

Towards a transformational (eco)musicology

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Interpreting artistic responses to the climate crisis and analysing intersections between today's wider crisis of sustainability and cultural practices have become established and dynamic areas of humanities research in past decades. Musicology has been no exception to these developments. Here, efforts have coalesced around the term "ecomusicology", defined originally by Aaron S. Allen as "the study of music, culture, and nature in all the complexities of those terms".¹ This article attempts to fuse together perspectives from the field of ecomusicology with music sociology and sustainable transformation research, with a view to expanding the existing conceptions of activist or transformation-centred work in ecomusicology.

Firstly, I discuss the current scope of ecomusicology, particularly as regards its relationship to activism and applied or transformation-centred research, identifying a gap in ecomusicology's approach to Western art music practices. Building on this, I present an example from my own research, which analyses sustainability and processes of institutional transformation within Western art music from a music sociology perspective. I will then offer reflections on how (eco)musicology could more firmly anchor itself in real-world processes of change and be more able to respond to the demands of musical presents and futures – and how this requires expanding the conventional tasks of the musicologist.

Ecomusicology and practices of Western art music

How has work in ecomusicology contributed to questions relating to sustainable transformation² and music? Where does Western classical music fit into these lines of inquiry? I offer here a very brief review of the current research areas of ecomusicology with two aims: firstly, to look at the extent to which music (and in particular, Western art music) has been discussed as a social phenomenon in ecomusicology and secondly, to gain an impression of transformational or activist work in ecomusicology and what the emphasis of such efforts is. Given that, as Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe state in the introduction to *Current Directions in Ecomusicology*, the roots of ecomusicology are to be found in ecological criticism, the "critical study of literary

and other artistic products in relation to the environment”,³ there are several strands of ecomusicology that treat music as text, analysing the relationship between musical works, artists and the environment. Eric Drott describes this research as being “the major tributary [...] that has fed ecomusicology to date”.⁴ These strands have tended to be the approaches applied to works of Western art music (whether historical or contemporary). Examples include work on 18th and 19th century music by authors such as Helga de la Motte Haber or Peter Schleuning, as grouped under the banner of ecomusicology by Alexander Rehding,⁵ relationships between music, national or regional identity and natural landscapes (as in work by Daniel Grimley⁶, Denise Von Glahn⁷ or, as a more recent example, analyses by Juha Torvinen and Susanna Välimäki⁸) or Allen’s investigations into representations of music and nature in 19th century Italian-language music periodicals.⁹ In contrast to this, the strands of ecomusicology that are rooted in ethnomusicology more readily discuss music and its relationships to the environment as social phenomena but apply this perspective to music and sound practices largely outside of the Western Art music tradition.¹⁰ There appears therefore to be a slight difference in how Western and non-Western musical forms have been treated in ecomusicology, distinctions that come more clearly to light in literature on activist or applied approaches within the field.

Ecomusicology has from its inception been driven by an activist impulse. This has in turn been shaped by and has grown in dialogue with reflection on activist or applied perspectives in musicology in general.¹¹ Key topics here have been projects relating to cultural sustainability or cultural heritage preservation, the conservation of endangered habitats without which certain cultural practices would potentially be lost,¹² efforts to raise awareness around the materials required for musical instrument building (the field of “eco-organology” or “ecoörganology”¹³) as well as investigations into the climate impact made by sound recording and distribution technologies.¹⁴ It is notable that the music at the centre of these projects is only rarely Western art music, with either non-Western folk or art traditions or Western pop or folk musics under discussion.

In his 2011 article, “Prospects and Problems for Ecomusicology in Confronting a Crisis of Culture”, Allen, intentionally or not, locates activism in ecomusicology outside of the practices of Western art music.¹⁵ He names as “explicitly activist” 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”.¹⁶ These endeavours “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”.¹⁷ I would, however, argue that it is crucial to frame practices of Western art music within an activist or transformational perspective within ecomusicology – and connected to that, to study it and its institutions empirically and critically as social phenomena. The concert hall is very much part of

our messy world of existential threats and complexities and its confines need to be interrogated as such.

I wish to propose here that music sociology perspectives that engage more closely (and to an extent, more practically) with transformational processes in institutions of Western art music could helpfully enrich existing approaches in ecomusicology. I see this as a means of more effectively realising the “political consciousness”¹⁸ of ecomusicology. The limits of textual or ecocritical analyses in ecomusicology and of approaches that focus on representations of nature in musical cultures have been similarly noted by Marc Perlman, who has doubted the activist potential of such work: “Ecomusicological findings might recruit music-lovers to the environmentalist cause or inspire them when they become discouraged. But beyond that, it’s not at all clear what the activist implications of ecomusicology might be.”¹⁹ There is work that has already begun the application of activist perspectives to Western art music, including Allen’s own explorations into Italian and Brazilian forestry in relation to sustainable violin instrument and bow production that expand his earlier position.²⁰ However, as I will explore further below, to more thoroughly anchor ecomusicology in processes that are taking place in musical cultures, the traditional roles and tasks of the musicologist may need to be expanded.

Researching transformation in classical music institutions

The project “A sustainable cultural mission for music – a new aspect of orchestral excellence” (“Ein nachhaltiger Kulturauftrag für Musik – ein neuer Aspekt orchestraler Exzellenz”) ran from 2021 to 2023 as a collaboration between the Kammerakademie Potsdam, a chamber orchestra in the city of Potsdam, and the Arts and Culture for Sustainable Development research group at RIFS Potsdam. The main aims of the project were firstly, to research and evaluate processes towards sustainable transformation at the orchestra (including the development of a social-ecological sustainability strategy with and for the orchestra); secondly, to analyse the discourse around sustainability in the orchestral sector; and thirdly, to investigate the social “contribution” and engagement of the orchestra in Potsdam via interviews and audience surveys. Our approach fused perspectives from empirical music sociology on Western art music and from sustainable transformation research. This cross-disciplinary field aims to study transformation and to contribute to “societal change processes towards sustainability”²¹, creating bridges between academic research, policy and industry. Here, our main focus was on the transformation processes within the orchestra, including evaluating attempts to establish more ecological modes of production and touring, to reform internal processes and working conditions and to integrate artistic perspectives on the climate crisis into its programming. These

research foci align with areas defined by Wittmayer and Hölscher as being the core concerns of transformation research, including researching the objects of transformation (in this instance, modes of production as well as attitudes towards sustainable action within the orchestra), change dynamics within processes and the drivers of change.²² The project also aimed to address larger questions regarding the contribution of Western art music to society and the ability of this musical form and its institutions to respond to current issues.

To give an example of a research activity from the project, I conducted a content analysis of the sustainability discourse in classical music institutions (with co-author Manuel Rivera) with the aim of assessing the extent to which classical music institutions' current interest in sustainability, in particular in the orchestral sector, has transformative potential.²³ We took the ability to practise self-critique as an indicator of transformativity and analysed the ways in which self-critique (or self-affirmation) is associated with understandings of "sustainability" among both individual classical musicians and institutions. In analysing definitions and understandings of sustainability, we looked for the presence of three core elements: globally oriented understandings of the sustainability crisis that go beyond local consequences of climate change, awareness of the concept of planetary boundaries (or in a broader sense, the ecological limits to growth) and awareness of the social justice aspects of sustainability (climate justice, intergenerational justice). Important points of reference came from sociological literature on the values in Western classical musical culture²⁴ and on taking a critical, "deflationary" approach to studying music and musical infrastructures in times of crisis.²⁵

We analysed three types of data source, corresponding to three levels of analysis. These included in-depth standardised interviews with musicians from a top-level German symphony orchestra with some engagement in sustainability projects ($N = 25$) to investigate understandings and opinions on an individual level,²⁶ interviews that had been posted to an online blog on the website of a prominent sustainability initiative in the German classical music scene, representing a semi-institutional level, $N = 16$ entries; and documents such as pledges and declarations from the main initiatives in the global scene ($N = 6$ examples).

The results from our analysis suggest that individuals and institutions tend towards narrower definitions of sustainability and are self-affirming in their articulations of the concept. We found little critique of existing practices in the orchestral sector (such as orchestral touring schedules and inviting guest soloists/conductors) and all three core elements of sustainability were rarely mentioned. There was instead more of a focus on ecological aspects; climate justice and social justice aspects were not often mentioned. More rounded understandings of sustainability did correlate with greater levels of critique, indicating the potential for learning and engagement. On the institutional level (and partly on the semi-institutional), we observed sustainability efforts coming into conflict with values in classical music cul-

ture in two main ways. Firstly, the analysis brought out a number of attempts to combine sustainability with narratives of institutional and musical excellence that establish links between being or seeming “sustainable” and being an “excellent” institution. Through this, sustainability is turned into a field of competition, something to be “good” at rather than viewing it as a common challenge that will need cooperation across the orchestral sector and a collective questioning of the standards of excellence in classical music practice. Secondly, we propose that the “preservation” culture within classical music institutions (performing and maintaining a canon of musical works) encourages a more superficial engagement with sustainability, one that romanticises a connection between music and nature. While valuing preservation can and does link well with climate protection in the form of conservation, we argue that it here stands in the way of critical reflection and potential transformative action.

These two findings build on Aaron S. Allen’s discussion of sustainability as being separable into the notions of “sustainability-maintain” and “sustainability-change”, a way of expressing the contradictory tensions in the term.²⁷ The practice of Western art music needs to move from “sustainability-maintain” towards a “change” mindset and, in this, confront what Allen refers to as the aesthetic dimensions of sustainability. Maintaining concepts of musical excellence based on the sounds of endangered materials and international touring profiles stand in the way of a more truly transformative engagement with sustainability. The results from this study have possible consequences not only for institutions such as concert halls and orchestras but also for those institutions training musicians in this tradition. The intention here is not to point fingers or place an undue burden of responsibility on classical music institutions but to demonstrate the conflicts in values that arise in these attempts at sustainable transformation. This is an aim that should be firmly in the remit of current (eco)musicology.

Alongside these insights, the project explored perceptions of the social contribution of the orchestra, and of classical music more broadly, through an empirical investigation consisting of audience surveys and interviews with specific audience groups in Potsdam. Data was collected on associations with classical music, perceptions of its relevance, experiences of exclusion at orchestral concerts and on the social responsibility of cultural institutions, among further topics.²⁸

Going beyond the research output, a key part of the project and of my role as a music sociologist was developing collaborative processes between the research group and the orchestra and supporting the integration of sustainability into a range of activities, including co-convening a joint sustainability committee (and negotiating differences of opinion across the orchestra), contributing to ideas for a sustainability festival and outreach projects held by the orchestra and screening potential emissions audit models for the organisation. Taking on such tasks as a researcher and musicologist was difficult at times: maintaining distance to the pro-

cesses at the orchestra whilst also being embedded in them, acting as a translator between research and practice and expanding my expertise to cover new topics and fields (e.g. carbon emissions auditing) were specific challenges. Despite this, the collaborative approach revealed how the traditional tasks of the musicologist can be expanded to facilitate and participate in relevant real-world transformational processes.²⁹

Musicology for the “not-yet”

Here, I have offered a brief sketch of some of the ways in which ecomusicology could be productively informed by perspectives and approaches from music sociology and sustainable transformation research. The Potsdam project offers an example of how Western art music practices can be engaged with directly and be made the focus of activist or applied (eco-)musicological work and how the tasks of the musicologist could be effectively adapted and expanded through this.

Collaborations with institutions are a central way in which musicology can usefully contribute to necessary processes of change. Specifically in relation to the concert hall (and its potential confines), one task for a transformational (eco)musicology could be to contribute to rethinking this space and form of institution. This would not only mean supporting and continuing efforts to transform concert formats and repertoire³⁰ but also contributing to reconceiving the concert hall as a forum, a public space for dialogue that makes connections between music, other performing arts and a range of issues and that activates and politicises musicological knowledge and the cultural heritage of Western classical music. From contributing to programme notes that connect classical works to present day issues or highlighting and contextualising the social-ecological impact of Western art music practices, there are numerous tasks for ecomusicology, and musicology more broadly, to take on here. As opposed to being a space in which to retreat from the present and from social concerns,³¹ the concert hall could become valued and researched as a space to engage. This idea builds on work by, for instance, ethnomusicologist Tina Ramnarine, who has proposed that reconceptualising classical music institutions as part of civil society could be fruitful in terms of revitalising their connection to the present.³² It is also what audiences are interested in: participants in the 2023 “Cultural Relevance Monitor” (“Relevanzmonitor Kultur”) overwhelmingly indicated that they expect cultural institutions to be places “for people to come together” and that “inspire political and societal discussions”.³³ The forthcoming results from the Potsdam project suggest similar opinions for classical music institutions. Such repurposing of the concert hall is already taking place – artistic and compositional practices from across the 20th century³⁴ and more recently, the actions of climate activists,³⁵ have started this work for us.

And finally, going beyond ecomusicology, a key step in contributing to any form of sustainable transformation is to strengthen musicology's wider relationship to the contemporary and to musical and social futures. This would mean fostering connections to current musical practice, pushing against the larger tendency to view musicology as a historically focused discipline (frequently held in its own processes of "maintaining" rather than "changing", similar to the institutions analysed above) and one that has been described as suffering from a kind of intellectual or conceptual "lateness".³⁶ To serve as inspiration for a future-oriented discipline, I draw here on a concept from the work of Dutch visual artist Jeanne van Heeswijk.³⁷ Her idea of "art for the not-yet", drawing on Ernst Bloch, calls for a propositional artistic practice focused on awakening the collective imagination of future worlds and training new, collective forms of social organisation. Contributing to creatively reconfiguring spaces such as the concert hall for collective engagement and researching future challenges in music production, reception and distribution would be examples of a future-oriented outlook for music studies. I wonder if we can move towards a musicology for the "not-yet", one that is speculative, not reactive, one that attempts transformation, rather than staying caught in preserving and maintaining, and one that is comfortable with taking on the range of tasks that such transformations will need.

Notes

- 1 Allen, Aaron S.: "Ecomusicology", *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, 2013, accessed March 31, 2025, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002240765>.
- 2 In this chapter, I use the term "sustainable transformation" to refer to processes of change towards more sustainable futures and to make connections between ecomusicology and sustainable transformation research. I use the terms "transformational" and "transformative" interchangeably throughout. For attempts to define and specifically distinguish "transformation" and "transformative" research, see Schneidewind, Uwe, Singer-Brodowski, Mandy and Augenstein, Karoline: "Transformative science for sustainability transitions", *Handbook on Sustainability Transition and Sustainable Peace*. Edited by Hans Günter Brauch et al. Berlin: Springer, 2016, pp. 123–136; and Wittmayer, Julia and Hölscher, Katharina: "Transformationsforschung. Definitionen, Ansätze, Methoden", *Umweltbundesamt* 103, 2017, accessed March 31, 2025, https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/sites/default/files/medien/1410/publikationen/2017-11-08_texte_103-2017_transformationsforschung.pdf.

- 3 Allen, Aaron S. and Dawe, Kevin: "Ecomusicologies", *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Nature, Environment*. Edited by Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe. New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 1–15, p. 2.
- 4 Drott, Eric: "The peasant's voice and the tourist's gaze: Listening to landscape in Luc Ferrari's *Petite symphonie intuitive pour un paysage de printemps*", *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Nature, Environment*. Edited by Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe. New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 233–244, p. 234.
- 5 Rehding, Alexander: "Eco-musicology", *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 127, no. 2 (2002): pp. 305–320, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrma/127.2.305>.
- 6 Grimley, Daniel: *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006.
- 7 Von Glahn, Denise: *The Sounds of Place: Music and the American Cultural Landscape*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003.
- 8 Torvinen, Juha and Välimäki, Susanna: "Music, ecology, and atmosphere: Environmental feelings and socio-cultural crisis in contemporary Finnish classical music", *Sounds, Ecologies, Musics*. Edited by Aaron S. Allen and Jeff Todd Titon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 86–107.
- 9 Allen, Aaron S.: "New directions: Ecological imaginations, soundscapes, and Italian opera", *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Nature, Environment*. Edited by Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe. New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 273–286.
- 10 This body of research is extremely rich and diverse and cannot be satisfactorily covered here, reviews of the relationships and overlaps between ethnomusicology and ecomusicology include: Perlman, Marc: "Ecology and Ethno/musicology: The Metaphorical, the Representational, and the Literal", *Ecomusicology Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (2012): pp. 15–21; Guyette, Margaret Q. and Post, Jennifer C.: "Ecomusicology, ethnomusicology, and soundscape ecology: Scientific and musical responses to sound study", *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Nature, Environment*. Edited by Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe. New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 40–56.
- 11 See, for example: Allen, Aaron S. et al.: "The sound commons and applied ecomusicologies", *The Routledge Companion to Applied Musicology*. Edited by Christopher Dromey. Abingdon: Routledge, 2023, pp. 143–159.
- 12 The key reference here is Titon, Jeff Todd: "Music and sustainability: An ecological viewpoint", *The World of Music* 51, no. 1 (2009): pp. 119–137; see also Grant, Catherine: "Music sustainability", *Oxford Bibliographies in Music*. Edited by Bruce Gustafson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013 for a review; and Post, Jennifer C.: "Resilient sounds: Rakiura Stewart Island, Aotearoa New Zealand", *Sounds, Ecologies, Musics*. Edited by Aaron S. Allen and Jeff Todd Titon. New York: Oxford Academic, 2023, pp. 153–176 for a more recent perspective.

- 13 Allen offers an extensive review of such research in: Allen, Aaron S.: "Ecoörganology: Toward the ecological study of musical instruments", *Sounds, Ecologies, Musics*. Edited by Aaron S. Allen and Jeff Todd Titon. New York: Oxford Academic, 2023, pp. 17–40.
- 14 For example: Brennan, Matt and Devine, Kyle: "The cost of music", *Popular Music* 39, no. 1 (2020): pp. 43–65.
- 15 Allen, Aaron S.: "Prospects and problems for ecomusicology in confronting a crisis of culture", *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 2 (2011): pp. 414–424.
- 16 Allen, "Prospects and problems", pp. 417–418.
- 17 Allen, "Prospects and problems", pp. 417–418.
- 18 Keogh, Brent and Collinson, Ian: "A place for everything and everything in its place—The (ab)uses of music ecology", *MUSICultures* 43, no. 1 (2016): pp. 1–15.
- 19 Perlman, "Ecology and Ethno/musicology: The Metaphorical, the Representational, and the Literal", p. 19.
- 20 Allen, Aaron S.: "Fatto di Fiemme: Stradivari's violins and the musical trees of the Paneveggio", *Invaluable Trees: Cultures of Nature, 1660–1830*. Edited by Laura Auricchio, Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook and Giulia Pacini. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation & University of Oxford, 2012, pp. 301–315. For a further perspective connecting cultural sustainability and Western classical music see: Chambers, Laura, "Feed the soil, not the plant: Case studies in the sustainability of Ontario's regional orchestras", *MUSICcultures* 45, no. 1–2 (2018): pp. 146–166.
- 21 Wittmayer and Hölscher, "Transformationsforschung", p. 5.
- 22 Wittmayer and Hölscher, "Transformationsforschung", pp. 20–21.
- 23 Emerson, Gina and Rivera, Manuel: "Selbstbestätigung und Selbstkritik durch Nachhaltigkeit im klassischen Musikbetrieb", *Soziologie und Nachhaltigkeit* 9, no. 2 (2023): pp. 100–122.
- 24 Bull, Anna: *Class, Control, and Classical Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- 25 Devine, Kyle and Boudreault-Fournier, Alexandrine (eds.): *Audible Infrastructures: Music, Sound, Media*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- 26 These interviews were not conducted specifically for this project but for related research by the Arts and Culture for Sustainable Development group at RIFS.
- 27 Allen, Aaron S.: "Sounding sustainable; or, the challenge of sustainability", *Cultural Sustainabilities: Music, Media, Language, Advocacy*. Edited by Timothy J. Cooley. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019, pp. 43–60.
- 28 The publication of these results is currently in preparation.
- 29 This broadening of tasks also requires a greater willingness towards and wider acceptance of reflection on researcher positionality in musicology, see November, Nancy: "Phenomenology, practice-led research, and applied musicology",

- The Routledge Companion to Applied Musicology*. Edited by Chris Dromey. Abingdon: Routledge, 2023, pp. 55–62.
- 30 For example: Uhde, Folkert and Gögl, Hans Joachim: “Strategies of proximity: Breaking away from the standard classical concert”, *Classical Music Futures: Practices of Innovation*. Edited by Neil Thomas Smith, Peter Peters and Karoly Molina. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2024, pp. 315–332; or output from the recently completed Experimental Concert Research project, accessed March 31, 2025, <https://experimental-concert-research.org>.
- 31 See, for example, the description of the concert hall as a site of boundary-drawing by the middle classes in Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*, p. xvi.
- 32 Ramnarine, Tina, “The orchestration of civil society: Community and conscience in symphony orchestras”, *Ethnomusicology Forum* 20, no. 3 (2012): pp. 327–351.
- 33 Liz Mohn Center, “Relevanzmonitor Kultur 2023”, accessed March 31, 2025, <https://liz-mohn-stiftung.de/projekt/relevanzmonitor-kultur/>.
- 34 For example, the work of Luigi Nono, Louis Andriessen, Cornelius Cardew and many others, see Adlington, Robert: *Musical Models of Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024; Adlington, Robert, “Whose voices? The fate of Luigi Nono’s voci destroying muros”, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 69, no. 1 (2016): pp. 179–236.
- 35 In November 2022, when protesters from the “Letzte Generation” movement interrupted a concert in the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, the concert hall became a site for direct political action. BR Klassik, “Klimaaktivisten in der Elbphilharmonie: Geigerin Julia Fischer reagiert gelassen”, November 25, 2022, accessed March 31, 2025, <https://www.br-klassik.de/aktuell/news-kritik/elbphilharmonie-klimaaktivisten-festkleben-dirigentenpult-julia-fischer-100.html>.
- 36 See, for example: Kerman, Joseph: *Contemplating Music*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 14–17.
- 37 Van Heeswijk, Jeanne, “Preparing for the not-yet”, *Slow Reader: A Resource for Design Thinking and Practice*. Edited by Ana Paula Pais and Carolyn F. Strauss. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2016, pp. 42–53; Van Heeswijk, Jeanne, Hlavajova, Maria and Rakes, Rachel (eds.), *Toward the Not-Yet: Art as Public Practice*. Utrecht, Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2021.