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Ecomusicology and the Potential of Music and Sound for Environmental Education

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Abstract

Ecomusicology is an interdisciplinary field drawing together scholars from sciences and humanities who share a research interest in the overlapping of music, culture, and nature. Human and non-human animals constantly rely on sonic signals to relate with other animals and the environment. Considering this auditory connection, and the contribution that ecocritical music and music about places may have in nurturing a sentiment of environmental stewardship, I propose an applied environmental education methodology that relies on participatory music making and critical listening to foster environmental awareness.

Keywords: ecomusicology, applied ethnomusicology, ethnomusicology, environmental education, soundscape, sound studies, environmental music, Tuscany, Italy, school project, ecology, elementary school.

Introduction: What is Ecomusicology?

I would like to start this essay by saying a word or two about the broad interdisciplinary field within which my research is situated, the field of *ecomusicology*. Generally, *ecomusicology* refers to the overlapping of, and interconnection between music, sound, nature, and culture. The *eco-* prefix refers to ecology, the branch of biology that deals with the relations between creatures, and between creatures and their environment. Therefore, as the word suggests, scholarship within this field usually includes ecology in relation to music, music in relation to ecology, or both. The scholars of this field derive in fact, from a wide variety of disciplines. Some of them come from various kinds of music-related scholarship, like ethnomusicologists, musicologists, popular music scholars; some are from more scientific disciplines like ecology, biology, environmental, and behavioural studies; and some are already interested in interdisciplinary fields, like acoustic ecology and sound studies' scholars.

The *music* component of the word requires more details. Considering its broad and inter-

disciplinary point of view, ecomusicology does not deal with specific styles or genres – nor does it deal with human-made sounds only – rather, it advocates for a more inclusive and holistic conception of music and sound. In detail, this field deals with human-made sounds, non-human-made sounds, and music. In this sense ecomusicology takes into consideration the soundscape of a place, meaning all the acoustical characteristics of a place, and music being only one of them.

This field so far has followed two major directions. The first is the study of musical culture as ecologists and biologists study an ecosystem or a living community. This means approaching musical communities with a holistic perception of their existence in relation to the connections between their members, and with other communities and external influences. The second direction, which is the focus of my research, is to meet the world musically. As music and sounds are omnipresent in our daily lives, musicians and music scholars may have a particular type of sensitivity that is necessary to deal with some of the problems that affect contemporary society, from a diverse and possibly more holistic perspective. They have in fact, developed a sort of very different skill that, if applied outside of their comfort areas, can produce unexpected, surprising, creative solutions to everyday issues. Some of these skills can be summarized in the ability to listen. This, whether it means listening to other humans or other animals and the environment, is perhaps the only way that we can choose if we want to connect with others in an interdependent way, understand the needs of our communities and places, and at the same time helping to re-establish and reinforce a very much needed connection with them.

Sounds and the Sense of Place

Humans relate to the world thanks to their sensorial perceptions. We rely on sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing, to make sense of and engage with the environment and other living beings. Among the five senses, hearing is particularly relevant to positioning any animal within a particular environment. Thanks to sounds and our marvellous auditory apparatus, we can identify and locate events of any sort that are happening around us. For instance, if a blackbird is singing in our neighbour's yard, it is thanks to our ears that we can locate the position of the bird in relation to our body. Comparing the different moments in which the sound reaches first one ear and then the other, and calculating the delay, the auditory cortex situated in the temporal lobe of our brains renders a sort of spatial representation of the surrounding environment, locating the sound source.

Sounds are essential information about a place. For animals, they are signals that can help to locate a food source or to identify a predator. For some human communities, they constitute an important body of knowledge regarding the status of their local environment. The Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea, for instance, are known to use sound to understand events happening in their surroundings, and the health of their environment: some bird songs announce the change of season, and a sudden silence from a specific area might mean that something new has happened there, perhaps a potential threat. Bird songs are so important

for them that Kaluli's music reflects birdsong's musicality, considered the highest emotional auditory expression. Kaluli's way to know the world highlights something that our society has long forgotten, or perhaps just put aside. We live in a condition of inter-relatedness – also auditory, but not only that - with other living beings and the surrounding environment and by acknowledging their sonic presence we acknowledge this relation of co-existence and interdependence that binds and connects all.

Each place has its own particular sounds or its soundscape. The word has an obvious similarity with the word “landscape,” but if the latter is made of visual objects, the soundscape is constituted by all the events that can be heard in a specific place. Footsteps, bird songs, car engines, and of course, music, are all part of the soundscape. In fact, every sound, either humanly produced or not, is part of it, and we are constantly immersed in this atmosphere of sonic signals that reach us and help us to make sense of the world around us. At this point, I would like to propose a simple experiment to the reader: close your eyes for one minute or two and try to focus on all the sounds that you hear, as if you were listening attentively to a complex musical composition. Focus on the ensemble first, and then on the singular presence of all of them. When you will reopen your eyes, your understanding of the surroundings will likely be improved by the listening practice.

Environmentalist Music

I have already highlighted how a soundscape comprehends all the sounds of a place, humanly made or not. Music, of course, is sound, although its peculiar characteristics of intention, production, and organization of the sound materials, mark it with a different level of complexity compared to the sound that the wind produces blowing through a forest. Music also differs from environmental sound in the sense that the artist can infuse the organized sounds with significance and agency, that will be ultimately interpreted by an audience.

Environmentalist music is a term that encompasses a different kind of music. Firstly, environmentalist does not mean *environmental* - that is the kind of background music that we hear in shops and elevators. Secondly, there are no restrictions on genre or styles. Any kind of music can carry a positive ecocritical message of awareness, therefore the ethical content of the music and the intent of the performers, arrangers, and lyricists, are way more important than its aesthetic aspects. Third, although environmentalist music is generally intended as activist songs aimed to support the many protests and movements in support of environmental rights around the world, but there is more to it. Singing about a place in a positive, constructive, way, for instance, is a way to support it, acknowledge its presence, and reflect on its importance for the song author and its community. Ecomusicology applies ecocriticism theory to analyse music, raising questions like: how does this song represent nature? How does this music inform the audience about a place? Simply, whenever one sings positively about a river, mountain, wood, hill, is because *the artists know* that that place is there and that *they recognize* that it is important for them somehow. It is then very likely that the artists think that the place needs to be

respected, and cared for, even though the song that they have composed may not be intended for singing at a climate march and/or the lyrics do not specifically mention environmental rights of any sort. Fourth, building on this last point, the intent of the artist does matter, a lot. A song may not be about environmental sustainability, but the lifestyle choices of the artist can take their art in that direction anyway. There are several practices in music-making other than performance and production. If a certain artist cares about the environmental impact of the process by which the instruments that they play are made, for instance, it is likely that their intent towards environmental rights is positive and constructive. The same applies if they care about the carbon footprints of the events and if they actively pursue venues that factor in issues such as the environmental impact of the performances in which they take part.

To summarize, environmentalist music is an umbrella term that refers to all the music that carries an environmentalist meaningful agenda, according to the categories mentioned above. Furthermore, its aesthetic features are of secondary importance, as the ethical intent of the artist and the ethical content of the music are more important than the genre, the style, and the musical tradition per se, as the ultimate tasks of this music are to foster a sense of stewardship for a place and to advocate for an improved sense of respect towards the environment.

Music and Sounds as Tools for Environmental Education

At this point, I am hoping to have given enough evidence on how sound connects us to places, and music and musicians help us to care about them. Quite surprisingly, despite all the evidence that I have listed so far, the cases of music being included in environmental education programs around the world are scarce and isolated. Therefore, my research is aimed at the production of an inclusive and re-adaptable methodology that brings elementary school pupils closer to their local environment via the participation with local environmentalist musicians and through critical listening to the local soundscape. I am conducting this research in an elementary school, as I strongly believe that the environmental crisis can only be solved by educating ourselves about the relationship that we share with the nature, our nature, and therefore we need locally informed actions. The first few pilot projects will happen in Tuscany, my native region in Italy, in a few selected schools with the participation of local music schools and cultural associations that normally conduct various kinds of music-based projects in schools in that area. Ethical research guidelines will be followed throughout the whole duration of the project. As the aim of this is to get a positive change in the community, parents, guardians, and the teachers themselves will be actively involved in every phase of it.

The involvement of local musicians is essential for two reasons. Firstly, I have already highlighted the importance of a “local solution” to address these issues. The musicians involved have local knowledge, and they personally care for the places they make music for. Secondly, this is a rapport that can benefit both parties: the pupils can learn from the musicians, and the musicians will get increased recognition in their homes, and hopefully the bond between musicians, pupils, and music associations will live after the end of the school project.

Interacting with them, the students will learn to reflect critically on the music they listen to, as they seek deeper meanings situated beyond words and notes, whilst discussing with the author the reasons that made them compose a certain song. When feasible, the pupils will learn to sing and/or play the songs. In that case, the bond between local communities and musicians will get even stronger.

After listening to musicians singing about places, the pupils will hear and learn themselves how places *sound*. Following some specific listening techniques, and accompanied by teachers and parents, my aim is to take each class to visit – or better, to *hear* – a place. The listening techniques are based on the awareness of the surroundings and share a lot with the principles of meditation – that is not very different from the little experiment that I asked the reader to perform in the second section of this article. Simply, we go to a place, like a beach, a forest, a park, a river or anywhere else that might be relevant, and we listen to it, dropping any other thoughts or disturbances. As we are more used to considering places in terms of “objects seen,” it may be necessary to close our eyes in order to get rid of the visible disturbances, focusing instead on the quality and detail that the audio signals offer to us. Back in class, we will discuss the sounds and the music listened to, playing with them and see how they overlap. As both the practices are quite different from what students do and listen to on an everyday basis, I expect some resistance, but at the same time, I am confident that the quality of the materials used, and the strong ethical intent and content of the project will reach and touch everybody’s heart – mine included – for the good.

Conclusion and Future Applications

This research has three main goals. The first is to investigate in which ways music and sound play a key role in environmental education, as they are deeply related to our sense of connection and understanding of the world; and that we, as musicians and music scholars are equipped with a particular set of skills that can be key in facing complex issues from a creative perspective. The second is to facilitate the creation of an independent and interdependent network of environmentalist musicians in Tuscany, Italy, connecting them with each other. Ultimately, I aim to create a consistent methodology for projects that can be re-applied in different contexts, cultural settings and age groups, whilst retaining the peculiarity of being locally sourced and informed, accordingly to places and needs that are considered important for any community.

Lastly, I would like to end this article with personal consideration. While music alone does not have the capacity to solve the current environmental crisis, I strongly believe that it can help us to move forward in a more holistic way, perhaps addressing the egocentric human-centred conception of the world on which our society is built and that likely is one of the causes of this situation. Surely, learning to listen deeply and carefully to what surrounds us is a very useful skill that might help to foster and nurture better relationships between ourselves and with the other living beings that dwell on this planet.

Declaration of interests

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Further Reading

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