



# Research Online at Trinity Laban

## Music Making as a Global Resource for Sustainable Futures (editorial)

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## Editorial

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## Keywords

Music Making, sustainable futures, community music, global resource, civic imagination

## Abstract

This special issue seeks to build a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding CM and sustainable futures, by bringing together research perspectives which illuminate the complexities of this relationship, and the potential of CM to address global challenges of sustainability. In particular, this issue seeks to highlight promising lines of enquiry into this complex subject, in order to understand better what attitudinal, ecological, epistemological, ontological and / or methodological shifts might be needed in order to develop a clearer focus on issues of CM and sustainability in future research.

# Introduction

At this point in history, planet earth and its inhabitants face unprecedented levels of threat to a sustainable collective future due to a range of issues including – but not limited to: the ‘great acceleration’ of human population and associated species extinction, mass migration and displacement, global warming and associated climate change, the rise of zoonotic diseases and associated pandemics, ageing populations, ongoing conflict, state-sponsored violence, the exploitation of the Global South, income inequality, structural injustices relating to gender, race, disability and socio-economic status (SES), social isolation and alienation ([United Nations 2015](#); [UN Environment 2020](#); [Oxfam International 2020, 2022](#)).

With this Special Issue, our intention has been to stimulate discourse on the relationship between music making and this complex nexus of existential crises which threaten the sustainability of present and future life on earth. While this might seem like a grandiose ambition, the pressing nature of the dramatic changes already being experienced within the earth system – e.g. global warming, rising sea levels, increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events – mean that the impacts of climate change are a global concern which affects everyone and permeates all human activity. The earth system itself is presently under considerable pressure, and climate science suggests we are close to many of the ‘tipping points’ ([University of Exeter 2023](#), n.pag) that might make life on earth increasingly *unsustainable*. Given such environmental precarity, it behoves us all to examine our activities, behaviours and practices to understand whether they are indeed sustainable, and community music should not be exempt in this regard.

Sustainability as a term is complex and freighted with assumptions and contradictions ([Lamberton 2005](#)). By focusing on music making and sustainable *futures* in the call for submissions to this Special Issue, we were keen to emphasize an understanding of sustainability and cultures of music making which went beyond simply sustaining a particular project or

practice. All community music initiatives – along with many music-making practices more generally – face threats to their sustainability, whether through funding sources, ticket sales, recruitment and retention, changes in governmental policy and so on. We invited contributors to consider sustainability from a more ecological perspective. Sustaining a cultural practice that involves air travel is clearly at odds with anything more environmentally sustainable. Therefore, we invited prospective contributors to consider sustainability at the least through the lens of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which highlight a wide range of dimensions of sustainability which might relate to music making, perhaps most pertinently in terms of Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG3), Quality Education (SDG4), Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG11), but also potentially Gender Equality (SDG5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG8), Reduced Inequalities (SDG10), Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG12), Climate Action (SDG13) and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG16).

We also encouraged contributors to think beyond the potential limitations of the UN's emphasis on sustainable *development*. In some environmental discourse, development and growth have historically been considered part of the problem of sustainability rather than part of any solution ([Lamberton 2005](#): 54). Lamberton's concept of sustainable *sufficiency* points towards a different kind of sustainable practice with a political edge to it, implying an ideological position at odds with an orthodox view of capitalist society where growth is a necessary part of sustainability, despite the obvious environmental repercussions of such a position.

For music to be understood as a 'global resource' in the context of sustainability, we suggested that further evidence is needed about the complex ways that participatory music making (or musicing/musicking) – and particularly community music – might make a meaningful contribution to addressing such a confluence of existential challenges, whether

such a position is indeed defensible, to what extent and on what grounds. Is participation in music making merely a distraction from such issues or if it is not, how *does* it address them? What is community music ‘doing’ in the situations where it occurs in relation to any of these issues? How does community music help people *cope* with the challenges of living in these times of multiple global crises? And how do community music practices help people *do something* about them?

We recognize that addressing some of these issues as they relate to community music might be uncomfortable. If community music – and music making more generally – is not found to be part of any solution to the present ecological crisis, do we need to therefore consider whether it might in fact be part of the problem? Might it be a distraction from the existential threats which permeate human existence in the twenty-first century? Or is there a sense in which it can speak – directly or indirectly – to those threats to give some hope that music making can contribute something positive to discourse about global environmental sustainability? Moreover, might music making be considered a resource which people can turn to and use as part of a concerted effort to foster a more sustainable future for all life on the planet? In this collection of articles, what we hope is revealed are some of the ways in which music making generally – and community music specifically – might be considered such a global resource, developing themes already established by previous initiatives ([Bartleet and Hesser 2020](#)).

## Articles in the first edition

What we hope this Special Issue begins to do is build a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding community music and sustainable futures, by bringing together research perspectives which illuminate the complexities of this relationship, and the potential of community music to address these global challenges. The issue highlights some promising lines of enquiry into this complex subject, which we hope might prompt

further reflection on what attitudinal, ecological, epistemological, ontological and/or methodological shifts might be needed in order to develop a clearer focus on issues of community music and sustainability in future research. The response to the call was so overwhelming that we were unable to include everything in one issue, and hence contributions are spread over two editions of the journal. In the following section, I summarize those articles included in the first edition.

In her article, ‘Considering approaches towards sustainability through reflexive ethnographic research into two international music gatherings’, Sarah-Jane Gibson introduces two contrasting ways of considering sustainability drawn from an eco-musicological perspective: *sustain-maintain* or *sustain-change*. The former is about the more familiar attitude towards sustaining particular musical practices, while the latter considers sustainability in the context of a practice’s environmental impact, which is at the heart of this Special Issue. Following an ethnographic approach to researching two projects which are part of the global Ethno youth music camps movement, she highlights the importance of an eco-centric – as opposed to an ethno-centric – attitude towards sustainability, and the value of ecological stewardship as both an attitude and an attribute of leadership in the context of sustainability. She raises a number of important questions and challenges about the ecological sustainability of these global offline networks, and also points to innovations in both settings which highlight how practices can shift in response to eco-centric attitudes.

Two articles from Colombia articulate the idea of community music practices as locally situated activities within a context of global sustainability, drawing on ‘epistemologies of the south’ ([Santos 2014, p.11](#)) to establish an epistemological framework for a deeper understanding of music making and sustainable futures. First, Ian Middleton, Alexandra Patiño and Moises Zamora’s account of the ‘Our histories sounding our futures’ project – with young people in the urban *comuna* of Siloé in the Colombian city of Cali – highlights the

methodological importance of involving participants as ethnographic co-researchers in their own narratives. In this context, a sustainable future is one where the voices of marginalized communities are amplified and takes on a political dimension. Their account charts how the young people involved in the project actively resist western ways of knowing and reject capitalist *doxa* by refusing to separate complex interests (e.g. facing everyday violence, caring about the planet, celebrating local culture) into discreet elements but rather taking a position which sees these concerns as all part of the same assemblage.

‘Community music and territorial experiences in Colombia: *Communitas*, *Buen Vivir* and sustainability’, explores a similar conceptual territory, providing a summary account of the work of *Sonido Colectivo*, a musicians’ cooperative based in Colombia, whose members work in multiple and complex settings of post-conflict, community cohesion and cultural regeneration. Drawing on theories of *communitas* (‘collective joy’) and *buen vivir* (‘care’ or ‘good life’) alongside notions of memory and territory, and forms of ritualizing and aesthetic interculturality, the (Samper et al) article presents a comprehensive overview of how cultures of music making operate as sites for both identity work and future building for participants facing multiple complex social challenges. Their ambitious account positions music making as a valuable critical framework for understanding sustainability as a practice, where the qualities of the music itself become a primary site for participants to articulate not only their experiences of complex social situations, but also the changes they seek within a wider social context. Their account highlights the agency both of territory/place and of music itself as a material – and the way that they are held within the body – in shaping responses to issues of sustainability. Their account emphasizes the importance of aesthetic (i.e. non-verbal) experience as a primary means of imagining alternative ways of being, and locates this perspective in the lived experience of musicians and participants from within the complex social circumstances of Colombia.

By contrast, in “‘This is My Place’: Considering the potential of place-based community music for community well-being and sustainability’, Fiona Evison considers the potential of place-based community music for community well-being and sustainability in a North American context, highlighting the centrality of *place* in cultural discourse about both community music and sustainability more generally. She locates the practice of relational composition within a culturally diverse Canadian community in the context of a number of the UN’s SDGs, illustrating how local practices can speak to global concerns. Relational composition in itself is an important way of emphasizing the connections and relationships which underpin community formation and cohesion, and which contribute to participants’ positive sense of well-being through Seligman’s (2011) theoretical framework of flourishing centred around positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). Central to her discussion is a consideration of the complex ways in which *place* comes to have meaning in the context of cultural life of both Indigenous and settler communities, and suggests that music making is a potent way of developing intercultural understandings which are grounded in a shared appreciation of the uniqueness of *place*. Furthermore, she suggests that place-based music making can be important sites for citizens not only to develop shared local cultural identities but also where they can come to appreciate those local identities in the context of wider global issues of sustainability.

In a similar vein of collaborative composition, Kirsten Graves takes quite a different perspective on the power of *place* in “‘Song from the Discarded’: The multisensory shaping of a community *corrido* in the Oaxaca dump’, sharing the remarkable story of the *Los Pепенadores* workers’ union from the garbage dump of Oaxaca, Mexico, a group of workers who perform the crucial yet often ignored task of recycling human garbage, placing them on the front line of environmental stewardship to mitigate human wasteful practices. Their creation of a community *corrido* – a Mexican folk song – to celebrate their work highlights the

ways in which the environment itself – in this case, a garbage dump – can be instrumental in the production of meaning, not merely as a subject but rather as a collaborator. In the world of Los Pepes, the garbage dump is an active agent in the co-production of the corrido, highlighting how materials themselves can be important actors within cultural experience. Graves uses multisensory songwriting as a research method to reveal a deep ecological understanding of this complex community, where acts of virtuosic listening become a potentially life-saving practice as well as a source of creative inspiration and community celebration. Her article questions many assumptions about the nature and scope of eco-musical practices, inviting us to consider such practices from the perspective of both human and non-human actors in collaboration.

The Special Issue also includes examples of *sustain-maintain* approaches to cultural sustainability with ecological potential. Songzi Tao's article on 'Sustaining minoritized culture, community and well-being through online traditional music making: A case study of Bai urban migrants in China', presents a detailed cyber-ethnographic case study of the online community music making undertaken by the internally displaced diaspora of the Bai people in China. In an era of mass migration, where community members are required through economic circumstances to live and work far away from their home, online music making provides a valuable way of staying culturally connected. Her study highlights the potential of online music communities (OMCs) ([Waldron 2018](#)) as sites of cultural sustainability which also have low environmental impact.

Taking an approach which considers community music in the context of its relationship to music education more generally, Javier Rivas and Esther Cavett document the experiences of a small group of student musicians involved as teachers within a non-formal participatory music programme in the United Kingdom. Their account illustrates the pedagogical and epistemological shifts which many student musicians face when they encounter the more

rhizomatic nature of participatory musical practices ([Camlin 2022](#)). The different emphasis on particularly ethical values – mutual care, compassion and vulnerability – which underpin participatory music making/community music might be seen to speak to issues of sustainability, as they highlight the pedagogical attitudes necessary to work effectively in such contexts. For all musicians wanting to put their music to the service of a more sustainable future, understanding these pedagogical shifts is an important move in developing a participatory practice, and Rivas and Cavett's article reminds us of the central importance of an ethically guided, reflective and reflexive pedagogy when it comes to considering music making as a resource not just for individual flourishing, but for more progressive, emancipatory purposes.

## Discussion

What the contents of this first edition of the Special Issue highlight is that what constitutes a sustainable future means different things to different people, from the more politically motivated practices of music making as ideological resistance in a Colombian context through to the OMCs seeking to preserve cultural traditions in Tao's account. What unites all of these contributions is a particular kind of investment on the part of the researcher on what sustainability might mean for their participants/co-researchers/students. There is personal interest underlying all of these accounts, which highlights the central importance of accounting for researcher positionality in this kind of research. A sustainable future is everyone's future, and researchers are as invested in that as any other citizen. Making the researcher's position clear – as these authors do – is an important foundation for establishing a broader discourse on this complex subject.

Gibson's adoption of the eco-musicological perspective of the *sustain-maintain* or *sustain-change* model of sustainability provides a helpful theoretical framework from which to

develop discourse around music making and sustainable futures. Adopting such a framework more generally might help to locate music-making practices in relation to sustainable futures on a continuum, from project sustainability at one end through to practices which more explicitly contribute to ecological and environmental sustainability agendas and sustain life on earth in the broadest sense on the other. This is not to diminish the value or importance of project sustainability – changing the world often means changing ‘the world within my reach’ ([Erelli 2006](#), n.pag) – but rather to locate it within this broader context of eco-centric thinking.

In a similar fashion, many of the authors identify dialogic processes as lying at the heart of work which addresses issues of sustainability, whether the Freirean enquiry celebrated by the Colombian writers, the collaborative compositional processes which Evison, Graves and Patiño et al. outline or the reflective dialogic practices of the teachers in Rivas and Cavett’s account. Dialogue appears to be an important epistemological framework for developing knowledge in this context, and this has clear implications for practice. Being part of a community – of practice, of research, of culture, of geography – provides an important site where all involved can articulate individual truths in the pursuit of a collective understanding, and build up forms of knowledge which operate diffractively, developing insights through the dialogue which emerges from engaging with perspectives different from one’s own. Patiño et al. express this dialogic process as inherently political, an act of resistance towards capitalist ideology, offering a promising insight into how music making might provide alternative spaces – interstices with the capitalist fabric of everyday life ([Camlin 2023](#): 144–45) – where alternative social realities can be imagined and enjoined.

While Gibson’s account invites us to think of music making and sustainable futures in the broadest terms, many of the practices outlined in this collection highlight the environmental maxim to ‘think global, act local’. For the most part, the musical and research activities outlined are local solutions to local problems. A number of accounts in this first edition – Patiño et al.,

Graves and Tao in particular – illustrate some of the methodological approaches which can be taken to amplify the marginalized voices from within those local communities, a vital step not only in articulating those marginalized perspectives but also in beginning to draw out commonalities of experience from such global diversity.

The underpinning hope in all of this is that in the context of a more sustainable future, community music activities represent part of a social solution to a global environmental problem which is also social in its foundation, namely the inequality which has arisen over time through the establishment of social hierarchies of dominance which ultimately extend beyond the human domain into non-human and more-than-human realms ([Bookchin 2023](#); [Camlin 2025](#)). For at least some of the authors in this collection, the solidarity which is fostered through music making extends beyond – and through – the immediate co-participants into a deepening ecological sensibility towards the natural world and the earth system itself.

There are no doubt complications and complexities surrounding an approach to understanding the relationship between music making and sustainable futures. Community music activities do not appear to routinely quantify their carbon footprint, so assessing the extent to which such practices have a negative impact on carbon budgets is largely not known, and as Patiño et al. note, rarely a straightforward process. Future research might usefully focus on deepening such an understanding, at least in comparison to other similar social activities. Also, as one of the musicians in Gibson's study highlights, there can often be a trade-off between social impact and environmental impact. Is social impact justifiable even if it comes at an environmental cost, especially if social solutions also foster environmental awareness? How do practitioners and researchers know when – and whether – what they are implementing is genuinely addressing concerns of sustainability and when it may be more tokenistic? Clearly, some practices will be more sustainable than others – local activities which involve minimal travel for participants will have a lower environmental impact than projects which involve

international air travel for large numbers of people, for example. How can valuable intercultural exchanges like the Ethno Gatherings, which Gibson documents, continue – or be re-imagined – in more sustainable forms? How might online and offline communities of musical practice combine to foster similar opportunities with a much reduced environmental impact, for example?

Another important feature of this first edition of the Special Issue is the degree to which marginalized voices are present within research agendas of sustainability. Given the increasing number of people displaced by climate change, for example – and other disruptions to a settled life which armed conflict, civil unrest and epidemics of infectious diseases bring – how might the voices of those lived experiences be amplified in academic community music discourse in order to deepen an understanding of the experience of displacement? In a similar vein, while the importance of *place* is perhaps a more familiar theme within community music discourse, the *materiality* of place – as illustrated particularly by Graves’s account – is more neglected. How are the materials of music making implicated in the development both of music and of community, especially in the context of ecological precarity, where local environmental relationships become key to an understanding of sustainability? We hope to address some of these questions and more in the second edition of this Special Issue, where editorial dialogue will also take a more prominent role in our discussions.

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