

REVIEW OF

SUSTAINABLE FUTURES FOR MUSIC CULTURES: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

BY HUIB SCHIPPERS AND CATHERINE GRANT, EDS. [2016, NEW YORK, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS], ISBN 9780190259075 (HARDCOVER)

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The sustainability of music and other intangible expressions of culture have been an important issue for scholars, governments, and the public in recent years. However, there is still a lack of systematic research and convincing results, especially focusing on the question what exactly affects sustainability across music cultures.

In 2016, the appearance of the book *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: An Ecological Perspective* edited by Huib Schippers and Catherine Grant is very impressive in this field. According to Anthony Seeger, the author of the book's foreword, this is a pioneering volume, it makes important and sophisticated contributions to contemporary thinking about how certain traditions thrive and others disappear.¹ It not only provides a series of distinctive cases for the discussion of this topic, but also provides a feasible and powerful theoretical framework.

It is worth mentioning that this book is not a simple collection of papers, but a compilation of the results of a relatively large and long-term research project, which was called *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: Towards an Ecology of Musical Diversity* generously funded by the Australian Research Council. Therefore, this may be the reason why some scholars considered in this book worked together tightly from beginning to end, and each chapter is structurally and thematically closely connected to the other despite analyzing wildly disparate traditions.² One editor of this book, Huib Schippers, is also the leader of the project, he designed it in order to examine how musical traditions are sustained in various cultures.

For this purpose, the project team selected nine highly diverse musical traditions that are rooted in completely different cultural contexts, in more than nine countries, and that makes up nine chapters of this book, preceded by two introductory chapters and followed by a concluding chapter. The authors of these chapters are besides the editors James Burns, Linda Barwick and Myfany Turpin, Peter Dunbar-Hall, John Drummond, Philip Hayward and Sueo Kuwahara, Patricia Shehan Campbell and Leticia Soto Flores, Esbjörn Wettermark and Håkan Lundström. To enhance comparability, the nine cases contain both endangered music traditions and some genres that are quite successfully used or have been relatively well-preserved so far. This approach shows the various degrees of vitality among different music genres. The traditions dealt with are: the Ghanaian Ewe Dancing-Drumming, Hindustani music, *Yawulyu/Awelye*: Central Australian Women's Songs, Balinese Gamelan, Western opera, *Amami Shimi Uta* from Japan's Amami Islands, the Korean Percussion Tradition *SamulNori*, the Mexican Mariachi music, and the Vietnamese *Ca Trù*.

As Anthony Seeger said, probably the most innovative feature of this book is the structure of the original research project.³ The way and logic of the book's writing is also based on this framework, which consists mainly of five domains of music for the systematic examination of the tradition's vitality, more precisely the sustainability. The five domains are: systems of learning, musicians and communities, contexts and constructs, regulations and infrastructure, and media and music industries. This also represents the so-called "ecosystem" of every musical culture. The nine in-depth case studies were

¹ Anthony Seeger, Foreword, edited by Huib Schippers and Catherine Grant, *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: An Ecological Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p.vii.

² Thurston, Timothy 2017., Review of *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: An Ecological Perspective* by Huib Schippers and Catherine Grant. *Asian Ethnology*, 76 (2) (2017): 416-417.

³ Anthony Seeger, Foreword, edited by Huib Schippers and Catherine Grant, *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: An Ecological Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p.vii.

conducted within the same framework, each one trying to inform about different situations of these five domains and summarizing each investigative report, and finally analyzing the relationship between the sustainability of the respective musical genre and these five domains. Besides, each chapter ends with a conclusion describing past and present sustainability efforts and assesses the tradition's future prospects.

The book is praised as breathing new life into the previously discredited realm of comparative musicology, from an emphatically non-Eurocentric perspective⁴ because it operates all different cases with a joint framework of research methods. I think, this is rather spiraling upward of the comparative discipline based on the accumulation of a large number of cases study, instead of a simple return to the comparative musicology era at the beginning of the 20th century.

There's no doubt about that, the structure, the method and the cases of the whole book are very illuminating. However, a very few questions remain. For example, how can sustainability of musical genres be quantified? To be specific, how to quantify each parameter? For instance, some cases show, greater government support and lower requirements for infrastructure may contribute to improve the sustainability of the genres. But how to define and quantify the “more and less”? Is there a joint standard for each parameter/domain? These could become crucial questions. Seen from this perspective, I prefer to consider the approach applied in this book as an analytical framework rather than a measurement system.

Another question is that there are quite big differences in the understanding and the practical situation of the five domains detailed above if looked at the different cases. For example, the Australian *Yawulyu* is considered more sustainable, because the requirement of facilities is minimal. But archives from other cases also belong to this domain of “regulations and infrastructure”. In contrast to the case above, the number of requirements not needed is proportional to the degree of sustainability. In result, I suggest that there is still a need to emphasize the particularities of each case. More attention should be paid to the dynamic state of each music genre and the continuous change in development rather than treating all these cases as rather static items being investigated.

Despite these open questions, I would like to recommend this book to Chinese and other Asian readers and scholars for intense discussion. On the one hand, it is conducive to similar cases and research in China since it can provide ideas and a specific framework for analysis and understanding sustainability of traditional music cultures in China. On the other hand, the large amount of cases investigated by Chinese scholars can also continue to explore whether this theoretical framework is applicable to a wider and more diversified cultural context. This may help go further to complement and improve the framework by referring to the particularity of cases in the China.

References

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⁴ Smithsonian Bookshop Advertisement. 2016. Accesible via <https://folkways.si.edu/schippers-grant/sustainable-futures-for-music-cultures>. Last accessed 15 December 2018.