

Listening to Nature, Listening to Difference

STEPHEN MEYER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

RACHEL MUNDY, GUEST EDITOR

Preface to the Special Issue

Stephen Meyer, Editor-in-Chief

As the first issue devoted almost entirely to a special topic, “Teaching Ecomusicology” represents a new departure for our *Journal*.¹ Ecomusicological topics are an especially appropriate focus, for they have played an increasingly important role in music history curricula over the past decade. Music history instructors have developed new courses such as “Music and the Environment” or “Introduction to Ecomusicology,” but they have also sought ways to incorporate ecological and environmental perspectives into other, more established parts of the curriculum. The publication of this special issue reflects some of these developments in our discipline, and the diversity of views represented by the different authors here is a sign of the robustness of our field. But this issue—we hope—serves another purpose as well. As I write these words, millions are grappling with catastrophic flooding, and hurricane and fire damage of nearly unimaginable proportions. Heat waves, droughts, and other extreme weather events have become an inescapable part of our world. Events such as these remind us of the fragility of our ecological systems and of the ways in which these are being radically altered by human activity. It is my hope that the ideas presented here will help us all to find new ways to respond with thoughtfulness and integrity to the rapidly changing world in which we work and live.

1. Although vol. 4, issue 2 of this *Journal* included a collection of essays in honor of Douglass Seaton, these were not dedicated to a specific topic.

Introduction

Rachel Mundy, Guest Editor

In 2015, editor-in-chief Stephen Meyer and I began discussing the idea of a special issue of the *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* devoted to ecomusicology. I asked that we focus the issue on nature and measures of difference, locating notions of natural sound in relation to other historically constructed categories of difference such as race, gender, sexuality, and national origin. My premise, then and now, is that the task of listening beyond the boundaries of human identity requires a map of the ways that sound is used to define the boundaries of personhood and the borders of privileged spaces. Under that premise, to teach ecomusicology is to teach through and with critical approaches to anti-speciesism, anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobia, and anti-xenophobia. As we emerge from a summer defined by parallel conversations about a white nationalism that contests the rights and worth of non-white individuals, and natural disasters that radically alter the habitats, borders, and lives of residents of Caribbean islands, central Mexico, and the Gulf coast, that premise seems just as vital.

Bringing ecomusicology into the music classroom raises profound questions about power and the privilege of human identity. For the past two centuries, notions of natural sound have served as a benchmark for broad evaluations of musical difference that allow for comparisons between categories such as race, gender, and sexuality. Western classical music is deeply shaped by the expression of these categorical comparisons in the form of idioms and styles. Theories that draw on traditions of intersectionality and posthumanism reveal the effects of such categories, but they do not explain the mechanisms that caused modern categories of identity to operate in the first place, nor do they account for the radical inequalities that govern the human/nonhuman divide. In this context, the task of teaching ecomusicology is conditioned by the task of teaching histories of musical difference from a critical and informed perspective. What, as Rosi Braidotti and others have asked, is the “anthropocene” if human identity is contested?² What, as Syl Ko has asked, is an animal if you’re not quite human yourself?³

This issue of the *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* is devoted to the questions about ethics, rights, and equity that arise when listening to those who are considered less than fully human. Environmentalism, soundscape composition,

2. See Braidotti’s “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism” and other essays in Richard Grusin, ed. *Anthropocene Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 21-48.

3. Syl Ko, “By “Human,” Everybody Just Means “White,” in Aph and Syl Ko, *Aphro-isms: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters* (NY: Lantern Books, 2017), 20-27.

and animal vocalizations have been increasingly frequent topics in music classrooms since the early 2000s. But students and teachers also need to engage with the ways that natural sound forms part of a broader history in which nature has been used to mark non-dominant peoples as inferior. In this issue, Stephen and I have brought together essays whose topics range from urban hip-hop to environmental activism in order to address the very broad stakes of sounding less than fully “human.” The humanities and sciences as we know them are bound to these stakes, and to engage with them is to work from within a tangled relationship in which nature has become tied to categorical notions of difference and experiences of human hierarchy. This issue examines the challenges of teaching ecomusicology at this moment, in which to talk about natural sound is to talk about how we hear and value human equity, and to talk about human equity is to talk about how we hear and value nature.

Those challenges begin with the interdisciplinary character of teaching ecomusicology against and through notions of natural difference. The essays in this issue draw on a wide range of traditions in order to do that work: critical identity studies (Black, Bohlman, and Burton), digital humanities (Galloway), Deep Listening (Hahn), grass roots activism (Pedelty), and ecocriticism (Allen). Authors in this issue draw on many fields specifically devoted to the study of sound, such as musicology, ethnomusicology, and sound studies.

In the pages that follow, “ecomusicology,” “sound studies,” and “soundscape” emerge as three especially significant words. Ecomusicology refers to music scholarship informed by environmental concerns, and its authors are primarily scholars, performers, and composers of music.⁴ Sound studies is a distinct area of research that locates sound in its cultural contexts. Authors in sound studies have a strong presence in Europe, and many come from backgrounds in media studies and science and technology studies.⁵ The concept of the soundscape bridges ecomusicology and sound studies. Popularized in 1977 with the publication of R. Murray Schafer’s *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, the term has acquired a broad usage in and beyond sound studies that is largely separate from its original environmental connotation.⁶ The practice of performing soundwalks, which is referred to in several essays in this issue, originated in parallel with Schafer’s World Soundscape Project

4. See, for example, Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe, eds., *Current Directions in Ecomusicology* (NY: Routledge, 2016).

5. See Karin Bijsterveld and Trevor Pinch, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Jonathan Sterne, ed., *The Sound Studies Reader* (NY: Routledge, 2012).

6. As in, for example, Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America 1900-1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); and Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

and the work of environmentalist composer Hildegard Westerkamp, and the exercise has likewise developed a broader usage.

The authors in this issue navigate a secondary encounter with disciplinary divides that is inherent to classes on music and nature: the disparate character of knowledge-making in the sciences and in the humanities. Ecocriticism, posthumanism, and animal studies engage with topics in biology and ecology; they also engage with problems of structural inequality and naturalized stereotypes. Research on these disparate topics relies on equally diverse methods of argumentation that have been developed to address the varying needs of researchers in different fields.⁷ The essays in this issue reflect these varied approaches, and can be adapted to explore different epistemologies of “natural” sound in the classroom.

The first two articles in this issue consider soundscapes whose “nature” is defined by the complexity of human histories. “Resounding the Campus: Pedagogy, Race, and the Environment,” by Amanda Black and Andrea Bohlman, turns to the problem of hearing through and against the presence of Confederate monuments on a college’s grounds as the authors confront histories of racial inequality through campus soundwalks. “Welcome to the Dirty South” by Justin Burton brings the ecological soundscape into conversation with urban hip-hop. Following these is Kate Galloway’s essay, “Digital Ecomusicologies: Applications of the Digital Humanities in Ecomusicology Research and Pedagogy,” which explores the place of ecomusicology in digital pedagogy. Finally, Mark Pedelty’s “We Live in the Lake: Ecomusicology as Public Pedagogy” suggests ways to teach ecomusicology through collaborative community activism, drawing on Freirean pedagogical theory.

The final two contributions of the issue offer methods to help teachers and students hear nonhuman natures and locate ecomusicology within music studies more broadly. Tomie Hahn’s graphic score and essay, “Layered Listeners: Lessons of the Land, Air, and Sea,” draws on the Deep Listening practices of Pauline Oliveros to invite students to compose immersive soundscapes inspired by the experience of a bird in flight. Juxtaposing the “long history” of music *per se* with the “short history” of ecomusicology, Aaron Allen’s “Greening the Curriculum: Beyond a Short Music History in Ecomusicology” offers a concrete example of ways to bring ecomusicology into the undergraduate classroom,

7. For teachers, resources that may help expose the intersection of scientific and cultural methodologies include Kalpana Rahita Seshadri’s study of linguistics and racial law in *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Eduardo Kohn’s anthropology of nature in *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); and Vivieros de Castro’s theory of perspectivism. See especially “Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies,” *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): 463–484.

alongside some broader thoughts about the future role of ecomusicology in music history pedagogy.

As Aaron Allen points out in his essay, ecomusicology has been described as the study of music in a time of environmental crisis. Taken together, this issue's essays draw on that shared point of origin to outline the beginnings of another view of ecomusicology, one in which to ask about environmental crisis is to ask about the social and scientific valuation of difference. How does listening to birdsong connect us to the histories and practices that teach us to hear Bach and New Orleans bounce? How do the rights, values, and ethics that we ascribe to different kinds of music inform the ways we hear those who are not considered fully human? Scholarship outside of musicology has laid the foundation for these questions by asking how modern ecologies of the human are connected to histories of social marginalization.⁸ My hope is that the essays presented here will help teachers and students build on these precedents by asking whose natures we listen to, and under what conditions we hear their call.

8. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Kalpana Rahita Seshadri, *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Alexander Weheliye, *Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).