

"Take It Outside, People!" Bridging Ecoacoustics and Improvised Music

Glen C. Whitehead

Volume 14, Number 2-3, 2021

Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1080725ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Guelph College of Arts

ISSN

1712-0624 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Whitehead, G. (2021). "Take It Outside, People!": Bridging Ecoacoustics and Improvised Music. *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, 14(2-3), 1–14.

Article abstract

The era of COVID-19 has profoundly shaken the foundations of our lives. Our event venues have closed; the support systems that we depend on for delivering works of art have all been shuttered. In response, musicians have turned to the digital world. While the digital world has become an important collaborative interface, I believe it is imperative to also explore the opposite direction—and take it outside! Even pre-COVID-19, it has been important to expand musical methodologies by connecting music creation systems with environmental sound practices in new ways. As recent developments in technology have opened up the possibilities of new types of environmentally based artistic engagement, artists of all kinds increasingly feel a profound need to participate in climate crisis activism through creative work.

Immersive participation is at the center of the fields of ecoacoustics, soundscape ecology, and related fields. These practices involve acts of listening and responding in participatory environmental engagement. Meanwhile, the field of critical improvisation has expanded from methodologies rooted in music and other arts to connect to a tapestry of multidisciplinary enquiries. I postulate that a shared fundamental human musical "task-scape" lies deep within the behavior systems of both improvised music and environmentally based sound practices. Both areas are constructed with methodologies for engaging with interactive dynamics of the unexpected, and both explore the profound phenomena between the observer and sound. In this article, I will illuminate how to bring these fields together in new ways by connecting pedagogies and practices within these arenas. Moreover, I will connect these to some of the more profound issues of our time through methodologies of improvised music and ecoacoustics to create new opportunities for performance and practice during and after COVID-19 as well as offer new types of research and artistic expression in regard to climate crisis.

“Take it Outside, People!”: Bridging Ecoacoustics and Improvised Music

Glen C. Whitehead

The era of COVID-19 has profoundly shaken the foundations of many aspects of our lives. Our event venues have closed; the spaces and support systems that we depend on for delivering works of art and connecting to audiences have all been shuttered, suspended in indefinite silence. In response, musicians have turned to largely one place—the digital, virtual world, struggling to compensate for the living art of music performance and practice. While the digital world has been an increasingly important collaborative interface, my impulse is to explore the opposite direction as a musician and improviser—and take it outside! I suggest that we turn into the headwind and explore how we might expand our practices with natural environments and improvised music. My goal in this paper is to bridge our applied engagement across both environmentally-based sound practices and improvised music creation. I aim to connect our understanding of these fields by: 1) contextualizing environmental immersive theory and experiences found in first-person field recording as an improvisational and musical act, and 2) proposing how environmental immersive practices fuse directly into improvisational musical practice and methodology. I see these theoretical constructs connecting three practices: 1) to create an intensive environmental field experience, perhaps with a field recorder; 2) to bring that experience directly back into a free improvisation ensemble setting; and 3) to utilize field recordings as part of an electroacoustic compositional improvisational process through editing and processing practiced in so many iterations today. Creating innovative musical practices within these contexts is even more vital in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the challenges of COVID-19, our music educational institutions have been struggling to establish new systems that move us beyond the long-standing dominance of Western music ideologies (Truax 19).

Listening-based immersive participation is at the center of the fields of ecoacoustics and Soundscape Ecology. These practices often involve multi-sensational acts of listening and responding in concentrated behaviours of complex participatory engagement in natural environments through sound. Meanwhile, the field of critical improvisation has expanded to connect to a tapestry of multidisciplinary enquiries. I postulate that a shared fundamental human “task-scape” that is simultaneously improvisational and musical lies deep within the behaviour systems inherent to improvised music and environmentally-based sound practices. Both of these fields are imbued with methodologies for engaging with interactive dynamics and uncanny serendipity (the unexpected) in a shared time and space. Both explore the relationships between the observer and sound or, more precisely, how humans experience sound. Both center on the experience of, and study around, the present or passing moment as the primary place of research and creation systems.

Improvised music is far too vast in scope to pinpoint without explanation. For the purposes of this article, I am referring here generally to the practice understood largely as *free improvisation*. While attempts at unified definitions of free improvisation have articulated a broader understood canon (Bailey; Jost; Morris), this opaque musical arena as a whole is resistant to ontological essentialism and defined more for its diversity of approaches and perspectives. This elasticity makes it possible to merge with the similarly malleable arena of environmental engagements. As a result, the ideas in this paper can work across a myriad of improvisational approaches. So, let’s explore the embodied, theoretical, and methodological connections between them.

In the past few decades, environmentally-based sound practices, including soundscape composition, acoustic ecology, ecoacoustics, and Soundscape Ecology among others, have become increasingly interdisciplinary. Beyond artistic arenas, the practitioners of these fields have drawn connections to a range of disciplines, such as biology, geography, ecology, climate change studies, architecture, and city planning, to name a few. In that sense, this essay builds upon the pioneering work of Pierre Schafer, Pauline Oliveros, Hildegard Westercamp, Barry Truax, and Annea Lockwood, among others, as well as more recent contributions by Matthew Burtner, Leah Barclay, and others who identify field recording or sonification as part of their artistic practice, such as Francisco Lopez, Andrea Polli, Viv Corringham, and others who identify field recording or sonification as part of their artistic practice (Lane; Carlyle). The field of critical improvisation studies has also expanded in a similar timeline to connect to a myriad of disciplines over the past few decades (Lewis and Piekut xii).

The artistic frame of first-person field recording, common across many environmental sound practices, has become its own kind of canon. The performer / composer “practitioner as artist” approach is a significant pivot, ripe with possibilities to connect to environmental approaches and compositional practices (Burtner 234). However, environmentally-based sound practices remain largely disconnected from improvised music. In this essay, I argue that environmentally-based listening and embodied practice could be much more deeply connected with the improvised music world based on shared methodological approaches.

In short, I have found remarkably similar experiences between improvised music practices and field recording activities. Bringing them together through an examination of their shared theoretical underpinnings may reveal how they can be reconciled as intuitively linked. If we focus on improvisational approaches to environmental engagement, particularly on the crest of new waves of research and ideas from critical improvisation and free improvisation studies, I believe we will create new concepts of musical vocabulary, reveal new ideas of musicality, and expand the nature of our instruments. To clarify this point, I will share my personal experience as an improviser and creative instrumentalist who has engaged significantly in immersive environmental work for the past several years.

The many references to *environment* in this article can take place virtually anywhere outside. Environmental sound study activities across artistic, scientific, and humanistic fields permeate just about every conceivable type of location from rural to urban, from deep wilderness to outside the front door. Therefore, I will keep the references to *environment* relatively general except when referring to specific locations and situations.

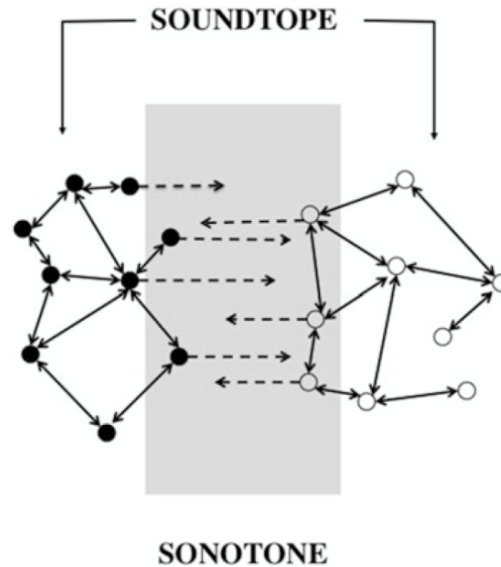
A long-standing debate exists in determining a definition of “improvisation” that works across contexts, disciplines, and practices. Exasperating this debate, particularly within art/music fields, improvisation (as a term) was often re-coded, replaced, or “masked” (Lewis and Piekut 4). As stated above, I will steer away from attempting to provide a “catch all” definition of improvisation that guides the ideas in this paper. However, one of the characteristics of musical improvisation on which many of my ideas hinge is that *process* is at the core of much improvised music methodology, particularly as it is conjoined with the “promise of an unforeseeable outcome” (Lewis and Piekut 4). Similarly, in environmental immersive practices the reliance on an understood time-based process within the random interplay of nature is paramount. The experience of embodied *listening* is the overarching behaviour that enables any of these ideas to flourish particularly when approached through lenses of both improvisational music methodologies and environmental immersive practices. It is with *listening* that I will begin.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has stripped away the fundamental ability for people to make music

together face-to-face, this new reality has also revealed the profound opportunities of *listening* as musicking. Both George E. Lewis and Vijay Iyer have theorized more recently that *listening* embodies similar behavioural and critical systems as musical improvisation. Listening is an act of improvisation, particularly when listening is in the context of live improvised music. Iyer explains that “[t]he experience of listening to music that is understood to be improvised differs significantly from listening knowingly to composed music. The main source of drama in improvised music is the sheer fact of the shared sense of time: the sense that the improviser is working, creating, generating musical material in the same time in which we are co-performing as listeners” (Iyer 80). I build on Iyer’s concept of the listener as co-performer, especially in the improvised music context. Using this definition, I offer that the act of listening and decision-making inherent in environmental immersive activities represents a similar musicking experience. Otherwise stated, applied environmentally-based sound work positions the listener as improviser and co-performer when framed in a methodology of immersive improvisation. Engaged environmental listening (the core practices of ecoacoustics, acoustic and Soundscape Ecology) is an act of *improvisational musicking*. The search for interesting environmental interactive sonic phenomena entails critical real-time decisions and hence is an improvisational endeavor. Moreover, the act of field recording as the embodiment of such immersive environmental listening engages intimately with the improvisation of living systems. From this standpoint, if we consciously connect immersive environmental actions and musical free improvisation, we can also connect with larger ideas, approaches, and systems such as *Deep Ecology* (Naess) and, certainly, the world of *Deep Listening* created by Pauline Oliveros.

I would suggest the listening-based improvisational behaviour systems outlined by Iyer and Lewis are similarly embedded in the methodologies of the fields of *ecoacoustics*, *acoustic ecology* and *Soundscape Ecology*. Soundscape Ecology strives to reconcile sonic interactivity, subjective perceptions, and empirical data across anthrophonies, biophonies and geophonies into a complete picture. This framing of the subjective and empirical that can be seen in core concepts of these fields can also resonate uniquely as musical and improvisational ideas. For instance, the *soundtope* is the acoustic result of vocalizing animals and living things in a shared geography, from its minimum to maximum scale. From the platform of the soundtope, the *sonotope* is the total scope of overlap and impact of all possible sounds and sources. The term *ecotone* is most interesting and, perhaps, most meaningful if recast in an improvisational frame. The result of two words—eco (oikos) and tone (tension)—it refers to spaces within the environment where biodiversity interacts most intensely, where actions and decisions of living systems may come with the highest consequences. At the heart of an ecotone is a focused geographical intensity defined as the *edge effect* (Farina 20). As Farina explains:

At the ecotones, many processes find a strong constraint called the edge effect. The edge effect in most cases enhances biodiversity but also other processes such as predation. Ecotones are also considered ecological traps or sink areas (sensu Pulliam, 1988) in which species attracted by their structure and food abundance experience a higher predatory pressure or habitat disturbance. It is reasonable to consider that, as for vegetation and animal distribution, ecotones exist also for other phenomena such as the sonic environment. (Farina 19, 21)



This graphic (Farina 20) creates a compelling visual picture of the improvisational interplay among these environmental systems.

Similarly, in his foundational writing on improvisation, George E. Lewis links the elements of listening, doing, surprise (indeterminacy), place/space, and intentionality. Lewis builds on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, which Bourdieu describes as "the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisation." Lewis explains,

Following Bourdieu, I want to sketch in outline form some characteristics of an emerging new definition of improvisation. First, one imagines that such a definition would be receptive to both production (doing) and reception (listening) or rather, would view listening as a form of doing . . . (116)

This concept suggests the improvisation of listening and reception as an embodied immersive experience that would also imply the notion of transduction through both "doing" and "reception." The idea of transduction here (lifting off Lewis's notion of *habitus*) situates the environmental immersive experience itself as a holistic act of transductive improvisation. As Julian Henrique states in his work on transduction of musical performance, "the human body can be considered a sensory transducer," and experiencing the "transformation (of) sonic energy to kinetic energy" (Henrique 468). Paul de Assis explains a similar idea. He states, "[t]he main transducer (interface), however, is a human body (notating a score, playing an instrument, vibrating vocal cords), a complex living organism inhabited by diverse layers of information and by innumerable drives, which, working together, shape the actual rendering of musical events" (Assis 139). I argue there is a core connection between the transductive process—from what occurs and what one experiences, listening and doing—both in the field as a sound practitioner and the production and embodied experience of free improvisation.

A related concept, *haecceity*, is useful here to bring more focus to the importance of the ever-present "moment of time" of improvisation. This idea embodies a philosophy of the essence of a "thing." It explains qualities that make something "this." Haecceity identifies the time-centered element within human-transductive processes as a thing unto itself which speaks to the physical, molecular movements within the singularity of events in time. Assis explains how haecceity "dramatizes space-time itself, curving it, folding it, giving it transient form and temporal

structure” (Assis 148). Coincidentally, this concept also resonates with key terminologies in Soundscape Ecology as explained above, such as the *soundtope*, *sonotone*, and *ecotone*, referring to the zone of interlacing phenomena where direct interaction takes place in the natural world at a given moment in time. Assis offers an angle on the idea of haecceity applied to the performing arts, *micro-haecceities*. He explains “[w]hen appropriating this terminology for the performing arts (music, dance, theatre, or performance) . . . I propose the introduction of the notion of *micro-haecceity* . . . collapsing it into an infinitesimal fraction of a second” (Assis 149). This concept is useful to flesh out the idea of the performer and sound artist as transducer. Assis continues, “[m]icro-haecceities are high energy-loaded and high-speed-moving singularities that carry a force of potential from one position to the next. They make up the visible or audible part of artistic transductive processes” (Assis 149). Again, there is a similar idea in Soundscape Ecology that drills down into the sonotone, the *edge effect*. Here, we see the connections between environmentally-based sound practices and improvisation rooted in their shared approaches of listening and generating; we interact in micro-haecceities. In both contexts, “[t]here is no time for contemplation; things must happen in the unavoidable urgency and imperative sequentially of the here-and-now” (Assis 150).

These core concepts and terminologies represent both empirical and interactive dynamics utilized to interpret improvisational living systems of nature in relation to the anthropomorphic impact that can simultaneously be reinterpreted and repurposed to apply to free improvisational music creation.

Ideas of such connections first came to me during the 2012 EcoSono Institute in Alaska, directed by Alaskan composer Matthew Burtner. Burtner’s approach was the first I encountered to combine comprehensively science, climate studies, technology, composition, and performance. While much of the work placed field recording and technology at the center of ecoacoustic activities, Burtner purposely marginalized technology *theoretically*, deeming it less significant when compared to the human experience. In Burtner’s approach, technology was peripheral to the more central purposes of engagement, experience, and embodiment. Burtner explains this approach:

Another formative concept of EcoSono is that the purpose of outdoor recording is not the acquisition of material samples, but to hear the world and learn from it. The aesthetic described here de-emphasizes sampling and soundscape composition in environmental sound artworks. A desire for human-environment collaborative work drives this tendency. Interactive ecoacoustics is about a real-time sound-based engagement with the natural world more than an attempt to record it. Human-environment-computer interactive art positions the human as an agent of change rather than a passive observer. (Burtner 235)

The challenge of decentering technology is even more important now in our current pandemic circumstances. As COVID-19 social distancing protocols have centered technological immersion in our lives, it is vital to offer new opportunities for creative musical practice. Burtner’s framing of a decidedly conscious choice to decenter technology from the experience while still utilizing technology—in an out-of-doors, into nature, improvisational immersive practice—offers a conceptual buffer to an increasingly technology-centered pandemic reality. Such ideas will undoubtedly be needed to connect in deeper ways to the Earth, and each other, in a post COVID-19 era.

As a long-time practitioner in improvised music, I came to recognize intuitively this environmental sound field as an embodiment of musical immersive experience. From that point

on, the activity of deliberate environmental engagement as an act of art transformed seamlessly into an improvisational search and discovery process. These immersive experiences were familiar to me because they mirrored being inside an improvised musical creation experience. This conscious recognition opened my senses, leading to one serendipitous experience after another with the natural world, and expanded my musical vocabulary in ways I didn't expect, connecting field experience with instrumental music practice. The field recorder became re-defined as a kind of cyborg instrument, or an extension to listening bodies where a larger foundation of environmental immersion is situated. Moreover, deeper themes emerged through environmental writers such as David Abram, who explores our larger relationships with nature. One such experience of his is particularly *musical*, a dangerous encounter with a female mother moose and his unique sonic, disarming response. He writes, “[t]he moose looked up as startled as I; she was facing me head-on, her nostrils flaring, her front legs taut . . . I took a deep breath and then found myself offering a single, sustained mellifluous note” (Abram 161).

One transformational experience for me occurred in Stewart Bay, Alaska during the 2012 EcoSono Institute. This particular day focused on underwater-hydrophone-listening while on a forty-foot boat which we positioned in various locations around the bay, including one spot in proximity to melting glaciers. While ghost-like ships that were just over the horizon made constant anthropomorphic sounds, we also heard the sounds of an ensemble of humpback whales. We could hear them, but not see them. Listening to the underwater hydrophones through our headphones, we realized that the pod of humpbacks was “bubble-net” feeding. Bubble-net feeding is a choreographed dance where a pod of humpback whales dive deep and spread out in a wide circle. While blowing bubbles, the pod closes the circle as it rises to the surface, trapping krill and small fish. Finally, the whales come together at the surface in a perfectly calculated crescendo, synchronously bursting through the surface with open mouths, capturing their prey. Anecdotally, the captain of the boat proclaimed that this was the first summer in his thirty-year career he had ever seen a humpback pod bubble-net feed. He learned from a biologist studying this particular pod that a female had joined the group recently and taught the pod this hunting technique.



Photo by Nashim Gargari, Stewart Bay, Alaska, 2012

As we listened intensely to the cascading choruses, the cadence suddenly came to a halt. In that second, we saw the pod breach the surface in a choreographed circle, perhaps a mile or two away. Our disappointment that the song was over was still lingering when, perhaps fifteen minutes later, it began again. We watched two or three more verses of bubble-net feeding. At the conclusion of each verse, the pod breached in a completely different location across the bay. These seemingly random choices by the pod about where to surface took on the form of

choreographed performance which allowed us to imagine the vast spaces beneath us being scouted and traversed. Then came the moment that blew the lid off of all assumptions. Listening to another chorus, just as any other, the pod suddenly burst through the surface ten feet from our boat. The surprise was beyond any of our experiences. The fusions of the sound beneath the surface with the sudden sonic reveal in the air was elation as we watched ten to twelve biomasses floating next to the boat for perhaps five minutes, as captured in the video, below. They peered at us indifferently, swallowing slowly their well-earned catch. The group of fifteen musicians on the boat remained silent for the whole experience. Yet, we were in full intensive aural and visual communication with one another, sharing the experience in full, mouths agape, some with tears. We all knew that we were witnessing something incredibly rare, elusive, and transformative for us as environmentally-based sound practitioners.



“Bubblenet Feeding.” Video by Glen Whitehead. <https://vimeo.com/44564301>

This experience exemplifies the inter-relationship between immersive experience of ecoacoustics and improvisation. Moreover, the profound experience of serendipity and surprise of whales surfacing directly next to the boat at that moment, and direct consequential engagement through sound, was similar to participation in musical free improvisation. This experience resonates particularly with ideas such as self-organizing (SOS) and non-linear systems. David Borgo offers succinct ideas on the impact of SOS as an improvisatory system. “They [SOS] are most often comprised of numerous individual agents that are autonomous but also exhibit a high degree of interconnectivity” (Borgo 126). He continues, “SOS are also inherently uncontrollable” (Borgo 127). As with Abram above, these full-embodied experiences also enabled me to connect across larger environmental ecological explorations such as the deep ecology work of Arne Naess, the investigation of relationships with non-humans of Timothy Morton, or eco-cosmopolitan and eco-critical writings of Ursula K. Heise.

These experiences feed directly into expanding ideas of musical vocabulary. One result was the creation of my first ecoacoustic improvisational piece out of field recordings of this day with the bubble-net feeding humpbacks, entitled *Mysticeti*. I have consequently performed this, and other pieces including *Sands that Move* (based on the Great Sand Dunes National Park), with Matthew Burtner in the EcoSono Ensemble and in concerts as part of tours in Eastern Australia and California, as well as several conferences and festival across the US and Canada. I performed these with other artists on a month-long solo European tour in Spring, 2019. This piece, *Mysticeti*, was also published along with several other pieces created from EcoSono Institute experiences in the *International Journal of Computer Music* (Burtner; Whitehead 102).



The EcoSono Ensemble performs *Mysticeti*.
Performed 1/18 at the Impulse Festival, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

Real-time environmental immersive experiences are encoded with improvisation and embody engagement with the unknown or unexpected. In both contexts, I am responding to the anticipated and unanticipated, to the real and imagined dynamics just about to happen. Any “in the moment” or “present moment” encounter resides at the intersection of multiple fields of play where the surprise of encounter is a portal to multidisciplinary connectivity. As David Borgo states in *Sync and Swarm*,

. . . although much does still separate the sciences from the humanities – and some separation may always be important—the emergence of a “third culture” that would improve the communication between the two seems both immanent and eminently desirable. . . [at] a moment in which our very ideas of order and disorder are being reconfigured and revalued in dramatic ways. I believe the methods and findings of the new sciences of “surprise” are useful in illuminating the dynamics and aesthetics of musical improvisation. . . [T]he Natural World is filled with examples of species that operate in a collective fashion that defies a top-down or centralized chain of command. (Borgo 1)

For me, this “science of surprise” echoes the waking moment, the moment of impact, the reactive split-second response that I experience both as an improviser and as an environmentally-based sound artist. These moments are the points of both arrival and departure of intersecting events that are then incorporated into our critical experiences; these moments represent the full embodiment of experiential discovery within real-time experience.

Through environmental immersive activities the link to improvisation as an inherent human attribute connected to imagination, awareness, and anticipation becomes clearer. To further contextualize these connections, according to musicologist Gary Tomlinson, a reorientation of the development of the human mind which advanced the species came uniquely from “a phenomenon that in human experience seems to underlie our general capacity to attend to and correlate sequences of events around us” (Tomlinson 81). Human beings long ago developed the consciousness to *think-at-a-distance*. That leap embodied a “release from proximity, whereby humans gradually gained the capacity to imagine things not present to the senses”

(Tomlinson 50). Tomlinson puts the ability that developed into *musicking* as the point of genesis for these remarkable evolutionary developments. As Derek Bailey postulates, “mankind’s first musical performance couldn’t have been anything but an improvisation” (Bailey 83). Certainly, these early human improvisations must be contextualized within the spaces and places of their natural environment as well as within communities of both human and non-human species.

Clarinetist, improviser, and environmental researcher David Rothenburg has developed a unique environmental practice improvising with various animal communities across the globe, including birds, whales, wolves, and more. Rothenburg is unique in articulating the most direct improvisational dialogue with non-humans, raising the question of intention, intervention, awareness, and consciousness. He asserts that “[e]ven a tiny bird brain can be attuned to the magic of organized sound, where the form might be greater than the function, beauty ever resonant and present, long before we were able to learn from its ways and hear the opposite of time” (Rothenberg 505). Just as in my experience with the whales in Alaska, Rothenburg embraces full immersion in the search and discovery process, open to serendipity, awareness in the moment, anticipation, and coincidence, with natural agents moving and participating in the improvising community.

Reimagining definitions of *community* to include not only humans, but the total picture of the natural world, poignantly connects methodologies of both improvisation and applied environmental immersive sound practices, bringing a much-needed theoretical context to environmental sonic fields. In the *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, Rothenburg writes that “interspecies Improvisation 101 should be a sanctioned part of our music education system. First, learn to listen. Pick up on the structure and inflection of the sounds animals are making. Take it in as an unknown musical world, and take it seriously by preparing yourself to join in” (Rothenburg 506). Improvisation, ecoacoustics, Soundscape Ecology, and all of the intersecting fields discussed here manifest diverse ideas of a larger, interconnected, deeply embodied *community* which includes all stakeholders involved in spaces and places. This notion of the interconnected community enables us to see how environmentally-based sound practice and improvisation are methodologically connected through shared spaces, the acts of listening, doing, and interacting, and the time frame of the present moment.

The onset of COVID-19 has resulted in previously unforeseen unique opportunities to expand both virtual and outdoor musical practices into new communities. In turn, these experiences helped accelerate the development of some of the ideas in this article. For instance, in June 2020 I participated in the Westben Residency. Situated two hours east of Toronto, the Westben Composer-Performer Residency articulates a collaborative creative vision in what would usually be an immersive experience with the surrounding natural world of the residency location. However, like so many situations, this residency also went virtual due to the pandemic. Working with vocalist / composer A.P. Bergeron (Quebec, Canada), guitarist Spencer Friedman (Queens, NYC), percussionist Gordon Fry (Nichols, Florida), we created a project utilizing concepts of environmental improvisation. As explained in the project description, “[t]his composition was created through a process of environmental improvisation and field recordings. Each member contributed material from explorations of their local geographies contemplating serendipity, scale, proximity and distance between themselves, their surroundings and each other.” [The resulting composition, “Chirr,” can be found here.](#)

In fall 2020, I also put some of the ideas in this article to test with two outdoor concerts under the theme “Take it Outside People!” in the Peak Frequency Concert series offered in the Music Program at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. The first was with Colorado Springs based Ormao Dance Co. and Denver-based improvisation ensemble the Bottesini Project, and

included a new composition by UCCS Visiting Assistant Professor Dr. Jon Forshee titled “Anti-Borderlands,” which utilized the semaphore flag signal system. The second concert featured the UCCS Symphony (which I direct) improvising through the natural environment of the Heller Center for the Arts as well as a performance of Pauline Oliveros’s “Four Meditations for Orchestra.”



Photo by Christina Jimenez, Sep 15, 2020.



Photo by Lynn Vidler, Oct 15, 2020.



Photo by Glen Whitehead, Oct 16, 2020.



Photo by Christina Jimenez, Sep 15, 2020.



Take it Outside, People! Anti-Borderlands



Take it Outside, People! UCCS Orchestra 21.

Acknowledging the listener as improviser immersed along with a living, dynamic environment, receptive and responsive to earthly events, is an embodiment of *empathy*. At heart, this comprehensive immersive approach is a call to explore empathy as a deeper, long-term methodology. In the age of COVID-19, climate crisis, and earnest calls for systemic changes for

social and racial justice, it is crucial that *activism* as a proactive force be understood and recognized as multidimensional and heterogeneous with frames of knowledge coming from a myriad of orientations to the world. Why is it important to acknowledge improvisational processes into environmental music-making systems and cultures? Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz provide a larger answer of the essence of improvisation as a cultural attribute, writing that:

Improvisation appeals to us because it is work that makes a difference in the world. It compels us to leave our comfort zones, to forge meaningful interactions with others across categories and social identities, to deepen the democratic strata of society through cultural activities that resonate fully with the contradictions and possibilities of our time. Improvisation in both expressive cultural and social-movement mobilizations can keep us attentive to our responsibility to build the world we hope to inhabit. (Fischlin et al. xxxi)

Bailey's assertion, that a good improvisation is a "celebration of the moment" (Bailey 142) succinctly sums up the improvisational experiences of both music creation and environmental field practices (reminiscent also of the idea of *micro-haecceities*). In this moment of mask-wearing, social-distancing, and concern about enclosed spaces, I urge you to celebrate the moment and take it outside, people! Hopefully, we will also have plenty to celebrate post COVID-19, particularly if we can build on the new challenges and opportunities in front of us and push ourselves to expand our horizons.

Works Cited

- Abram, David. *Becoming an Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*. Vintage, 2010.
- Assis, Paul de. *Logic of Experimentation: Rethinking Music Performance through Artistic Research*. Leuven, 2018.
- Bailey, Derek. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. De Capo, 1993.
- Borgo, David. *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age*. Continuum, 2005.
- Burtner, Matthew. "EcoSono: Adventures in Interactive Ecoacoustics in the World." *Organized Sound*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2011.
- Farina, Almo. *Soundscape Ecology: Principles, Patterns, Methods and Applications*. Springer, 2020.
- Fischlin, Daniel, et al. *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*. Duke UP, 2013.
- Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford UP, 2008.
- Iyer, Vijay. "Improvisation, Temporality, and Embodied Experience." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 1, nos. 3–4, 2004, pp.159–73.
- Jost, Ekkehard. *Free Jazz*. Da Capo, 1974.
- Lane, Cathy and Carlyle, Angus. *In the Field: The Art of Field Recording*. Uniform Books, 2011.

Lewis, George E. "Mobilitas Animi: Improvising Technologies, Intending Chance." *Parallax*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2007, pp. 108–22.

Lewis, George E., and Benjamin Piekut, editors. *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Vol. 1*. Oxford UP, 2017.

Morris, Joe. *Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music*. Riti, 2012

Morton, Timothy. *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People*. Verso, 2017.

Naess, Arne. *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*, edited by Alan Drengson and Bill Devall. Counterpoint, 2008.

Oliveros, Pauline. *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*. iUniverse, 2005.

Rothenburg, David. "Interspecies Improvisation." *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Vol. 1*, edited by George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, Oxford UP, 2017.

Tomlinson, Gary. *A Million Years of Music: The Emergence of Human Modernity*. Zone Books, 2015.

Truax, Barry. "Soundscape, Acoustic Communication and Environmental Sound Composition." *Contemporary Music Review*, vol.15, issue1-2, 1996, pp. 49–65.

Whitehead, Glen C. "Sound Anthology: Program Notes." *Computer Music Journal*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2018, pp 99–106.