

Sustainable futures for music traditions: Towards an ecology of musical diversity

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1 Introduction

Sustainable Futures: towards an ecology of musical aims to identify what factors play a role in the sustainability of music cultures, and how these can be made to work effectively for the survival of specific forms of music. It is funded by the Australian Research Council and carried out in an international partnership with six universities and three NGOs. The project aims to produce an accessible and user-friendly interface for disseminating findings to assist communities and governments across the world forge musical futures on their own terms.

2 Background to the project

While musics have always emerged and disappeared through changing tastes or circumstances, some minority musics' are—in the words of ethnomusicologist Tony Seeger—'being disappeared' by non-musical influences and powers. This is causing a substantial reduction in the diversity of music we can access and enjoy, now, and even more so in the future. Colonisation, migration, rapid technological development and the proliferation of popular culture through global markets have put a major strain on the capacity of many types of music to evolve with changing circumstances.

This is somewhat ironic as we are in an era where there is a greater range of music available to us than ever before. Depending on our taste, mood or company we can select music from most parts of the world with little effort. By toggling an ipod, flipping through radio stations or TV channels, surfing the web or browsing through record stores we can access an astounding diversity of music. Some of this music we can even see live in our own country in cosmopolitan cities or at festivals that bring musicians from across the globe. We take this musical diversity for granted, just like the international smorgasbords of food available to many of us is. It is sobering to remember that less than 300 years ago Johann Sebastian Bach had to walk through the rain for two days (and almost lost his job) just to hear another organist, Buxtehude, in a German town not far from where he lived.

Why is it that at a time when we have a greater access to musical diversity than ever before, some music cultures are on the brink of extinction? UNESCO also notes this conundrum in stating 'while the processes of globalization enhance interaction between cultures, they also represent a challenge to diversity' (2005:2). Certainly musics have been emerging and disappearing throughout history, but over the past five decades the 'disappearing' has intensified. The reality that music once constrained to a single locale is now available across the world has led to some forms of music being strengthened and weakened others. The extent of this change far exceeds the evolutionary processes that have governed musical diversity in earlier periods.

3 Why we need music diversity

Let us take a step back and ask, well, why does it matter if there is a loss of musical diversity? Might it not be a more harmonious world if everyone listened to the 'one beat', a world reminiscent of a time before Babel (babil) when there was only one language?

If our world consisted of one homogeneous style of music it would be an impoverished world. Variety is the spice of life. Not only would life be incredibly dull without a choice of music styles to play and listen to, but our identity would also suffer. We define ourselves in contrast to others and music is a large part of our identity. There is also a rights issue: do we accept the death of smaller musics at the hands of the more powerful—the more ‘louder’? The importance of cultural diversity for the full realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and recognition of cultural diversity as a common heritage of humanity is highlighted in the UNESCO 2005 Convention (2005:1) and the IMC 2006 report.

We can also imagine that in a world without musical diversity, music *per se* may wither, as without inspiration from different kinds of music we risk losing the desire to create music at all. Interaction between music styles is a necessary process for maintaining music traditions. UNESCO recognizes the ‘vital role of cultural interaction for the renewal and nurturing of cultural traditions’. Like biological ecosystems, music relies on diversity.

For many people the continuation of specific music genres is high on the agenda for a number of reasons. In some cases the music is fundamental to the continuation of a particular culture. The music may play an important role in uniting people in an expression of shared identity, or assist in the process of healing wounds. The diversity in music plays a significant role in the economy. In Australia alone the music industry is worth \$6.8 billion per annum (MCA, 2008). More broadly, UNESCO emphasize that cultural diversity is a mainspring of sustainable development (2005:2).

Music can often express what the spoken word cannot. Some types of music play a crucial role in furthering the cause of social justice issues. A fine example is the late Mercedes Sosa, shown here, who was described in one obituary as having ‘fought South America’s dictators with her voice’.¹ Many health and educational benefits of engaging with music have also been documented and a diversity of music provides greater access for people to engage with music and achieve these benefits. For oral cultures, the many genres of songs, especially Indigenous songs, can be a unique source of historical information and can even contain ecological observations that can provide insights into solving problems in history and the sciences.

But how do people sustain or revitalize musics, and how can government and industry support these processes? We know, for example, that when a sense of cultural identity or prestige is strongly linked to a particular music, this supports its sustainability. But what can be done to foster this link?

4 Supporting music diversity

In a healthy, flourishing music tradition the practice of making or engaging with the particular music—a practice known as ‘musicking’ (1999)—is a recognised and valued part of life. More specifically, a flourishing music is one where:

- people have access to hearing, participating in and learning the particular music;
- musicians have opportunities to perform their music;
- society, or sub groups within the society, develop and innovate the music freely.

For many years, a number of governments, NGOs and development agencies have provided support for specific music cultures, ranging from supporting a single event to projects running over longer periods of time. More recently, these efforts have been supported by policies such as the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003) and *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (2005) and the IMC’s *Protection and Promotion of Musical Diversity* study of (2006). These

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mercedes_Sosa

documents and projects point to the need for greater insight into the triggers of sustainability of music across cultures—the ecology of musical diversity. This is the core quest of our project.

Sustainable Futures: towards an ecology of musical diversity is a five-year, five-million (AUS) dollar research project. It focuses on nine in-depth case studies of music cultures in widely different contexts and states of wellbeing. It is funded by the Australian Research Council and carried out in an international partnership with six universities and three NGOs, the International Music Council, being a significant partner.

5 Understanding the ecology of music

While all musics evolve, some changes are regarded as having a negative impact on the music. In fact, a severe change to the music may lead some musicians to regard it as a departure from the particular music tradition all together. That same change may be regarded by others as an innovation and a positive development in the tradition.

We can also consider forces that motivate changes in music cultures. At one end of the spectrum are external forces—forces beyond an individual's control—while at the other end are influences that a musician chooses to engage with, which inspire them to pursue new directions in their music.

Developments in music driven by the performers themselves, such as the choice to adopt a new instrument, or varying the musical form or playing in a new context, are necessary processes for healthy music traditions. A decision to incorporate these new elements into one's music as a form of enrichment is very different to changes due to forced acculturation, where the new music is seen as a threat and very often dominating. At this end of the 'unnatural change' spectrum are changes resulting from the forcible displacement of people, war or genocide, climate change, religious prejudice, laws and regulations, technological developments, infrastructural challenges, socioeconomic change and failing educational systems. Such external forces can diminish the prestige associated with the music and can impact negatively on the sustainability of the tradition.

In some cases it is not easy to know just where on the spectrum a particular innovation lies and musicians' opinions on this may differ. Understanding the factors influencing the health of a music tradition is a complex task that we tackle by involving highly experienced researchers with the given music culture. These researchers are well placed to assess the state of the tradition, identify the influences on the health of the tradition and evaluate initiatives to support the tradition, including past, present and future. This brings me now to our approach.

6 Approach

6.1 Case Studies

Nine case studies comprise the core of the Sustainable Futures Project. These represent both endangered and 'successful' forms of musical expressions, as 'success stories' of the latter may well inform strategies towards sustainability. Carefully selected for their diversity in history, present forms, dissemination, transmission and vitality, they are:

Traditional Aboriginal music from Australia, West African percussion, SamulNori from Korea, Balinese gamelan, Mexican mariachi, Western classical opera, Hindustani music, Art music of the Viet people, and music from the Amami islands of Japan.

In addition, a study of Cape Verdian music in Rotterdam (*Ninja Kors*) will provide insight into drastic recontextualisations in contemporary urban settings.

For each case study, researchers will conduct interviews with key musicians and stakeholders about the health of the music cultures.

6.2 Factors influencing the health of music cultures

We take an original and comprehensive approach by grouping the myriad of influences on the sustainability of musics into five broad domains. Across these domains we have formulated over 200 questions to elucidate the factors affecting the state of traditions. Here I summarise the five broad domains:

1. The first domain involves how music is **learnt**: Is it being taught formally or through a submersion environment? Is notation being used? Is it taught in an institution? Is it being taught through a master-apprentice approach, as is Vietnamese Ca Trù music shown here. How have these methods changed and what is the result?

Many Aboriginal musics for example, are traditionally learnt through emersion, such as *arrartenh-artenhe* shown here. Today, however, performances are infrequent and the traditional learning method is proving difficult to maintain.

2. The second domain relates to the role of the tradition and **musicians within the community**. It includes issues such as, are musicians paid to perform, compose or teach? Are there tenured positions or are musicians free-lance? This domain identifies the community support for the music.
3. The third domain relates to **attitudes steering musical directions**, including views on recontextualisation, authenticity and appropriation. Consider Mariza, the Mozambique-Portuguese Fado singer who incorporates 'new' instruments, somewhat controversially, though undoubtedly she is a major force in sustaining Fado music.
4. The fourth area relates to the **hardware of music**: Where do musicians perform, compose, collaborate and source instruments? What are the effects of regulations on performance venues or in education systems?

Performance opportunities for traditional Aboriginal musicians are limited to occasional public relations events, such as launches and official openings and anniversaries such as the one shown here.

I am pleased to be able to say that as of last month, Australia is now a party to the United Nations Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. We hope this may lead to special measures to support Australia's Indigenous traditional musics, which are all at risk of extinction.

5. The final area addresses **dissemination and commercial aspects of music**: How is the music being distributed, publicised and broadcast? Who are the patrons or buyers? What are the marketing techniques on album covers?

In these five areas that influence the sustainability of a music culture, notice that music itself is absent from this list. We believe that features of the music, such as scale structure, instrumentation, timbre, musical form etc. play a limited role in the health of a tradition.

Diagnosing the state of a music tradition and implementing steps to support the tradition, such as teaching or promoting appreciation, do however involve knowledge of the musical features. Note that it is possible to have a detailed knowledge of a music tradition without necessarily being able to make this knowledge explicit. This is comparable to the way that native speakers know a language without necessarily being able to articulate the rules of the language.

In Sustainable Futures each case study researcher will conduct interviews covering each of the five domains. In addition there will be a section on specific ways that development of the music can be supported. Issues encountered in the implementation of these initiatives will also be identified. Our approach recognises that these domains overlap, and that specific initiatives will relate to several domains. By conducting our research in this way we aim to leave no areas uncovered, as well we believe this will bring out the relationships between domains.

As an example, traditional Aboriginal performances usually go for several hours. In general musicians are unwilling to compromise their lengthy performance for the tourist market, with its unpredictable economic returns. One innovation from the non-commercial sector has been to begin the performance 'backstage' and present only the final act of the performance 'on stage' to the public. This was the case at the launch of a new building in Alice Springs this year. Aboriginal Musicians have adapted quickly to new attire and technology. People buy oxide from building suppliers instead of grinding ochre for body paint, they buy feathers from the two-dollar shop and make hats from beer cartons rather than paper-bark.

7 Outcomes

The project will empower musicians and communities by identifying factors that help sustain music cultures and those that work against their survival and will make this information widely accessible. How will we do this?

In addition to a handbook of things that are conducive and threatening to the health of music cultures, a key innovative outcome of the project will be a freely available, user-friendly online template. This self-assessment form will give practical suggestions to sustain the particular music and refer to cases where such steps have been taken.

The resource will be of direct practical use to musicians, individuals and organizations by assisting them to diagnose underlying issues and plan for preserving important intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

In this way the project will feed directly into the exchange of information about best practices for the promotion and protection of musics, an integral part of cultural expressions. Thus contributing to a vibrant and diverse musical life in communities across the globe, and by extension to their sense of identity and wellbeing.

8 References

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