Cities as Cultural Ecosystems:

Researching and Understanding Music Sustainability in Urban Settings

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Abstract

From the beginning of the twenty-first century, there has been a rapid growth of interest in the preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), stimulated by a suite of UNESCO Conventions and Declarations (2001, 2003, 2005, and UNCHR 2007). Globally, this has led to impressive growth of awareness and efforts to preserve the world's arts and crafts, and considerable investment by many countries in initiatives to preserve cultural diversity. A key element in these efforts is defining the nature of what needs to be preserved in consultation with communities, and devising strategies on how best to approach the particular challenges that entails. While globalization and urbanization are often painted as the enemies of sustainability, I argue that most struggles and celebrations of sustainability in the arts inevitably play out in contemporary urbanized, globalized, mediatized, and commodified environments, which may be part of the solution as much as they are part of the problem. Following the work of scholars like Titon, this paper argues it is imperative to regard cultural practices as part of dynamic processes in dynamic environments rather than as artefacts in static environments. At its centre is a model of 'cultural ecosystems,' outcome of a five-year international research project (2009-2014) funded by the Australian Research Council: *Sustainable futures for music cultures: Toward an ecology of cultural diversity*. Taking music as an example, this article explores how an ecological approach can shed new light on approaches to cultural sustainability in urban environments.

Keywords: Sustainability, Musical Ecosystems, Urban Arts Research, UNESCO, Intangible Cultural Heritage.

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A Passage to India

January 2012. As I step out of my newly refurbished room in the West Wing of Jaldeen in Kolkata (quite a small palace, really, nothing fancy), ITC Sangeet Research Academy Director Ravi Mathur asks me if the cook that has been assigned to me is to my liking. I praise her skills in preparing Bengali dishes (and keep private my reservations about soaking cornflakes in hot milk before serving them in the morning). As we speak, one of the guards comes up to alert me that a private car is waiting at the gates to transport me to my next interview, with a former record executive of The Gramophone Company of India. As I settle in the back in the air-conditioned comfort of a leather seat, I smile reflecting on the blessings of this type of fieldwork, thinking of the stories of my more rurally inclined colleagues, wading knee-deep through leech-infested mud to gather data on the musical practices they study. I create a Facebook post to celebrate the comforts of my urban ethnomusicology experience, which yields appropriate fieldwork envy from colleagues.

The Sangeet Research Academy is one of the main providers of new talent to the vibrant world of North Indian classical vocal music. Inspired by the court traditions the music stems from, the Indian Tobacco Company (perhaps slightly ironic as the sponsor of vocal excellence) decided to build an urban residential campus where the greatest talents can live and study with reputed masters for as many years as it takes for them to mature into the next generation of public performers in the large music festivals across the cities of India. They will also feature in the 'music circles', mostly urban circuits of music lovers and connoisseurs organizing recitals in homes and smaller venues, and present at SPICMACAY, a highly active student concert network. While the stations of All India Radio in almost every major urban centre in India had been the prime disseminator of Hindustani music and a major source of income for musicians for the first decades after the 1947 Independence (and the subsequent collapse of court patronage), underfunding since the 1980s has limited its impact on music and musicians in present-day India. Privately run music schools, mostly centred around a single musician, complete the picture of a practice solidly anchored in contemporary urban environments (Schippers, in press).

I am on my second three-city tour of North India (the first one was in 2010), gathering data for a large international research project I initiated three years earlier with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of the forces that affect music sustainability. I am getting rich data, from highly philosophical views on the connection between North Indian classical music and the cycles of nature to the impossibility for music lovers to get to concerts in gridlocked cities of up to 22 million people; from its central place on Indian nationalist agenda that led to Independence to frustration at shifts from serious criticism, to celebrity gossip in the English language papers. My work with Indian classical music (going back to 1975) and subsequent encounters with music in other parts of Asia, Australia, Africa, the US and various countries in multicultural Europe had convinced me that survival and vibrancy of music may be more correlated with such external forces impacting on any musical practice than its perceived intrinsic musical value. If we

wanted to understand more about sustaining music, I felt we needed to increase our understanding of the former.

Excited by this idea, the Australian Research Council generously funded an ambitious five-year collaboration between seven universities and three non-governmental organizations to test a new approach to understanding sustainability in music. 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: Australian Indigenous Yawulyu, Vietnamese Ca tru, Ghanaian Ewe dance-drumming, Balinese gamelan, Western opera, Korean Samulnori, Mexican Mariachi, Amami Shima Uta (Japan), and Hindustani music. Four of these traditions (Yawulyu, Ewe dance-drumming, Balinese gamelan and Shima Uta) are primarily rural and regional, the other five predominantly centre around cities. That meant that from the start, the research had to abandon romantic notions of 'pure' traditions in idyllic surroundings, and embrace the complex cultural dynamics of cities like Hanoi, Mumbai, Sydney, Seoul, and Mexico City. This necessitated a much more inclusive approach than the hostility towards new, intrusive realities advocated by 'salvage ethnomusicology.' In essence, *all* factors impacting on a music practice, including researchers, were regarded as forces to be reckoned with, rather than as forces wished away (Schippers, 2015:140).

Music Sustainability

While innovative in its approach, *sustainable futures* built on the awareness that one of the key worldwide challenges for many cultural practices is vibrancy and survival. For example, in music, while globalization and rapid technological development have given more people access to more sounds than ever before, many music practices struggle to deal with rapid change. The risk of diversity declining, disappearing or even entire traditions 'being disappeared' (Seeger, 2008) is real. Governments, NGOs and especially UNESCO have flagged threats to intangible cultural heritage as one of the great challenges of this century, as evidenced by their Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), and Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005), as well as the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

Every arts discipline calls for its own responses to a need for 'safeguarding'. Over the past hundred years, five key responses to 'music in need of safeguarding' have dominated: making available grants and subsidies for specific music practices; organizing festivals and events raising awareness; bestowing awards and other forms of recognition for senior culture bearers; creating archives of recorded and/or notated music; and facilitating classes and workshops for next generations of practitioners. Each of these have obvious merit, but they also tend to be top-down, and focusing more on repertoire than on music practice as organic processes.

An Ecological Approach

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Schippers, 2015:135-137), the history of ecological thinking can inform an understanding of its potential for application in cultural research. In 1870, Haeckel introduced the concept of ecology as: "the study of all those complex interrelations referred to by Darwin as the conditions of the struggle for existence" (quoted in Stauffer, 1957: 140). This has proven to be a powerful tool to address processes in biology, but over time has gained considerable traction as a metaphor in other disciplines as far afield as organizational structures, energy preservation, and urban planning. In 1935, building on Haeckel's work, Tansley was the first to describe the concept of 'ecosystem'. He defined it as:

> 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. (1935:299).

He continues: "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" (ibid.). This echoes the question whether art practices are best regarded as artifacts, or are more usefully considered as part of a dynamic system.

This line of thinking is highly relevant for those involved in Intangible Cultural Heritage. It was adopted by several (ethno)musicologists from the 1960s, most notably Jeff T. Titon, who argued 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).

– that creates the basis for a compelling case to regard music sustainability 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. It also constitutes a major departure from dominant (Western) narratives: While it is 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. For example: few experts in orchestral music will support the view that the world's best-selling classical musician Andre Rieu is the greatest violinist or conductor, yet, with over 35 million CDs and DVDs sold, he commercially outperforms any orchestra in the world by generous margins. However, few will challenge his marketing prowess, the lack of which can drive other music practices to or over the edge of extinction.

Following Tansley's 1935 definition, we can tentatively define any music culture as an ecosystem:

> The whole system -not only a specific music genre, but the entire complex- of factors defining the genesis, development and sustainability of the surrounding music culture in the widest sense, including the role of individuals, communities, values and attitudes, learning processes, contexts for making music, infrastructure and organizations, rights and regulations, diaspora and travel, media and the music industry. (Schippers, 2015:137).

Such a definition creates exciting, but also challenging perspectives on making contributions to cultural sustainability, and necessitates a structured approach to enable artists, scholars and communities to come to shared understandings and develop meaningful exchanges and effective strategies to address sustainability.

Five Domains

While recognizing that many forces interact on any cultural practice, Sustainable futures structured the most prominent factors for sustainability in five interrelated domains: systems of learning; musicians and communities; contexts and constructs; infrastructure and regulations; and media and the music industry. Virtually every musical practice relates to these domains, even if it means that a particular aspect (e.g. formal education; support for instrument builders; link to the music industry) is not developed for any variety of reasons. Across the domains, almost 200 questions were formulated, the essence of which can be summarized as represented below:

Regarding systems of learning we asked:
- How is the music learned? By 'total immersion', by notation, by listening to masters and recordings, by a formal teaching process, or by a combination of those?
- 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 prestigious, or just part of life)?
- Are there environments in which learning and teaching can take place successfully (within the community, in institutions, online)?

To get a better understanding of the relationships between musicians and their communities, we asked:
- What place does the music have in the community? (e.g. everybody is engaged, professionals, only elite)
- How does the community at large engage with musicians? (e.g. adore, respect, tolerate, persecute)
- How do musicians interact with each other? (e.g. as colleagues, competitors, unions, frenemies)
- How do musicians make their living? (e.g. making music only, part of their income, income from other sources)

Regarding the context (both physically and in terms of occasion) and construct (the values and attitudes that underlie the music practice), we asked:

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

For performing arts, the 'hardware' (places to perform, instruments, costumes) is of great importance, as well as laws and regulations (from copyright to censorship). This led to the following questions:

- 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)?
- 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? (For a full list, see soundfutures.org, 2015)

Jointly, the answers to these questions across nine case studies (Schippers & Grant, 2016) provided fascinating insights into why some music practices are quite vibrant while others were struggling. It also made clear that both in rural and urban environments, there is a complex interplay between the various domains. For instance, a high profile in the media can contribute to the prestige of an art form, and in turn serve to inspire young people to learn, secure financial support through patronage, and political goodwill to support infrastructure (Drummond, 2016). Reversely, stigma of a particular music practice or its performers may lead to years or generations of struggle, and eventually the disappearance of a genre (e.g. Ramnarain, 2003).

Cultural Ecosystems

The findings from nine music cultures across the five domains strongly support a dynamic approach to understanding cultural sustainability. Importantly, in this model it is the *musical practice* rather than the *music as object* that is at the centre. Particularly in urban environments, it is important to distinguish specific prac-

tices from traditions, styles or genres at large, as there are situations were only one style of mariachi, or *ca tru*, or opera, resonates with a particular environment, while others languish or never even become part of the cultural landscape.

From these considerations and the underlying data arise the potential for a graphic representation of cultural ecosystems, in this case focused on music, which can be applied to virtually any music practice in rural or urban environments:
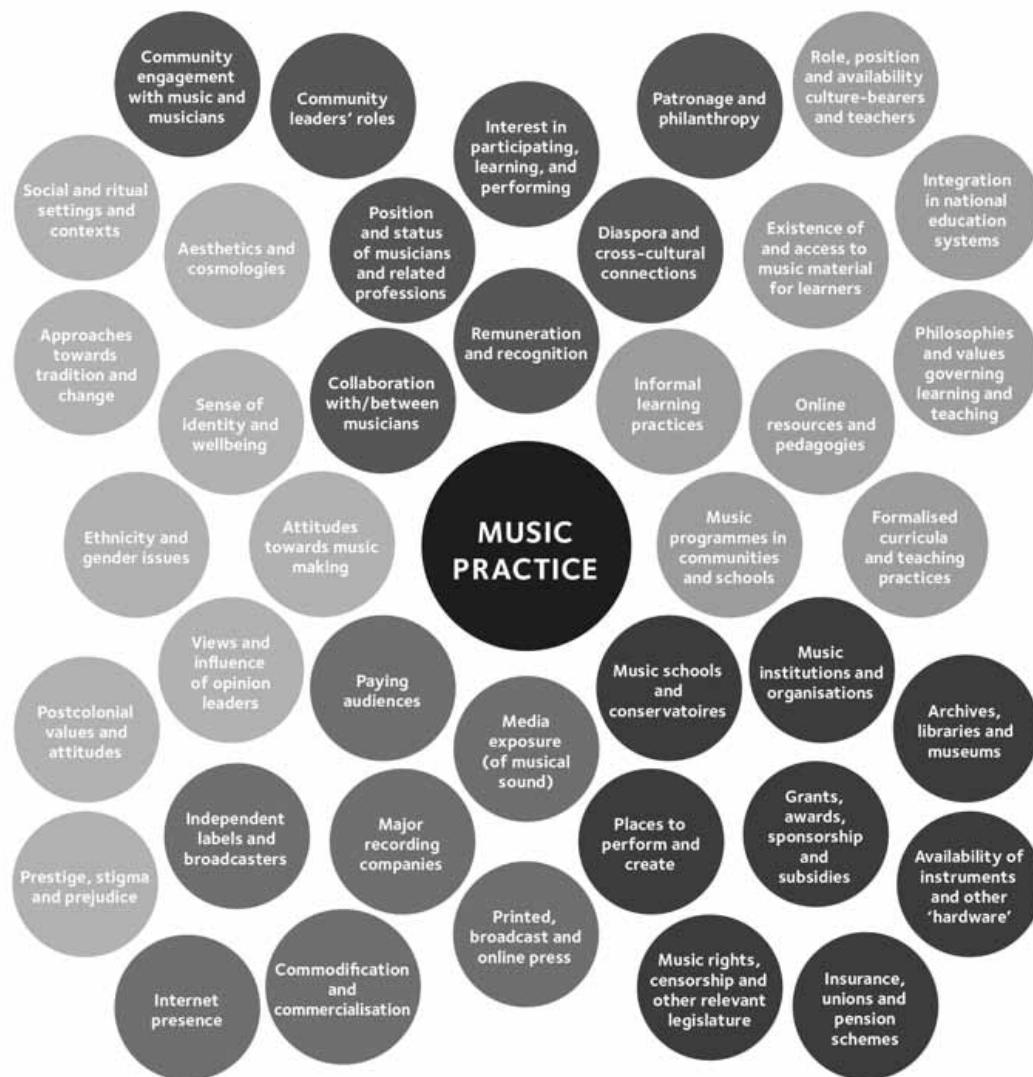

Figure 1. Musical Ecosystems: A graphic representation of key forces working on the sustainability of music practices across five domains. Clockwise from the top: musicians and communities; systems of learning music; infrastructure and regulations; media and the music industry, and contexts and constructs.

For each music practice – and for each environment for any music practice – the interpretation and relative importance of each of the 'balloons' will of course vary. Communities tend to be defined quite differently in urban and rural environments. In the latter there is a greater chance of having high-level music education,

extensive infrastructure, and access to media, as well as diverse and fluid values and attitudes. Those can profoundly affect the sustainability of a music practice. But as mentioned before, it is worth considering each of those factors for every music practice under scrutiny, as the *absence* of a particular factor may be as telling as the presence of another.

Practical Applications

If the idea of cultural ecosystems is tenable theoretically, the next question that arises is how it can impact on practice. One of the objectives of Sustainable futures was to "empower communities to forge musical futures on their own terms" (soundfutures, 2015). As mentioned before, much work on sustainability has been focused on efforts to maintain 'authentic' environments for specific music practices to flourish. While this approach may be laudable from an idealistic perspective and can be successful in some cases, it is flawed in assuming that major changes affecting the vibrancy of music practices worldwide can be stopped. It is also good to remember that most music genres are in fact very flexible and have successfully adapted to change over centuries: recontextualization is a rule rather than an exception in music (Schippers, 2010:53-60). Others have come into being because of their urban environment: genres like jazz and hiphop are quintessentially urban.

In that way, cities can be regarded as new environments for musical creativity to flourish. The cultural ecosystems of cities can be dirty, complex, and opaque. However, like any setting, exploring and understanding them clarifies what factors are conducive for particular music practices among the people that create, perform, teach, organise, promote, and support them. Deep awareness of these main factors in musical ecosystems and their interrelationships can be a powerful tool to ensure the cultural diversity of our planet for decades to come; a diversity that will almost certainly play out more in urban centres than in the idyllic, untainted settings in hidden valleys or on tropical islands, in secluded villages or in royal courts, in our memory or our imagination.

Acknowledgements & About the Author

Huib Schippers is the Director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings and an Adjunct Professor at Griffith University, where he was the inaugural Director of the innovative Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre from 2003-2015.

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