An Introduction to Sustainability and Ethnomusicology in the Australasian context

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In the first decade of the twenty-first century, sustainability has emerged as a topic of substantial importance in music research, expressed differently depending on scholarly and musical contexts, but generally positioned in relation to broader environmental, social, economic and cultural issues. Scholarly interest in the relationships between music and nature has a long history, reaching back into the nineteenth century, but for reasons that perhaps reflect current global discourses of diversity and ecology, sustainability resonates widely and loudly in contemporary culture. It is a word that is understood across divergent audiences, and it evokes our collective human interest in tropes of change, continuity and survival. In music research, this has been reflected across disciplines and continents, from the consolidation of an Ecocriticism Study Group in the American Musicological Society in 2007, to the 2009 special issue of the world of music dedicated to sustainability, and the adoption of ‘Sounding Ecologies’ as a theme for the 2010 conference of the Society for Ethnomusicology. Meanwhile, in Australia, the Australian Research Council provided unprecedented support for research into music and sustainability though the Linkage project Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: Towards an Ecology of Music Diversity in 2009. A glance at available research literature reveals ever-expanding resources for music, sustainability and the environment, from Aaron S. Allen’s contributions to the definition of ecomusicology as a field of study (2012) through to Mark Pedelty’s research on rock, folk and the environment (2012). However, where the ecomusicological gaze is focussed on the sustainability of music cultures, it is also imperative to consider the sustainability of the musicians who produce this culture (Titon 2009, 6).

It should come as no surprise that this ecomusicological turn resonates with the work of ethnomusicologists, many of whom conduct fieldwork in cultural contexts where direct and powerful links exist between music, culture and the environment, and where cultural practices may be facing sustainability pressures because of cultural change. This is especially the case for many Indigenous music cultures in Oceania and the wider Asia-Pacific, where ongoing tension exists between traditional practices and contemporary social, cultural and economic forces, however these may be categorised. Thus, the regional discourse for sustainability in ethnomusicology is not only concerned with matters of nature and the environment, but moreover with the very survival, continuity and adaptation of culture. Such concerns are repeated at a global level, where they are often framed in terms of protection and preservation:
Everywhere in the World, in varying degrees, traditional cultures find themselves in danger as the conditions under which they thrived are swept away by modernity and the effects of globalisation. These cultures … gradually lose their relevance in their original context and end up by slowly fading out of existence. Industrialisation, rural exodus, economic or political migrations, rampant urbanisation … All these factors contribute to the deconstruction of traditional cultures with such a force that it will require at least an equal amount of energy to halt the phenomenon (Defrance 2008, 39).

Thus, the appraisal of the contemporary global situation of ‘traditional’ cultures can serve as a provocative and stimulating starting-point for considering the sustainability of musical expressions.

The critical state of many elements of cultural heritage has been recognised internationally (e.g., UNESCO 2003), and it is helpful to consider the issue of music sustainability in relation to this wider context. In concert with the preoccupations of early twentieth century comparative musicology, many contemporary ethnomusicologists have expressed concern about the ‘disappearing world’ (Howard 2006, 173) of which music is a part, the risk of homogenisation of music at an international level (Letts 2006), the challenges faced by small, local music cultures ‘belonging to the weak end of power distribution’ (Nettl 2005, 168), and the impact of cultural hegemony on such cultures and the music genres that make them up (Mundy 2001). More broadly, international recognition has grown of the complex array of issues affecting ‘traditional’ cultural expressions, for example with regard to copyright, intellectual property, artists’ rights, and fair trade (e.g., World Intellectual Property Organisation 2009).

Arguably though, a sense of crisis alone does not do justice to the flip side of the cultural coin. Even if modernity is ‘sweeping away’ cultures and leaving them to ‘fade out of existence’ (as Defrance, above, suggests), there are often enormous socioeconomic benefits accompanying advancements in information and communications technology, industry, health, transportation, urban services, and so on. This fact has implications for those working with communities on matters of cultural sustainability, for example when communities decide to adopt new cultural practices and new ways of life based on the opportunities offered by new developments.

The seven articles in this special issue reflect these concerns, and present innovative responses to sustainability pressures that move a way from a deficit discourse of cultural loss towards proactive attempts at cultural maintenance and renewal, often involving the application of new technologies. They stem from a two-day symposium on ethnomusicology and sustainability held at the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, in March 2011, which prompted ongoing discussion of the place of sustainability in ethnomusicology in our region. These discussions coalesced into the two themes that underpin and provide coherence to the articles presented here: the role of applied research in Australasian ethnomusicology, and the conceptualisation of sustainability in Indigenous music research contexts.

A common feature of the articles in this special issue is that they all present approaches to research in which applied community engagement and real-world outcomes from academic research are pursued. This undercurrent of community engagement is, arguably, a defining feature of ethnomusicology in Australia and New Zealand (Corn 2009, 22). As Dan Bendrups...
has observed, some of the most enduring ethnomusicological studies of Indigenous music in our region have eventuated from the researchers’ direct and often deeply personal engagement their research collaborators “…built on relationships of trust and reciprocity in which the agency and authority of Indigenous musicians and culture bearers is paramount” (2012: 9).

Broadly speaking, applied ethnomusicology is defined as being ‘guided by principles of social responsibility, which extends the usual academic goal of broadening and deepening knowledge and understanding toward solving concrete problems and toward working both inside and beyond typical academic contexts’ (Usner 2007). Emerging approaches in applied ethnomusicology, including new perspectives on how ethnomusicological research might influence cultural change (e.g. Harrison et al. 2010), are of direct relevance to the discourse of sustainability.

Ethnomusicologists drawing on applied frameworks have a range of options when assisting communities with matters of musical vitality and viability. Potential roles for the researcher in these contexts include documenting genre(s) at risk; helping build community capacity for initiatives that support cultural or specifically musical sustainability; generating community leadership for activities to strengthen cultural practices; creating learning and teaching resources, and otherwise supporting education and transmission processes (see Tan 2008, 71-72); alerting the community to the possibilities for cultural revitalisation; engaging in public or government advocacy and lobbying; raising public or scholarly awareness of the local situation; and helping implement revitalisation strategies. These are only a few of the many possibilities. Most if not all of these have been put into practice by ethnomusicologists in one way or other, in a range of community-based contexts, and many of them are reflected in the contributions made to this special issue.

Ethnomusicologists working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other Indigenous communities in the Asia-Pacific region are acutely aware of the challenges faced by these communities to sustain their music traditions. As Marett writes, it is predicted that 98% of song traditions in Australia have been lost since colonisation (Marett 2010) and ethnomusicologists continue to work closely with communities to sustain and document traditions that remain. Finding ways to continue the teaching and learning of songs within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is discussed by many researchers as an increasingly difficult task for Indigenous Australian communities. The reasons for this include the realities of losing senior members of communities and with them the loss of song cultures, a lack of interest from younger generations, and the need for individuals to move away from communities for education, health, employment opportunities and family responsibilities (e.g., Campbell 2012; Barwick et al. this volume; Mackinlay 2009; Magowan 2007).

Technology plays an important role in assisting Indigenous communities throughout the region to sustain their music traditions. As the articles in this volume reveal, Indigenous performers and culture bearers are increasingly active in recording their own music, while ethnomusicologists also use technology to document songs in CDs, DVDs and other

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1 The term ‘Aboriginal’ refers to Indigenous Australians whose culture is tied to country on mainland Australia, while ‘Torres Strait’ describes those Indigenous Australians whose country are the islands in the Torres Strait. In this introduction we use the term ‘Indigenous Australians’ to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
multimedia (Neuenfeldt 2007). Audio and visual recording of performances within communities is also a way for Indigenous people to document their social histories and ‘create counter-narratives to colonisation through the performance of song as story and survival’ (Mackinlay 2010, 106). Recordings by ethnomusicologists are in fact becoming part of the sharing knowledge between generations of performers and as teaching and learning resources in schools (see Barwick et al. in this volume). The repatriation of sound recordings made by previous generations of ethnomusicologists has also been another way for ethnomusicologists to assist communities in preserving and sometimes reviving traditions (see Gillespie, and Campbell in this volume). Dialogue between Indigenous communities and researchers about the role of technology is taking place because of ‘the ever-increasing use of IT to access, create and collate tangible and intangible cultural information and heritage [and] the torrent of new media and digitisation’ (AIATSIS 2010). As Magowan notes, ongoing discussions with Indigenous communities about the use of technology is needed (2005, 71).

Close and continuing relationships between non-Indigenous ethnomusicologists and Indigenous people are central in assisting Indigenous communities in sustaining their traditions and this is a thread that runs strongly through this volume, and in the ethnomusicological literature more generally (e.g., Hayward 2005; Barney 2012). This is echoed by Indigenous scholars in Australia who call for non-Indigenous researchers to enter into meaningful dialogues with Indigenous people to bring about a reconciled Australia. For example, Huggins argues that ‘strong collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous [people]… is to be encouraged and supported wherever possible’ (2008, iv) while Nakata emphasises the need to develop and nurture working collaborations, ‘relationships and dialogue at the level of scholarly knowledge production’ (2004, 4).

Research collaboration takes place as a result of diverse interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, not only because of ethnomusicologists’ interest in Indigenous music making, but also through musical collaborations, friendships and family connections. Projects that are driven and/or initiated by Indigenous communities are also increasingly acknowledged as key to meeting community needs. Examples of close research partnerships are reflected in ethnomusicological research project grants (e.g., Corn et al., 2004; Marett et al., 2005) and co-authored presentations and articles (e.g., Neuenfeldt and Kepa 2011, Corn and Gumbula 2002; Barney and Solomon 2010; Marett et al. 2006; Martin and Trelown 2010; Campbell and Strong Women’s Group 2011).

Certainly there is still much work to be done to assist Indigenous communities in sustaining their music traditions and improve relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia and the region. To this end, the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia has been playing an important part in promoting Indigenous researchers (see Corn this volume). Linked with this is the lack of Indigenous students studying music at tertiary level and the limited number of Indigenous academics who are involved with supporting Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Asmar and Page 2008). Yet the research of ethnomusicologists working closely with Indigenous people is a way to ‘unstick’ Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations and work towards social justice for Indigenous people in Australia and the region.

These observations point to a close correlation between the pursuit of music sustainability and culturally engaged research, whether defined as applied ethnomusicology, culturally engaged research facilitation (Hayward 2005), or simply understood as the pragmatic reality of the requirements for doing good work in our field in our region (Corn 2009). As the articles in
this volume reveal, applied research practices present particular challenges, but also opportunities to achieve real change, and to contribute to professional as well as personal growth. For Treloyn and Emberly, the challenges of working with formal archival collections are framed in relation to the benefits that obtain from digitising and widely disseminating recorded materials back to their communities of origin, including very remote communities. Meanwhile, Gillespie’s initiatives at sound recording repatriation are framed in relation to an entirely different socioeconomic force: the mining industry. Where Barwick, Laughren and Turpin make a specific foray into the sustainability of a particularly marginalised musical practice, women’s Yawulyu/Awelye songs from Central Australia, Brunt and Johnson discuss the implications of an online platform for expanding access to Javanese gamelan in tertiary music education, and examine the sustainability of this pedagogical practice.

Genevieve Campbell’s article on sustaining Tiwi song draws on her own experiences of ethnographic immersion in this community over more than four years, and documents the community’s response to the use of ethnographic recordings as a tool for sustaining the performance of Kulama songs. Contrastingly, Wilson’s article on the music of the PNG band Paramana Strangers turns the ethnographic gaze towards the role of commercial recordings in sustaining local music. The final article in this volume, contributed by Aaron Corn, introduces the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia, and explains the manner in which this project is contributing to cultural sustainability for Aboriginal communities across Australia.