

The Study of the Music & Culture of the Environmental Crisis: Interview with Aaron S. Allen

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Abstract:

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*****Note: Full text of article below**

The Study of the Music & Culture of the Environmental Crisis

Interview with Aaron S. Allen
by Juha Torvinen & Andreas Engström

JT&AE: First a personal question: why ecomusicology?

AA: Because that's how we're going to save the world, right? Ironic hyperbole aside, there are both professional and personal reasons for my engagement with ecomusicology.

Professionally, I do think it's of profound importance that scholars of human culture contribute to understanding, and when possible, alleviating environmental crises. We all have a role to play, and even if the usual approach to environmental concerns is a scientific one, humanists must not step aside entirely. We can help to understand history, to communicate effectively, to empower emotionally, to raise consciousness, to revel in beauty, to give attention to subjects previously ignored, and so on. As I and others have argued, the environmental crisis is fundamentally a crisis of culture; scientific approaches are central to the problems and solutions, but so are humanistic approaches.

On the personal side, I think ecomusicology was a natural progression for me given my background in both environmental studies and music. I was born on a rural farm, and after growing up there, in Key West, Florida (an island that is the southernmost city in the USA), on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, and in New Orleans, I had a first hand knowledge of profoundly beautiful and threatened environments. As an undergraduate student at Tulane, I told my advisor that I wanted to declare a joint BA in music and BS in environmental studies; he responded, "Why? So you can play your flute out in the swamp?" Neither the flute nor swamps were of particular interest to me, but his response of incredulity combined with sarcasm encouraged me to seek out connections that were meaningful and not at all frivolous. When it came time to choose a path after college, I decided that I needed a break from my years of environmental activism, so I followed my interests in musicology.

Combining both the professional and personal elements is what I find to be the intellectual and individual challenges of ecomusicology. In essence, it's difficult to connect these different fields (environmental studies and music) in rigorous, robust, and intellectually sound ways. My Ph.D. studies at Harvard did not allow me to pursue ecomusicology, but after I graduated I was fortunate to get involved with the founding of the Ecocriticism Study Group of the American Musicological Society and the Ecomusicology Special Interest Group of the Society for Ethnomusicology. The professional stimulation combined with my personal background and a desire to do something meaningful, even if only in our relatively obscure world of music studies, meant that I put a lot of time and energy, gladly, into ecomusicology. Honestly, I don't think that it will ever become mainstream, and that's okay (and neither ethnomusicology nor musicology will become mainstream either!). I do think, however, that ecomusicology can be very gratifying for those who engage in it and those who benefit from it.

JT&AE: Ecomusicology started to gain currency in the decades around 2000. However, explicitly ecocritical music has been composed and performed for about a half of a century. Why didn't music scholars wake up earlier to environmental concerns?

AA: I'd like to respond to that question in two ways. First, to agree with it and answer directly: There are a variety of reasons that music scholars did not pursue explicitly environmental agendas. One is that the environmental crisis (as, we might say, distinct from an awareness of and/or connection to the environment) has been a subject of concern for only a few decades; there are of course important precedents, but many major upheavals in the way humans relate to the world changed in the second half of the twentieth

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century. It's taken, perhaps, some time for those changes and the resulting concerns to filter into the relatively isolated world of music scholarship. Another reason might be institutional, in that universities have long struggled to reward and encourage inter-, cross- and trans- disciplinary work. Although I don't have the data to substantiate the following claim, I might hypothesize that a significant reason music scholars didn't wake up to environmental issues is the perception of politics. Musicology in Europe and the United States in the early part of the twentieth century was conservative and tried to develop its status as a legitimate scientific pursuit worthy of status as an academic discipline (and hence as a university department or faculty). As a result, change has been slow. The split (in the United States at least) between historical musicology and ethnomusicology—which I think is tremendously unfortunate and counterproductive—shows some of that conservatism, as does the history of the “new musicology” in the past few decades. But I think many music scholars have been concerned not to represent themselves too politically. Environmental issues are nothing if not political—and here we see the cultural status of environmental issues as well. The openness of ethnomusicology and the groundwork laid by the “new musicology” have both contributed to clearing the ground for ecomusicology.

Second, I'd like to disagree, if I may, with the premise of the question and say that thinkers have long made connections between music (or sound), the environment (or nature, however its construed), and human society/culture—even if not as an explicit ecomusicology. Consider, for example, in Western culture, the ancient Greek “Harmony of the Spheres,” or medieval treatises on the status of bird song and musicians who imitate it, or 18th-century engagements with the natural, or Romantic fascination with nature, etc. This is to say nothing of the rest of the world, where in some cases, as in Asia, there is a long written tradition of such connections, while in other cases there may be oral traditions and present understandings (rather than “scholarship” *per se*) and musicking (rather than “compositions”). So while I do see some barriers to the contemporary development of ecomusicology, I also understand it as a longer, if not explicitly named, tradition.

JT&AE: *It seems to me that always when a new branch of research emerges it appears first as a unified, even harmonious field with a common goal. However, soon the branch starts dispersing into different competing schools. Environmentally oriented music scholars have already used at least two seemingly parallel terms “environmental ethnomusicology” and “ecomusicology,” and for example Professor Mark Pedelty has stated that ecomusicology has so far been concerned mostly with classical music (which is actually not quite true in a European context). Do you think there is (or will be) some kind of fractioning in ecomusicology? What would it be like? Or have the environmental crises become so ubiquitous that they will unite music scholars in a common cause?*

AA: I have a dual hope for ecomusicology: first that it does not fracture, but second that it fuses with many other realms of scholarly inquiry so that it doesn't become stale, isolated, or irrelevant. Those two hopes are apparently contradictory, and achieving them will be a challenge. And even if the name “ecomusicology” is not used, the approaches are what matter, be they of soundscape studies and/or environmental ethnomusicology and/or anything else related but with a different name.

I've been attending environmental conferences since the mid 1990s and music conferences since the late 1990s. At most environmental conferences I get a sense of sharing ideas, dialogue, and pursuing common goals; at most music conferences I get a sense of privacy, monologue, and independence. Both cultures are admirable and have their places and benefits and failings. Balancing the two would be tricky, but I do think that the common cause will be enough to unite ecomusicology scholars to a significant degree.

I might also add that before there was an explicitly named ecomusicology (be that a recent affair, as in the past few years, or one that dates back to the first reference to the word that I've found, from the 1970s), we had soundscape studies. Ecomusicology is both an umbrella term that could encompass soundscape studies and it's also a tributary, or descendent, of it. (Of course, these are just names, methodologies, and the people associated

with them, for as I mentioned previously, I think that something like ecomusicology, or soundscape studies if you want, has been going on for a long time.) That's when we consider ecomusicology holistically, as any study of sound/music and nature/environment and culture/society. But when an element of the environmental or ecological activist is combined, I think that's where there is something clearly ecomusicological, something that clearly identifies ecomusicology as something contemporary and different.

Literary ecocritics and environmental historians still, after decades of their fields being well established (if not mainstreamed), are still having arguments about defining their fields. (The same goes for ethnomusicology, at least in the United States.) I think it's a natural evolution in any field to argue about it and push at its boundaries. If not, then the field becomes moribund. We can think of it in the same way we might think about ecological stasis: it doesn't exist, as nature is always changing. There's a constant struggle in nature, and the only constant is change. So I hope there will be arguments about streams and branches in ecomusicology as much as I also hope there will be a way for it to become another tool in not just the music scholar's toolbox but also part of the more general study of the cultural crisis of the environment.

JT&AE: One interesting aspect of ecomusicology derives from its relevance for music history. As I see it, ecomusicology is not only an approach for finding out some ecocritical things hiding in music. Ecomusicology is also, even mainly, a new way to hear music, any music, as the context of environmental crises justifies ecocritical listening of any music and justifies negotiation of ecocritical messages even in music that is not ecocritical as such or even in cases where composer's/performer's intentions are not ecocritical as such. You are yourself also a Beethoven scholar. How do you see the relevance of ecomusicology to music of previous centuries, as e.g. with Beethoven's Pastoral symphony?

Indeed, the ecocritical approach has relevance for both current and historical musics, and explicitly and otherwise unacknowledged environmental works and contexts. On the one hand, the historical ecomusicological approach can provide different

understandings and new perspectives on material that has both been well cultivated and may not otherwise be well known. Here, we can find the wonder, allure, and need for not just ecomusicology but all scholarly inquiry in general: as understanding the past through the continual reflections of our own time. On the other hand, that could lend to the perception that ecomusicology is just a way to reinterpret, yet again, the same old material; as such, ecomusicology could be seen as a fad. I hope not! It's up to all of us to produce rigorous and meaningful work that works against such criticism.

Regarding Beethoven: I wrote an article entitled "Symphonic Pastorals" [*Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 15 (2011): 22-42] that considered various symphonies from the long nineteenth century, and Beethoven's Sixth was central to it. I took an ecocritical approach, drawing on the pastoral (a favorite topic among ecocritics), to argue that even an apparently "mute" or "textless" genre like the symphony can express conceptions of nature. Furthermore, those conceptions changed between composers and throughout time. The ecomusicological approach here is not one concerned so much with activism or environmental crisis; rather, it is one concerned with historical conceptions of nature—and that approach contributes to the understanding function that cultural scholars can contribute to confronting the environmental crisis.

JT&AE: Ecomusicologists often emphasize the activist nature of their field. What forms could this type of activism take in contemporary Western society? Isn't ecomusicology a close relative or even a branch of cultural musicology since it emphasizes the cultural conditions of musicking and political consequences of any music scholarly work?

AA: Absolutely, I see ecomusicology as resulting from cultural musicology and its willingness to engage with difficult subjects, such as race, politics, gender, sexuality, and power. As for the forms of activism, consider the perhaps trite saying: knowledge is power. Understanding is certainly a fundamental type of activism, and closely related to it is empowerment. Consider a parallel with feminism: scholarly research, teaching, and dissemination on feminism can empower

participants, readers, and especially students. They can learn about past injustices, discover role models, and realize that each of us could participate in the cultural change afoot. The same could be said for ecomusicological work in research, teaching, and dissemination. There are a number of scholars (e.g. Mark Pedelty, Andrew Mark, Catherine Botrill) whose work is either explicitly or tangentially ecomusicological, and whose ideas connect not only with scholars and students but also with practicing musicians (of modestly local and profoundly global reach) and music venues, all of whom could make a difference and spread the word to make issues of environmentalism and sustainability more mainstream, understood, accessible, and accepted. Mark Pedelty in particular has thought long and hard about the potentials and pitfalls of such efforts. Part of the challenge is to maintain the beauty, inspiration, fascination, and emotion of music while not weighing it down with too much gloom and doom and, at the same time, connecting music and musicking to issues much bigger than ourselves.

JT&AE: How could we make ecomusicology more common in the field of music research? Would it be a desirable goal if we could some day talk about "an ecological turn" of music research?

AA: I do think it would be a good thing to some day refer to the ecological turn. But my hope is that such a turn would become just another aspect of cultural research and thinking. I also hope that ecomusicology does not become another academic silo in which its practitioners talk only with each other. And of course to make ecomusicology another tool in the toolbox and to prevent such isolation, ecomusicology must become more common. Apart from launching an ad campaign (which I actually do not think would work, nor do I think it would be an appropriate thing to do), I think that the best ways to make ecomusicology more common are to be patient, to do good work, and to keep publishing, teaching, talking, and sharing ideas.

JT&AE: You are presently doing research on the violin, and the material for its bow is usually taken from the pernambuco tree. The situation for this tree is, from an environmental perspective, deeply troubled. Are there any

alternative materials for making a violin bow that are more environmental friendly? And how is the violin "community" reacting to this? Is there any awareness at all about the serious situation or the alternatives?

AA: The use of wood for musical instruments is potentially sustainable and environmentally responsible. For example, some of the best spruce used to make violin soundboards is grown in a sustainable, culturally specific, and historically rich way, and so there are models for responsible and renewable materials use. [See my "Fatto di Fiemme": Stradivari's Violins and the Musical Trees of the Paneveggio," in *Invaluable Trees: Cultures of Nature, 1660-1830*, eds. Laura Auricchio, Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, and Giulia Pacini, 301-315 (Oxford: SVEC, 2012).] There are alternatives for bows, such as graphite and carbon fiber, but neither are renewable (being made from minerals and/or petroleum). Wood is an ideal medium, but the violin community—performers, teachers, luthiers, and archetiers—must decide to do the right thing, because pernambuco is currently not a sustainable choice for professional quality bows. The International Pernambuco Conservation Initiative, an organization comprised primarily of archetiers and luthiers, is indeed searching for responsible and sustainable solutions. But by and large, the concern remains (as far as I understand it) absent from the performance community. Performers are aware of alternatives, but almost in the same breath those alternatives are refuted as not good enough. Players, especially professionals, want the best tool for the job, and to them, pernambuco makes for the best tool. As awareness increases, and as a younger, more sustainability-minded generation comes of age, my hope is that the situation will change. And of course, I hope that ecomusicological work can help understand the situation, disseminate ideas and stories about it, and aid in ameliorating it.

JT&AE: In terms of material for instruments and equipment, the environmental impact could be significant: what about hardware like electrical instruments, amplifiers, speakers, and more specialized tools and equipment, is there any awareness from the music and art world? In the more commercial field, like mobile phones, companies are constantly being watched, by

media at least, for filling the requirements of being environmental friendly as well as providing decent working conditions. But what about this art equipment, which in its totality may not be of such minor concern?

AA: Well, in this question and in the previous, I have to say: make sure you check out the book that I'm co-writing with Kevin Dawe and Jennifer Post! We're going to be addressing these very issues. You're absolutely correct that there are significant impacts from the technology that's used to support all sorts of musical endeavors, from performing and recording to listening and distributing. Music is perhaps perceived as an unambiguous good: making and appreciating music is part of what makes us human, and while it may or may not be uniquely human, it sure feels good. So finding faults with the infrastructure of music is a difficult pill to swallow. I cannot speak authoritatively about the general perceptions in the arts world about these material environmental concerns with regard to music instruments and technologies, but I can say that anecdotally they are of no significant concern to musicians and listeners. And that's something that bothers me greatly. We do need to raise awareness of these issues, be they our gadgets' energy use (which contributes to global warming) or the source of the materials (e.g. endangered trees or rare earth minerals obtained through exploitative child labor). The social and environmental movements that have brought attention to the materials in our phones and other technology are slowly gaining ground, and some corporations are starting to take notice and make changes. We need to do the same with musical instruments and technologies.

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After earning a B.A. in music and a B.S. in environmental studies from Tulane, Allen received his Ph.D. in music from Harvard with a dissertation on the nineteenth-century Italian reception of Beethoven. He is a 2012 Fellow of the American Academy in Rome.

Allen co-founded and chaired the Ecocriticism Study Group of the American Musicological Society and the Ecomusicology Special Interest Group of the Society for Ethnomusicology. His conference presentations include venues in music scholarship (AMS, SEM), interdisciplinary studies (19th-Century Studies Association), and environmental studies (American Society for Environmental History, Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, Association of Environmental Studies and Sciences).

His publications include encyclopedia entries on ecomusicology and on sustainability for Grove and on climate change for Music in American Life. Allen organized and contributed to the seminal ecomusicology colloquy in the Journal of the American Musicological Society. He has published reviews and essays in environmental studies publications, such as the Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences and the edited collection Environmental Leadership: A Reference Handbook (Sage). Allen's ecocriticism essay on nineteenth-century symphonies appeared in Green Letters, while another ecocritical essay on Canadian musician Bruce Cockburn is in the edited volume Rock Politics (Ashgate). An early version of his research on the connections between sustainability, wood for music instruments, and environmental history appeared in the edited volume Invaluable Trees (Oxford/SVEC). Allen is currently co-editing (with Kevin Dawe) a Routledge Research guide on ecomusicology and is co-authoring (with Kevin Dawe and Jennifer Post) a book entitled The Tree that became a Lute: Musical Instruments, Sustainability and the Politics of Natural Resource Use (Illinois UP).