



Cities as cultural ecosystems:

Researching, understanding and operationalising
music sustainability in urban settings

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Sustainability in music

One of the key worldwide challenges for music genres is sustainability. While globalisation and rapid technological development have given more people access to more music than ever before, many music practices struggle to deal with rapid change.

Worldwide, there has never been a period like the last 100 years in terms of social change, development of market forces, reach and impact of technology and media, and political and religious ideologies influencing how people engage with music.

UNESCO and ICH

The risk of diversity declining, disappearing or even entire traditions 'being disappeared' (Seeger) is real. Governments, NGOs and especially UNESCO have flagged threats to intangible cultural heritage as one of the great challenges of this century in a suite of key documents:

Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001);
Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003); Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005);
Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, 2007).

Urban and rural settings

The focus of initiatives for disappearing traditions has been more on rural than on urban traditions. Rural traditions have arguably been more affected by global changes in the past hundred years, and it is easy to imbibe rural practices with a sense of 'authenticity' that touches the salvage ethnomusicologist's heart.

Urbanisation, on the other hand, is often depicted as a force of evil, destroying the beauty of what once was. While it is easy to understand the reasoning behind this, it is also naïve and unhelpful.

Common responses

The sense that cultural diversity is worth maintaining is not new. Over the past hundred years, there have been many initiatives for 'music in need of safeguarding'. Five key responses have dominated:

- Archives of recorded and/or notated music
- Festivals and events raising awareness
- Subsidies for specific music practices
- Awards/recognition for senior culture bearers
- Workshops for next generations of practitioners

Artefact or organism

A key challenge in dealing with Intangible Cultural Heritage in rural and urban settings is determining whether something has to be preserved, and if so, what, why and how.

Many initiatives to date have approached music practices primarily as artefacts, to be safeguarded by recording and preserving them in archives. However, the question arises whether that creates a future for a living, breathing tradition, which has the power to engage, involve and excite people?

Ecology and ecosystems

In 1870, Haeckel introduced the concept of ecology. 65 years later, building on this idea, Tansley first described the concept of an ecosystem:

“the whole system (in the sense of physics), including not only the organism complex, but also the whole complex of physical factors forming what we call the environment of the biome, the habitat factors in the widest sense. Though the organism may claim our primary interest, when we are trying to think fundamentally we cannot separate them from their special environment, with which they form one physical system.” (1935: 299)

Ecology of music

In 1964, Archer published an article 'On the Ecology of Music'. His line of thinking was refined by others, most notably Jeff T. Titon, who argues for considering:

“Cultural and musical rights and ownership, the circulation and conservation of music, the internal vitality of music cultures and the social organization of their music-making, music education and transmission, the roles of community scholars and practitioners, intangible cultural heritage, tourism, and the creative economy, preservation versus revitalization, partnerships among cultural workers and community leaders, and good stewardship of musical resources.” (Titon, 2009a: 5)

Music cultures as ecosystems

These writings point to music sustainability not as simple preservation, but as dependent on a complex of forces that impact on their sustainability, much like an ecosystem works on an organism, largely irrespective of musical structure or content

That constitutes a major departure from dominant (Western) narratives. While it tempting to think that the most worthy and valuable music gets supported, not all music genres that thrive and survive are easily identified as the 'best' music in terms of sound, content or structure

Sustainable futures

From 2009-2014, nine research teams based at universities in Australia, Europe and the US embarked on a concerted effort to describe nine music genres (ranging from moribund to vibrant) as ecosystems:

Four were primarily rural: Australian Indigenous Yawulyu, Ghanaian Ewe dance-drumming, Balinese gamelan, and Amami Shima Uta (Japan). The other five: Vietnamese ca tru, Western opera, Korean samulnori, Mexican Mariachi, and Hindustani music, all have a strong urban base.

Five domains of music sustainability

While there are different ways to structure the forces working on music practices, the following five were found to be the closest to comprehensive and used as the five domains informing 'Sustainable futures'

- Learning and teaching
- Musicians and communities
- Contexts and constructs
- Infrastructure and regulations
- Media and the music industry

Learning and teaching

- How is the music learned? By 'total immersion', by listening to recordings, by a formal teaching process?
- Are people that know the music genre well enough passionate about passing it on to a next generation?
- Are there people eager and able to learn the music genre (because it's deep, cool, or just part of life)?
- Are there environments in which learning and teaching can take place successfully (within the community, in institutions, online)?

Musicians and communities

- What place does the music have in the community (everybody is engaged, professionals, only elite)?
- How does the community at large engage with musicians (adore, respect, tolerate, persecute)?
- How do musicians interact with each other (as colleagues, competitors, unions, frenemies)?
- How do musicians make their living (making music only, part of their income, income from other source)

Contexts and constructs

- In what environments and for what occasions is music made (spontaneous, festivals, concerts)?
- What is the typical setting for music making (anywhere, village square, pub, opera house)?
- How highly esteemed is the music by those who engage with it (very prestigious, entertainment)?
- What other thought patterns play a role (gender issues, religion, racism, social hierarchies)?

Infrastructure & regulations

- What structures –if any- are needed for learning, creating, performing, and disseminating music?
- Are the materials for instruments and other performance needs readily available?
- What kind of support structure exists for the music in terms of funding, tax breaks, copyright?
- What adverse regulations exist (noise limits, censorship, taxation, visa restrictions)?

Media & the music industry

- How often and when can people hear the music genre on the radio or see it on television?
- How much attention does the writing press devote to the music genre and in what way?
- How prominent is the online presence of the music and who are the key contributors?
- To what extent do impresarios, major labels and independents engage with the music?

Ecosystems of music cultures





Urban ecosystems

While much of the literature explicitly or implicitly refers to globalisation, commodification, mediatisation, AND urbanisation as *intrusions* into the ecosystem, it stands to reason from a sustainability perspective to include all forces working on any music practice as part of the musical ecosystem.

Thus, both inside and outside factors are part of the picture and are taken into account when developing strategies for ensuring a practice remains vibrant. Three examples from the case studies will illustrate:

Hindustani music

The raga music of North India has a time-honoured transmission system in guru-shishya-parampara.

An intellectual and cultural elite forms the inner circle of support for musicians, who are divided themselves

There is a strong belief in the excellence of raga music, and a conviction it will never disappear

Performances need minimal infrastructure, and has a surprisingly low dependence on government support

Technological uptake has been early through over a 100 years of recordings, radio, TV, and now Internet.

Vietnamese ca tru

Ca tru has a long tradition of one-to-one transmission, mostly within music families, but that has dissipated

Community support has turned into avoidance due to associations with undesirable non-musical elements

The prestige of the music has suffered greatly from the process above, effectively almost eradicating the genre

The music has modest infrastructure needs; is using community houses and historical settings to rebuild

The revival movement has cleverly used media and the 2009 UNESCO Listing to rebuild impetus.

Western opera

As a complex artform, most opera training takes place through long learning trajectories in conservatoires

Opera draws a relatively small, but highly influential and wealthy community of dedicated patrons

Opera has successfully positioned itself as one the greatest achievements of western performing arts

Infrastructure and funding needs for opera are massive, and supported by its prestige

There is long engagement with the music industry, and a fascinating new tradition of opera 'live-on-screen'.

Engaging communities

One of the great challenges of music research in the 21st century is to go beyond 'mere' academic outcomes. Over the past twenty-five years, we have been searching for ways to make our findings truly useful for the people we work with.

The *Sustainable futures* project on which this presentation is based is committed to ensure research insights are made available to communities, with the aim to empower them to forge musical futures on their own terms. To this end, a dedicated website has been developed as the basis for targeted initiatives

soundfutures.org

In addition to an overview of the key ideas of *Sustainable futures*, the website has a number of features that aim to reach a range of stakeholders:

- Summaries of each of the nine case studies bringing out the most salient points across the five domains
- An online questionnaire to explore (self-diagnose in a way) the sustainability of any music genre
- A three-minute animation to introduce the idea of sustainability and ecosystems in music

The background features a stylized landscape with green mountain peaks at the top and bottom. A wide, textured band of orange and yellow occupies the center, resembling a sunset or a field of flowers. The text is centered within this band.

soundfutures.org

sustaining music, engaging communities