

Abstract for AMS Philadelphia 2009
75 Years of AMS: Why Now is the Time for Ecomusicology
Ecocriticism Study Group

Aaron S. Allen (University of North Carolina, Greensboro), chair
Suzannah Clark (Harvard University), respondent
Emily Doolittle (Cornish College), respondent
Helmi Järviluoma (University of Eastern Finland), respondent
Mitchell Morris (University of California, Los Angeles), keynote
Thomas Peattie (Boston University), respondent

The 75th anniversary of the AMS is an opportune time to reflect on the objectives, tasks, and social responsibilities of the musicological community. In this spirit, the Ecocriticism Study Group (ESG) will probe the significance and relevance of ecomusicology, i.e. the intellectual and practical connections between the studies of music, nature, and culture. The growing interest in music and ecology is hardly surprising, considering that environmental concerns are and have been a focus in public discourse, the sciences, and the humanities. While past ESG panels have emphasized pluralistic perspectives and approaches to ecomusicology, the format of this session will be somewhat different: a keynote lecture, preceded by an introduction and followed by a panel response. Thereafter will follow what promises to be a constructive and lively discussion aiming to clarify — but perhaps even further confounding — the sub-discipline of ecomusicology.

Mitchell Morris's keynote, "Ecologies of Mind, Economies of Desire," will explore the parallels between ecomusicology and gender/sexuality studies in music, two areas that have contributed to significant transformations in musicology over the last few decades. To address and contribute to the varying interpretations and disputes in these fields, Morris will outline their shared features, such as: 1) enquiry that balances aesthetic and epistemological concerns with ethical questions; 2) commitment to expanding the range of subject positions and situated bodies of knowledge that receive disciplinary endorsement; and 3) a willingness to recognize the contingencies and potential ephemerality of the life of mind and art.

Aaron Allen's introduction, "A Brief History of Ecomusicology," will contextualize both ecomusicology and Morris's paper. He will provide a brief historiographical sketch of various instances of ecomusicology, ranging from distant historical attempts to more recent creative and academic initiatives (including the ESG), and then outline some challenges facing ecomusicology. After Morris's keynote, four distinguished scholars will provide position statements and responses to the previous perspectives. Theorist Suzannah Clark's interest in ecocriticism pertains to how tonal theorists have used ideas of nature to construct tonality and explain the rudiments of music. Composer and biomusic researcher Emily Doolittle explores the relationship between bird and other animal songs and human music by drawing on tools from biology, philosophy, and anthropology as well as music. Ethnomusicologist Helmi Järviluoma is interested in gender/sexuality and popular music studies and is also a leading figure in acoustic ecology and soundscape studies. Musicologist Thomas Peattie's recent research focuses on Gustav Mahler's conception of nature from the perspective of fin-de-siècle urban culture. Together, the six scholars involved in this session represent many of the areas of musicological inquiry, both traditional — e.g., anthropology, composition, history, music theory, philosophy — and cutting edge: biology, cultural studies, ecology, environmental studies, and gender/sexuality studies.

The goals of this session are: to offer perspectives on the contemporary state of ecomusicology and demonstrate its timeliness and possibilities, to provide a framework for further interrogating the methods and goals of music scholarship, and to imagine future possibilities for research in a flourishing sub-discipline that has taken root within the history of the AMS.