernambuco, also known as *pau brasil*, which grows only in Brazil's Atlantic Coastal Forest. Once an abundant and fundamental resource to native and colonial peoples (the country was named after the tree), today *pau brasil* is nearly extinct due to many ecological pressures.¹⁰ Archetiers have made valiant efforts to find alternatives and to use the resource responsibly, yet professional players continue to insist on expensive—and ecologically destructive—pernambuco bows. The red spruce growing in the unique alpine microclimate of the Val di Fiemme's Paneveggio Forest has fared better. This species of tree is widely distributed, but a special microclimate in the Paneveggio provides for excellent spruce resonance wood for musical instrument soundboards. Antonio Stradivari used Paneveggian spruce, and his creations have contributed to the renown of that forest; myths abound regarding his jaunts through the Paneveggio seeking out the most musical trees. Such associations led to this region's nickname: the "forest of violins." The Venetian Republic wanted Paneveggio's tall, strong trees for their navy, but along with unique topological features, Fiemmesi traditions of conservation since the twelfth century thwarted such threats. Today, more trees grow in the Paneveggio than loggers harvest, thanks in part to those traditions but also to the fame of the musical wood from the forest of violins.¹¹

⁹ See the collection of articles on the state of literary criticism in the book review section of the *New York Times*, 2 January 2011.

¹⁰ For more on pernambuco, see Wilder, *Conservation, Restoration, and Repair of Stringed Instruments*.

¹¹ Allen, "Fatto di Fiemme."

The values accorded to individual tree species (spruce and pernambuco) and to the cultural commodities dependent on them (violins and bows) together create a ripple effect that reverberates globally.¹² While the Western art music tradition that relies on those instruments may be elite, and while record and ticket sales may be declining (with corresponding efforts to preserve and sustain the culture), the impacts—negative and positive—are still felt well beyond the ephemeral sounds of the privileged space of the concert hall. And while musicology may be misunderstood in the academy and may seem marginal to confronting environmental problems, with the proper focus, quality efforts, analytical insights, scholarly rigor, and necessary communication savvy, ecomusicology may still contribute to understanding and averting, or at least attenuating, the crises before us.

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¹² The concept of cultural commodities is from Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*.

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