AARON S. ALLEN & JEFF TODD TITON (ED.), *SOUNDS, ECOLOGIES, MUSICS* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), ISBN 9780197546642, 324 pp., £22.99 (paperback)

Sounds, Ecologies, Musics is a welcome addition to the growing body of ecomusicological literature, providing a snapshot of a critical practice that may need some introduction. The context in which this volume has been published is well known, but should nonetheless be named. The world is currently experiencing a three-pronged emergency, consisting of climate change, biodiversity collapse, and habitat loss, all of which are set to have dire consequences for the future habitability of large portions of the globe. A wealth of scientific evidence has not yet led to a solution to these problems or convinced populations to adopt the radical behavioural changes required. Art and culture, arguably, have a vital role to play in resisting the logic of extraction and exploitation of natural resources, and encouraging more ecological thoughts and actions. To that end, scholars in the humanities have turned their attention to the cultural and affective aspects of ecological matters, with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* being an important early text .[1] Ecocriticism as a distinct critical practice emerged from literature studies in the 1980s and is defined by Cheryl Glotfelty as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment'.[2] Although slower to respond than their colleagues in literary studies, music scholars have in recent years begun to scrutinise these problems, recognising that a concerted effort across all sectors of society is needed to change destructive human behaviours.

One early use of the term 'ecomusicology' by Maria Anna Harley was inspired by her attraction to the 'Deep Ecology' movement and sought to position the significance of music in its embeddedness in natural processes, rather than in its cultural or social context.[3] However, Harley's paper did not instigate a great flood of interest in the topic. Alexander Rehding noted in a 2002 review of three new books on the relationship of music to nature that the ecocritical turn in literature and cultural studies had then 'hardly hit musicology'.[4] The ecocritical turn in music studies was eventually

[1] Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Penguin, 1965).

[2] Cheryll Glotfelty, 'Literary Studies in an age of environmental crisis', in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (ed.), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.

[3] Maria Anna Harley, 'Notes on Music Ecology as a New Research Paradigm', unpublished conference paper, 1996, <https://studylib.net/doc/8836149/notes-on-music-ecology-as-a-new-research-paradigm> [Accessed 10 June 2025].

[4] Alexander Rehding, 'Eco-Musicology' [review article], *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 127 (2002), 305–20: 305.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.35561/JSMI20265

acknowledged with the establishment of ecomusicology study groups by the American Musicological Society in 2007 and by the Society for Ethnomusicology in 2011. In an introduction to the topic, Aaron S. Allen clarifies that the 'eco' prefix denotes 'ecocritical musicology' rather than 'ecological musicology',[5] and later defines ecomusicology as follows:

> Ecomusicology, or ecocritical musicology, is 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 natural environment.[6]

The theme was adopted by ethnomusicologists, building on the legacy of eco-literate predecessors including Steven Feld, Jeff Todd Titon and Anthony Seeger and, in the years since, the field has, if not flourished, certainly taken root.

In 2016, the first major edited volume dedicated to the subject arrived in the form of *Current Directions in Ecomusicology*, winner of the 2018 Ellen Koskoff Society for Ethnomusicology Prize.[7] Ecomusicology was at that time finding its home as a distinct subdiscipline of ethnomusicology, albeit one with a particular interest in transdisciplinary work. The resulting literature has arrived in a steady stream and is well-documented in a recent wide-ranging literature survey.[8] Another landmark was the 2021 publication of Jeff Todd Titon's *Toward A Sound Ecology*, a collection that traced a forty-year scholarly journey from ethnomusicology to ecomusicology. Titon and Allen have since collaborated to produce a new edited volume that will hopefully move the subdiscipline on from issues of definition.

Sounds, Ecologies, Musics complements Allen and Dawe's 2016 volume by providing an opportunity for a plurality of voices to articulate disparate approaches to ecomusicology. In *Sounds, Ecologies, Musics*, music can also include sounds produced by humans (anthrophony), non-human beings (biophony) and natural processes (geophony). The editors seek to broaden the remit of ecomusicology beyond that followed by ethnomusicologists who to date have dominated the field. The stated aim of the book is to 'consider sound and music from ecological perspectives as well as

---

[5] Aaron S. Allen, 'Ecomusicology: Ecocriticism and Musicology', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 64 (2011), 391–94: 393.

[6] Aaron S. Allen, 'Ecomusicology', in *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002240765> [Accessed 10 June 2025].

[7] Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe (ed.), *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Culture, Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[8] Mark Pedelty, Aaron S. Allen, Chiao-Wen Chiang, Rebecca Dirksen, and Tyler Kinnear, 'Ecomusicology: Tributaries and Distributaries of an Integrative Field', *Music Research Annual*, 3 (2022), 1–36.

ecologies from sonic perspectives' (1). This expansive statement of intent permits a wealth of perspectives, which the editors frame as a positive mode of informality and permeability.

After the introduction, the book is divided into three sections. The first comprises four chapters, and is concerned with cases in which music, sound and natural environments are interwoven. The next four chapters are all centred specifically on indigenous perspectives and non-western ontologies. The final section consists of four chapters that describe cross-disciplinary projects, and the final chapter by Titon stands alone as a consideration of the slippages that can occur when science and humanities scholarship are mixed. The structure of the book makes thematic sense, despite the variety of topics covered, which include Western Art Music (Juha Torvinen and Susanna Välimäki; Denise Von Glahn), Applied Ethnomusicology (Huib Schippers and Gillian Howell), multispecies ethnography (Mark Pedelty; Julianne Graper; Jennifer C. Post), and the material economy of musical instruments (Aaron S. Allen; James Edwards and Junko Konishi). The collection of authors represents a continuity with the established body of literature (five of the fourteen chapters feature an author who also contributed to Allen and Dawe's *Current Directions in Ecomusicology*) and a significant development of the scope of ecomusicology.

The point of the plural forms in the title is to resist foreclosing any of the multiple uses of each term by the academic, geographical or cultural communities represented within the pages. Graper's chapter, based on field work in the alternative music scene of Austin City, Texas, is a good example of a multi-species ethnography that recurs in several contributions. In it, she shows how a colony of bats—initially feared and disliked by residents—became beloved, partly through the adoption of bat iconography by the city's live alternative music scene. For example, the band Bat City Surfers plays a loud heavy version of distorted guitar music and borrow heavily from horror movie aesthetics to present an almost comically macho image of punk energy. The alterity and darkness of bat symbolism appealed to this subculture and became a way of exploring its own socio-economic 'otherness' in a celebratory, rather than aggressive way.

In contrast, Von Glahn's chapter draws on conventional Western art music analysis and ecocriticism to interpret Judith Shatin's *Ice Becomes Water* through the lens of North American indigenous attitudes to nature. For the Tlingit people of the Pacific Northwest of North America, glaciers—as with many non-human entities—are agents rather than inanimate objects. In the composition a string orchestra is accompanied, and occasionally overwhelmed, by field recordings of calving glaciers. As the piece develops, extended bowing technique gives a material quality to the strings that eventually makes the musical element indistinguishable from the field recording. Shatin's composition seeks to make humanity's connection to glaciers and other entities

audible through the interaction of pitch, rhythm and timbre. Music, according to Von Glahn, is an analogy for the 'intricate web of vivifying relationships that connect humans and the larger world to each other' (178).

Quite early on in the development of ecocriticism, there was a recognition that it was not enough merely to observe and critique texts from an ecological perspective; there had to be an element of advocacy too.[9] It is significant that many chapters contain at least passing references to the systemic challenges that face anyone who tries to encourage behavioural change for the benefit of ecology over economy. This comes to the fore in the second section of the book, which is centred on addressing the tension between indigenous and settler concepts of ecology. Other chapters also deal with just transitions to a less destructive economic system. Pedelty's chapter analyses an arts-based intervention on a conservation project, which considers the complexities of noise regulation in the context of the whale-watching industry on Canada's Pacific coast. Pedelty's focus here is not only on music, but on the entire sound commons, which includes music, whale communication, and underwater noise pollution.

The chapters by Post, and Edwards and Konishi, employ Socio-Ecological Systems (SES) analysis, which uses the complex reciprocal interactions between natural and social systems as a framework for developing policies that benefit human and nonhuman entities in any given area. Post's chapter concerns the overlapping sonic practices of wildlife, human residents, conservationists, and indigenous Māori on Rakiura Stewart Island in Aotearoa New Zealand. She argues for the importance of a listening practice that is attuned to the cultural, social, and ecological systems on the island, as a way of integrating and respecting the various epistemologies at play. Most scholarly works steer away from direct activism, but there is a sense in which the climate crisis is so all-encompassing that any stance of neutrality is an abdication of responsibility for the wellbeing of the species. As Torvinen and Välimäki state on their analysis of affective atmospherics in Finnish contemporary classical music, ecocritical music is 'a future-oriented project seeking to find new paths for our relationship to nature' (103).

The editors have done a good job in developing the core concerns of existing ecomusicological literature while opening up new fronts for further exploration. Ethnomusicologists have dominated the conversation up to now, and the porousness of Allen and Titon's approach allows a disparate collection of voices to articulate a variety of ecomusicologies. For transdisciplinary work, however, this multiplicity may need to be tempered in the interests of shared understanding. Titon's own contribution mulls on the misunderstandings that occur when concepts like 'ecology' migrate from

[9] Glotfelty, 'Literary Studies in an age of environmental crisis', xxi.

scientific discourse into the humanities. It is a dense trek through the literature and Titon is a skilful guide, but this chapter might well have been placed at the start rather than the end, given its relevance to all the other contributions.

The overarching themes of transdisciplinary cooperation, the application of ecological theories to musical contexts, ecojustice, and indigenous perspectives appropriately represent many of the concerns of the wider ecomusicological literature. Most of the chapters are suitable for undergraduate courses on ecocriticism or ecoliteracy, while those studying ecology from a scientific background should appreciate the application of ethnography and musical analysis.

Kevin McNally

University College Cork