

Composing futures

Activism and ecology in contemporary music

Pia Palme

Three threads, woven in counterpoint...

In this text, three threads, or storylines, intersect each other. One storyline gives an account of a *feministing* campaign that arose in January 2021, directed towards the ZKM Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Karlsruhe.¹ International online protest took action against a particular event, the project *Einklang freier Wesen*, which was announced as a ‘showcase’ symposium plus large scale streaming concert and featured a new work by the composer Georg Friedrich Haas in a complex technical setting, under the participation of several renowned music ensembles and venues. The featured composer, most of the performing musicians, and all the speakers on the panel were men, white men.² The ZKM is one of leading institutions in the field of music, art, and media. Therefore, feminist activists organised themselves in protest—I was one of them. Our campaign succeeded, the event was cancelled and we—the activists—initiated a critical dialogue with the curators. As a result, the symposium was re-planned and re-staged later that year. Furthermore, the ZKM created a position to address issues of diversity and gender in their institution. That is why the term *feministing* is used in the context of this campaign: a critical and creative action was initiated, resulting in a longer process and reflective discourse that brought about change.³

Another thread in this text explores musical role models, hierarchies, and canons from a personal standpoint and moves on to introduce ideas of ecology. Ecosystem ecology is a systemic tool that I find increasingly useful for my work within the wider field of music and composition. Over the last few years, my relationship with the environment has changed considerably and, in parallel, I have observed a change in my practice. When I refer to my practice, I am referring to composing, performing, and conducting artistic research, mainly in the field of experimental music theatre in the most inclusive sense. My interest is to compose music *with*

1 The Center for Art and Media, see also <https://zkm.de/en> (accessed 9 November 2021); in the following I use the abbreviation ZKM.

2 The website of the ZKM still shows the date and the original constellation of participants under this link <https://zkm.de/de/media/video/symposium-showcase-einklang-freier-wesen> (accessed 14 September 2021).

3 The term *feministing* was introduced by the British art historian, curator and activist Gill Park and describes a practice in which art, critical analysis, and political action converge (Park 2020, p. 290).

environments, or environments *with* music. In this context, music is to be understood as live performed music that includes the community of an audience. Music theatre involves multiple collaborations with other artists from a variety of disciplines. In essence, my practice is an *activity*: as an artist I *do* something—sometimes alone, often *with* others, or in public. For that reason, I prefer to use descriptive expressions such as interaction, interference, pollution, filter, collaboration, or cooperation in the context of my work; these words connote an active exchange of materials. On the other hand, I have always conceived my practice as *situational*, meaning that my work and process are grounded within a certain situation and context. However, my practice is not about/in/through an environment. The word *with* is most precise: examining the word com-posing, we find the term *with* (Latin *com*) right in the prefix. Therefore, I suggest the phrase ‘my work and research emerge *with* an environment’.

The event at the ZKM was criticised for being undemocratic, patriarchal, sexist, racist, and white supremacist. Apparently, the curators and organisers, the ZKM and Ensemble Resonanz, relied on the musical canon in a rather conventional sense. Basically, a ‘canon’ establishes a model for interrelations. There is currently much discussion about transforming the conception of the musical canon, which dominates the academic discourse and regulates the contemporary music industry.⁴ It is a historical model that builds on the notion of power and favours a particular curatorial style and aesthetic manifestation, in the sense of a ‘law’, ‘rule’, or ‘principle’ by which something can be judged.⁵

In the Anthropocene, we need a systemic model in resonance with the diversity and complexity of our current situation. *Ecosystem ecology* provides a conception that foregrounds equity and interdependence in relationships. I propose that a shift towards ecology not only affects the environment *around* music; it also changes the way we listen into music, it changes the compositional practice and the performance process.

This text also features a third voice relevant to this discourse, which sounds out intimate and poetic reflections that kept surfacing from deep within during my writing process. This exposes the activities that continue within my mind and imagination. My process of thinking is a constant and active participant in my everyday life, as an inner ecosystem.

4 For example, see the abstracts of papers presented at the isaScience 2021 Conference ‘Heroes, Canons, Cults. Critical Inquiries’ organised by the mdw University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. At this conference, I presented a preliminary version of my essay and research under the title ‘Feministing the ZKM or How to Establish a Musical Ecosystem Beyond the Canon’ as a multimedia lecture. The abstract can be found at <https://repo.mdw.ac.at/isascience/2021/texts/BoA.pdf> (accessed 15 March 2022).

5 These nouns appear in the definition of a ‘canon’ in dictionaries online, such as at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/canon> (accessed 20 August 2021).

The different parts of this explorative essay unfold in counterpoint. Theoretical investigations punctuate first-hand narratives and meet poetic lines—the personal, the political, and the imaginative all converge in writing. In this way, counterpoint becomes a feminist practice in textual composition. All threads converge upon the topic of political thinking and acting, that is, building futures. Here, I am speaking about the essay, but the same is relevant in my everyday practice of composing: it paves the way for cultural productions such as music theatre pieces, which have not yet been realised. In this way, composing is a political activity. Feminist activisms aim at cultural change.⁶ Working at the intersections of composition and research, feminisms and ecology, I understand my practice as composing futures.

Composition and decomposition dance with each other in my practice.

Every sound—or noise—that I perceive/perform/imagine/notate/explore comes into being, grows, develops, and decays. Fragile sounds interweave and interfere with each other, with the environment, with myself.

A polyphony of coming and going.
I listen into, and belong with, an ecosystem.

Every one of my pieces surfaces, lives through a process of growth and maturation. And, finally, all my works decompose. Their afterlives continue—as memories in people's minds, in documentations, on websites, in financial calculations.

ZKM-thread

Friday, 22 January 2021

For days, I have been sitting at my desk in front of the computer, working towards deadlines. By mail I receive an invitation to an online event at ZKM Karlsruhe next week. A prestige event announced as *Einklang freier Wesen*. I scan the content. A big streaming thing and fat symposium. Good ensembles. Skimming through the names—oh no, it looks like only men! And this title! I don't want to look more closely and click it away; I want to stick to my own work.

Monday, 25 January 2021

I talk to Christina Fischer-Lessiak, my co-researcher and colleague at the Kunstuniversität.⁷ We are in lockdown, home-office. The university is closed. Christina also works remotely these days, in Graz, while I remain in Vienna. We coordinate our work plans for the upcoming week, and I mention ZKM's event and my discon-

6 To acknowledge the many different types of feminist and activist engagement, I use the plural forms *activisms* and *feminisms*.

7 The University of Music and Performing Arts Graz.

tent about it. Georg Friedrich Haas' composition gave its name to the symposium: *Einklang freier Wesen*—officially translated as 'free beings in harmony'. What an irony: freedom and harmony without female* beings!?! Men among themselves!?

Tuesday, 26 January 2021

I prepare our online lecture series, the *Fragility of Sounds* lectures. The next lecture is coming up in two days, featuring Georgina Born and Juliet Fraser, and I want to present it properly. I update websites and add biographies.⁸ In the meantime, Christina had taken a closer look at the ZKM event. She concludes that it is indeed poorly conceived and must be called out for criticism. She is a member of the network GRiNM Gender Relations in New Music⁹ and proposes to inform them about the event; maybe they want to do something?

Wednesday, 27 January 2021

There it is again: the feeling of annoyance becoming stronger. A hot background noise on a gut level rising to my awareness. My fingers dance over the keyboard typing, I'm sending out invitations, writing and posting. I don't want to spend my energy fighting these patriarchs. But the anger keeps re-surfacing. Later that day, Christina forwards the replies she received from GRiNM. Her mail contains messages from the Archiv Frau und Musik Frankfurt¹⁰, also *musica femina münchen*¹¹ has become involved. Should we join forces in a potential initiative, she asks? I hesitate. Yes, I'm aware of my own growing anger. No, I'd rather not react this time, I'm so tired of this kind of activism. Does it change anything? I have work to do, deadlines are coming up, I need the time for myself. If someone else initiates something, okay, then I might join in. I read more emails with long discussions weighing possible modes of action. A lot of words tumble over my screen, yet nobody has become active, so far.

In my experience, this obstacle often occurs in non-hierarchical networks: intense discussions evolve and block activity. An initiative may die down because of that.

8 The Fragility of Sounds Lecture Series is documented under <https://www.fragilityof-sounds.org/fragility-of-sounds-lecture-series/> (accessed 9 November 2021).

9 The network GRiNM was initiated during the Darmstadt International Summer Course 2016 to address issues of inclusion and gender. Their website is <https://grinm.org> (accessed 28 September 2021).

10 The Archiv Frau und Musik Frankfurt was founded in 1979 to collect and document works by female composers and conductors. It is the oldest and largest archive of its kind worldwide. See under <https://www.archiv-frau-musik.de/en/> (accessed 28 September 2021).

11 The organisation *musica femina münchen* promotes music from female composers through research and documentation, by staging concerts, lectures, and conferences. See under <http://www.musica-femina-muenchen.de> (accessed 30 September 2021).

Or is it the fact that, mostly, people are lazy by nature—like me—and prefer others to become active instead?

I notice that I'm already thinking about the possibility of doing something myself.

Another message arrives late that night from the composer, musician, and initiator Sylvia Hinz in Berlin, concerning the lecture series. I am tired, answer back, and on the side briefly mention the ZKM event. We talk—my energy again rises, and I decide to act.

Is it because of my growing anger?

Is it because I'm alone most of the time, staring at a computer screen for hours—because it is cold outside, and everything is closed down?

Is it because my bodily energy needs a vent to escape?

Is it the fact that I miss collaborative performances 'in real life'?

Well after midnight a letter is prepared—perky, radical, and a bit bold, it mirrors my overall mood. I only take the time to write a German version and don't think our activism will get much international attention, anyhow. I mail the sketch to possible supporters, friends and colleagues from the music scene, and ask for feedback.

Ecology-thread

I grew up with a local family canon of music. My parents cultivated their collection of records—symphonies by Beethoven, Mozart, Mahler, Brahms, Bruckner, Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Dvořák, and the like; this kind of classical collection was typical for the Austrian middle-class household of the time. In the evenings or on weekends, our living room would resonate with this music. In contrast, from early on my personal focus as a musician was on the recorder and oboe instruments. I loved Renaissance and Baroque music, which I practiced, studied, and performed from a young age as a student at the Conservatory of Vienna. By then, I had drifted away both from the taste of my family's canon as well as from the pop-culture appetite of my age group, adoring Bach and Händel, Telemann, Frescobaldi, Purcell, Jacob van Eyck, Orlando di Lasso. The personal ranking of composers whom I cherished didn't feel like a canon to me. Nor did I notice that there was not a single female* composer in my entire instrumental repertoire. However, the composer who changed my musical life was Hildegard von Bingen. Her *Ordo Virtutum* from 1151 just smashed me when it was introduced in a music history class at the Conservatory. I had never heard anything like that before. It did not even sound like *music* to me as it opened up secret dimensions of listening.

Years later, I went into free improvisation and electronic music, doing away with scores written by others to explore my own music: experiments with bass recorders, microphones, and analogue electronic assemblages. There, again, I discovered a canon of improvisers and experimentalists. Are musicians, festivals, and

audiences alike in their habits of establishing canonical orders? Hierarchies provide a grid to hang on to. By then, my own role models were the composers and performers whom I listened to and observed in live concerts, many of them local artists and women. With some of them I would eventually collaborate, such as with Elisabeth Flunger, Electric Indigo, Mía Zabelka, Jorge Sanchez-Chiong, Angélica Castelló, Thomas Grill, Matija Schellander. One could say, a personal canon of experimental and electronic music grew out of collaborative appreciation. Over the years, I developed into a composer/performer with my grid of reference widening once again. More women came into my focus. During my doctoral research in composition at the University of Huddersfield I was confronted with the ‘official’ canon of new music for the first time. For me, it was shock to find out how strictly guided the inner circles of contemporary music can be in academic institutions—like a gated community. I felt I didn’t belong there. At the same time, I met with a diverse cohort of like-minded musicians, researchers, artists, and composers from different cultural backgrounds around the world. In numerous discussions, we shared our visions and doubts while struggling to find our own voices. These people became my patchwork composer’s family that I still like to connect with.

ZKM-thread

Thursday, 28 January 2021

By mail, Christina Fischer-Lessiak approaches our colleagues at the Kunstuniversität, Centre of Gender Studies. I connect to the female:pressure network of electronic musicians and to their founder, the composer, DJ, and activist Susanne Kirchmayr a.k.a. Electric Indigo. This community runs a highly active international mailing list. Also, I contact the mica – music austria platform for support.¹² Positive reactions come in immediately from Susanne and other female:pressure members! Encouragement is signalled from mica and there has still been no reaction from the Centre of Gender Research.

So, the actual work is left to ‘us’.

From Christina and from colleagues, feedback about the letter of protest comes in. I revise the letter until it seems to be ready for send-off. First, I post it to the female:pressure list and ask for signatures: Who is willing to sign their name? We need your names and professions, please, otherwise the signature doesn’t count as much.

Immediately, replies with signatures and encouraging comments arrive.

12 Founded in 1994 as an independent, non-profit association, mica – music austria provides information on the Austrian music scene, to support Austria-based musicians with advice and information, to promote local music at home and abroad, and to improve the conditions for music productions in Austria. See under <https://www.musicaustria.at> (accessed 28 September 2021).

GRiNM notifies us that the campaign was discussed by them at length. However, no collective statement will be issued. The women from the Archiv Frau und Musik Frankfurt have composed an official letter of protest for their institution and send it to me. We communicate via Zoom and decide to collaborate. The two letters complete each other: theirs is polite, while mine, for female:pressure, is provocative.

Discussions continue within the various groups: who can officially back both statements? Will my letter have the backing of a significant share of people from the female:pressure network? Finally, we, the activists, decide that our letters will include a statement of solidarity and mention GRiNM, the Archiv Frau und Musik Frankfurt, musica femina münchen and the international female:pressure network as the four collaborators.

Who are the people in charge of the ZKM event, anyhow?

Searching for names and mail addresses, I inspect the websites of every ensemble and venue that participates. There are only men occupying the leading positions, with one exception: Prof. Dr. Nike Wagner from Beethovenfest. Also, the co-director of the ensemble Musikfabrik is a woman. Otherwise, they are all men! These are the people who make decisions for and curate the most prominent contemporary music ensembles and influential institutions.

A group of men.

More and more signatures come in via female:pressure.

The echo is fantastic.

Ecology-thread

Early in 2020, Christina Fischer-Lessiak asked me about my relationship with the canon of composers that is central in European musicology. During our discussion, a dreamlike image came up in my mind: the canon appears as a massive tree in front of me. I perceive myself hovering around that tree, like a freeform flowing plant. Or a big insect. A bird? The canon is all roots, a huge darkish stem with fissured bark. I cannot see where the higher branches end. Where is the vision? No connection exists from my side except loose ties to some historic composers whose work I appreciate. Where are the female* composers?

For some reason, this image has stayed with me and keeps popping up in my thoughts. Where exactly is my place in this assemblage? During the pandemic, the image began to change. In Zoom conferences, I met many inspiring people from all over the world who are active in the various fields of music. I read inspiring biographies of women artists. In my mind, a community forms that stretches over continents and through time, a community I belong to. This group of brilliant people who are musicians, composers, scholars, educators, curators, performers—

do they establish a law, rule, or principle by which something is judged?¹³ This group in music has a different systemic structure, they are my chosen family—my *Wahlverwandschaften*.¹⁴

I know of so many important women—such as Francesca Caccini, Barbara Strozzi, Dame Ethel Mary Smyth, Clara Schumann—and the many female* identified contemporaries I have personally met with and whose work I appreciate: Éliane Radigue, Liza Lim, Katharina Klement, Eva Reiter, Pauline Oliveros, Chaya Czernowin, Elaine Mitchener, Ryoko Akama, Caro C, Olga Neuwirth, Nina Whiteman, Clara Ianotta, Jennifer Walshe, Laura Bowler, Elisabeth Schimana... Now, it feels great, there is company around. I locate these women in the space in between the tree and myself.

I hear a flock of birds flapping around me...

I turn around and my view expands.

I'm in a FOREST. There is more than one tree.

A FOREST instead of a canon.

A FOREST because it is alive.

Because it is complex and interdependent and nourishing and inclusive.

Because it expands and grows.

It smells of damp earth, mushrooms, and rotting leaves.

So much concentration is grafted towards a single tree, the canon. Turning away from it, I become aware of the forest around me, a dense forest that stretches far on all sides. Within this forest, 'the routes of art's canonical logic' are misleading (Deepwell 2020, p. 10). The situation reminds me of the German proverb *den Wald vor lauter Bäumen nicht sehen*—in English, this roughly translates into *not to see the forest for the trees*. I belong to the forest, I'm part of something bigger and much more connected than a canon, I'm part of something that is evolving towards the future, growing upward without hesitation. Something that accommodates all kinds of creatures and critters. Even the 'old canon' might survive—or decompose—in this forest.

More than one.

The forest is a place where all the living and nonliving interact and interfere and decompose with each other.

I'm part of an ecosystem of music.

Human beings assemble to collaborate for a music theatre production, they work together for some time. The community grows further as they are joined by an audience.

13 These nouns appear in the definition of a 'canon' in dictionaries online, such as at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/canon> (accessed 20 August 2021).

14 This German term, which was used by Johann Wolfgang Goethe as a book title, is sometimes translated as 'kin by choice'.

During the process, everybody is individually touched and changed. At some point, the community begins to disintegrate and shifts into a phase of decomposition. People leave the group—some earlier, some later. Artistic relationships form and dissolve. Technologies are gathered for a performance, they contribute to the work, they disintegrate. An empty listening space—a concert auditorium, a living room, a forest, an abandoned factory hall—fills with music and noise, reflecting the sound waves, reverberating and resonating, and becomes still again and silent.

ZKM-thread

Friday, 29 January 2021

I work until late again and sleep only a few hours. In the morning, I send personal mails to composer-colleagues asking for support for the campaign. Responses come in right away. By now, more than a hundred signatures have appeared and I add them to the letter. The activists meet online and we decide on a coordinated action around 11:00 am. In time, I begin to send off the signed letter to the complete list of people in charge of the ZKM event, one by one, starting off with ZKM's director Peter Weibel, personally from my mail account.

A message arrives from Franziska Gromann, the SWR-2 journalist for online culture news. She normally covers the ZKM and heard about the protest via the female:pressure member forum. She wants to publish something about the campaign and maybe conduct an interview. But she can only report about the actions, if our letters of protest reach the *public* in some way—for example via social media—and not only go to the decision-makers directly.

I notify the Archiv Frau und Musik and we discuss how to proceed. We had thought that direct mails would be enough; neither had we anticipated this kind of media attention, nor are we experienced in online activism. We decide that we will feed all our social media accounts, official and private ones. I use the hashtags #ZKMPolyphony #ZKMFreeCrittters. I work with concentration and in contact with Elisabeth Treydte in the Frankfurt Archiv. GRiNM has now decided to join in and publish a statement via social media, too. They post the f:p letter on their website—great!

Finally, our letters are published, posted on various platforms and on the media pages of the ZKM, too. Reactions come in. I send screenshots from our actions to Franziska Gromann. We talk on the phone. I say that I don't want to be personally interviewed. I find it risky, because I'm a composer and not a feminist activist. She understands and will publish her article, nevertheless, linking to our media statements. There, my name can be found all over the place, this cannot be avoided. My colleagues just laugh about my anxiety, the message 'Wieso *outen*?'¹⁵ comes in with a big Smiley attached.

15 German for 'why out yourself'.

At 3:30 I notice that the lineup of the symposium appears as changed on the ZKM website. Three women have been added to the panel: Christine Fischer, Eva Böcker, and Martina Seeber.

At 4:10 the SWR2 goes online with their article, and we share it, too. Immediately afterwards, more reactions pour in from the ZKM. The activists and the SWR post updates, protests continue.

At 4:30 pm I notice that the event is cancelled entirely. A statement appears on ZKM's site, a kind of excuse, to some extent, announcing that showcase will be postponed. The SWR updates their article at 16:34.¹⁶ The composer Haas publishes a statement saying that the symposium format never was his idea, he was just invited. He writes that he favours diversity and should have noticed.

Lots of congratulations come in via female:pressure. We celebrate—separately, at home. I raise a glass of wine toasting to friends online. I'm excited and very tired at the same time. Maybe the entire thing just happened because of the pandemic? Because we are all working at home, remotely? Because we miss the community spirit of art projects?

Ecology-thread

Ecology can take the form of a science, or a philosophy, or a worldview. In the context of music, all approaches hold great potential. Already in 1962, the musicologist William Kay Archer proposed an *ecology of music* (Archer 1964). Since then, the discussion continued at irregular intervals in the community. Mostly, it was the composers themselves who advocated ecological concepts, both in order to contextualise their music as well as in intrinsic connection with their compositional practice.

For instance, in 1976 John Cage stated in an interview 'Music, as I conceive it, is ecological. You could go further and say that *it IS ecology* [sic].'

He continued, pointing out that music

[...] has always opened onto nature, even when it was structured "in the opposite direction". The problem was that people paid all their attention to its construction. Today we can diversify our attention, and construction no longer hides ecology from us. (Gardner, Gora, Cage 1981, p. 229).

Further composers, who early on used the term ecology in connection with their practice, are for example R. Murray Schafer, Hilde Westerkamp, Annea Lockwood, David Dunn, or Pauline Oliveros with her *Deep Listening Practice* and the conception of the *sonosphere* (Oliveros 2011). More recently, we find John Luther

16 The article by Gromann in its final form is available under <https://www.swr.de/swr2/musik-klassik/artikel-zkm-veranstaltung-ohne-frauen-100.html> (accessed 10 November 2021).

Adams, Liza Lim, and Daniel Portelli who integrate composition with environmental awareness.

Increasingly, composers argue that ecology not only influences contextual parameters. It influences the content, structure, and form—the aesthetics—of composing as well. This is because composers are the ones who are experts in listening, as the sound artist, researcher into listening, and composer Hilde Westerkamp explains in her theoretical writing that is published on her extensive website. With their ears, they investigate their environments (Westerkamp 2002). It is significant that, among the artistic disciplines, it was music that prepared the way for ecological awareness in art.

I propose that this has to do with the unique capacity of listening perception to thoroughly connect to any environment, whether natural or manmade. Listening brings the inner and outer dimensions together and in this totality the entire ecosystem can be heard—the sonosphere, a polyphony of voices.

In his book *Hungry Listening*, the composer and Indigenous researcher in sound Dylan Robinson puts forth that a discussion must be held on a global level and from diverse perspectives, to disrupt the anthropocentrism of listening:

To wrest listening away from its standard conception as largely human- and animal-centered activity allows us to understand listening as an ecology in which we are not only listening, but listened to (Robinson 2020, p. 98).

The position of Indigenous people must be considered, there is much to learn from them, about their ways of life and their understanding of an intrinsic connection with an environment. Robinson explains that in Indigenous communities, a greater sense of interdependency and kinship is common understanding. Indigenous communities recognise trees, rivers, mountains, and the like as kin; for them, the idea of an ‘ecology’ is not new (Robinson 2020, p. 98). In 2017, four rivers worldwide were legally granted personhood through the intervention of Indigenous people: the Whanganui River in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers in India, and the Yarra River in Australia¹⁷. Imagine this scene: a human being, perhaps a sound artist, stands on the shores of the Whanganui river, looking at the flow of the water and recording the sound—a person-to-person interaction is taking place, two persons listening to each other.

In the Indigenous world view, this is an ‘ordinary’ situation taking place.

In the post-anthropocentric age, in my practice, this is an ‘ordinary’ situation taking place.

17 See under <https://sustainablemusic.blogspot.com/2021/07/environmental-sustainability-personhood.html> (accessed 02 August 2021) and also in Adam Taylor’s article *There are now 3 rivers that legally have the same rights as humans* that can be found under <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/21/there-are-now-3-rivers-that-legally-have-the-same-rights-as-humans/> (accessed 30 July 2021).

In an ecosystem, ontological interconnectedness is a rule. All entities are conceived as permeable and open. An entity closed off from the environment cannot exist. Every organism constantly interacts with the surroundings; matter and energy are being exchanged (Keller & Golley 2000, p.23). This notion is a paradigmatic shift from conceiving any human being—an artist, or composer—as a singular, self-sufficient personality, let alone a so-called genius.

Along the same lines, from their standpoint as innovators of music and its interfaces, the composer Michael Gurevich and the musical data scientist Jeffrey Treviño search for an *ecology of musical creation*:

As an alternative to the traditional model of composer, performer and listener as monolithic individuals, each inhabiting a predefined context, an ecological approach to musical creation focuses on the relationships between composers, performers and listeners as a part of a system that includes external factors such as genre, historical reception, sonic context and performance scenario (Gurevich and Treviño 2007, p. 108).

Another example of how ecology changes not only the contextual framework of music, but the music itself, can be found in the ideas of Chaya Czernowin. In a recent interview, the composer talks about ‘ecologies’ when she describes how she assembles recorded sounds, instruments, and electronic means to build different musical environments.¹⁸ Working with multiple recordings of a single instrument, she collaborated with Lukas Nowok from the SWR Experimentalstudio to process the samples and create spatialised compositions. She found that ‘the instrument could become its own ecology or its own solo’. Czernowin often uses recordings of natural sounds; in her 2019 opera *Heart Chamber*, the subtle sounds of a single leaf crackling were used to compose an electronic part.¹⁹ In this way, Czernowin not only brings the sounds of an environment into her music; she also develops compositional structures.

In her own way, the composer Liza Lim draws on ecological research and on her own observances of environments for her projects. Along with her wide ecological framework she transforms compositional structures and innovates instrumentations, such as the extension of a *contraforte* (a bassoon-type instrument) with a plastic tube in *Extinction Events and Dawn Chorus*.²⁰ In a recent interview, she answers the question of how she got involved with environmen-

18 Pia Palme in conversation with Chaya Czernowin online on 11 May 2020. The interview is published in this book.

19 Czernowin, Ch. (2019). *Heart Chamber. An inquiry about love*. Opera in four acts and eight close-ups, libretto by the composer. Mainz: Schott. Premiere 15. November 2019, Berlin, Deutsche Oper, conductor: Johannes Kalitzke, Orchester der Deutschen Oper Berlin. Available at <https://en.schott-music.com/shop/heart-chamber-no374943.html> (accessed 27 September 2021).

20 See under <https://lizalimcomposer.com/2017/12/19/extinction-events-dawn-chorus/> (accessed 28 September 2021). The piece was premiered in 2018.

tal topics: ‘it’s the other way around—“environmental topics” got involved with me. In the last years we’ve become so much more aware of how entangled we humans are with climate crisis.’²¹ Lim explores how temporal attention spans are transformed in the Anthropocene and how these ‘ecological “time effects” generate new forms of musical thinking’ in her compositions (Lim 2020).

It is worthy to note that ecology advocates human observation and perception. Ecologists have always encouraged personal investigations, asserting that any environment can be directly experienced and explored by any human being; machinery and technology can contribute to—but are not required to—carry out a scientific observation (Keller & Golley 2000, p. 10).

I find this very important; it puts ecology within reach of all human beings, regardless of their situation or access to technologies.

The river composes itself as it listens to me.
I compose myself as the river listens to me.
Whenever I listen, I am being listened to by my environment.
The theatre of listening is a theatre of being-with,
in which all elements perform in equity.

ZKM-thread

The ZKM story continues:

Peter Weibel sends out an extensive statement to the people who were involved.

In February, we, the activists, are invited to an online discussion about the campaign. Two curators from the ZKM and Ensemble Resonanz who were responsible for the event meet with Elisabeth Treydte, Christina Fischer-Lessiak, Meredith Nicoll, and myself. Our conversation is respectfully polite. We parry the arguments from the men using standard feminist reasoning. Elisabeth repeatedly draws attention to the fact that we, the activists, are working on behalf of the cause of women*, giving advice about diversity in music without being paid for our expertise—as we are doing during this meeting. I call the concert a ‘Maskulinale’ in reference to the 2020 ZKM festival ‘Feminale’ which showcased female composers. With that, I manage to catch the curators’ attention. Something clicks in their minds, they laugh heartily. It appears that none of the men involved had considered diversity in the context of the event, although both are familiar with the discussion and are willing to improve the situation. We point out that work must begin by analysing the systemic networks that are in operation in music and that it is essential to rely on statistics and facts instead of feelings or instinct in

21 This can be read at the composer’s website under <https://lizalimcomposer.com/2020/09/17/more-than-human-songs/> (accessed 28 July 2021).

order to improve the structures. The ZKM announces that they will add a diversity-deputy to their staff. Until now, no one had specifically looked at this topic in their institution.

Is the conversation too polite?

Are we being too compliant?

We provide a lot of knowledge.

It is the same story, as usual: feminists give away their expertise, for free...

The new 'showcase' is staged in April 2021. This time, the ZKM curators inform us beforehand whom they plan to invite as speakers and specifically ask for the participation of someone from the activist groups; Gina Emerson from GRiNM is then included. The title is altered to '*... aus freier Lust ... verbunden ... / Einklang freier Wesen*'. The theme of the panel discussion is now more general, about the implications of the digital age. The history of the event is not mentioned at all during the entire symposium. The piece by Georg Friedrich Haas is once more in the centre. We move forward and yet—more than ever—I feel the urge to engage.

To *feminist* my environment.

To *feminist* composition.

To *ecologist* musical structures.

Within this context, ecological thinking 'naturally' expands feminist activism towards the dimension of the nonhuman and anorganic.

Ecology-thread

Via ecological perception, I can define myself as a composer of disciplines, practices, activisms, and knowledges.

Historically, ecosystem ecology first emerged in the natural sciences and then expanded towards the human sciences; it became the study of total reality (Keller & Golley 2000, p. 15). Any ecology is informed by the 'aesthetic, spiritual, and social filters through which we all inevitably experience the world' (Keller & Golley 200, p. 14). I advocate for the term *culture* in connection with ecology: my quest is to establish ecology to conceive of a totality of nature and culture in music theatre. I prefer to conceive of a system that is alive and integrative, dissolving the rifts between nature and humanity, between art as a product or process, between performers and audiences—this list could be continued, and this is what I urgently need and what I search for. Many times, I have struggled to define my work towards the outside or the industry, because I tend to integrate multiple disciplines into my process. I have announced a project as 'music theatre' because it seemed to be the most appropriate term to acknowledge the complexity and the spatial dimensions of what I compose. Ecology transforms the manifold activities that make up my practice into a single compositional network. It is a science or philosophy that brings together disciplines, it is about *synthesis*. Literally, *synthe-*

sis is the Ancient Greek translation of the Latin word *compositio*. I propose that ecological understanding acts in the same way as composition acts in music, on a larger scale: elements are brought together and connected in meaningful ways—in ways that are evident in the environment itself, in ways that extend beyond human decision-making and anthropocentric thinking.

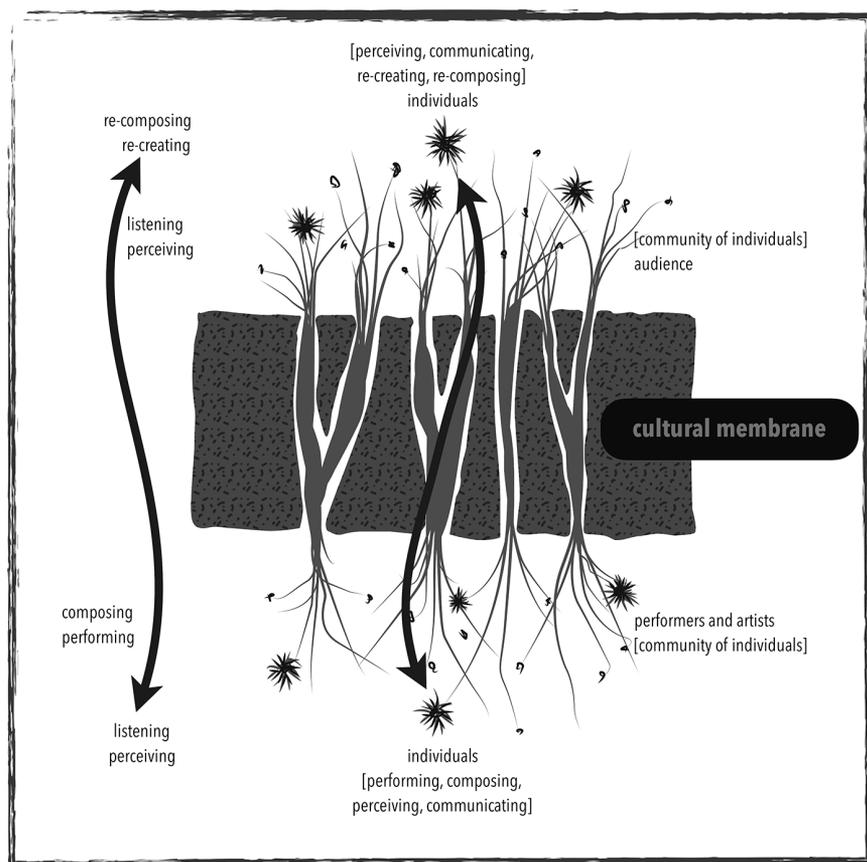


Figure 1 Music theatre as *cultural membrane* (graphic by Palme and Palme, Fischer-Lessiak)

I aim for a concept of music theatre that is founded on the overall fragility of existence. Such a model can be devised along the biological function of the cellular membrane. The membrane is a complex biological structure which not only constitutes the cell boundary. Participating in the cell metabolism, it actively controls the entire exchange between the inner space of the cell (the cell fluid) and its outer environment. It regulates the molecular identity of the cell and communication with neighbouring cells (Alberts et al 2008; Capra and Luisi 2014). Along this model, Figure 1 illustrates how a performance can direct the exchange between

a community of artists and performers—including the composer(s)—and their audience. The event of a music theatre performance (or more generally, any kind of live performance) functions as *cultural membrane*. It is a systemic entity that is alive and active. On the one side, the audience constitutes a community of individuals who listen or watch while communicating amongst themselves. On the other side, the community of artists builds their interactive network. Thus, we find communities who interrelate because of, and through, the regulating power of music theatre. The membrane generates a dense flow of exchange, as the individual members of the groups participate and share in performing, listening, watching, perceiving, communicating, and composing. Since perception is a creative activity, listening equals (re-)composing in this flow between communities.²² As this model shows, ecology is about a perceptual decision we make; it is about tracing the patterns and connections that already exist, rather than about intentionally inventing something.

Ecology investigates systems of all proportions—as small as a raindrop or as big as an ocean—in the end, they all interact with each other, within the planetary ecosystem. This is a relief for me, I have always understood my works as organic or alive—ongoing processes, in a certain sense. I feel ‘at home’ in the thick forest of disciplines and experiments which surround my compositional process. When working with musical instruments, electronic components, and other materials such as paper, stones, parts of plants, or bones, these materials become collaborative agencies in composition. With all cells and atoms, my *brainbody-in-culture* is part of an ecosystem while composing an ecosystem.²³

...and decomposed.

Decomposition is the most consequential factor that ecology brings to our awareness; in my experience, the process of decomposition is the essential property that distinguishes an ecosystem from any other system. Decomposition and disintegration affect the organic spectrum as well as the anorganic.

The music sociologist Kyle Devine innovates the idea of an ecological approach with his publication *Decomposed: a political ecology of music*. He investigates materials and sound technologies used in connection with recorded music from an ecological perspective. While ‘political ecology is multifaceted and difficult to summarise’, Devine suggests that ‘a political ecology of music would study how the stuff of musical culture is made and possessed, dispossessed and unmade’

22 The equation listening=composing was introduced in my doctoral thesis *The noise of mind: a feminist practice in composition* (Palme 2017). It is based on research in neuroscience, such as Eric Kandel’s findings.

23 The term *brainbody-in-culture* was introduced by female* scientists into the neuro-feminist discourse, as is explained in the groundbreaking book *Gendered Neurocultures* by Sigrid Schmitz and Grit Höppner (Schmitz and Höppner 2014, p. 17).

(Devine 2015, p. 367). Devine provides a detailed analysis of the decomposition of materials such as shellac, plastic, and consumer electronics. In this context, I want to mention the artist and researcher Thomas Grill, who directed the artistic research project *Rotting Sounds: Embracing the temporal deterioration of digital audio* at the mdw University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna.²⁴

Taking yet another approach, the composer Daniel Portelli presents his ensemble work *Whale Fall* (Portelli 2021) on his website and explains how he conceived the music in relation to the decaying process of a whale carcass slowly sinking to the ocean floor.²⁵ He centres on the instability of the ecosystem and this idea is transferred to the music as ‘decomposing sounds’. Falling pitches and distorted sound productions from instruments and electronics interact with recordings of whale songs. Portelli describes this as ‘dark spiralling and destabilising granulations of sound’ and notes that for him sound is inherently interwoven with ecology. The final section of the work is inspired by the chamber of the massive inner ear bone of a whale. Portelli imagines the bone resting on the ocean floor ‘forever listening to the changing acoustic ecology of the ocean’.

The composer grows hair and skin, cells and nails, she eats—digests—discharges. Liquids drop to the earth. Compositions, sweat, blood, tears, waste, noises and sounds ooze from her brainbody-in-culture.

She is//part of//an ecosystem.

Decomposition disintegrates everything, physically and mentally. In my experience, even my ideas, my plans and memory, my works and texts disintegrate. Even the very ideas of control or beauty. Decomposition defies any conception of aesthetics.

In my practice, decomposition is a powerful contributor. It is my ever-present collaborator. Sounds decay. Materials decompose. Often, I use the disintegrating parts of already performed compositions in my practice, to nourish new works.

Again, works disintegrate.

My text disintegrates.

My *brainbody-in-culture* disintegrates.

In my music, composition and decomposition continuously sound in counterpoint.

I grow, age, and decompose. Slowly, dust settles to the floor. The afterglow of a piece lingers on while ideas for a new composition have already emerged in my imagination, from the many experiments and inspirations I found during the work. From the dirt, plans and plants shoot up and are being watered.

24 Look at the comprehensive website of the project under <https://rottingsounds.org> (accessed 28 July 2021).

25 Available at <http://danielportelli.com.au/whale-fall/> (accessed 29 July 2021).

Ideas flow from my mind-space through my hands and into my fingertips, the keys on my recorder softly rattle while the clicks mingle with the echo of my rotting thoughts and my earlobes tingle with the faint whiff of things-to-come.

Gone is the first spark of inspiration while the work slowly and steadily progresses.

As I am writing, I decompose while my thoughts flourish.
The past and future dance with each other in my practice.

This text is—was//part of//an ecosystem.

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All emails, discussions, phone calls, and conversations referred to in my report about the ZKM-campaign are documented and archived by myself.

