UNESCO’s 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage represents the first concerted international effort to minimise the widespread threat to the world’s languages, musical traditions, dance and theatre forms, traditional environmental and medical knowledge, and other intangible manifestations of culture. The threat is seen to be primarily a result of deep and rapid sociocultural transformations of recent decades brought about by a host of phenomena, from environmental challenges to technological developments, from rural-to-urban migration to economic and political shifts.

These transformations have brought marked changes in the functions and contexts of many music genres, especially those of indigenous and minority peoples. Sometimes these changes boost musical vitality: a popular YouTube clip or single can quickly raise a genre’s national or international profile, which in turn may serve to regenerate local interest in it.

In other situations though, these changes compromise viability. For instance, entire sets of New Zealand Maori paddling and food-bearing songs disappeared when they became functionally redundant due to changing ways of life. The urban settlement of traditionally nomadic Mongolian herding communities resulted in the loss of ritual contexts and was thus a primary factor in the atrophy of the string fiddle culture ‘morin khurr’. Television, the internet and other mass media have displaced community gatherings in which music once was central, and young people especially are turning more and more to these newer forms of diversion; anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler partly attributes the precarious situation of the Tongan choreographed sung speech tradition lakalaka to the encroachment of European and Asian music and cultures on Tongan youth culture. Other examples abound.

According to ethnomusicologist Keith Howard, these are grounds for action. He believes that “while music will change over time . . . , it’s important to find strategies to . . . give [communities] the power to promote, preserve, and maintain their musical heritage, allowing that heritage to develop but to maintain their sense of identity and belonging” (interview with Huib Schippers, Nov 2008). Indeed, the costs of losing musical heritage may be high in terms of concomitant loss of
individual and collective identity, systems of knowledge, connection with ancestry and heritage, social cohesion, cultural or ethnic pride, and loss of other forms of intangible heritage in which music is integral (such as dance or theatre forms). In this way, consequences of the threatened viability of small music genres extend well beyond the individual and community levels.

This commentary first looks at approaches developing in response to this threat to local musics and global musical diversity, beyond those directly related to the UNESCO convention. It then suggests how efforts from other fields, particularly language-related disciplines such as linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, might play a role in understanding possible ways forward for threatened music genres.

**A New Applied Research Focus**

Much as early anthropological linguistics was devoted to documenting dying languages, early ethnomusicological (or ‘music folklore’) research centered on documenting musical traditions seen as doomed to extinction – an approach scholars now refer to as *salvage ethnomusicology*. Current approaches to musics in decline are more pragmatic, acknowledging the natural emergence, change and decay of musical traditions. Yet they also embody an acute awareness of many forceful global processes currently acting upon small music genres.

Increasingly, researchers and activists are addressing the complex challenges of sustaining and revitalising small music genres, spurred by the 2003 UNESCO Convention and other calls-to-arms, such as the 2006 International Music Council report *The Protection and Promotion of Musical Diversity*.

The issues are multifaceted. How can a musical tradition’s natural processes of change be reconciled with efforts to “safeguard” it? What roles should advocates, researchers or fieldworkers play in maintaining the vitality of a single music genre, or global music diversity at large? Who should have the final say on what to safeguard, and how, particularly when communities harbour many voices? How can the commercial goals of the mass media and music industry be balanced with efforts to maintain the vitality of small music genres?

Action-oriented perspectives like those found in anthropology and sociolinguistics, where the applied agenda is an explicit part of the discourse and approach, are now emerging in ethnomusicology too. Increasingly, researchers of music in and of the cultures of the world are recognising the possibility – and sometimes the obligation – to act as agents of change in the communities they study. Applied ethnomusicology is still in its nascent stages, and is striving to determine what constitutes progressive, respectful enquiry into what is now an issue of some urgency. To this end, sustainability was a focus topic of the Applied Ethnomusicology Study Group.
meeting of the International Council for Traditional Music in Hanoi in July 2010; it was also the theme of a 2009 edition of the leading journal World of Music.

The five-year research project Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: Towards an Ecology of Musical Diversity, led by Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre (see http://musecology.griffith.edu.au/) is representative of the applied ethnomusicological approach. Funded by the Australia Research Council 2009-2013, the project is designed to build a solid base of knowledge and resources to help communities and other stakeholders (such as cultural organisations, policy-makers and researchers) negotiate more successful practices relating to music sustainability. The charitable foundation Musical Futures has been established as part of the project, with the aim to provide seed funding to enable communities to act upon the project’s research outcomes.

**Learning from Other Disciplines**

To some degree at least, mechanisms emanating from the 2003 UNESCO Convention have already begun to help specific endangered musical traditions. UNESCO’s “List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding” often brings genres raised visibility, government support, and increased community pride in music. In some cases this has had a positive effect on musical vitality, such as in the endangered north Vietnamese chamber music genre ca trù; community engagement has grown significantly in the last 5 years or so, not least due to the extensive preparations for nomination of ca trù to UNESCO’s List. On the other hand, for ca trù as for many other genres, external pressures continue to mount, and it remains to be seen whether UNESCO recognition or various practical initiatives emanating from it (like festivals, national conferences, and youth music classes) can outweigh the forces of the changing sociocultural environment.

The global processes acting on small music genres are beyond researchers’ or communities’ power to stop, even should they wish to do so. Efforts to mediate therefore require a keen appreciation of the ecosystems in which musics operate – of the multifaceted web of economic, political, ideological, social, environmental, and other musical and non-musical factors at play in musical viability. It seems wise to move beyond protecting music genres in isolation and to refocus our attention on their ecologies; that is, to tackle the problem at the level of the forest, not the trees.

In this regard, other disciplines may prove informative for ethnomusicologists. Since the early 1990s, when the dire predicament of many languages was recognised (a number of linguists believe 50% of the world’s 6,000-odd languages are at risk of disappearing this century), the study of endangered languages and their ecologies has given considerable impulse to the development of maintenance and revitalisation initiatives.
Music and language are both intangible manifestations and expressions of culture, and both are impacted by similar forces within the global and local environment. For this reason, applied ethnomusicology might be well positioned to draw on related insights from the field of language maintenance to determine the most effective ways forward for endangered music genres. Similarly, linguistic and cultural anthropologists can make an enormous contribution to the development of efforts to sustain musical heritage by illuminating the wider picture of how music (like language) contributes to social identity, interrelates with expressions of cultural beliefs, ideologies and behaviours, and functions in relationship to wider representations of social worlds.

We are just beginning to comprehend the effect of rapid global change on the small music genres of the world. The wide-scale threat to these genres may hold wider repercussions for cultural identity, strength, and diversity. Music, like language, is one of the key links that ties us to one another – both within and across communities – as well as to the past. The challenge for researchers is to bring clarity and understanding to the forces underlying this threat so that communities, in collaboration with other stakeholders, can establish sustainable futures for their music.

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