People and Place Based Notation: Liner Notes for 2+1=3

Ben Finley

Villa Frederick-James. Photo by Ben Finley.

As a concerned human-composer/improviser considering the stakes of chronic environmental degradation, I am compelled to ask:

How do we practice music in ways that recognize and activate its ecological significance?

And by extension:

What are the roles of musicians and artistic institutions in the climate crisis?

In August 2019, I participated in the two-week long Summer Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation in the Gaspésie, Québec. Here, we were prompted to “explore how improvisation (as both an artistic and a social practice) can encourage us to see (and hear) the world anew” (*Summer Institute Course Kit 2019*). To get to know my fellow participants and to connect with this breath-giving place, I composed six site-specified trios titled 2+1=3 (two people + a particular location). An improvisatory notation unfolded from vibrant networks of humans, bird life, geology, history, marine life, the skies and lookout points that surrounded this paradise

eroding. Co-creating $2+1=3$ with human duets and biophonous/geophonous landforms encouraged me to think that compositional-improvisational processes might enliven an ecologically significant relational care between creatures, landscapes, and communities. I hope these liner notes contribute to our understanding and activation of music's cultural-environmental value.

In the first week of the Summer Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation, musicians and sound-makers from a wide range of ages/backgrounds and ways of being/perspectives met on a beach in Coin-du-Banc, Québec, to improvise together. We introduced ourselves, sitting on circularized driftwood. When it came to Ajay Heble, the director and co-founder of the Summer Institute, he introduced a poignant quote from cultural theorist Ien Ang that (retrospectively) ruddered my compositional-improvisational investigations for the next two weeks: "One of the most urgent predicaments of our time can be described in deceptively simple terms: how are we to live together in this century?" (Ang 193). Transience fully bloomed—death, deaths, and dying together—is also a part of this cohabitation challenge.

Refocusing my opening inquiries, I ask: how might composing improvisatory structures—with people and places—contribute to the urgent project of cohabitation exacerbated by the climate crisis?

Back to camp: stepping into the sparkling joy and rigor of Marianne Trudel's improvisation facilitation, the cohort experimented in different ensemble groupings and habitats. We worked with Robin Servant, Michael Waterman, and the beach to find and make electroacoustic musical instruments. Indoored with rain, Kathy Kennedy led some of Pauline Oliveros's Deep Listening practices. We made campfires, swam, hiked, cooked together, and stargazed—all wondrous improvisations! There were conflicts, disagreements and intricate negotiations. There was transformation/sadness/rejuvenation/frustration and living sound-music. The week concluded with a public concert in a narrow fisherfolk-built church; our instruments sang in transitory community, steps from our initial meeting place. While we explored the artistic craft of improvisation, something else was developing. New perspectives/lived experiences on Ang's call—*confronting the complexity of living together*—were being improvised.

In the second week, some participants departed, and some arrived. This time, the focus was to reflect critically on arts-based improvisatory practices in a more research-oriented fashion. The week culminated in a three-hour multimedia event open to the residents of Percé in the historic Villa Frederick-James—a structure threatened in the short-term by erosion, our host Julie told me. The villa became our risky improvising partner; it sits just a few fast-disappearing meters from a vast North Atlantic cliff peninsula, with the inevitable gravity of climate change working a way. The building was originally the summer home and final resting place of the American painter Frederick James. Now, its historically radiant, time-worn foundations are under the auspices of Université Laval where they can host guests like our throng/swarm/sleuth/band/zeal(?) of curious improvisers.

For over ten thousand years, the Mi'kmaq have been calling this place Sigsôg ("steep rocks" or "crag") and Pelseg ("fishing place") ("Percé (ville)"). The villa faces west, towards France. In 1534, Jacques Cartier claimed the land of Gaspé in the name of King Francis I and captured two Haudenosaunee people to use them as guides to explore the St. Lawrence River and establish camps ("Arrival"). Before the current economic impacts of tourism, fishing was almost the exclusive source of livelihood. Now the town is a hub of artistic activity with many festivals, residencies, and concert series. Today, the Mi'kmaq—a nation in the Wabanaki Confederacy—

are on the forefront of many environmental issues including ecosystem health and clean water rights (Toensing).

The “big rock” of Percé is visible to the villa’s periphery. It’s the surest image of any postcard in Percé. This rock is a designated UNESCO Global Geopark wonder (Vigneault). Despite this rock weighing around five million tonnes, our host from week one, Alain, tried to convince me—successfully, for some seconds—that the rock was a gift from the Danish (just like France’s gift of the Statue of Liberty). Percé rock baffles wonder. Its exposed strata spark geologic time travel. It harbours remarkable interspecies sounds/connections on and around its herbaceous meadow. It’s a magnificent concert hall. At low tide you can cross the sandbar and touch it. Life abounds through, in, and on this rock. It’s a graveyard and a sanctuary. One hundred and fifty fossil species rest under the choirs of Northern Gannets. It will be here for 1600 more decades with the current pace of erosion (Canadian Wildlife Service). The rock lays bare hundreds of millions of years of time capsules reflecting five distinct geologic periods: Cambrian (542-489 Ma), Ordovician (489-443 Ma), Silurian (443-418 Ma), Devonian (418-359 Ma) and Carboniferous (359-299 Ma) (“Geology of Percé”).

Percé rock! Photo by Ben Finley.

Here are the original program notes for 2+1=3:

Starting with some questions:

1. **Places:** *How are environments involved in the musical performance? How might we compose/improvise music in a way that takes into account space/place as another crucial performer? How might we compose with landforms?*

2. **People:** *What are some meaningful ways we can compose/improvise music that embraces the personal backgrounds and histories of the performers to deepen the music being made?*

I've composed duets for members of the Summer Institute based on getting to know them as people and interviewing them as a unit. I've sought out locations at the Villa Fredrick-James to make compositions for them directly inspired by the location in which they will be performed. The duet is joined by the landscape and becomes a trio!

Does this personal and environmentally attuned/inspired approach to composition/improvisation create a connection between place and people in a way that enriches participatory listening? Could composing improvisation structures with [people's histories] + [landscapes as performers] generate an ethics of care for each other and our lived environments?

Also, what is best left unscripted?

6 groups of trios (duo + environment)

1. Canon - Reza and Stacey
2. Danger - Adrian and Carey
3. Steps - Mia and Nicola
4. Percé et Oiseaux - Ben and Brent
5. Living room / Salon - Erin and Fili
6. What key? Comment ouvrir la clé - Leif and David

Questions qui ont inspiré la création de ces performances:

1- L'environnement : *Est-ce que l'environnement peut influencer une performance musicale ou une composition? Comment?*

2- Les gens : *Comment est-il possible de composer/d'improviser de la musique tout en incluant son identité ou celle des interprètes pour enrichir la musique qui est créée?*

J'ai décidé de composer des duos spécifiquement pour les participants de l'Institut d'été pour pouvoir connaître davantage leur histoire personnelle. Ensuite, j'ai choisi différents lieux autour ou dans la Villa Frederick James pour alimenter la création de mes différentes structures d'improvisation. Chaque création sera jouée dans le lieu qui l'a inspirée. En fin de compte, chaque duo deviendra un trio, puisque l'environnement aura un rôle aussi important que les participants dans l'interprétation de mes créations.

Est-ce que cette façon personnelle et environnementale de créer et/ou d'improviser peut amener les gens à avoir une connexion avec le lieu, et ainsi inciter l'écoute de l'autre? Est-ce que le fait de composer des structures d'improvisation basées sur l'histoire des improvisateurs ainsi que sur l'environnement qui les entoure peut créer une certaine empathie pour l'autre ainsi que pour notre milieu de vie?

These liner notes/musical-cultural-environmental value inquiries are indebted to the rich history of diverse Black American creative music practices that sound new spatial/vibrational/relational alternatives to systems of oppression—including the work of Alice Coltrane, Nicole Mitchell, Julius Eastman, Matana Roberts, Wadada Leo Smith, Sun Ra, Pamela Z, Horace Tapscott, and Nina Simone, just to name a few. Oftentimes, anthropocentric environmental activism is materially focused and silent to the systemic injustices of aggrieved human ecosystems. Anthony Braxton reminds us, “the context of a given narrative-focus is not separate from the community of values it takes place in. More and more, the challenge of a dynamic ‘planet-realignment’ will force the ‘world-group’ to build viewpoints based on a context of ‘constructs’ that have demonstrated clear evolution (form/change) equal to the theater of possibilities we now find ourselves in (from a composite perspective)” (Braxton, “Narrative”). What new vibrant and ethical social practices might emerge from music that engages with local and biospheric community-based learnings?

Composing these pieces was largely an excuse to get to know the participants and Percé. I trio-ed them up after reflecting on how they might complement or contrast each other. The fragmentary notation in $2+1=3$ is a grounding point from which to improvise your sound-being. With the help of my friend Fili, we interviewed each duo at the site of their improvising geophysical partner. The site-determined interview process provided crucial insights: what the places brought out in people and the inverse. I’ll say more about this through my scores and discussions with each specific trio. Some trios felt as if they wrote themselves. Like this one:

2+1=3 Canon, For Reza and Stacey. Composed by Ben Finley.

Reza and Stacey were the first people I met at the airport. By the time we took a 54 km taxi in the middle of the night to Pércé, I noticed they both shared an open courage in play and a fiery patient kindness. This spilled into their performance ethos. Fili and I showed them the performance-landform space, a vista outstretching from a barely noticeable buried weapon: a cannon. We asked them some starting questi—*click/smash/bam/ring!* They took off! Luckily, they had their instruments in hand (tar and gong), and a way to get to know each other instantly unfolded: play sprung to sound, ocean to earth. Their initial improvisation took on an emergent musical form. Here's what I first noted:

- 1) *Gather*
- 2) *Ocean*
- 3) *Release*

The cyclical silence-and-deafening response of the ocean created its own canon—a soundscape offering, a reflection. My “role” of “composer” in this “trio” mostly consisted of seeding the first intra-action¹ and then getting out of the way. I prompted, witnessed, listened. I left and delicately scored what I heard, trying not to lose the initial charge. I showed the score to Reza and Stacy. We continued the collaboration by clarifying timings, directionalities, and themes.

The final performance they gave was stunning! Something about biotic-abiotic notation makes it easy to rehear vivid details about the performance and the place. I remember how invisible the cannon seemed at first to us listener-participants. I can readily reimagine how Reza and Stacey introduced that under-the-surface war machine into awareness and how they reconstituted that energy into the ocean and back to us, entangling us in intra-action. I'm curious how Reza, Stacey, and the listener-participants recall those moments.

The score tried to let go of the need to recreate the first take. Though Reza and Stacey's first encounter was brilliant and raw, I also perceived some blockages. It takes time to work out, articulate and reciprocate boundaries. I tried to both respect these negotiations and co-create a space where they felt free to spontaneously make music. I acknowledge that this score, however open, is also full of bias and a particular vantage point. But, as they later told me, the notation elucidated nuances that Reza and Stacey didn't hear in the first improvisatory moment. They didn't recognize the same energy momentums or narratives that Fili and I could witness a few steps back.

After listening, working with landforms (not necessarily landscapes), unfolding structures together, and playing, our co-creative piece was blasted into life.

An Ecology/Environmentalism Distinction

Earlier in the week, in her workshop “Mapping the Ecology of Improvised Music Performance in Canada,” Ellen Waterman offered a crucial non-equivalency between environmentalism and ecology. What are the differences? In *Current Directions in Ecomusicology*, Waterman and animal behavioral ecologist W. Alice Boyle lay out some methodological and conceptual distinctions between these two terms in a chapter called “The Ecology of Musical Performance: Towards a Robust Methodology.” Waterman and Boyle define *environmentalism* as “a political and social movement—efforts of people to change and reduce our negative impact on other creatures, landscapes, and the Earth's biogeochemical processes,” and *ecology* as “the field of study that can help us to understand the behavior, distribution, and interactions among those

creatures, the structure of communities and landscapes, and the dynamics of living systems” (26). Unthinkingly conflating the two “erodes the core scientific meaning of the word ecology” (26).

If we consider the ecological significance of compositions-improvisations, Boyle and Waterman raise an acute question: “just how far can we stretch a metaphor drawn from perceptions of a scientific discipline into essentially artistic areas of inquiry?” (25). Ellen’s *Summer Institute* module had us consider a few adventurous theories that might illuminate composition-improvisation’s ecological significance: Donna Haraway’s ideas on “sympoiesis” (“Sympoiesis”), and Jane Bennett’s “vibrant matter” (“The Force of Things”). Both of these ecological theories posit that understanding our relationality with other “things” is part of the healing necessary to aid our troubled planet. *Sympoiesis* describes a dynamically relational and boundaryless system or simply, a “making-with.” It is derived from the Greek words for *collective* and *production* (Dempster). When applied to composerly or improvisatory consciousness, it might be a helpful term to describe and acknowledge all of the complex intra-relationships among performers, place, history, cultural contexts, embodied cognition, distributed cognition, etc. This kind of *making-with* is key to Haraway’s call for seeing and hearing the world anew: “Earthlings are never alone. . . Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company” (58). I take it many improviser-composers are interested in a similar project!

Musically, I wonder how an *ethics of co-creation* (Fischlin, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*) might interface with ecological concepts like sympoiesis. How might a making-with compositional-improvisational ethos support biotic and abiotic relationships?

Bennett’s ideas on “vibrant matter” are in an intriguing discourse with issues in environmental ethics surrounding means-to-an-end instrumentality. Bennett’s aim is to “enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us, [and to] generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies, [that] will enable wiser interventions into that ecology” (4). She shows how our shared materiality with non-human things calls forth our attention and our very being: “In a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself” (12-13). This “knotted world” might help us develop models of personhood that aren’t disposable, objectifiable or as vulnerable to exploitation. What do we have in common with the resources we exploit? What vital materiality do we share with humans, instruments, listener-participants, collaborators, and landscapes?

By combining ecological perspectives like vibrant matter and sympoiesis, we can better determine a sustainable flow of biotic and abiotic resources and generate resiliency and adaptation in a changing climate. Perhaps compositional/improvisational practices might give rise to cohabitational experiences that align interdisciplinary values of biospheric care. I hope more research will take place on the cultural-environmental value of music through an ecocritical lens, so that we as composers, improvisers, artistic facilitators, and listener-participants can meaningfully understand our roles in mitigating/adapting chronic environmental degradation (Daughtry). When considering the often-contradictory persona of the environmentalist, ecomusicologist Mark Pedelty reminds us how “[i]n some ways it is easier to be the critical outsider than the conflicted insider. . . Activism is about embracing conundrums and braving the slings and arrows of critics, including critics who are always at the ready to point out contradictions rather than examine serious problems” (206).

In $2+1=3$, I started with getting to know people, caring for their input and agency, while listening to the biotic and abiotic entanglements of places. However limited or flawed, a situated ethics of

care seems to emerge from this making-with. Does a need to care for each other sprout from hearing ourselves as deeply knotted with our surroundings? Improvisers, composers, and artistic facilitators might help us care for the biodiversity of our intertwined relationships—perhaps even becoming leaders in modeling sustainability principles (Titon “Music and Sustainability”), community engagement (Heble, *Classroom Action*), bio-inspired innovation (Benyus), and eco-literate pedagogy (Shevock). In an interview discussing her book *Autonomous Nature*, environmental historian Carolyn Merchant suggests that we need new (and I argue improvisatory) ways of living to confront the complexities of climate change:

2+1=3 Danger

To Carey + Adrian From Ben

Freely improvise with 3 elements

1 - Rock

- Explore a sonic texture that grounds/heals you
- Notice when your duo partner is in their texture but feel free to keep your own

2 - House

- Explore the words of the lullaby in your own way

Words and I, sing in my
Sun wave felt, lullaby
As the rocks, laugh and cry
Fall back home, by my side

3 - Danger

- Sonically explore your extremes of fear

2+1=3 Danger, To Carey + Adrian. Composed by Ben Finley.

I argue that twenty-first century humanity is in the throes of a paradigm shift, one that is triggered by two factors: the rise of the new sciences of chaos and complexity and climate change as the most widespread catastrophe for the human future. Chaos and complexity, unlike the more mechanistic sciences of the past, challenge our ability to predict with perfect certainty. Because chaotic systems are sensitive to initial conditions, uncertainty increases exponentially with elapsed time. Complexity, which deals with an extremely large number of dynamic sets of relationships, limits the degree of predictability. Because climate change is both global in scope and cumulative in effect, it reflects these uncertainties and limits to predictability. New ways of living within the everyday world are therefore needed. (Merchant)

The second piece, “2+1=3 Danger—Carey + Adrian” emerged from a sign at the edge of a cliff that said “Danger.” This cautioned a very real concern when improvising only steps away from a hundred-meter drop. When Fili and I interviewed Carey and Adrian, an immediate connection became obvious: they are both parents to young children who were then far away. They told me that the childcare demands on their co-caregivers back home—and a longing to be reunited and to unload the burden of their partners—teetered in tension with the desire to be fully present throughout the week. A conspicuous Christian cross—crossed out here—evokes a difficult colonial history with Christian missionaries, who first came to Gespe’gewa’gi (the Gaspésie) around 1670. It is a reminder of Cartier’s betrayal of the Mi’kmaq and the Haudenosaunee. The piece features: physiographic presence, the love and weight of childcare, the signs of danger. All could fall apart. The precarious balance of cohabitation.

Music-Sound Relevance to Environmentalism

Timothy Morton suggests that global warming is an example of a *hyperobject*—a term he coined to designate “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (Morton 1). These decentralized “objects” are so complex that they are comprehensively unknowable/ungraspable to the individual in any local instantiation. Can music do anything to help us sense or grapple with hyperobjects? Morton argues that the music of La Monte Young “is a two-pronged attempt both to bring hyperobjects into human aesthetic-causal (social, psychic, philosophical) space, and to open that space to the wider world, or rather to the charnel ground after the end of the world; that is, to create a musical-social space for a while (hours and days) in which the project of attunement to the nonhuman is performed” (119).

As we participate in musical-social spaces, we actively sustain cultures in solidarity with other listener-participants. Musicians and artistic facilitators have vital roles in fostering relationships of care in these spaces. In “Radical Critical Empathy and Cultural Sustainability” Rory Turner suggests, “[i]f we grasp culture pragmatically as that which sustains or does not sustain us, as a means of being, then we may need to regard it differently than is commonly done. Here culture becomes a field of participation characterized perhaps by care and mutuality, or by neglect and violence” (Turner 33). Sustaining reciprocally beneficial cultures may be crucial to mitigating climate change. In *Cultural Sustainabilities*, ecomusicologist Timothy Cooley points out that “the scientific community agrees that human activity is having a deleterious impact on global environmental and ecological systems, yet human societies—especially those that prioritize wealth over welfare—resist the changes needed to mitigate this impact. Changing human behavior is as much a cultural question as a scientific one” (Cooley xxv). Perhaps artistic experiences offer alternatives to overconsumption, the illusion of infinite resources, and the ease of disposability. Composing/improvising music can offer valuable sites of biospheric participation, radical empathy, resonant hyperobject experiences, intergenerational mentorship,

and accessible cohabitation practices. Maybe composing and improvising, in these frameworks, can “reduce our negative impact on other creatures [and] landscapes” (Waterman 26).

A stimulating field to emerge from the environmental crisis is Ecomusicology: “the study of the intersections of music/sound, culture/society, and nature/environment” (Allen n.p.).² Beneath these dichotomies is a care for the biosphere and music. Ecomusicology includes a range of musical practices, methodologies, and organizational efforts. It combines disciplinary seeds such as “anthropology, biology, ecology, environmental studies, ethnomusicology, history, literature, musicology, performance studies, and psychology” (Allen n.p.).

Is there a danger of losing precision with such interdisciplinary breadth? In “Environmental Awareness and Liberal Education,” Andrew Brennan points out the contradiction that environmental philosophy programs are often housed in environmentally unsustainable buildings (Brennan). Without belabouring or oversimplifying the breadth-depth dichotomy, specialization can sometimes create tunnel vision that self-sabotages its own mission. It can indoctrinate indifference to hypocrisy. Many perspectives are necessary to grapple with the chaos and complexity of any hyperobject. Climate change hosts a wide domain of challenges and responses—including economic, political, sociological, ecological, physiological, geomorphology and chemical perspectives, to mention a few. “The more environmental scientists and geographers try to do justice to the complexity of their subject-matter,” Brennan explains, “the more defensive they have to become about their status in departments with rigid disciplinary structures” (523). In the face of catastrophic climate change, these internal academic quarrels are inconsequential to what’s at stake.

2+1=3 Steps, For Stacey + Mia. Composed by Ben Finley.

Alternatives to siloed academia have been brilliantly articulated by John Dewey. Dewey's approach to pedagogy often focuses on experience-based, exchange-based and place-based paradigms (Dewey, *Experience and Education*). Contemporary ecomusiologists inspired by John Dewey's work, like Mark Shevock, have developed fascinating approaches to eco-literate music pedagogy (Shevock) that embraces a philosophy of the soil and a sympoietic localized grounding. Hybridized urban-agrarian, multi-geomorphological ethical sound relationalities are on the horizon!

"2+1=3 Steps, For Stacey and Mia," emerged from a highly personal encounter. In our interviews/conversations, I learned that Stacey loves to sing outwardly, boldly, unstuffed and radiant. Mia prizes deep understanding with others, listening, equity, and expression. Although one of my favorite conversationalists and a brilliant creator, Mia isn't so...about singing. The first encounter, in our location, played itself: Stacey sang boldly in the stairs, Mia came down and threw a hilarious narrative wrench into the sunshine. It was up to them how they'd use those emergent tools on the remaining patchwork. The show ended up being very funny. There was tension and struggle, but most memorably, laughter. No one being forced to sing, no one being silenced, and no ending scripted.

What does a flourishing ecosystem sound like?

"Sound is an indicator of the health of an ecosystem. The healthier the habitat, the more 'musical' the polyphony of the creatures that occupy it" (Titon "Why Thoreau" 78).

Credit is due to scholar-activist Jeff Todd Titon, a direct mentor to many in the field of ecomusicology, for his seminal interdisciplinary work showing how artistic cultures are dynamic ecosystems—not just like them—and likewise, they should be treated as valuable renewable resources.

What sustainability principles follow from ecology?

"[Sustainability] efforts should be guided by principles drawn from ecology, not economy; and specifically by four principles from the new conservation ecology—diversity, limits to growth, interconnectedness, and stewardship" (Titon "Music and Sustainability" 119).

"2+1=3 Percé et Oiseaux, For Brent Rowan (and Ben Finley)" is in ABA form with B extending indeterminately longer than A. Brent and I interviewed each other at a spot among stunning hill and ocean intersections. Seabirds routinely flew in and out of ridge atmospheres and downtown heights. They soared without getting bogged down in too much human curiosity. The boreal chickadee and blackpoll warbler songbirds sang. Brent and I were grateful guests of northern gannets, common murre, black-legged kittiwakes, Atlantic puffins, cormorants, herring gulls, great black-backed gulls, black guillemots and razorbills (Canadian Wildlife Service).

$2 + 1 = 3$
Percé et Oiseaux - For Brent Rowan Ben Finley

The musical score is for a piece titled "2 + 1 = 3" by Ben Finley, composed for Sax in Eb and Bass. The score is written in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The main melody (A) is marked with a tempo of quarter note = 100 and is repeated a few times. The score includes a section (B) labeled "LONGER THAN A" which is marked with a tempo of quarter note = 100 and is repeated a few times. The section (B) is further divided into two parts: "PEOPLE" for the Sax in Eb and "BIRDS" for the Bass. The score ends with a section labeled "End" which is marked with a tempo of quarter note = 100 and is repeated a few times. The score is written for Sax in Eb and Bass.

2+1=3 Percé et Oiseaux, For Brent and Ben. Composed by Ben Finley.

What birds are with you at this reading moment?

Northern gannets at Bonaventure Island and Percé Rock MBS. Photo by Jean-François Rail.

Fili took on the interviewer/facilitation role. I played the bass on this one. It was refreshing to step into a different dynamic and see what it's like as a performer to be asked pre-compositional questions. After talking with Brent, and learning that he was once a math major, I came up with a melody that was just memorizable (both forwards and in reverse) in the tiny time we had to rehearse. The form length constraint of $B > A$ helped Brent and I dance with tracked time and gave us an improvisatory structure to expand our conversations.

A crucial element of this notational approach was to conduct the interviews at the site of the performance. Our conversations *in* these places gave rise to our connection *with* these places.

An unexpected outcome of composing in this way is that I can picture the sites of these performances and remember the actual music in rich details.

How can we compose a lasting connection to places with listener-participants?

2+1=3 What key? Comment ouvrir la clé?

Hello? Hi? Anyone in there?
What is happening? What. Is. Happening.
I want to direct your attention to the door.
Something is happening.
What?
That is for you to understand.
Most of the time people don't recognize me.
They just stick out their hand and turn.
People don't think about what they are turning.
Not YOU of course.
But other people.
Most people.

I bet you never knew that door knobs have lips.
Well, why shouldn't they?
There is something you should know.
Long ago, before computers or phones, doors were the principal entertainment.
People would laugh and play all day with doors.
Sometimes they were open.
Sometimes they were closed.
Sometimes they would open a crack, and then...
Boom!

I want to direct your attention to the door.
Something is happening.
Is it time to leave?
Is it time to open up a crack?
I am a cyborg door knob.
Check this out.

People of course still use doors all day but not like they used to.
When I was a handle for Frederic James you should have seen it!
He would play all day with doors.
Opening, closing, leaving us partially open.
Open to the weather.
I'm afraid doors are becoming extinct.
There is too much concern with keys.
I don't play in a key.
I am free.
You might think that not having a handle on the situation is terrifying.
And I kind of agree.
But who knows?
Who knows what will open when you throw away the key?
And the handle?
And you are left with your lips.
What will you do then?
Not YOU of course.
But most people.

I want to direct your attention to the door.
I don't want you to understand, do you understand?
I want you to feel free.
Free to open or close.
Play or... Boom.

What was that?
The cliff is eroding!
Be careful!
The cliff is eroding!
The cliff is eroding!
Be careful!
Open while you can.
Be... aghhhhhhhhhhh.

2+1=3 What key? Comment ouvrir la clé?, For David and Leif. Composed by Ben Finley.

"2+1=3 What key? Comment ouvrir la clé?" was the most intentionally humorous of the six pieces, largely thanks to the dynamic duo of Leif and David.³ I wanted to bring out Leif's interest in computer programming and David's resonantly angled baritone speaking voice, quickness of perception, and perhaps a bit of public shyness in conjunction with his (group-felt) grounded

competency. When we first arrived at Villa Frederick-James we were given a tour of the building with the exception of one room. Our interest and curiosity jumped. Our host, Julie, told us that there was a break-in at the villa the night before—someone had broken down a door! She eventually asked if we might like to see the gap, and the whole zeal said yes, of course. While the door was quickly replaced, the doorknob remained missing. Hmm. I asked Julie if we might hold off from filling that space one more day, until after the performance. Certainly inspired by Beckett's *Not I*, David became the lips of the doorknob. Certainly inspired by Jim Harley's seminar a few days earlier on "Human-Computer Interactivity," Leif became the throbbing artificially intelligent electronic heart, activating sounds a door over. Nearing the end of the 3-hour performance, to everyone's surprise, two doorknobs began to activate.

My one regret in this piece is that the rehearsal got the biggest laughs. It might have induced more fresh laughter if the surprise was concealed until the actual performance. Leif, David, and I could have withheld our dress rehearsal. Still, the actual performance was surreal and funny. Keep in mind, this was the penultimate piece in a long colloquium, so people were very surprised and potentially self-questioning when the door holes began to monologue and bleep and bloop.

This piece fit around David and Leif's personalities. The door allowed David to launch an unabashedly disjunctive circumstance. Leif executed responding electronic sounds out of the other door with an extremely receptive sensitivity. Our interview made this possible. It allowed me to not only get to know them as individuals, but also see how they reacted as a duo, indoors and as doors. After a few lines, the audience was right with us, in a moment of materiality speaking for itself—in a vital presence.

Mitigation and Adaptation

Circling back, is there a need to reformulate our original question concerning music and the environmental crisis? Is it enough to practice music in ecologically significant ways? How might music strengthen cultural responses to environmental degradation? I have noticed many music colleagues and friends have a growing anxiety surrounding these questions.

Since carbon dioxide (one of the strongest greenhouse gasses contributing to global warming) lingers in the atmosphere for hundreds of years, we are committed to climate change over centuries. NASA's site dedicated to climate change research shows two possible responses: *mitigation*, "reducing emissions of and stabilizing the levels of heat-trapping greenhouse gases in the atmosphere," and *adaptation*, "adapting to the climate change already in the pipeline" ("Global Climate Change"). Our ability to improvise is not only an aesthetic expression, but also a survival skill. Jason Ur, a Harvard archeologist researching the collapse of ancient Mesopotamian cities suggests "[w]hen we excavate the remains of past civilizations, we very rarely find any evidence that they as a whole society made any attempts to change in the face of a drying climate, a warming atmosphere or other changes. I view this inflexibility as the real reason for collapse" (Sohn).

In addition to the survival adaptations afforded by improvisation, maximalist music notation (and detailed preparation) is also very valuable for this kind of project. Composing our past present and future is not limited to any one style of notation. A felt sense of concern for future generations is often musical. Think of generational signifiers like baby cries, dying breaths, place memories; these vibrations/sounds help us to understand our relations with others; they help us care for each other. We often use all kinds of musical metaphors (and notations) to

describe and practice these relations: attunement, resolution, consonance, dissonance, listening, flow, responsibility, and liveness (Caines).

Many composers-improvisers create music as a way of getting to know people, creating an ethics of care, openness to alterity, ecological consideration and bio-resonance. In “Deep Summer Music,” Libby Larson invokes all involved in the piece to become wheat. Ecomusicologist Denise von Glahn gives a compelling reading into this work: “Larson advocates for attention to place with her music. She challenges listeners to heed the intricate relationships between places and people by composing them in her music” (Von Glahn “Musical Actions” 270).

Many music facilitators and organizations are taking up the call to co-imagine cultural sustainability through multi-perspectival inclusivity, partnerships and musical experiences. *Sweet Land*, an open-air opera produced by the experimental opera company The Industry in Los Angeles in 2020, sonically and theatrically explores Thanksgiving mythologies and the enduring legacies of violent settler colonialism. *Sweet Land* is an experiment in co-creativity; it featured co-composers Raven Chacon and Du Yun, co-librettists Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney, co-directors Yuval Sharon and Cannupa Hanska Luger and a large and diverse cast and crew. *Sweet Land* narratively shows an opera erasing itself through a challenging historical reckoning while sounding collaborative futures.

Building from Bennett’s theories of vibrant materialism, improvising-composing may offer a materially sustainable (if ephemeral) cultural resource. Composing-improvising then becomes a network of emergent acts. It includes curation, transient community architecture, facilitation, environmentalism, ecological depth perception, anti-oppression practices, artistic organizing, relationship building. At best, People and Place Based notation grounds an excuse to be together in negotiable/flourishing cohabitation while voicing the specific concerns of people and places.

Two Ecologically Significant “Notations” for Composer-Improvisers:

1. Compositing Cohabitation: How might we compose/improvise music with space and place? How might the co-presence afforded by vibrating sound offer an ethics of biospheric belonging? How do we engage with the historical rootedness and transience of a place? How do we co-create sites of wisdom, negotiable public assemblies, and intergenerational exchanges that allow for dissension, disagreement and conflict?
2. Improvising Personhood: What are some meaningful ways we can compose/improvise music that embraces the personal backgrounds and histories of performers? Does this communally enrich the music being made? How can we co-create encouraging and mutually reciprocal music cultures?

For $2+1=3$, I listened at the sites many times. I tried to include cultural-historical-geographical dimensions, realizing that this is never an airtight, comprehensive project.⁴ Perhaps the birth and death of the performative moment here acknowledges the transience of our own lives and efforts: “[a] flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely” (Freud). A kind of biotic-abiotic noticing may afford a depth perception of our localized salience landscapes (Vervaeke) and the cultivation of a relational wisdom—projects already well time-tested by traditional ecological knowledge and Indigenous practices (Nelson).

Each performer comes with their own history and creative practices. When we embrace these lived practices wholeheartedly—as well as critically engage with them—substantial personal insights can be exchanged. In this way, the performer doesn't have to live up to a previous paradigm of what is expected of their instrument or standardized performance practice.⁵ What *musically* interests who I'm writing for/with? What do they gravitate towards or repel? What sounds or sonic organization makes them feel at home, out walking, in chaos, in intrigue, in ecstasy, in equanimity? Will that permeate to listener-participants?

What roles emerge for you?

2+1=3 encouraged me to note three musical roles that give me unending joy:

- 1) Embodied Practice—*lifetime affinity of an improvisatory bass rudder*
- 2) Composing Community—*with people and environments*
- 3) Arts Facilitator—*biospheric belonging and connecting through a vivid co-presencing*

In friendship, sometimes we are there to hear out, sometimes encourage, sometimes we are there to mend or help delineate boundaries. Maybe some kind of biotic-abiotic or People and Place Based notation might strengthen cultural-environmental relationships to befriend our troubled biosphere. In *All about Love: New Visions*, writer bell hooks warns that if we turn away from love, “we risk moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again” (5).

I composed a video with/for Erin and Fili and they improvised with it live. Check out the video [through this link](#).

Still from 2+1=3 Living Room, For Erin and Fili.
Composed by Ben Finley.

Ways for Musicians and Music Institutions to Create Participatory Artistic Ecologies

In *Ethical Know-How: Action Wisdom and Cognition*, cognitive scientist Francisco Varela presents a distinction between ethical action that is rooted in a “detached, critical morality based on prescriptive principles” and an “active and engaged ethics based on a tradition that identifies the good” (3). The first focuses on what it is good to do/what we are obligated to do. The second is focused on what is good/what it is good to be. Varela is interested in examining the spontaneous nature of wisdom characterized by the second version. He draws from phenomenology and pragmatism as well as wisdom traditions like Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism to present a comparative approach between a situated, spontaneous ethics and the categorical moral judgement tradition (which might include thinkers like Kant, Habermas, and Rawls). Varela argues that an ethics of spontaneity, a kind of improvisatory ethics, is more in line with modern understandings of cognitive science: “[at] the very centre of this emerging view is the conviction that the proper units of knowledge are primarily *concrete*, embodied, incorporated, lived; that knowledge is about situatedness; and that the uniqueness of knowledge, its historicity and context, is not a ‘noise’ concealing an abstract configuration in its true essence” (7). This situated spontaneous care is well marked in Critical Studies for Improvisation literature which shows improvisation as a vital political and cultural model for ethical dialogue and action.⁶

By embracing situatedness, composer-improvisers can help set up the conditions to seed spontaneous care. This could be extended to include the biosphere. Engaging with biological and cultural realities to negotiate our microworlds and microidentities is almost common practice for improviser-composers. Eco-literate pedagogy (Shevock), in partnership with emerging cognitive science, can help a slew of pedagogical and performance practices. It can help human beings socialize our young people through music—teaching them the ethos of kinship and vital materialism. However, in the case of climate change justice, often young people are teaching adults these lessons. This is demonstrated by the leadership of Indigenous youth like Autumn Peltier, Xiye Bastida, and Artemisa Xakriabá. In her song “Generation” from the 2017 album *Medicine Songs*, Buffy Sainte-Marie sings:

Kids were sent from heaven inside to lead you to the future

Wrap their eyes in blindfolds and still they'll find their way

Blind their lives with pills and lies and still they find their vision

And soon they leave you to your yesterday.⁷

Moving beyond conservatory models and towards participatory artistic ecologies, musicians then become intergenerational cultural sustainability workers—as both teachers and students—to save our troubled relations. We can learn from bioregionalism to explore place-based artistic approaches in our locally lived environments (Tuan). We become apprentices, studying with the mentorship of life systems that have survived for billions of years. We become a part of the multi-scalar cycles active all around us: birth, growth, decay, and recycling back (Benyus). Ideas of what it means to be a “successful” artist can also be reformulated. With these perspectives, artistic institutions like music festivals (celebratory sites of participatory artistic co-experiences) have the potential to become a locus for environmental and community flourishing.

Intergenerational cultural sustainability would emanate from their operations as a core artistic practice, not as a sidelined greenwashing endeavor to attract ecotourists.

What Do Destructive Ecosystems Sound Like?

Music events can be wasteful. Music can null and lull us into purchasing. Music can sound the persuasive conversion tipping point hymnals of consumerist theology (Crary). Music can serve as an exclusive aesthetic purity-object, to be upheld over anything else, muddling our ethical treatment and inclusion of others. Music can be an effective torture weapon. Music can appropriate cultural expressions for effective profiteering. Tall stages can heighten borders of aesthetic activators. Musical institutions are common sites of discrimination, sexism, racism, ableism, greed, hurt, discomfort, inequity, belittling, trauma. Musicians can function as small-time oil lobbyists by leading guzzling travel lifestyles.

And how much embodied carbon does the music industry emit anyways? In Titon's "Sustainable Music Blog," he offers several complex methodologies to consider this question. Titon acknowledges that these calculations can lead to feelings of insignificance, "[w]hen only 90 corporations, the vast majority being fossil fuel producers such as Exxon and state entities such as GAZPROM (Russian Federation) and Aramco (Saudi Arabia), contribute more than 70% of GHGs annually (Heede 2014), one wonders whether ethnomusicologists' time wouldn't be better spent in convincing our institutions to divest from fossil fuels than in encouraging the music industry to reduce GHGs" ("Music's Carbon Footprint"). But this raises other important concerns: who are the major consumers of these corporations and how are musicians and music consumers implicated in this consumption? The shift to internet-based music listening may not be as environmentally progressive as we might initially think. The intense energy demands of data centers, and the direct contribution of LP's, cassettes, and CDs to petroculturalism, question the claim of the supposed immateriality of recorded music (Devine).

How might we use ecocritical frameworks to go beyond anesthetizing/aestheticizing data? What tools may close the gap of "out of sight, out of mind" consumerism and orient musical practices toward environmental and ecological sustainability? In addition to the cultural, relational and experiential sustainability previously discussed, perhaps eco-literate musical practices can help offer and imagine thoughtful localized alternatives and partnerships.

Setting Goals

In order to fashion a co-creative ethics of cohabitation across domains of identity like gender, race, nationalities, species, materiality and resources, we need to set goals. The United Nations has set 17 sustainability goals for 2030 that are worth listening to while imagining this ethics ("Transforming our World").

A being-based, diverse, inclusive, decolonized, listening, engaged, dialogical, phenomenologically rich, eco-literate, socially involved, transformational (rather than transactional), participatory music practice can respond to many of these goals. But perhaps not in these liner notes.

Sustainable Development Goals. Image by United Nations.

Composers - Stewards or Seeds?

In times of economic theology (Crary), how do we become seeds not owners? According to Tilton, “[w]e should move toward newer participatory models, based on knowledge developed in collaborations seeking consensus among cultural heritage managers and community members, with a broader ecological view and the goal of adaptive management that relinquishes control, accepts uncertainty, understands the dynamic and person-centered nature of expressive culture, and that, instead of looking toward a golden age in the past, develops flexible policies that enable a sustainable future” (“Music and Sustainability” 121). How might we acknowledge and activate music’s biocultural renewable resources?

Research Guideposts for Community-Based Participatory Art

If we embrace socially-engaged research practices in our composing/improvising, and a spontaneous and situated ethics, each new composition will have a different model, a different form of community, reflected by the unique people, rituals, and places involved. Rebecca Caines’ workshop on “Global Approaches to Socially Engaged Improvisation” inspired me to consider some questions when writing with others:

How are we ethically entangled with each other?

How might we respectfully acknowledge the protocols and customs of a place?

How do we co-create accessible sites that celebrate listening to each other’s needs?

How do we critically recognize and work to dismantle the roots of social inequities?

How might we build reciprocity and care in our biotic and abiotic relationships?

How might we engage in dialogical transformations that fairly implicate us all?

How might an improvisation methodology help us negotiate our being together?

Jesse Stewart also gave us Summer Institute participants many great musical-cohabitation ideas to consider. Jesse founded We Are All Musicians (WAAM). WAAM operates with community-based principles that recognize music as a fundamental human right, regardless of level of music training, income, age, or ability. Through community partnerships, workshops, and performances, WAAM seeks to create inclusive musical environments, often with underserved communities (folks with disabilities, a diversity of ages, and a variety of socio-economic circumstances). These projects usually take on a co-creative approach that enlivens the social dimensions of music in a playful and participatory ethos. This might happen through the use of invented, adaptive use instruments like AUMI (Adaptive Use Musical Instruments), co-composed soundscapes, or other interactive installations.

Social music, community music, creative music, improvisatory music, ecomusicking—whatever we call it, these musical practices can fulfill sociological and personal needs during chronic and acute moments of the climate crisis. Perhaps these approaches can be considered ecologically *and* environmentally significant in that they build community resilience, play, ritual, connection, and—with contradictory imperfections—infinately renewable resources of *play*. The combinatory abilities of *listening* (see “savoring silence” in Corbin, *A History of Silence*) and *acting with care* (Caines), exemplified by WAAM, can offer pathways for musicians, music institutions, and festivals to create participatory artistic ecologies that might help us mitigate and adapt to chronic environmental degradation.

Future Directions: 2+1+?=?

music for/with others,

may spark an ethics of care in support of flourishing ecosystems,

may offer renewable biocultural resources,

and it may build resilient/adaptive community partnerships

to continually face environmentally destructive hyperobjects

Sound-music serves to attune us to our surroundings. In *The Music of Life: The Inner Nature and Effects of Sound*, musician, teacher and mystic Inyat Khan suggests that we are drawn to music “because it corresponds with the rhythm and tone that are keeping the mechanism of our whole being intact” (72). Sound-music sustains. Music sounds a phenomenological portal through which we can express our innermost with others. Maybe music can help us sense the biodiverse web that affords our survival—sounding responsive and responsible futures.

Sound-music is vital to mitigating disaster. Sound-music has a unique ability to form caring assemblies and resilient communities across domains of difference (Fischlin). It doesn’t happen on its own; care and listening must be enacted by artistic facilitators and musician-listener-participants. How can we practice music in ways that unlock music’s cultural-environmental value? There is much work to do to make our cultures sustainable by recognizing inequities and

dismantling systematic injustices such as racism, ableism, and sexism—in and beyond our musical communities. There is a lot of playing and improvising to do and valuable thinking to be offered by musicians. There are new forms of musical dissemination, new ecological conservation economies to explore. We can do better to turn waste into food and to make our artistic institutions exemplars of sustainability.

Refocusing my opening inquiries, I ask: how might composing improvisatory structures—*making-with* vibrant biotic-abiotic sympoiesis—contribute to the urgent ethical project of cohabitation exacerbated by our limits as individuals grappling with hyperobjects?

In a lecture titled “Improvising in a Silent way,” Ajay Heble asked us: “What is the pedagogical role played by silence? What are the social implications?” Composer-performer People and Place Based notation is meant to offer, in dialogue with other notational and denotational systems, the many ways of cohabiting and listening to each other. Silence, listening, and an ethics of care, music has many ecologically significant parts to play.

Let me quote from the *Summer Institute Course Kit 2019* one more time:

Working with the title “Devising Place, Improvising Space, and Situating Knowledge” as our point of departure, our two-week program of activities will explore how improvisation (as both an artistic and a social practice) can encourage us to see (and to hear) the world anew. Our focus will be on what improvisation might be able to teach us about vernacular cultures, about the situated knowledges of communities, as well as about our understandings of the spaces we inhabit, the places where we live, work, and play. (n.p.)

See you by the driftwood.

“Jeu d'enfant-5” by Land Artist John Michaud. Photo by John Michaud.

Notes

¹ “Intra-action” is a term coined by Karen Barad to describe how bodies (of different kinds) participate in dynamic exchanges and diffractions of agency and connectivity. It is used as an alternative to the term “interaction,” which has connotations of objectivity and separation (Barad 141).

² In *Acoustic Multinaturalism*, Ana María Ochoa Gautier raises a critical concern: “one needs to question whether the central objective of sound/music scholars concerned with the environment is to create a sub-disciplinary field centered on the issues of ‘nature, culture, and music’ or, to the contrary, to take the time to drastically rethink the political implications of keeping the underlying ontology that such a relation implies” (Gautier).

³ Frédérique Arroyas’s module inspired this piece. She asked us: how does improvisation and storytelling offer “a window into the spaces we inhabit?” (*Summer Institute Course Kit 2019*).

⁴ See Dylan Robinson’s *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* for a crucial discussion on colonial and Indigenous listening positionalities. As a white male who has systematically benefited from the injustices of ongoing colonization, I acknowledge the importance of these discussions. It is my intention that these liner notes open more empathetic ways of relating and listening in contemporary music practices and align musical-cultural environmentalism with anti-oppression efforts to decolonize the way we think of sound. My hope is that these liner notes work towards imagining and participating in a world (musical and otherwise) that includes all of us.

⁵ Jeanne Lee is a great example of someone who resisted standardized performance practices and instrument essentialism. (Eric Lewis’ seminar on “Improvising Identity: Jeanne Lee and Anti-Essentialist Singing” in *Summer Institute Course Kit 2019*).

⁶ For more information see *The Fierce Urgency of Now* written by Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz as well as *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound and Subjectivity* written by Gillian Sidall and Ellen Waterman.

⁷ Although I contextualize these lyrics within the fight for climate change justice and Indigenous youth leadership, the song should be listened to in its entirety as intersecting themes are prevalent—including political and corporate greed, and the Idle No More movement.

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Relevant Online Resources:

Artists and climate change: www.artistsandclimatechange.com/

Biomimicry: www.asknature.org

Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques en Improvisation: www.criticalimprov.com

Dan Shevock's Ecoliteracy Blog: www.eco-literate.com/blog#_ftn1

Ecomusicology Journal: www.ecomusicology.info/

Jeff Todd Titan. 2008-present. Sustainable music: A research blog on the subject of sustainability and music: www.sustainablemusic.blogspot.com/search/label/ecomusicology

John Michaud's Land Art Blog: www.johnmichaud.blogspot.com/p/activites.html

Julie's Bicycle, Source for Music Festival Sustainability: www.juliesbicycle.com

Sea Sounds: www.dosits.org/galleries/audio-gallery/

Sound Futures: www.soundfutures.org

World Forum for Acoustic Ecology: www.wfae.net/