

REVIEW: BRITISH FORUM FOR ETHNOMUSICOLOGY (BFE) ANNUAL CONFERENCE, 8-11 APRIL 2021

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Abstract

This is a review of an event. The event was the ‘British Forum for Ethnomusicology (BFE) Annual Conference, 8-11 April 2021’, which was held online due to actual circumstances of limited mobility. Both writers attended and shaped this review through their personal thoughts based on accessible information.

Keywords

Review, Event analysis, British Forum for Ethnomusicology, Online discussions

Amid a global pandemic and heightened urgency to mitigate the effects of climate crises, the theme of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology (BFE) Annual Conference, “Music, Culture, and Nature,” was very fitting. Hosted by the School of Music and Performing Arts at Bath Spa University, the conference was held from 8 to 11 April 2021. This was a conference long in the making, as the preparation had started in 2019 and the conference was planned to be held in 2020, until the Covid-19 pandemic hit. Great appreciation must be given to the organizing committee, as the conference, despite being held completely virtually, was highly engaging and easy to navigate.

At the Welcome Session, Amanda Bayley contended that music plays a pivotal role in helping us think about nature and cultural heritage. Indeed, this is a point that was clearly demonstrated by the presenters. Amongst the papers in the first day, Jun Feng showed how the vanishing practice of the paiziluo shawm and percussion bands highlights the problems of the rural-urban integration policy in Hubei province, China, which has pushed migration to the cities and urbanised the rural landscape. As a result, the original environment for the folk rituals in which the bands play a significant part is lost. Similarly, Salvador Hernandez argued that “the natural environment is an active force that can affect the sustainability of musical traditions.” This is shown clearly in the case of Durango, Mexico, where the practice of the *xuravét* circle dance and music (as a part of the agricultural ritual *El Costumbre*) has been declining due to the degrading condition of the natural environment of San Pedro Xicoras. The condition is not only causing diminishing agricultural harvest, but has also pushed migration to the cities, which means now there are only two or three people left in the village who are authorised to execute the ritual.

On the second half of the first day, the panel of the Society for Ethnomusicology provided some possible answers to a question we must all ask ourselves: “how do ethnomusicologists respond to climate crises?” Drawing from their works in Mongolia, Brazil, Haiti, and the United States,

the panellists (Jennifer Post, Michael Silvers, Rebecca Dirksen, Jeff Todd Titon) shared their experience as ethnomusicologists in assisting communities to sustain their cultural, including musical, traditions. From the discussion, it is clear that transmission of local ecological knowledge is key to creating a sustainable natural environment and the musical cultures that are deeply embedded in it, and ethnomusicologists certainly can play a part in assisting the communities in doing so.

This point on the importance of local ecological knowledge was echoed on the second day of the conference by, among others, Sebastian Hachmeyer, who discussed the sustainability of musical bamboos and flute making in the Bolivian Andes. The shifting of role from flute makers to middlemen to harvest musical bamboos has led to overexploitation of the bamboos, because the middlemen, unlike the flute makers, are not equipped with the ecological knowledge to harvest bamboos with minimal disruption to the ecosystem.

Keynote speaker Angela Impey re-stressed the point through her sharing of the ethno-ornithology project, the aim of which is to garner and amplify valuable insights from environmental listening, especially of the sounds of birds which reflect ecological changes, events, and complexities. A trans-disciplinary project in collaboration with climate scientists, engineers, soundscape ecologists, ornithologists and local ‘citizen scientists’, songs, language and ritual actions of indigenous community used as insights would complement scientific data on and contribute to the mitigation actions for climate crises.

The second day of the conference was then closed by a beautiful concert to honour the memories of mbira master Chartwell Dutiro (1957-2019).

Day 3 started with a host of fascinating panels and papers that continued to deliberate, in different ways, on the conference theme of ‘Music, Culture, and Nature’. In the first panel, *Music and industrial/environmental heritage*, Felicity Greenland discussed the old Japanese folk song *mi yoen*, one among the 200 such songs, associated with Japanese whaling of the pre-modern period. It is interesting to note that these folk songs – which Greenland divided into celebration or the ceremonial songs, work songs, and others – also indicated the belief systems, attitudes, and practices associated with whales and whaling practice among the Japanese whaling community, which in turn contributed to a sense of community among them. This also indicates that in such traditional societies, human survival needs were closely linked to nature and its sustainability. Some songs, Greenland notes, reflected the belief that ‘only if the Right whales bear young will the right whales be always in the sea.’ Whales were viewed as gifts from gods to the community, and at times even god themselves. Hence, a close connection between nature, culture, and importance to sustenance was closely established.

On the other hand, global warming and climate change has become a significant concern today, putting forward the need to engage with environment and its sustainability. Klisala Harrison, in the same panel, explored the manner in which Greenlandic music is intertwined with the politics of extractivism and climate change at the time of arctic ice-melt resulting from climate change. Music has become a crucial tool for locals against extractivism and this is reflected in the lyrics of varied Greenlandic popular music forms of the recent past. In this manner, we can say that music provides voice of protest to the concerned and marginalised citizens through which they can raise important environmental (and political) concerns.

The relationship between sound, living beings, and the environment was also actively explored on the final day of the conference, particularly in the panel on Sound ecologies. Alex South, for instance, presented on the idea of zoomusicology. Taking from the scholarly work of Emily Doolittle and Bruno Gingras, South defines zoomusicology as the area that studies “the music-like sound communication among non-human animals” (2015: R819). In this presentation, South further explored the complexities reflected in the sounds and rhythm of humpback

whales. Therefore, not only human music-making, but non-human music and songs also extensively inform the music and nature ecology. The final presentation of this panel by Mukasa Wafula pointed towards the impact of climate change and socio-economic changes like urbanisation, education, religion, and new farming methods on the traditional Chiswa or termite harvesting among the Bukusu people in Kenya. This in turn influenced the music that accompanies this process. Such changes, Wafula notes, has led to a decline in social institutions among the Bakusu people and the songs of termite harvesting, which has consequently impacted the sound ecology in general. Such music was traditionally used to either ‘motivate, attract, or confuse’ the termites to leave their dugouts in order to catch them, particularly at the time of no rain. The playing of instruments in this process, Wafula noted, also attracted birds who could also eat the termite for their survival. Therefore, termite harvesting can be viewed as not only bringing together the community for their quest for survival, but it also presents the idea of sustainability and that different species, particularly humans and animals, are inter-dependent. This interconnectedness is extremely relevant in the present context.

This conference included panels and roundtables beyond the theme of the conference, which contributed to its dynamism. In a panel on ‘City sounds and spaces’ on Day 3, for instance, Snezhina Gulubova explored the changing nature of the Cuban music scene and its most prominent musical contexts, the streets of Havana, amidst the introduction of internet access, private property and increased travel to and from the Cuban island. Streets that were the home of Cuban music, of everyday music making where the economically-weaker afro-cuban children could learn music, has now become a more regulated music space and a space of ‘five-star hotels, exclusive shopping malls and Chanel’s seasonal catwalks.’

The third day also included Equality, Diversity and Inclusion workshop that touched upon the collaboration of BFE with the EDIMS (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in Music Studies). Shzr Ee Tan mentions in her video in the conference’s Whova App, “EDIMS is a cross organisational network which aims to promote, support and share the practice in relation to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in music higher education in the UK.” (EDIMS, 2021). Chairs Matthew Machin-Autenrieth and Alexander Cannon, further discuss a number of EDI initiatives that the BFE has undertaken in the past year. Some of them include internal and external conversations with EDIMS colleagues on how to combat racism in the discipline of ethnomusicology as well as building this discipline as diverse and inclusive. This detailed discussion was followed by the testimonials of academics and students in the field of Ethnomusicology who shared their personal experiences as a BIPOC. Min Y. Ong, Hadi Bastani, Dunya Habash, Cassandra Balbar, Laudan Nooshin, and Simran Singh raised some important questions concerning the idea of inclusion and equality in this workshop.

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