

Sounding the Climate Crisis: Time and the More-than-Human in Contemporary Folk Music in Scotland and England

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Across the world, contemporary musicians and music listeners are responding to and resisting the inequalities that drive and compound environmental problems. In the UK, folk musicians are taking a particularly prominent role, drawing on folk music's extensive history of engagement with environmental issues to acknowledge the UK's high accountability for global climate change and to suggest better ways forward. My project focuses on the folk scene to foreground questions of time, which have accompanied this surge in environmentally motivated music. There is an increasing realization that the climate crisis is a "problem of time" (Cole 2021; Chakrabarty 2022); that it forces us to think differently about how we view time and how it is experienced. Yet, despite long-standing claims that music is an art "about time" (Langer 1953; Stambaugh 1964; Jones 2007), there remains almost no scholarship on time that brings musicology and the environmental humanities together. To address this gap, my project will draw on fieldwork, walking methodologies, and interviews conducted between June 2021 and February 2023, to illuminate how more-than-human temporalities are formed and articulated in performance and discourse around contemporary folk-music practices in the UK. In particular, I will develop my PhD thesis into a book manuscript that provides an analysis of the myriad ways in which contemporary folk-music practices shape understandings of time and environment. Moreover, I will point toward how these understandings can be both environmentally harmful and can demonstrate new paths for temporal relations with the more-than-human world.

Chapter 1 begins by outlining how foundational understandings of folk music in Europe largely relied on a linear idea of time, which upholds a binary between human "modernity" and "nature" (including certain groups of humans who are deemed unmodern, like "the folk"). By dialoguing a contemporary case study with the writings of early folk-music collectors, I examine the extent to which this understanding of time—which also undergirds environmentally damaging colonialist-capitalist epistemes—is reproduced or challenged in folk-music practices today.

Chapter 2 brings deep time into the purview of ethnomusicological research for the first time. I ask how some folk musicians—through connecting to geologic features, journeys through landscapes, and the framework of the Anthropocene—are furthering a worldview that is receptive to temporalities often considered beyond human comprehension. In Scotland, folk music (and especially Gaelic music) is frequently collocated with the country's distinctive and supposedly "timeless" geologies and landscapes. With reference to several case studies, these attributes of timelessness are shown to be disrupted through music; instead, both deep time and folk music are positioned as lively and bearing on the present.

Chapter 3 explores the understandings of seasonal, migratory, and food-growing patterns in contemporary folk-music practices. Bringing together folk music and the scientific field of phenology (the study of seasonal and lifecycle timings), I show that the latter is a potent means of understanding the temporal coordinations between species and how anthropogenic climate change is disrupting them. Complementarily, I identify two affordances that folk music

contributes to phenology, pointing toward areas in which cultural practices might become better attuned to timings across species and how these are becoming out of sync.

Chapter 4 expands on work by environmental humanities scholars to explore how musicians in one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world address themes of loss and extinctions. I demonstrate that historically inscribed anxieties about the extinction and erosion of folk-music practices are reworked by contemporary musicians to position cultural and ecological losses as inextricably linked. Furthermore, my participants fold potential future extinctions back into their present, unravelling linear notions of time and enabling musicians and listeners to enact accountability toward those not yet here.

Overall, then, I believe that contemporary folk music takes us to the heart of some of the biggest issues around time and the climate crisis, simultaneously reifying and disavowing ecologically harmful systems of power. My project therefore emphasizes that it matters how time is conceptualized culturally, because these conceptualizations have material implications for the flourishing or diminishment of human and more-than-human worlds.