

Encountering, exploring, and teaching ecomusicology – a personal journey

Mark Porter

Different paths and different speeds

As the presence of ecomusicology continues to grow in our research and in our curricula, many of us have begun to engage with it in different ways. Whilst some of us have established a clear agenda for how we want to do this, others of us are still figuring out how ecomusicological concerns might integrate with our own research and teaching agendas. The sharing of experience is an important part of how we learn to navigate these questions, and so, in this short contribution, I want to share some of my own ecomusicological journey in the hope that it might open a little more space for others to do the same.

My first encounter with ecomusicological research was somewhat ambivalent in nature. Each semester, the department where I was completing my doctorate would hold regular research colloquia. The exact details of the event are somewhat hazy in my mind, but I remember being intrigued one week as a presenter introduced us to questions of sustainability through a focus on the sourcing of wood for the manufacture of musical instruments. Sustainability of raw materials was connected to the sustainability of particular musical cultures and the ecosystems that surrounded them, and I was drawn in by the idea that we could begin to connect musicological research with broader environmental concerns. Issues of climate change had not yet reached their current intense presence in many of our lives but these and other patterns of wide-spread ecological destruction were nevertheless clearly visible as global and social challenges that we were often failing to address.

Whilst I was intrigued, this initial encounter also left me somewhat unconvinced. The particular focus of the talk struck me as something of a niche interest – a way of engaging important sustainability concerns, but one that was too distant from the main concerns driving my own research, or musicological research in general to be able to make much of a wider impact. My own work focussed closely on the dynamics of communities and their rich and varied experiences of music – the meaning of music in their lives, the way they negotiated questions of value, emotion, ethics, and diversity. Amidst those concerns, an approach focussing primarily on physical raw materials struck me as a remarkably dry one, and my initial curiosity that issues of music and ecology might in some way come together turned

slowly into a sense of disappointment that they did so in a way that I myself struggled to do anything with. At this early stage in my research, I wasn't in much of a position to imagine what a richer way of engaging environmental themes might look like and, as a result, after my initial encounter, it was a number of years before I eventually re-engaged with ecomusicological research.

The hook that ultimately drew me in arrived several years later, when ecological initiatives started to cross over with my existing expertise and interests. My main research focus is on the intersection of music and Christian communities, and around the middle of 2019 I began to notice that increasing numbers of these communities were themselves using music in connection with ecological crises and relationships. I saw evangelicals begin to put together ecological albums, composers exploring requiems for lost species, faith-based protest groups integrating music into their activism and forest church groups publishing music for outdoor rituals (Porter 2023), and with this, I finally found my way in through the door. I was drawn in simultaneously by a sense of curiosity, of not knowing why or how these groups were beginning to integrate music, faith and ecology, by my own sense of investment in environmental themes, which had grown over the years through increasing personal connections with the plants, animals and landscapes around me, and through a growing societal awareness that we are on the verge of a global systemic environmental catastrophe. As these different groups began to experiment with ecological themes, I began to understand a little more clearly that there really might be something significant going on here, something that went beyond a forced attempt to bring together musicological research and current social issues as topics that didn't really want to fit together, and which might have genuine depth and importance to it.

Overwhelmed by texts

Whilst I have often been confronted with large numbers of articles when seeking to engage with a new field of research, on diving into themes of sustainability and climate with a new sense of drive and perspective, I very quickly found that it is easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer volume and diversity of the literature. The minute you feel you have mastered one perspective you catch another out of the corner of your eye and realise that there are thousands more papers that might just be relevant to the thing you are hoping to investigate. In no particular order, I began to delve into work on ecocriticism, ecopsychology, ecotheology, ecofeminism, ecomusicology, social movements and protest, popular music

studies research, sound studies research, theories of innovation, the environmental humanities, religious studies research on the climate, anthropology of climate change, sociology of climate change, ecopedagogy, green consumerism, sustainable event management, human-animal studies, and much more alongside.

Organising these different perspectives in my head and on the page, as well as getting a grip on the feeling that there were deep and unmappable oceans of research that I would never have any hope of gaining any perspective on, was a crucial challenge. Not only a challenge, however. In exploring this vast and multi-dimensional pool of literature, I slowly began to understand how deeply and widely ecological themes touch on our way of being and acting in the world; that these were not themes that are set apart in their own little niche, but that they are pervasive and at the centre of almost everything we think and do. To this extent, there is no musical activity that is separate from ecological relationships, and no aspect of that activity which is separate from them either. Just as ethnomusicology has helped to show us how all music is ultimately human activity, and that music can never be separated from matters of human society, interaction and experience, so ecomusicology began to show me that these relationships stretch further, and that no human activity or interaction is separate from the multitude of ecological relationships that we participate in, even at our most isolated or most inward-focussed moments.

Slowly my sense of orientation grew, as I mapped the different fields of research in my head, and as I encountered the writings of others who had already begun to do the same. Many of the usual authors offered me important reference points in mapping a larger field of research – figures such as Aaron Allen, Jeff Todd Titon and Mark Pedelty helped to offer a narrative and to organise something of the multiplicity that I was confronted with from a musicological vantage point (see e.g. Pedelty et al. 2022; Allen/Dawe 2016). The logics and structure which they draw together have many of their own limitations and blind spots, but in navigating a much broader research landscape, these voices helped to give my explorations a sense of identity and a feeling of a common project rather than simply of an individual quest. A similar range of authors served to offer a sense of orientation when it comes to the religious aspect of my research, as well as the different themes that emerged in connection with particular ethnographic explorations, and as I slowly narrowed down a list of my key conversation partners, I began to find my own footing within the environmental humanities ocean.

The importance of encounter

My developing sense of orientation within the literature grew up not in abstract isolation, but precisely as it came into dialogue with the different communities and projects that had turned my head in an ecomusicological direction in the first place. I engaged with hymn-writers and writers of worship songs, with writers of ecological requiems, with faith-based climate protestors, with individuals writing songs for environmental communication and with groups developing outdoor rituals. Through these different engagements I saw the role of music in processing ecological grief and hope, in bringing broader constituencies onboard, in managing dynamics of ecological protest, in negotiating relationships between people, spaces and other beings, and much more besides. As particular themes came to the fore in my fieldwork, so I became more aware which existing bodies of thought might have a bearing on the phenomena I was interested in, and where those connections might have something to say to the communities that I was engaging with.

As my research has developed, this process of dialogue has forced to reflect on my role as a researcher coming in and out of different people's lives, wondering whether my work really has something to offer when they are often the ones engaging in practical work raising awareness, changing the attitudes of communities, protesting, and seeking to bring people with them along the way. One thing that quickly became clear was that most of them were feeling their way a little bit in working through their different projects. Often, they had no clear models which they would want to follow, and often it felt like they were unaware of other people trying similar projects and also trying things out in their own way. This led me to begin to imagine myself as a kind of networker, able to report from one conversation to another on different projects which were happening, or to suggest other groups that they might find interesting. I'm often aware of how inadequately I fulfil this role, and of the ways in which my more-academic writing can sometimes act counterproductively when it comes to offering something truly useful. Nevertheless, it is partly these conversations and the ability to sometimes offer something back during them which has helped to give my work a sense of drive and purpose which I would struggle to hold on to if working primarily for and with an academic audience.

First attempts at pedagogy – showcasing diversity

Teaching courses has played just as important a role in my developing sense of orientation as my field research. Whilst conversations with faith-based groups provided a concrete hook

into one set of practical concerns, engaging students with ecomusicological research has helped me to organise other ecomusicological perspectives which don't always raise their head so quickly in my particular context of research. My first attempt at teaching and planning a course in ecomusicology aimed to showcase a broad range of different ecomusicological approaches and initiatives in the hope that somewhere in amidst these different ideas and encounters there might be something which each of the students could latch onto some way and take a little further. Putting the course together involved my own attempt to categorise a set of thematic areas at the intersection of music and the environment that could serve to provide a focus for a week-by-week journey. Rather than doing this purely on the basis of my existing explorations, this involved a deliberate attempt to figure out which areas and perspectives my existing research had forgotten, and where there might be some ways of seeing which my field research so far had not prepared me for and which might challenge me as well as the students to think in a wider variety of directions.

Early weeks focussed on large-scale questions of the relationship between music and ecology, and some background to the field. To give a taste for the diversity of ecomusicological approaches early on, students were asked to present on individual chapters from *Current directions in ecomusicology* (Allen/Dawe 2016), and to critique the degree to which the different approaches they offered were helpful or unhelpful to them. This led through to a week focussing specifically on ecofeminist approaches to the environment (Plumwood 1993) and to music (Von Glahn 2016; Feisst 2016), and from here on in, I adopted a thematic focus, working through weeks on soundscapes and acoustemologies (Schafer 1993; Feld 2012), music consumption (Devine 2019), grief and mourning (Cunsolo/Landman 2017), sound art (Gilmurray 2017), and popular music (Ingram 2010). Whilst much music pedagogy traditionally offers a historical approach, this was something I tended to avoid. There are all sorts of ways to re-read historical compositions and projects through an ecomusicological lens, however recent or contemporary practices and creative responses to the ecological crisis seem, in many ways, a more appropriate entry point to the challenges that are facing us at the current moment. A novel situation demands, in some sense, an orientation shaped around creativity, and whilst attention to longer-term trajectories can indeed help us to obtain a useful sense of perspective, there is a danger that a focus primarily on those trajectories pushes current possibilities for engagement to the background.

Whilst I had been relatively nervous at the start of the course that students weren't willing or able to engage to strongly with the more-theoretical offerings, coming home from

classes a little discouraged by discussions that didn't take off and conversations that they didn't seem able to easily relate to, as each week posed different discussion questions and dilemmas, and as we began to focus on much more concrete phenomena it felt that we had been on an important journey and, crucially, that some of them had begun to take some ownership of these different themes beyond the space of the classroom. The final weeks of the course were dedicated to students' own presentations on topics from their own interest. These included topics such as eco-metal, local musicians' attitudes to sustainability, underwater soundscapes, sustainable music festivals, some of which felt like relatively superficial analyses, and some of which seemed to be much more personal or to probe much deeper. I was particularly excited when some of these presentations pointed to areas that I myself hadn't come across, or where a student had connected the course to something that was important to them in the rest of their life. The journey from initial disengagement to voicing their own critical perspectives and then to engage in these small-scale research presentations gave me a sense of achievement, a feeling that we had grown together over the course of the semester, and that all of us in some sense went out of that classroom with perspectives on the world around us that we weren't expecting at the beginning of the semester.

Spaces for connection and reflection

Going on your own journey inevitably makes you curious about the journeys that others have been on. Did they take the same path? Did they encounter the same set of issues? Often this is harder to do in a pedagogical context than in a research one, since lecturers do not always think to publish reflections on their own teaching practice with quite the same frequency that they do with research. Syllabuses are sometimes available online, but many are not, and many require a reach of imagination to understand how a particular set of readings and titles might have played out in practice and in a particular university environment.

Many of those who have written up their approaches to ecomusicological pedagogy have focussed on themes of attentiveness and observation, emphasising the potential for courses in this area to push students to encounter the world around them in a different manner. Whilst these share some commonalities with my first attempts to engage students' ecological imaginations, they are often more-explicitly experience- or location-focussed in nature than my own initial explorations. David Shevock (2018), for example, has emphasised the importance of musical connection to place, alongside an interest in the spiritual dimension

that can be present in both environmental relationships and the learning process. He discusses practices of attentiveness to the sounds around us and responses to them in processes of creativity, alongside attention to the compositions of musicians who also had a connection to a particular place or ecosystem in the music that they wrote or performed. Shevock emphasises music as practice rather than as aesthetics and connects ecomusicological pedagogy together with other issues of justice and recognition. A number of other authors point in a similar direction. Amanda Black, Andrea Bohlman, and Donna Kwon (Black/Bohlman 2017; Kwon 2017) all focus on the potential of soundwalks, Black and Bohlman focus on the relationship between soundwalks, the unheard, and race, whilst Kwon emphasises dimensions of political ecology which are connected to sound – the contestation of noise, and its connection to particular projects on the part of particular groups, inequalities, and powers.

Justin Adams Burton (2017) describes a regionally focused approach centred around the soundscapes of southern hip-hop and the ways in which ecomusicological paradigms can shape a course on subject matter not traditionally approached through an ecomusicological lens. He intentionally focusses on urban environments, integrating questions of social welfare with the ways in which nature and the human come together in city environments. In his course, cities are politicised in relation to questions of inequality, and they are sites of environmental degradation as well as vitalization and revitalization. Kate Galloway's (2017) approach, meanwhile, is publicly engaged, once again deploying soundwalks as the main paradigm for student engagement, but conceptualising these within a community-engaged digital mindset. Galloway uses the paradigm of the maker space in order to suggest that processes of communal creativity and technological engagement can allow students to take on a variety of different roles as they reflect upon and curate their sound-walk recordings, commenting on and presenting them in digital formats for a wider public to encounter and engage in.

In common with many of the soundwalk-focussed approaches, Marie Jorritsma (2022) emphasises themes of connection and empathy, Jorritsma, however draws on scholars who are a little more sceptical regarding the primacy of the local, instead developing an approach which connects theoretical ecological topics to particular case studies. It is an approach which maintains the importance of the concrete and the specific but adopts a more ethnomusicological emphasis on the diversity and range that learning from different locations can bring with it. Jorritsma suggests that these principles needn't be confined to a particular

course on ecomusicology, but can be deployed across the curriculum and, indeed, in our daily lives. Aaron Allen reaches in a similarly expansive direction, suggesting that “Environmental education in general and environmental leadership in particular can benefit from ecomusicology’s capacity to connect the sciences, arts, and humanities” (2012: 374).

According to Allen:

“If ecological thinking relates to stretching powers of observation—developing imaginative thinking and problem solving, deepening emotional responses to the world and to societies, considering varying and often conflicting philosophical positions simultaneously, and building strong and sustainable communities and teams—and if these goals are important, then the study of ecomusicology in an ESS [environmental studies and sciences] context is one potential avenue toward developing environmental leaders’ ability to think ecologically”. (2012: 374–5)

It is precisely this broader connective ability that Allen cherishes,

“Studying ecomusicology and achieving a better understanding of sound and music in general can help environmental leaders (a) use their imaginations, (b) appeal to audiences in intelligent and emotionally meaningful ways, (c) make informed decisions by taking into account a variety of sources of data, (d) consider diverse perspectives (aesthetically, philosophically, politically), (e) develop an ease with interdisciplinary approaches, and (f) think critically in new and innovative ways to solve”. (2012: 380)

In an article in the *Journal of music history pedagogy* (2017), Allen adopts a similarly expansive focus, taking an ecomusicology course focussed on critical thinking and writing, and suggesting ways in which ecomusicological concerns have the potential to extend further into historical-focussed courses as part of a broader liberal arts education which bring together different subjects, offering students a sober but not hopeless view of the world, and bringing together the mind and feelings and equips students to live well in a place.

Freirian approaches

Alongside reflection and sensitisation, many educators go further in connecting their courses to creative engagement and action. Many pedagogical suggestions in this area built on Paulo Freire’s work in his *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (2005 [1970]), a work which points to the role of education in the revolution against unjust systems. Freire emphasises a problem-oriented approach to education which is less about the acquisition of knowledge and more

about becoming aware of structures of oppression and creating a two-way partnership and dialogue between teachers and students which is able to reflect upon existing systems, enquiring together and creating an awareness that can eliminate feelings of dependence in order to empower students to become agents of their own liberation. Michael Macdonald draws on the work of Freire to connect strongly together pedagogy and social systems. Macdonald emphasises community partnerships and activism, in order to develop a Critical Multiliteracies Pedagogy “oriented towards developing critical self-awareness about the aesthetics resources of the capitalist culture industries” (2017: 223). He combines critical awareness and capability with the ability to act, with different aesthetic systems competing and connecting to different ethical regimes. Katja Sutela likewise emphasises an activist approach, describing a project centred around the composition of environmentally-related children’s songs, in collaboration with artists and a scientist. Sutela suggests that “activist music education is part of the larger movement of artistic activism, an effective and affective practice toward social change. Composing, in turn, is both an artistic and pedagogical way to work toward desired change” (2023: 2). She emphasises an eco-social paradigm of art education, which uses the mediating realm of embodiment as a holistic means of relating multi-species interaction and human participation with the more-than-human world as well as stressing the role of imagination and vision in relation to the future and themes of responsibility. Composition becomes a means of awakening and inspiring, a means of cultivating empathy, care, and sensitivity and a means of empowerment.

Mark Pedelty takes a Freirean path in his development of community-based video production projects focussed on co-creation in community. The first project he describes connects a song inspired by the concept of singing fish, with the creation of an animation sequence drawing together a local eco-system and organisations within the community, whilst his other projects combine together a similar range of inspirations and collaborations. Pedelty suggests that

“one of the potential roles for ecomusicology, therefore, is to widen that space, to encourage more musicians and environmentalists to engage in environmentally relevant music, to support projects through which that is made possible, and to envision ecomusicology as a field of praxis that promises to enrich both the musical experience and ecosystems”. (2017: 80)

The process is centred around dialogue and praxis and draws on the resources of the academy but is far from centred around it. On the basis of a survey of students in popular music

education, meanwhile, Donna Weston and Leah Coutts suggest that “students mostly have the willingness to engage in environmental issues but struggle to see how this might connect with their musical practices”. They propose that this may well be the result of a deficit in higher education models, and build up a Freirian proposal for a pedagogical framework which

“encourages critical thinking; empowers students to name and change their world; engages students and teachers in a common pursuit; recognizes the power of music to create change; provides frameworks for storytelling and story dissemination and offers exposure to issues of environmentalism and climate change with invitations to engage more fully for those students wishing to explore their music in this space”. (Weston/Coutts 2023: 10)

Each of these approaches emphasises the potential for action, for partnership, and for empowering students to do things.

Second attempts at pedagogy – collaboration and practice

As with many things, teaching an ecomusicology course the second time around brought a different kind of clarity, and a different sense of what I really wanted to get out of the course. Whilst some of theory was allowed to stay, it was condensed down into much smaller time-periods, leaving the course with a more concrete focus as we went through. I decided, too, that the assignment had to change. It was more-engaging, indeed potentially more useful, to focus not on the production of further academic texts, but to give the students a space to prepare some practical proposals for events, courses or musical activities that might, at least in theory, be able to contribute to their own future endeavours, wondering not just how to think about the things around them at the moment, but about the things that might be able to happen if they had a hand in shaping them. In teaching on themes of ecological crisis, I felt that a disengaged pedagogical model has very little to offer – it is not what is needed socially, and it also not what students need personally in their own wrestling with the crisis. Rather, they need to imagine – and be enabled to imagine – ways to process and to influence the world around them, gaining a sense of what might be possible and then applying some of their own creativity to think about how they might be able to make that happen.

As well as providing the students with space for their own creativity, the course also brought in a broader range of voices beyond my own in creating a more collaborative learning environment. Teaching together with a friend and colleague week by week helped to balance out some of the weaknesses in my own teaching and gave some space to mutually

complement and critique each-other's approaches. Inviting guests to speak with the students via videocall, meanwhile, gave an important space for them to engage with practitioners, to ask about different projects and to get a feel for what different people were really trying to do in the world and why. Whilst we invited a range of different guests with different contributions and approaches, ultimately the students engaged most strongly with an invitation from a semi-local musician to quiz them about their own creative processes and the thoughts behind it. An element of relatability and possible transfer over to their own experience seemed to achieve much more than the invitation of someone engaged in more-radically different practices.

Unlike the first course, this one was not primarily directed at an audience of musicologists. It was therefore interesting to see how these themes were indeed of interest to a much broader range of students, all of whom brought with them a latent capacity to reflect on musical and sonic practices regardless of the disciplinary barriers that musicological discourse can sometimes erect. Indeed, in early weeks it was particularly important to encourage this broader body of students that their experiences of and perspectives on music and sound were well worth paying attention to – that everyday experience and reflection should not sit at a distance from expert musicological opinions but, rather, that they constitute an important way of knowing the world around us on precisely the kind of level that ecological musical projects might be able to make some kind of impact on people and communities.

As a class made up largely of trainee-teachers, many of the envisioned projects focussed on a classroom environment and the different ways in which sound can be used as a means to engage children with the environment. This was a trend I had not anticipated at the start of the teaching, and which challenged to me to think in new directions alongside the expertise of the students from other areas of their studies. Alongside this, students presented plans for sustainability-focussed music festivals and clubs, working together in groups to produce plans which were a mixture of fantasy and ideas which they might genuinely be able to contribute to or realise themselves at some point in the near or further-distant future. These projects spanned a broad spectrum, from those which felt they had only engaged relatively superficially with the issues that we had been discussing to those which felt deeply and creatively engaged with the challenge.

Whilst some of the fantasy proposals from the course had been exciting, and it seemed that some of them might genuinely contribute to the students' future practice,

particularly where they had developed activities to engage together with students of their own as a part of school curricula, I was particularly pleased when one of the projects took a leap from fantasy to reality within the course of the semester. As part of their assignment, two of the students conducted conversations with people around them to learn about their perspectives on climate-related themes, used these to write a multi-section protest song, recorded the protest song together with some friends, and then used the song itself with a group of protestors as part of a local demonstration against German expansion of one of their largest coalmines. The practical implementation of their idea went significantly beyond our relatively limited expectations of conceptualising a project, and carried with it the realisation that the work we enabled had real potential to make its way into wider IRL engagements. There is, of course, no way to compel students into this kind of engagement, but it seems that at least some of them already want it, and in providing more-explicit space for them to be able to do so, I had the feeling that we might be able to open up opportunities for their work to have meaning beyond the completion of an assignment and the subsequent award of a mark and a comment. This second course, therefore, left me with the resolve to consider this aspect more in future teaching projects.

Reaching outwards

Beyond this second course, the journey begins to take a number of different directions. In working on issues of ecology, it can often feel a somewhat artificial barrier to separate questions of music from other ecological approaches and issues, and my subsequent teaching projects have been a product of this kind of natural fluidity. A collaborative teaching project focussed on writing sustainable narratives last semester will be followed by one focussing on ethnographic interviews on climate-related themes in the semester ahead. Viewing music in isolation is not particularly helpful in a crisis that demands a wide-reaching and multi-dimensional societal response. Whilst music is often set aside as something special and different in a way that other arts or activities are not, this often tends to hinder rather than aid musicologists' ability to participate in wider conversations, creating a scepticism as to music's relevance on a wide range of issues whilst also slowing down musicologists' attention to ideas outside of their own immediate field of interest. My further journey thus involves a continued process of experimentation, trying out different ideas and pathways in the classroom in a continued attempt to learn more in collaboration with the students, to find out which avenues inspire something meaningful, and to hope that some of this might go on

its own journey beyond the university to shape the projects and explorations that the students go on to participate in over coming months and years.

I am not yet convinced that I do proper justice to the potential of ecomusicological engagement in my pedagogy. I see with joy the points where students engage and open up, and often observe the way that they seem hungry to do something with the ecological angst, concern and hopelessness that they and the rest of us are currently experiencing. These courses were well attended for a reason – because these are pressing concerns, and because our universities should really be spaces where we have the room to empower students to engage and address them. Over the course of teaching them I have become more and more convinced that an adequate ecological pedagogy is one that allows students the space to process their ecological concern, that leads them to encounter some of the different possibilities that are available, and which helps them to engage concretely, imaginatively or interactively with the different human and ecological processes that are currently in dire need of action as they leave the space of the classroom and take their experience there into the world around them.¹ A key part of my role is not simply to teach, but to realise that students often choose to come to this topic precisely because of an existing investment in our environmental situation. To this extent, I, and all of us, need to do some justice to this investment and concern.

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¹ Similar impulses can be found in other areas of musicological engagement such as applied ethnomusicology (Harrison 2015).

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