



Within Ethnomusicology, Where Is Ecomusicology? Music, Sound, and Environment*

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Abstract

Does ethnomusicology have a role to play in the conversations swirling around the current environmental crisis? By virtue of our training and experience as ethnomusicologists, do we have skills, knowledge, and expertise that gives us credibility in the embattled public sphere? Do we have standing, as ethnomusicologists, to contribute any wisdom to policy-making about the environment? Ethnomusicologists who have engaged with ecomusicology do bring to these conversations an understanding of sound, music, nature, culture and the environment. Ecomusicology as a field coalesced about ten years ago as the ecocritical study of music. Borrowing from literary ecocriticism, musicologists examined relationships among composers, compositions, nature, and the cultural production of music. Directly after the publication of a manifesto in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* in 2011, ecomusicology attracted scholars worldwide not only from musicology but also from ethnomusicology, organology, acoustics, anthropology, and ecological science. Ecomusicology also attracted composers, performers, journalists, and environmental activists with interests in music. At the first ecomusicology conference, in 2012, the wide variety of approaches to this new field were on display. Within a few years, the definition of ecomusicology had expanded to become the study of sound, music, culture, nature, and the environment in a time of environmental crisis. More recently, ecomusicologists have begun to explore the “eco-” prefix, not as ecocriticism but as ecology. Ever since William K. Archer’s pioneering observations about music and ecology in 1964, ethnomusicologists and musicologists have proposed an ecological fra-

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ming of the cultural production of music, drawing on such fields as cultural ecology, ecological psychology, and human ecology. This scholarship is pre-dates the field of ecomusicology. Ecomusicology, however, adds ecological scientists to the conversation about music and ecology, it emphasizes the physical as well as the cultural environment, and it also brings a new sense of environmental crisis combining scholarship with activism. Acoustic dimensions of the environment have thus far received little consideration in discussions of such issues as climate change, industrial pollution, environmental justice, and habitat loss. An ecomusicological approach to the place of music and sound in the environment enables ethnomusicologists to contribute their knowledge to these ongoing discussions, while it also grounds environmental activism in scholarship.

Etnomüzikoloji İçinde, Ekomüzikoloji Nerede? Müzik, Ses ve Çevre

Özet

Etnomüzikolojinin mevcut çevresel kriz etrafında dönen konuşmalarda bir rolü var mı? Etnomüzikolog olarak eğitim ve deneyimimiz sayesinde, bize kamusal alanda güvenilirlik kazandıran beceri, bilgi ve uzmanlığımız var mı? Etnomüzikologlar olarak çevre ile ilgili politika geliştirmeye herhangi bir bilgelik katmak için ayakta duruyor muyuz? Ekomüzikoloji ile uğraşan etnomüzikologlar bu konuşmalara ses, müzik, doğa, kültür ve çevre anlayışını getirmektedir. Bir alan olarak ekomüzikoloji, yaklaşık on yıl önce müziğin ekokritik çalışması olarak birleşti. Ekoritizm terimini edebiyattan ödünç alan müzikologlar besteciler, besteler, doğa ve müziğin kültürel üretimi arasındaki ilişkileri incelediler. Amerikan Müzikoloji Derneği Dergisi'nde 2011 yılında bir bildirinin yayınlanmasından hemen sonra, ekomüzikoloji dünya çapında sadece müzikolojiden değil, etnomüzikoloji, organoloji, akustik, antropoloji ve ekolojik bilim içindeki insanlarını cezbedti. Ekomüzikoloji ayrıca müzikle ilgilenen besteciler, sanatçılar, gazeteciler ve çevre aktivistlerini de cezbedti. İlk olarak 2012 yılındaki ekomüzikoloji konferansında, bu yeni alana dair çok çeşitli yaklaşımlar sergilendi. Birkaç yıl içinde, ekomüzikolojinin tanımı, çevresel bir kriz döneminde ses, müzik, kültür, doğa ve çevre çalışmaları olarak genişletilmişti. Daha yakın zamanda, ekomüzikologlar ekokritizm olarak değil ekoloji olarak "eko" önekini keşfetmeye başladılar. William K. Archer'in 1964'te müzik ve ekoloji hakkındaki öncü gözlemlerinden bu yana, etnomüzikologlar ve müzikologlar, kültürel ekoloji, ekolojik psikoloji ve insan ekolojisi gibi alanlara dayanarak müziğin kültürel üretiminin ekolojik bir çerçevesini ortaya koydular. Bu bilgi, ecomusicology alanından önce gelir. Ekomüzikoloji, müzik ve ekoloji konusundaki sohbete ekolojik bilim insanlarını ekler, fiziksel ve kültürel çevreyi vurgular ve aynı zamanda bursu aktivizm ile birleştiren yeni bir çevresel kriz hissi getirir. Ekomüzikoloji, müzik ve ekoloji konusundaki sohbete ekolojik bilim adamları ekler, Kültürel çevreyi olduğu kadar fiziksel çevreyi de vurgular ve aynı zamanda bu bilimi aktivizm ile birleştiren yeni bir çevresel kriz duygusu getirir. İklim değişikliği, endüstriyel kirlilik, çevre adaleti ve habitat kaybı gibi konuların tartışılması içinde çevrenin akustik boyutları çok az dikkate alınmıştır. Müzik ve sesin ortamdaki yerine dair ekomüzikolojik bir yaklaşım, etnomüzikologların bu devam eden tartışmalara bilgileri ile katkıda bulunmalarını sağlarken, aynı zamanda bilimde çevresel aktivizmi de temel almaktadır.

The novel coronavirus pandemic brought an immediacy to the gradually intensifying environmental crisis. Scientists now agree that habitat pressures that put different species that are not naturally close to each other in the same environment, are causing unusual behavior among plants and animals. One result is the proliferation of novel viruses.¹ Nonhuman nature, it would seem, keeps sending human beings messages, whether in the dreadful sounds of climate change, or now in the wake of the terrible COVID-19 pandemic that threatens millions of lives worldwide. On the other hand, scientists have called attention to the positive environmental effects of the mass confinements, quarantines, and lockdowns. Much less carbon dioxide is going into the atmosphere because many fewer people are traveling by air. Shipping noise in the oceans is down, and whales and dolphins are communicating more freely. Environmentalists are hoping that the post-virus economy will accelerate the conversion to renewable energy systems.

Does ethnomusicology have a role to play in the conversations swirling around the current environmental crisis? Of course, ethnomusicologists traditionally exercise what rights we have to speak out as private citizens, but does ethnomusicology as a field have a role to play? What, after all, are the relations between music and environment? By virtue of our training and experience as ethnomusicologists, do we have skills, knowledge, and expertise that give us credibility in the embattled public sphere? Do we have standing, as ethnomusicologists, to contribute any wisdom to policy-making about the environment? We may recall the difficulties faced by the President of the Society for Ethnomusicology when interviewed on a radio talk show and asked to defend the Society's position statement condemning the use of music for torture.² The host was skeptical that an academic society specializing in music understood anything about how wars ought to be waged.

What ethnomusicology might do to help mitigate the climate crisis was the question addressed in the President's Roundtable at the annual conference of the Society for Ethnomusicology in 2018. Most of the six scholars who spoke to that question, myself included, considered the relations between the environment and music within the more inclusive category, so-

¹ Frutos, Roger, Marc L. Roig, Jordi Serra-Cobo, and Christian A. Devaux. "COVID-19: The conjunction of events leading to the pandemic and lessons to learn for future threats." *Frontiers in Medicine*, 2020. doi: 10.3389/fmed.2020.00223.

² Philip Bohlman interviewed by Hugh Hewitt, Feb. 9, 2007. <https://www.hugh-hewitt.com/philip-bohlman-representing-the-guys-and-dear-god-dont-call-them-gals-at-the-society-for-ethnomusicology-on-the-use-of-music-as-torture/>

und.³ Some said that among the skills ethnomusicologists brought to the table were people skills, developed over the course of ethnographic fieldwork. A few of the speakers had backgrounds in ecological science, and one advocated for partnerships between ethnomusicologists and ecological scientists to study the environmental adaptations indigenous peoples have made that could be useful in mitigating the climate crisis, thus lending some credibility to our contributions to the policy conversations about the environment. Some spoke about ethnomusicology's longstanding interest in the relationships between music, ritual, and the environment, especially in traditional hunter-gatherer and horticultural social groups where indigenous groups sought to influence the forces of nature to provide an abundance of food. Yet it was also plain that should ethnomusicologists bring to the environmental table the indigenous ecological knowledges of music and ritual, some policy-makers would respond that they wished to base their environmental interventions in science, not superstition.

Five of the six speakers on the President's Roundtable were active participants in an emerging multidisciplinary field, called ecomusicology. Ecomusicology is a "crisis field" poised to address issues of music and the environment in a time of environmental crisis. Ethnomusicologists have played an important, but not dominant, role in developing ecomusicology. Among the study groups within the Society for Ethnomusicology, one is devoted to ecomusicology. In the remainder of this presentation I will discuss this new field which combines scholarship, creative work, and environmental activism, for ecomusicology appeals to an increasing number of ethnomusicologists concerned with music and the environment. Indeed, ecomusicology attracts musicologists, ethnomusicologists, environmental activists, acousticians, anthropologists, composers, performers, ecological scientists, and scholars in the field of sound studies. Each brings different perspectives, concerns, questions, methodologies, and analyses to the discussion of music and environment. There is a study group within the Society for Ethnomusicology devoted to ecomusicology. There is, also, a study group within the American Musicological Society devoted to ecomusicology. By design there is no society for ecomusicology, but ecomusicologists have held two major conferences in this decade, we have a journal called *Ecomusicology Review*, and a listserv.

The field of ecomusicology coalesced in this second decade of the current century, under the guiding hand of musicologist Aaron S. Allen. As an undergraduate at Tulane Allen had pursued a double major in music and environmental studies. As a PhD student in musicology at Harvard he was direc-

³ The participants were musicologists Aaron S. Allen and Denise Von Glahn, anthropologist Mark Pedelty, and ethnomusicologists Ruth Hellier-Tinoco, Jennifer Post, and myself. The roundtable was moderated by SEM President-Elect Timothy J. Cooley.

ted to a traditional dissertation topic on Beethoven, while his professors left him to pursue his interests in music and the environment on his own time. Those interests blossomed after he began a teaching career in the department of music at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and sought out other scholars interested in music and the environment.

Allen was centrally involved in four landmark ecomusicological publications in the 2010s. The first was a colloquy of articles under the heading ecomusicology published in 2011 in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, and the second was an entry defining ecomusicology in the *Grove Dictionary of American Music*, available to scholars since 2011 but published in 2014. Allen introduced the colloquy and wrote the Grove entry. Both publications were aimed at musicologists, and both drew on Alexander Rehding's seminal review article, where he discussed recent works on music and nature under the heading "Eco-Musicology."⁴ In them Allen defined ecomusicology as "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 environment." After acknowledging, as Rehding had discussed, that the meanings of music, culture, and nature were complex, unstable and contested, Allen went on to explain that the "eco" in ecomusicology was not a reference to ecology per se but, rather, to ecocriticism, a branch of literary criticism that developed in the late 20th century that emphasized relations between authors, literature, and the environment. Therefore, ecomusicology was best understood as ecocritical musicology, emphasizing relations between composers, music literature, and the environment.⁵

However, Allen soon recognized that defining ecomusicology as eco-critical musicology was too restrictive. True, he had taken pains to reference Charles Seeger's definition of musicology as the study of music in all its manifestations, rather than primarily as the study of Western art, or classical, music. Besides, the discipline of musicology had opened up in the past thirty years as the so-called "new musicologists" expanded the canon by exploring musical theatre, jazz, rock, soul, and hip-hop music, as well as by elevating the careers of women and people of color who had been neglected as composers and performers. Musicology, like other academic disciplines, attempted to attract minorities into graduate school and as faculty members. Surely there was room for ecomusicology in the musicological tent. In his Grove Dictionary definition, Allen recognized ecomusicology's cross-disciplinary appeal to studies in soundscape and acoustic ecology, as well as biomusico-

⁴ Rehding, Alexander. "Review Article: Eco-Musicology." *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, vol. 127, no. 2, 2002, pp. 305-320.

⁵ Allen, Aaron S. "Ecomusicology: Ecocriticism and Musicology." *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2011, p. 393.

logy (the study of animal sound communication), and an ethnomusicology that went beyond ethnographic description and interpretation to issues that were “political and critical.”⁶ At the first ecomusicology conference, which took place in October, 2012 in New Orleans, the majority of attendees were musicologists. However, one could not help noticing that scholars, activists and scientists who did not identify as musicologists were present as well, and that some were presenting their own research as ecomusicology. These included ethnomusicologists drawing on their field’s long ethnographic engagement with music and cultural ecology. They included applied ethnomusicologists interested in harnessing concepts of sustainability to music and cultural policy. They included composers and performers whose music engaged directly with the environment. They included scientists interested in bi-music. They included public intellectuals and journalists synthesizing research in music and the environment.

After the 2012 ecomusicology conference Allen and his British colleague Kevin Dawe determined to put together a book reflecting varieties of ecomusicological scholarship. Drawing partly on presentations from the 2012 conference but not limited to them, *Current Directions in Ecomusicology (CDE)* was published by Routledge in 2016 and became the third ecomusicology landmark of the decade. This ambitious and eclectic work was divided into parts: Ecological Directions, Fieldwork Directions, Critical Directions, and Textual Directions. The book foregrounded four major, though not mutually exclusive, perspectives: ecological, ethnomusicological, (eco)critical (including ethics, as well as postmodern and critical theory), and textual (i.e., engaging primarily with texts, usually from a musicological standpoint). “There is no one ecomusicology but many ecomusicologies constituting a dynamic field,” Allen and Dawe wrote.⁷

Drawing on my own experiences at the 2012 conference, I came to view ecomusicology as a crisis field and defined it a little more broadly than Allen had done, as “the study of music, sound, culture, nature and the environment in a time of environmental crisis.”⁸ Allen and I had been corresponding about music, sustainability, ecology and the use of metaphors in ecomusicology since February of 2012. I had been writing about music and ecology decades prior to the invention of the term ecomusicology. Allen had critiqued my 2009 article in which I developed ecological approach to musical sustainabi-

⁶ Allen, Aaron S. “Ecomusicology (ecocritical musicology)” *Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd edition.

⁷ Allen Aaron S., and Kevin Dawe, eds. *Current Directions in Ecomusicology*. Routledge, 2016, p. 1.

⁸ Titon, Jeff Todd. “The Nature of Ecomusicology.” *Música e Cultura revista da ABET*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2013, pp. 8-18. Originally the keynote address for the 2013 conference of the Brazilian Society for Ethnomusicology, in João Pessoa, Brazil.

lity, based on applying principles borrowed from conservation biology to music and sustainability, for using ecology as a metaphor by bringing it out of the physical environment and into the world of cultural policy.⁹ I had also employed ecology as a metaphor, he said, in my 1984 claim that music cultures could be understood as ecosystems.¹⁰ Allen, in other words, made the important distinction between ecology as metaphor and ecology as science. He acknowledged that in my more recent work I employed ecology directly in relation to the physical environment when I appealed on scientific grounds for a sound commons for all living creatures.¹¹ However, the term sound commons is itself a metaphor, and in the sciences as in the humanities metaphors have powerful explanatory qualities and are impossible to avoid, even in mathematics.¹² Darwin cheerfully admitted that his phrase, “struggle for existence,” was a metaphor.¹³ The tensions between the objective world of science and the subjective realm of metaphor greatly troubled Henry David Thoreau, the subject of my own contribution to *CDE*. I view them as creative rather than destructive tensions.

The music/ecology metaphor was the object of critique in two articles, one written by Brent Keogh and the other by Keogh and Ian Collinson.¹⁴ They critiqued not only ecomusicology but also ethnomusicology, arguing that their use of the music/ecology metaphor was both misleading and also a

⁹ Titon, Jeff Todd. “Music and Sustainability: An Ecological Viewpoint.” *The World of Music*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2009, pp. 119-137. Allen, Aaron. “Sounding Sustainable; or, The Challenge of Sustainability,” 49-51. In *Cultural Sustainabilities: Music, Media, Language, Advocacy*, edited by Timothy J. Cooley, 43-62. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019.

¹⁰ Titon, Jeff Todd, and Mark Slobin. “The Music Culture as a World of Music.” In *Worlds of Music*, edited by Jeff Todd Titon. Schirmer Books, 1984, p. 9. When I wrote that music cultures could be understood as ecological systems, I meant both that music cultures were like ecological systems, and also that they were ecological systems.

¹¹ Titon, Jeff Todd. “A Sound Commons for All Living Creatures.” *Smithsonian Folkways Magazine* (Fall-Winter 2012). <https://folkways.si.edu/magazine-fall-winter-2012-sound-commons-living-creatures/science-and-nature-world/music/article/smithsonian>

¹² Manin, Yuri. *Mathematics as Metaphor*. American Mathematical Society, 2007.

¹³ In *On The Origin of Species*, first edition, chapter 3, Darwin wrote: “I use the term Struggle for Existence in a large and metaphorical sense, including dependence of one being on another, and including (which is more important) not only the life of the individual, but success in leaving progeny. . . .”

¹⁴ Brent Keogh, “On the Limitations of Music Ecology.” *Journal of Music Research Online* 4 (2013). <http://www.jmro.org.au/index.php/mca2/article/view/83>. Brent Keogh and Ian Collinson, “‘A Place for Everything and Everything in Its Place’: The (Ab)uses of Music Ecology.” *MUSICultures* 43, no. 1 (2016), 1-15.

distraction from more important inquiries into music as cultural production. At the same time, a critique by ethnomusicologist Anna Maria Ochoa Gautier argued that ecomusicologists had failed to draw upon an important earlier strand in ethnomusicology exemplified by Steven Feld's concept of acoustemology, referring to societies like the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea where sound played an outsized role in determining what humans could know and how they could know it—i.e., in social epistemologies.¹⁵

Rather than responding immediately to these critiques, Allen and I decided it would be best at first to respond indirectly, by demonstrating, in a special issue of a journal, the variety of ecological approaches to music and sound. A call for articles resulted in fifty-five proposals, far more than we thought we would receive. In 2018 twelve of those articles were published, in a special issue of the journal *MUSICultures*.¹⁶ This was the fourth landmark in ecomusicology in this decade. Topics included the indigenous ecological knowledges and their relations to music and sound; human-animal cross-species interactions involving sounds and symbols; new age atmospheric music and the environment; ecological psychology and phenomenology of musical performance; music-culture ecosystems and the sustainability of symphony orchestras; and ecocritical musicology with an emphasis on compositions from an ecological standpoint.

In the Introduction to this special issue, Allen wrote that ecology provided ecomusicology with both a problem and an opportunity. For Allen, the problem of ecology was “the invocation of ecology to mean something other than what ecological scientists mean by it.” The opportunity, however, was in ecology's ability to inform “other realms of inquiry that resonate with music and sound studies.”¹⁷ In my Afterword to this special issue, I wrote about two problems *in* contemporary ecology that presented difficulties for ecomusicologists. One was the change, in the past century, from the balance-of-nature paradigm to the disturbance-and-change paradigm. However, most ecomusicologists consider still nature and the environment to trend toward an ideal state of balance or equilibrium. The second problem is the ongoing debate, within ecological science, between population ecologists, who work from the bottom up, and ecosystem ecologists, who apply a systems appro-

¹⁵ Gautier, Ana María Ochoa. “Acoustic Multinaturalism, the Value of Nature, and the Nature of Music in Ecomusicology.” *Boundary 2*, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 107-141. DOI 10.1215/01903659-3340661.

¹⁶ Allen, Aaron S., and Jeff Todd Titon, eds. *MUSICultures*, vol. 45, nos. 1-2, 2018. Special issue on Ecologies.

¹⁷ Allen, Aaron S. “One Ecology and Many Ecologies: The Problem and Opportunity of Ecology for Music and Sound Studies.” *MUSICultures*, vol. 45, nos. 1-2, 2018, p. 1.

ach and work from the top down.¹⁸ In the mid-20th century ecosystem ecologists gained the advantage and held it for several decades, but their mathematical models were not nearly as accurate as had been hoped, and as a result ecosystem ecology is no longer at the center of the field of ecology. Nevertheless, the ecosystem remains the principal metaphor with which ecomusicologists think about sustainability and music cultures although, to be sure, the music-culture models that ecomusicologists have employed are descriptive, not mathematical.

Certainly the music/ecology metaphor has its limitations when yoked to the abandoned balance of nature ecological paradigm, as it was for most of the previous century. Yet the contemporary science that accounts for ongoing relations among organisms and environment retains the idea that these constitute systems, however temporarily stable their equilibria may be after regime changes. In the same way, music-culture ecosystems may be described in terms of non-totalizing, dynamic relations among the parts and emergent, unpredicted consequences in the behavior of the whole. Ochoa Gautier's argument that research by Feld and others foregrounded relations between music and the environment is certainly correct, while it is also true that much of the research in Indigenous societies during the previous century focused on the ritual uses of music to ensure that nature would provide sufficient food and water for survival. However, this scholarly research appears chiefly as cultural ecology adapted to the study of music, rather than as proto-ecomusicology. Moreover, when first published, it lacked the present sense of a planetary environmental crisis even though the Environmental Movement had begun some thirty years earlier with the work of Rachel Carson in the 1950s. More recently, Feld and others have revisited this early research from more of an applied standpoint, both with a sense of crisis and a view toward cultural and environmental sustainability; but they do not identify their work as ecomusicology.¹⁹ The broad and growing appeal of music and ecology prompted Allen and me to turn the special issue of *MUSICultures* into a book: "Sounds, Ecologies, Musics." In this book we intend to further clarify the challenges posed and opportunities offered when sound and music are considered from ecological perspectives. In the book we seek to address two principal questions: (1) What is the place, and the role, of music and sound in this crisis of the so-called Anthropocene? and (2) How might ecological thinking help

¹⁸ Titon, Jeff Todd. "Ecomusicology and the Problems in Ecology." *MUSICultures*, vol. 45, nos. 1-2, 2018, pp. 260-261.

¹⁹ Feld, Steven. *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression*. 3rd edition, with a new Afterword. Duke University Press, 2012. Originally published in 1982. See also Seeger, Anthony. *Why Suyu Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People*. University of Illinois Press, 2004. Originally published in 1987. See also Roseman, Maria. *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest: Temiar Music and Medicine*. University of California Press, 1991.

ecomusicologists to understand, and mitigate, this crisis? We invited a half-dozen additional authors to contribute, and after gathering up abstracts and submitting a book proposal, last winter we signed an advance contract with Oxford University Press. Authors (including co-editors Allen and Titon) are in the midst of writing our contributions. We are hopeful that within a few years the book will be published.

Ecomusicology coalesced at the beginning of the current decade as the ecocritical study of music. That is, the “eco” in ecomusicology referred to ecocriticism. Today, the “eco” also refers to ecology. The expanding “eco” invites ecologists under the ecomusicological tent, and it also encourages ec ethnomusicologists to adopt an ecological perspective. This ecological perspective from ecomusicology offers ethnomusicologists an opportunity to contribute more directly and authoritatively to the public discourse surrounding the environmental crisis, and to do so from a point of view that foregrounds the sounding universe in which humans and other animals are continuing to adapt their musical and sonic communication in response to changes in habitat and climate.

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