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Concepts of sustainability in music

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Keynote talk delivered at European Forum on Music, Budapest, 8 June 2023.

Please note that the keynote talk below is a work in progress: I am currently developing it into an article for submission to a peer-reviewed journal. © Matt Brennan 2023.

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Introduction

“Sustainability” is an incredibly slippery concept which has migrated from the world of policy-speak and infiltrated the discourse of arts and culture. As a result, the term is now much used (and sometimes abused) by industry lobbying groups, policymakers, academics, and arts organisations across the creative sector.

Despite having been co-opted for a range of different purposes, the concept of sustainability is not likely to disappear from public discourse. The 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals are designed to underpin the global socio-political agenda until 2030 (see Slide 1). As a result, “sustainability” remains a watchword of the early twenty-first century, with activists, academics, and politicians all struggling to balance its wide-ranging meanings and interpretations to address the urgent economic, environmental, and humanitarian challenges facing our planet.



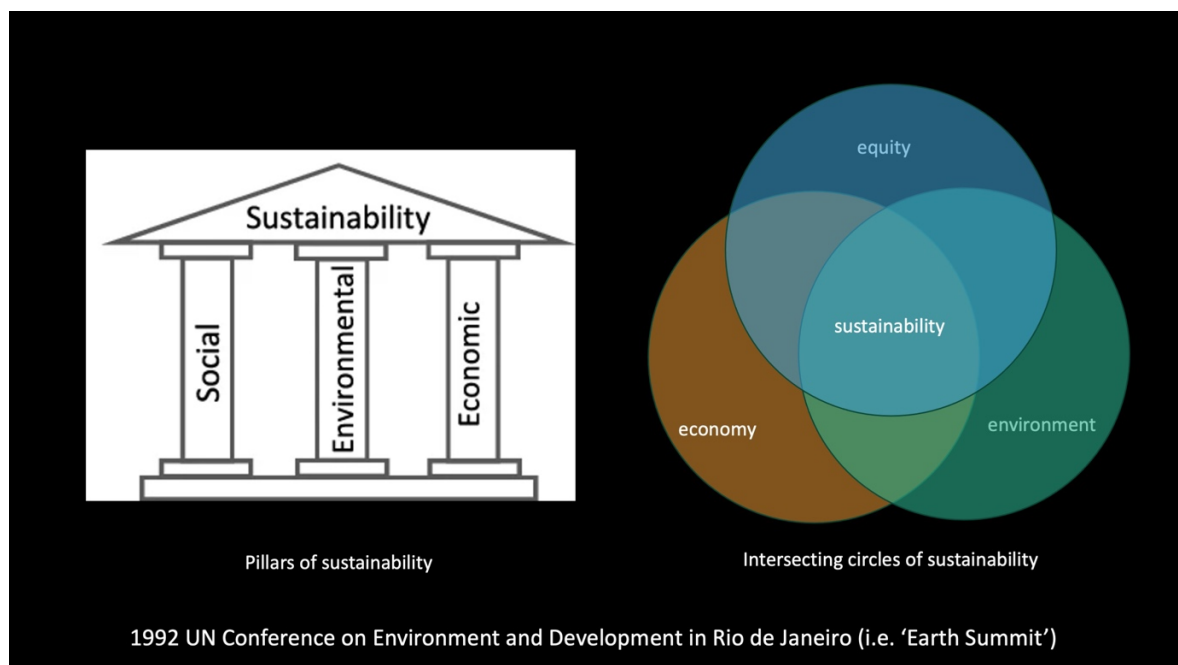
Slide 1

As an academic I'm interested the relationship between music and sustainability in all its forms, as well as how related concepts like ‘music ecosystems’ are used in the arts and culture sector. I’m aware some of you will already be very familiar with the origins of

sustainable development, while others in the room might be less familiar, so I'll try briefly to put us all on the same footing.

In 1987 the United Nations published a report called *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report, which aimed to address 'the critical issues of environment and development and to formulate innovative, concrete, and realistic action proposals to deal with them.' It famously defined 'sustainable development' as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'

The next major shift in conceptualizing sustainability came with the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, also known as the 'Earth Summit'. This summit introduced the concept of three pillars of sustainability: environmental, social, economic. You will also sometimes see these pillars represented as intersecting circles (see Slide 2). The idea is that sustainable development is built on the necessary combination of these three foundations: sustainable development needs to balance the interests of the economy, a fair society, and a habitable environment.



Slide 2

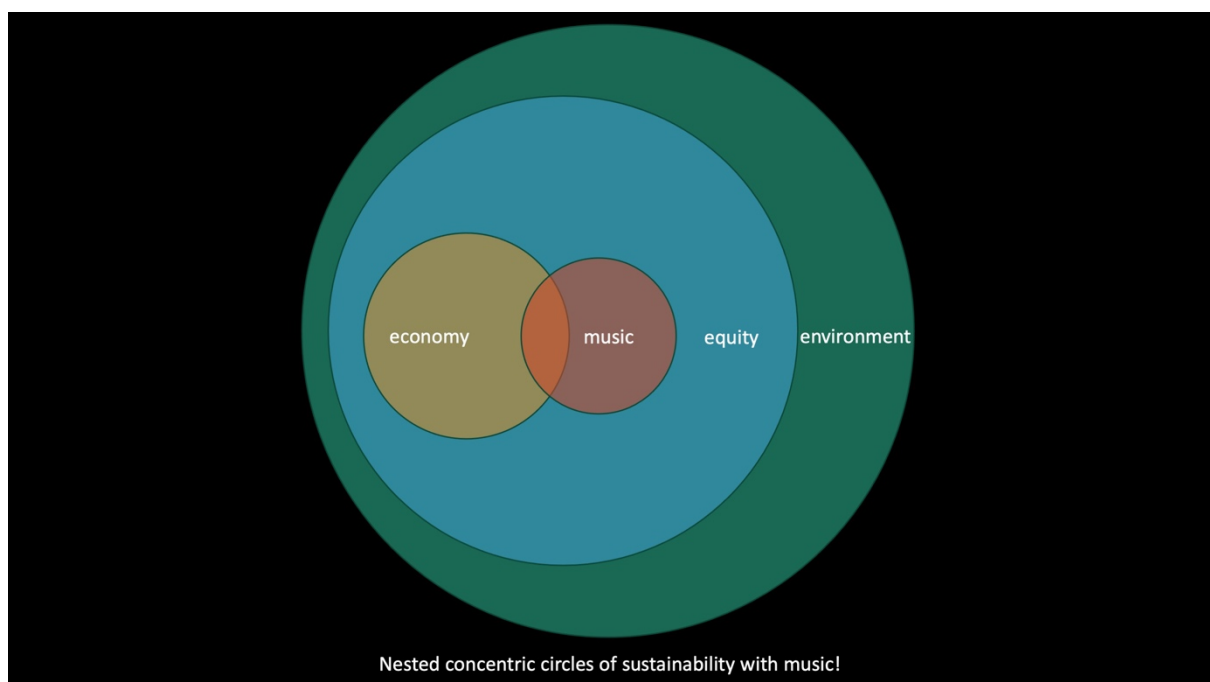
This is great in theory, but the problem has historically been that the institutions – both private and public - with the power to deliver sustainable development have tended to prioritize the economy first, with a fair society coming in second, and the environment in distant third place. In the thirty-odd years since the Earth Summit in Rio, it's fair to say that humans have failed to develop a more environmentally sustainable global order, and of course humanity as a whole depends on a habitable planet.

From three pillars to three nested baskets

To overcome the tendency to prioritize economy, give short shrift to equity, and ignore environment, a popular alternative has emerged to visualize sustainability, in the form of nested concentric circles. This 'nested basket' model more clearly illustrates that economic prosperity doesn't mean much if that prosperity isn't fairly distributed, and fairly distributed

economic prosperity becomes pointless if it creates an uninhabitable planet. The nested basket model is supposed to demonstrate that sustainable prosperity should be contingent on sustainable society, and both of those priorities depend on human activity being environmentally sustainable overall.

So where does music come into this picture of sustainability? Aaron Allen and colleagues suggested adding the concept of aesthetics into the nested model, arguing that the 'kind of world . . . we want to sustain' is 'not one that just considers environment, equity, and economics, but also one that includes joy, excitement, emotion, goodness, and beauty – a world that looks good, feels good, sounds good, and is good' (Allen 2014, p. 9). I like this idea and have updated Allen's model below to reflect that fact that music is a cultural practice but also an economic one, and these two ways of thinking about music sometimes overlap and conflict (see Slide 3).



Slide 3

From a policy perspective, in the past two decades there have been numerous milestones for music and sustainability. A partial list might include:

- The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
- The 2004 launch of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, which includes Cities of Music.
- And the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

In addition, major research projects that have been funded, notably the five-year 'Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures' project funded by Australian Research Council and run in collaboration with the International Music Council and many others, which ran from 2009 to 2014.

This project conceptualized the factors affecting the sustainability of music ecosystems across **five domains**, including 1) learning and teaching music; 2) musicians and communities; 3) contexts and constructs; 4) infrastructure and regulations; and 5) media and

the music industry. There is too much going on in this diagram to talk about it in detail, but it's another useful model to add to the mix (see Slide 4).



Slide 4

All of the efforts I mentioned have focused on sustaining music in different ways. Here are three to summarize so far:

1. Sustaining Music practices as a form of human cultural expression;
2. Sustaining Music in a way that is fair, diverse, and inclusive;
3. Sustaining Music as a form of meaningful work at the individual, community, and sectoral levels.

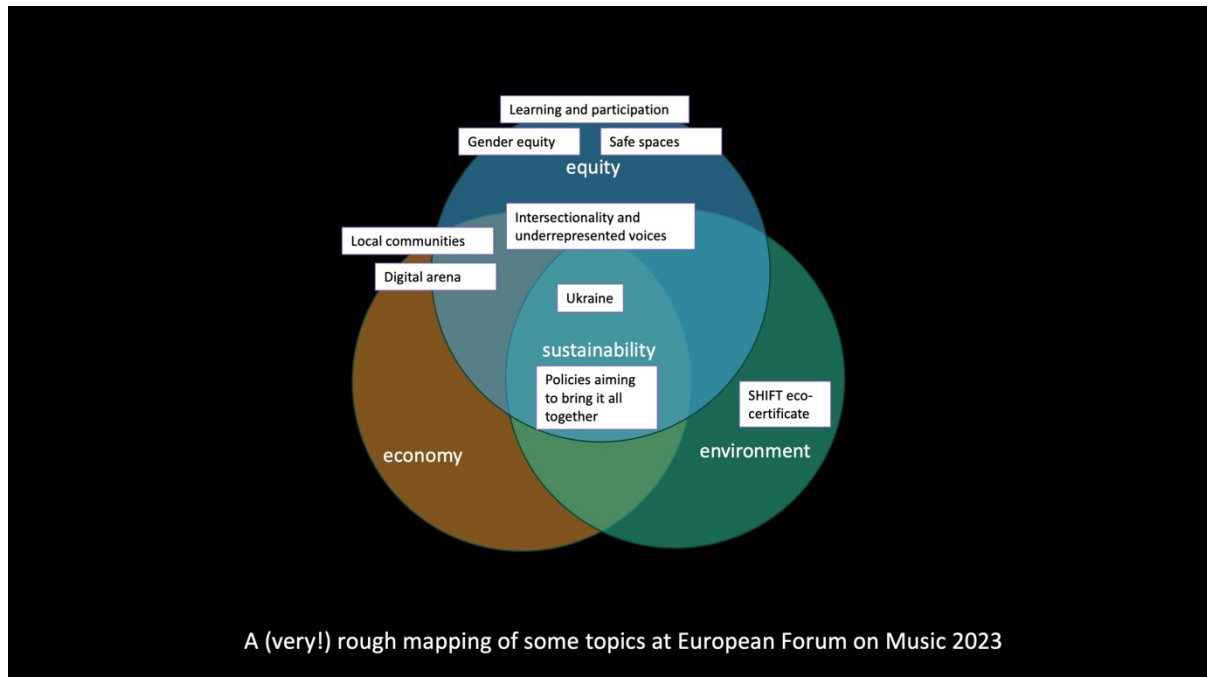
To complicate these three approaches even further, the word “sustain” might carry additional layers of meaning. Huib Schippers, who led the Sustainable Futures project I mentioned, deliberately tried to move away from linking ‘sustaining music’ to what he described as “the preservation, or the safeguarding of an object ... keeping a particular object in place, rather than keeping the process that nurtures the tradition alive.” Instead he preferred to conceive “sustaining music” as something closer to the French word *soutenir*. Or as Schippers put it: "You put your hand under something to support it, so it has the space to fly and develop in whatever way it wants" (quoted in Russell 2022).

Applying the models above to the European Forum on Music conference programme

You could also roughly map the topics of the 2023 European Forum on Music according to the concepts of sustainability we’ve discussed so far. I’ve used the intersecting circles diagram, and I realize this is just my own attempt and some of you may see your topic occupying a very different place on this diagram. So we probably need a second draft of this already, but roughly (see Slide 5):

1. Sustaining music in the Ukraine
2. Sustaining gender equity

3. Safe spaces
4. Intersectionality and underrepresented voices
5. Sustaining music in the digital arena
6. EU strategies and policies on music and the “Music Moves Europe’ initiative
7. Sustaining learning and participation in music
8. Sustaining music in local communities.
9. Desk where you can learn about the SHIFT eco-certificate for your organisation



Slide 5

I think what’s interesting about this kind of mapping exercise is that you can already see certain concepts of sustainability taking priority over others. Again, some of you may see these topics having different areas of emphasis than how I’ve mapped it. But as you might imagine, the numerous options for conceptualizing sustainability can lead to a problem. The researcher Sarahchandra Lele (2013) put this very well when he wrote ‘the strength of the term sustainable development – its universal appeal – is also its weakness, allowing it to be co-opted and redefined in ways that actually limit its goals and hence the societal changes needed to achieve them.’

Working in music during a climate emergency

With that in mind, I now wanted to switch gears and talk a bit more about how me might conceptualize sustaining music in a way that addresses all three key aspects using the nested basket idea: the idea that sustainable prosperity is contingent on a fair society, and both of those priorities depend on human activity being environmentally sustainable overall (which of course it is not). That’s probably why I have a recurring anxiety dream about Greta Thunberg, who I was lucky enough to see speak in Glasgow during COP26 in 2021.

In my anxiety dream, Greta is seated amongst the students in my university classroom. I am teaching what I normally teach: some aspect of popular music or the music industries. She listens quietly for a few minutes, then stands up and leaves the room. She leaves for the same reason she left her own classroom in Sweden at the age of fifteen. My lecture is of no use to

her, nor anyone of her generation. It is a lecture predicated on a future which does not exist. My lectures about the music industries are unwelcome distractions from a climate emergency.

How do I teach music responsibly during a climate emergency? How do I equip my students with knowledge and skills that will be relevant five years from now? Ten or twenty years from now? I understand that the global economy, and the creative economy within it, will be dramatically impacted by climate change in ways that are currently difficult to imagine (in much the same way that the impact of a global pandemic on the music sector was difficult to imagine for most of us before it actually happened in 2020). And yet I also feel confident in predicting certain truths about the future of music: humans will continue to make music. Many will also try to make a living out of music, to monetize the labour of their music-making. As has been the case ever since music became something you might consider paying for, making money out of music will almost certainly continue to be low security, precarious work where the supply of willing workers exceeds demand. All of the above conditions will likely persist even in the face of a climate emergency.

There are a few more certainties to weigh up. The music industries, like any industrial sector, have environmental consequences. Live music and music tourism encourage audience and artist travel, as well as energy consumption in the production of live performances. The recorded music sector relies on the infrastructure of the internet and its related carbon emissions; it also produces luxury commodities such as vinyl records from non-renewable oil-based plastics.

I could say none of this is music's problem, and actually music people just need to focus on music. After all, it's a relatively low emitting industry and the real problem is big multinational corporations and large industries like transport, energy, food production, investment banking, manufacturing, and so on. But music activity is of course reliant on all of those infrastructures. As an example, I relied on the aviation industry to fly from Edinburgh to Budapest to attend this conference. I'm as complicit as anyone. Yet as Greta reminds us:

Now we all have a choice. We can create transformational action that will safeguard the living conditions for future generations. Or we can continue with our business as usual and fail ... We are now at a time in history where everyone with any insight of the climate crisis that threatens our civilization and the entire biosphere must speak out. In clear language. No matter how uncomfortable and unprofitable that may be. We must change almost everything in our current societies ... I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is. (Thunberg, 2019, pp. 20–22)

Thunberg uses strong language to make us realize climate change is an immediate crisis, and the reason she needs to do this is that we are often trying to address multiple competing crises at the same time.

In the arts and culture certainly, we often first face the threat of defunding and budget cuts (crisis 1). A second and related threat to the sector is poor working conditions for music professionals. In recent years there has been increasing evidence from researchers like Sally Anne Gross and George Musgrave that while participation in music is sometimes linked health and wellbeing benefits, participation in the music industries is more often linked to ill health. The consequence of these two factors can be seen in the exodus of music workers across the sector in the wake of the pandemic and who have not come back to working in music (crisis 2). These are problems that those working in arts and culture encounter on a

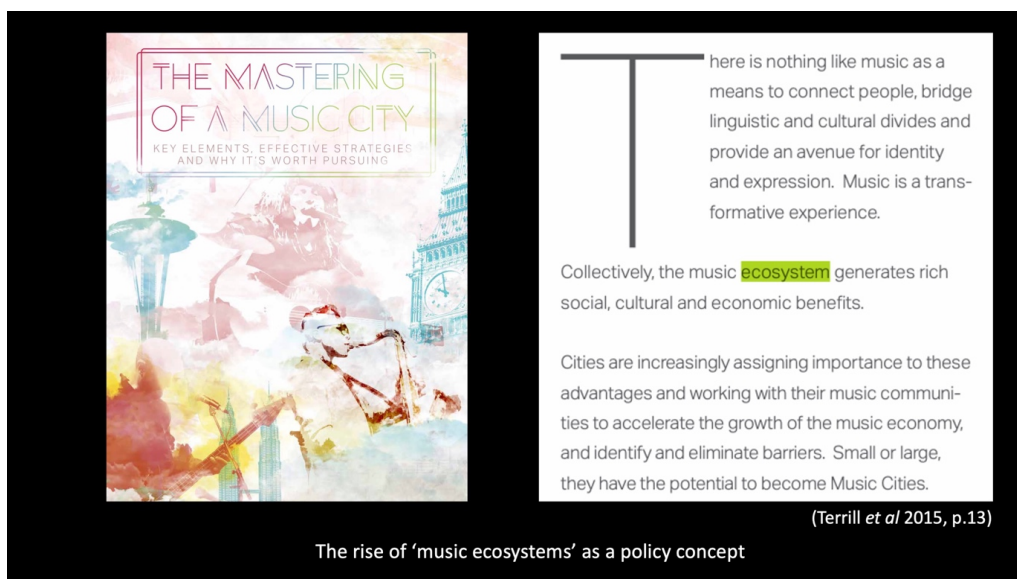
near daily basis and it can take all of one's energy to address them, not leaving much capacity to consider the underlying biosphere crisis (crisis 3).

The rise of 'music ecosystems' as a policy concept

Another consequence of multiple crises competing for our attention is the trend across the music sector to borrow from the language of environmental science to describe its own situation – using terms like music 'ecology,' 'ecosystem,' and 'sustainability.' As my colleagues and I have argued elsewhere, historically academic researchers tended to discuss music culture using frameworks taken from fields like sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies: terms like music 'culture,' 'network,' or 'community.' Meanwhile, the music industries and policymakers have framed music using the language of business management and urban planning: talking about creative 'sectors,' 'economies,' and 'clusters' (Behr, Brennan, *et al* 2016).

But now we increasingly use terms like music ecologies and ecosystems, and I think part of this – whether conscious or not – is a strategic move to up the tone of music policy discourse to a level of urgency that can compete with other crises demanding attention and investment.

What I find interesting with the terms 'music ecology' and 'music ecosystem', with all the loose environmental connotations they carry, is how they have migrated over the 2010s from academic discourse into music industry and cultural policy discourse. Here's a Canadian example: in 2015 the key lobbying organization for major record companies in Canada, Music Canada, published a highly influential report called 'The Mastering of a Music City', which advocated for city councils to develop bespoke music policies (see Slide 6). Throughout the report the musical activity of cities is described as an 'ecosystem' which in their words 'generates rich social, cultural, and economic benefits.' Since that report was published many cities around the world have published their own music policies using similar terms.



THE MASTERING OF A MUSIC CITY
KEY ELEMENTS, EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES
AND WHY IT'S WORTH PURSUING

There is nothing like music as a means to connect people, bridge linguistic and cultural divides and provide an avenue for identity and expression. Music is a transformative experience.

Collectively, the music ecosystem generates rich social, cultural and economic benefits.

Cities are increasingly assigning importance to these advantages and working with their music communities to accelerate the growth of the music economy, and identify and eliminate barriers. Small or large, they have the potential to become Music Cities.

(Terrill *et al* 2015, p.13)

The rise of 'music ecosystems' as a policy concept

Slide 6

While I think that there is a lot of good work happening in this space, I worry that it downplays how the creative economy is entangled in wider infrastructures that contribute to

the environmental crisis. So I want to propose two alternative concepts that might help address this.

Two new concepts to address current challenges in music and sustainability: the music doughnut and the musical utopia

My first suggestion is inspired by Kate Raworth's model of 'doughnut economics,' which she devised in 2011 with Oxfam and popularized in her 2017 book of the same title. Essentially, the doughnut economics model acknowledges that the objective of unchecked economic growth is propelling humanity towards irrevocable damage to the planet and a projected sixth mass extinction event.

The model of Doughnut Economics is founded on a simple diagram illustrating a sustainable window for economic activity, providing, in Raworth's words, 'a social foundation of well-being that no one should fall below, and an ecological ceiling of planetary pressure that we should not go beyond. Between the two lies a safe and just space for all.' (Raworth 2017: 11). You see in the diagram, for example, elements of social foundation including 'energy, water, food, health, education' and so on, while the consequences of overshooting our ecological ceiling include 'ocean acidification, pollution, biodiversity loss' and other depressing outcomes (see Slide 7).



The diagram illustrates the Doughnut Economics model. It features two concentric circles. The inner circle is labeled 'SOCIAL FOUNDATION' and contains various social and economic elements: water, food, energy, health, networks, education, housing, income & work, gender equality, peace & justice, social equity, and political voice. The outer circle is labeled 'ECOLOGICAL CEILING' and is surrounded by environmental threats: climate change, ocean acidification, chemical pollution, nitrogen & phosphorus loading, freshwater withdrawals, land conversion, biodiversity loss, and air pollution. The space between the two circles is labeled 'the safe and just space for humanity'. An arrow labeled 'OVERSHOOT' points from the social foundation towards the ecological ceiling, indicating a breach of the sustainable boundary. Another arrow labeled 'SHORTFALL' points from the ecological ceiling towards the social foundation, indicating a lack of resources for the social foundation. The outer ring is labeled 'REGENERATIVE AND DISTRIBUTIVE ECONOMY'.

The Doughnut:
'a social foundation of well-being that no one should fall below, and an ecological ceiling of planetary pressure that we should not go beyond. Between the two lies a safe and just space for all.' (Raworth 2017: 11)

New concepts for music and sustainability: Doughnut Economics

Slide 7

Raworth's model of economic activity is about as high level as it's possible to get, global in scale, but she encourages people working in different areas to adapt and apply the model to their own fields.

So based on Raworth's Doughnut, I want to offer a tentative definition for a 'music doughnut' (see Slide 8):

'A Music Doughnut is a sustainable system for musical life that contributes to a social foundation of well-being that no one should fall below, while respecting the ecological

ceiling of planetary pressure that we should not go beyond. A sustainable music ecosystem operates between the limits of the aforementioned foundation and ceiling – a safe and just musical space for all.'

A Music Doughnut is 'a sustainable system for musical life that contributes to a social foundation of well-being that no one should fall below, while respecting the ecological ceiling of planetary pressure that we should not go beyond. Between the two lies a safe and just musical space for all.'

My attempt at a definition for a 'Music Doughnut' (based on Raworth 2017)

Slide 8

I think there is also room for the music doughnut to embrace a more radical collection of ideas, for example circular economy and degrowth, as part of what makes it a distinctive approach – an approach that actively questions the merits of unchecked growth of music at an industrial scale (and all the other industries it depends on, of course). This is an approach that I hope to encourage my students to think about and incorporate into their scholarly thinking as well as career strategies. (Raworth's doughnut model is obviously not without its critics - e.g. Teicher 2021 - and I'm still learning about critiques of the doughnut as I work towards finishing an article based on this idea.)

So I now want to offer a second concept of a 'musical utopia.' Here I'm drawing on the work of climate fiction (or 'cli-fi') author Kim Stanley Robinson, whose book 'Ministry for the Future,' I can highly recommend (see Slide 9). But I am even more taken with his 2011 essay, 'Remarks on Utopia in the Age of Climate Change'. In it he argues:

Climate change is inevitable—we're already in it ... the infrastructures we build have lifetimes that last decades, sometimes centuries, and changing them necessarily takes time. We're probably not going to be able to cap the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere at less than 450 parts per million ... At that point we will be living on a quite different planet, in a significantly damaged biosphere, with its life-support systems so harmed that human existence will be substantially threatened. It has become a case of utopia or catastrophe, and utopia has gone from being a somewhat minor literary problem to a necessary survival strategy.



Slide 9

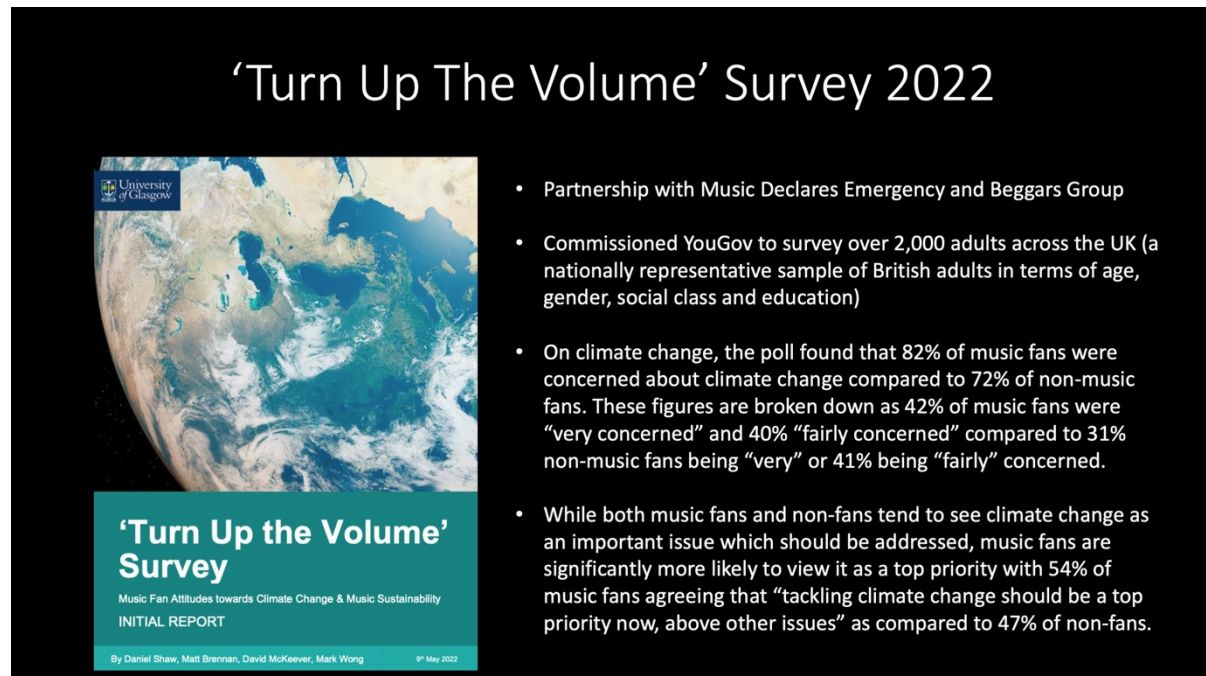
There is a strong role for the arts and humanities in this utopian project, according to Robinson: 'It's the humanities' job to disabuse [scientists of the] mistaken notion [that scientific endeavour] is straightforward and nonpolitical], by way of fully supportive lessons in history, philosophy, political theory, rhetoric, and literature.'

So one coping strategy could be to envision what musical culture might look and sound like in carbon-neutral civilization, and then consider the steps needed to get there. This approach actually aligns with current academic research on sustainable development. As my colleague Kyle Devine and I have note elsewhere, 'convincing publics and policymakers to address the global challenge of sustainable development simply by presenting data-driven argument and scientific consensus has ultimately been perceived as a failure' (Brennan and Devine 2020, p.58). Similarly, Bendor *et al* (2017) have argued:

Sustainability can no longer rely exclusively on scientific knowledge production to determine the right path to a single sustainable future ... Rather it relies on how well society explores, imaginatively inhabits, and evaluates multiple possible futures; on the kind of stories societies tell about who they are and what is important to them; and on the avenues for collective action that open up as a consequence ... [Engaging the public on sustainability issues should aim to shift] away from making people face some brute reality, away from a single slow-moving disaster scenario and towards enchanting them with the openness of the world as an imaginary place (ibid).

I think there is a lot of room for the music sector to contribute to this wider experiment. I recently conducted some survey research on this topic with a team at Glasgow in partnership with the Beggars Group record company consortium, and the organization Music Declares Emergency (see Slide 10). There is a myth that music was more linked to social movements in the 1960s and 70s, but in recent decades has maybe lost some of that wider social resonance. So our team wanted to understand whether the link between music fans and broader social consciousness is still strong when it comes to climate change.

To do that, we surveyed just over two thousand adults across the UK asking them questions about their music engagement on the one hand, and then a separate list of questions about their attitudes on climate change. The survey was distributed by YouGov to a broad range of respondents making up nationally representative sample of British adults in terms of age, gender, social class and education.



'Turn Up The Volume' Survey 2022

- Partnership with Music Declares Emergency and Beggars Group
- Commissioned YouGov to survey over 2,000 adults across the UK (a nationally representative sample of British adults in terms of age, gender, social class and education)
- On climate change, the poll found that 82% of music fans were concerned about climate change compared to 72% of non-music fans. These figures are broken down as 42% of music fans were "very concerned" and 40% "fairly concerned" compared to 31% non-music fans being "very" or 41% being "fairly" concerned.
- While both music fans and non-fans tend to see climate change as an important issue which should be addressed, music fans are significantly more likely to view it as a top priority with 54% of music fans agreeing that "tackling climate change should be a top priority now, above other issues" as compared to 47% of non-fans.

Slide 10

Importantly, the respondents weren't all music lovers, which is what allows us to make a comparison between fans and non-fans. We asked people to rate how important music was to them personally and also in their daily routines. And from that we got a dataset of roughly 1,000 fans for whom music was 'important' or 'very important', and roughly 1,000 others who said music was not so important to them, and we could then compare these two groups when it came to their attitudes on climate change. We also asked them about their listening habits and music spending habits for further comparison.

On climate change, the poll found that 82% of music fans were concerned about climate change compared to 72% of non-music fans. And while both music fans and non-fans tend to see climate change as an important issue which should be addressed, music fans are significantly more likely to view it as a top priority with 54% of music fans agreeing that "tackling climate change should be a top priority now, above other issues" as compared to 47% of non-fans (Shaw, Brennan *et al* 2022).

I think we can use these findings in at least two ways. First, we can use the findings to persuade the music sector as a whole to take bolder steps toward reducing their footprints, ones that might even require audiences to change their behaviour a bit, because we now have data showing that music audiences would support that more strongly compared to the general public. Second, there's an opportunity to engage music audiences who feel more strongly about climate change to help drive change beyond the music industry. Music may have a small carbon footprint relative to other sectors, but it relies on a much bigger and not very glamorous infrastructure of high emitting industries like transport, manufacturing, construction, and so on. So we can think about new ways that we might encourage music

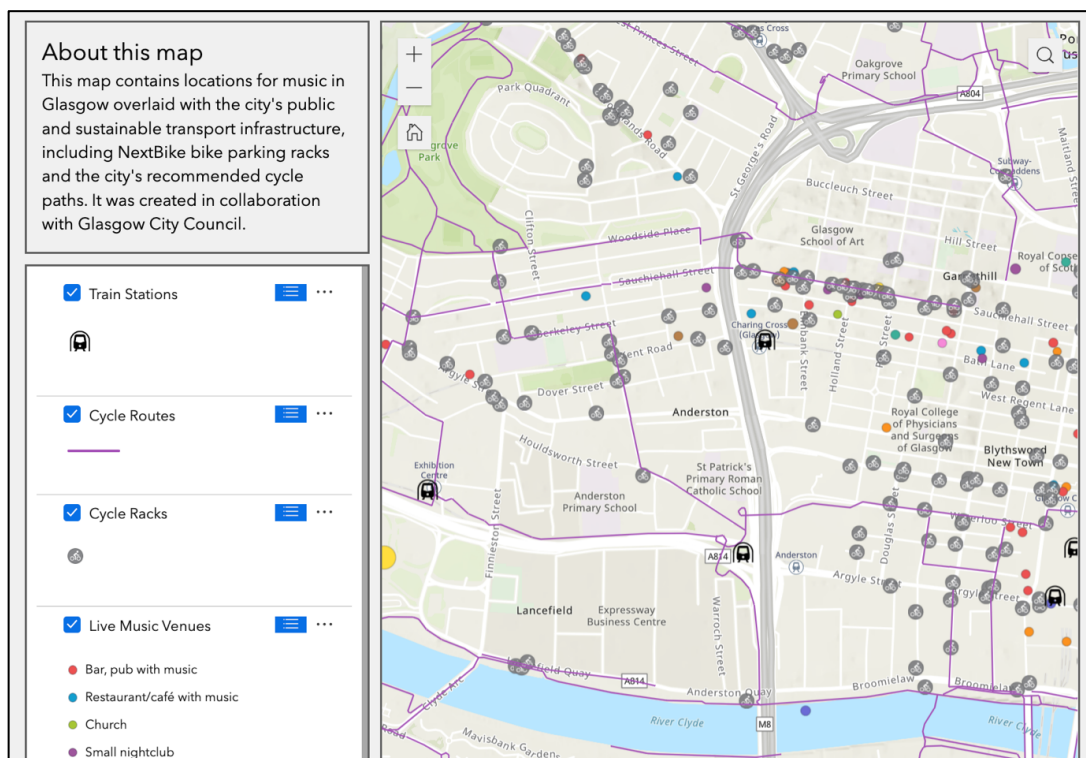
participants to adopt sustainable behaviours with a view to accelerating green transition across the wider infrastructure and society that they're embedded in.

UNESCO is also encouraging this kind of activity. In February 2022, UNESCO published its Global Report monitoring the implementation of the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. The report noted that 'national sustainable development planning has recognized the cultural and creative sectors as levers to advance cultural, social and economic outcomes', but despite this the 'role played by culture and creativity in sustainable development, including for the environmental transition, remains widely underinvested (as it is only acknowledged in 13% of Voluntary National Reviews monitoring the implementation of the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals)' (UNESCO 2022).

To this end, I'm now working on a new research project called 'Imagining a just and green future for music cities: The case of Glasgow as a UNESCO City of Music.' I have two research questions:

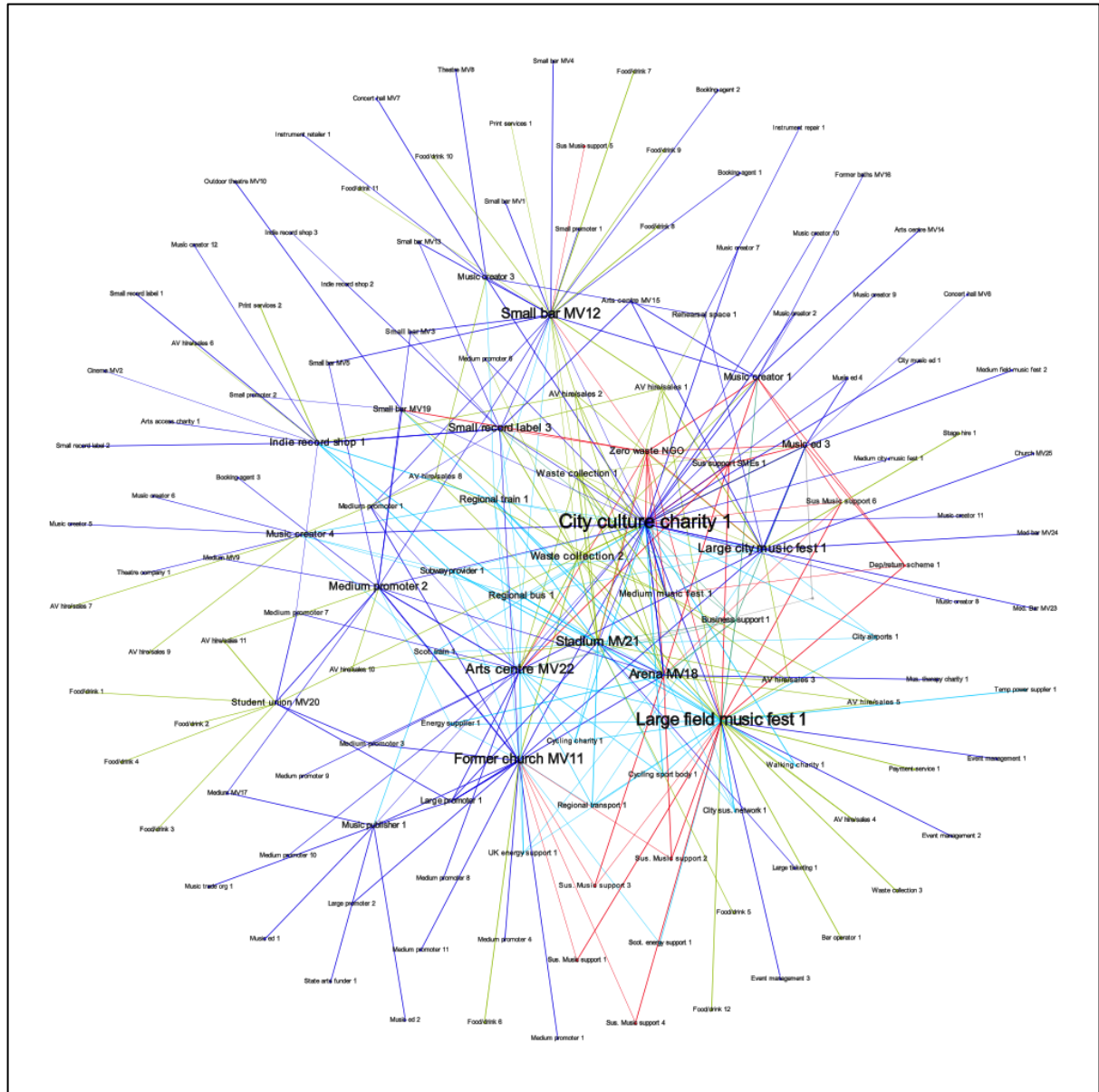
1. What does a 'just and green transition' mean in the context of a city's music industry and culture?
2. How can music activity be integrated into the city's wider just and green transition strategy?

We're currently making a geospatial map of music in Glasgow (see Slide 11), and also a social network analysis map (see Slide 12). Our geo-spatial research not only provides a map of all the locations in the city where music happens (which can then be filtered according to type and capacity), but it also allows us to layer additional datasets (e.g. the city's cycling infrastructure, flood risk areas, etc.) to explore how other aspects of urban planning may impact the music sector. (You can view our [Glasgow Music City Map online here.](#))



Slide 11: ArcGIS map of music venues and cycling infrastructure in Glasgow (2023)

Meanwhile, the social network analysis provides a way to visualize relationships between music organisations and energy infrastructure (e.g. travel, energy supply, procurement, and connections – or lack thereof – with sustainability support organisations). This allows us to identify what challenges hinder (and what potential new resources might assist) music organizations to work towards a just green transition.



Slide 12: Gephi social network analysis map of music organizations in Glasgow (2023)

If anyone's interested in more details about the 'Imagining a just and green future for music cities' project above, please feel free to contact me via e-mail.

Conclusion

As we enjoy this conference and learn more hear more perspectives about what it might mean to 'Sustain Music', I'm going to keep in mind a wee toolkit of concepts. The aim to 'Sustain Music' can be understand in at least four overlapping ways:

1. Sustain Music As a form of human expression (cultural)
2. Sustain Music In a way that is fair, diverse, and inclusive (equity)
3. Sustain Music As a form of meaningful work at both the individual and sectoral level (economic)
4. Sustain Music As part of, and a means to participate in, the larger existential project of sustaining a habitable earth for future generations and mitigating climate catastrophe (environmental)

Thanks again for the invitation to speak, I look forward to chatting to - and learning from - all of you during the rest of the conference.

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